

# Prison Workplace Health Promotion: A Needs Assessment to Inform Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

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**PURPOSE:** Discrimination, one of the most studied areas of racism, contributes to chronic stress and mental health issues among employees in the workplace [1-2]. Prison corrections workers experience disproportionately high rates of depression and anxiety related to chronic stress [3]. The goals of this project were to: 1) explore prison employee perceptions of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB); and 2) identify potential interventions to address (DEIB) in a Midwest U.S. prison system.

**DESIGN:** This qualitative study used participatory action research to develop focus group questions and determine selection of prison workplaces.

**METHOD:** A participatory prison system executive team, facilitated by the lead researcher, was formed to consider the needs of employees and design of this project. With literature and professional experience, it was decided to perform focus groups at randomly selected sites (N = 53, employing 8,400) across the state. The team assisted with the selection and refining of focus group questions identified from existing resources [4]. The questions were used to explore employee concerns about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and what workers felt would be helpful to address those concerns. Six sites were randomly selected based on type of facility and location. There were 3 prison sites, 2 probation and parole districts, and 1 transition center. A steering team representing the four main types of facilities was created based on the selected sites. The steering team included staff contacts who assisted with recruiting volunteers to participate based on their interest in discussing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging topics related to work. Virtual focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by research assistants to explore themes suggested by participants. Transcripts were independently coded by 2 researchers and thematic analysis was performed with a 3rd rater. The project was approved by the Saint Louis University Institutional Review Board. All participants were provided with study procedures to inform their decision to voluntarily participate. For added protection, they were also provided with information on emotional or stress related resources available through their employee assistance program.

**RESULTS:** A total of 9, one-hour focus groups were completed out of 10 attempted. There was a total of 47 participants with a range of 1 up to 8, and an average of 5 participants per focus group. Participants were primarily from the daytime shift. The focus groups were mostly represented by non-custody staff (90%) as compared to custody staff (10%). Job titles of participants included probation and parole officers (POs), administration, clerical, records, cooks, correctional officers, and unit supervisors. The most prominent areas of concern were for improving teamwork, valuing employees, addressing microaggressions, and reducing special advantages. Limited information was provided in the area of micro-inequity, negative bias, and inequities. Suggestions for improvements included supervisors setting a precedence, boosting morale through honesty and peer to peer support, standing up for coworkers, developing professional goals, and taking risks by getting to know peers.

**CONCLUSION:** System-wide needs assessment is critical to better understanding the issues and potential solutions surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the workplace. This study provides an overview of the challenges to DEIB and shows the need for even more in-depth evaluation to determine workplace interventions that address DEIB and prevent or reduce related stressors among workers.

## References

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