

Good Job or Dirty Work? Public Perceptions of Correctional Employment [1](#)

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Prison guards (correctional officers) are truly imprisoned: They are not only physically confined but are locked into movie caricatures, into pejorative prophecies (sometimes self-fulfilling), into anachronistic supervision patterns, into unfair civil service definitions, into undeserved hostilities and prejudgments of their actions. Officers are imprisoned by our ignorance of who they are and what they do, which is the price they pay for working behind walls. —Hans Toch (1981)

PHILIBER (1987) NOTES that historically correctional work was viewed as a job of last resort, usually taken after previous job failures or failure in the military. Studies of correctional employment also create the impression that prison work is “dirty work” that is characterized by high levels of stress, role problems, dissatisfaction, and burnout. Furthermore, as the quote above by Hans Toch (1981) makes clear, this view is reinforced, if distorted, by unfavorable stereotypes of “guards.”

Although it seems clear that prison work is held in low esteem, very little research exists on public attitudes toward correctional employment. This is a notable oversight. The corrections system has become a major employer and the correctional industry a significant part of the economy. In 2006, for example, there were 765,466 correctional employees² in the United States with a monthly payroll of \$2.8 billion. Nationally, approximately 24 out of every 10,000 residents were employed in corrections (Perry, 2008). The U.S. Department of Labor (2009) reports that 417,810 individuals were employed as “corrections officers and jailers” in 2006 and another 37,400 were employed as “first-line supervisors/managers of correctional officers.”

Where it was once common for citizens to cry “Not in my backyard!” when faced with the prospect of locating a prison in their community, prison jobs are now aggressively pursued by local governments. This is especially true in rural areas. Beale (1996) reports, for example, that between 1992 and 1994, 83 state, federal and private prisons were opened in non-metro areas. This represents 60 percent of the new prison construction for this time period. According to Beale, prisons constructed in non-metro areas in this three-year period housed close to 65,000 inmates and provided 23,000 jobs in direct employment. Moreover, Beale reports that new

prisons are more likely to be sited in rural areas now than they were in the past.

Despite the willingness of communities to invest in and compete for prison jobs, little systematic knowledge exists about public support for the prison industry as a source of economic growth or perceptions about prison work. This is a surprising oversight given the massive investment of public money in prison expansion. Indeed, the willingness to compete for prison jobs stands in contrast to stereotypes about the quality and desirability of correctional employment. In one respect, prison work is seen as a much-needed, stable addition to the economy and, in another, as “dirty work” that is undesirable. This research explores public attitudes about the expansion of the prison industry and the quality of jobs found in prisons to illuminate this apparent contradiction in views. In addition, this work attempts to provide additional insight into a more general concern—understanding the quality of prison employment.

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Public Attitudes About Prison Work

One of the few studies to examine attitudes about correctional officers was conducted by the Florida Department of Corrections (Tully & Morris, 1998). When asked to list those words that best describe correctional officers, Florida residents referred to correctional officers as “tough,” “brave,” “underpaid,” “dedicated,” and “strong.” Moreover, when representatives of the media were asked the same question, they responded similarly with descriptions such as “tough,” “brave,” “dedicated,” “stressed,” and “underpaid.” Respondents in this survey also said that they thought correctional officers should receive the same pay as police officers.

Although limited in scope and vulnerable to social desirability response bias, this research raises questions about longheld assumptions about public perceptions of correctional officers. The findings suggest that the public holds mostly positive views of correctional officers but views prison work as stressful and dangerous (officers are brave, tough, and strong). The findings also indicate that the public recognizes that COs are underappreciated (that is, dedicated but underpaid).

Studies of occupational prestige provide some additional insight into how the public views the quality of correctional employment. The 1989 wave of the General Social Survey included occupational prestige ratings for hundreds of occupations, including correctional officers. The average prestige score for all occupations was 43.4. Physicians received the highest prestige score, an 86. Other highly rated occupations included lawyers (75) and professors (74). The mean prestige score given to correctional officers was 40, placing this occupation below other “protective” services such as police officers (with prestige scores of 60) and firefighters (53), and below the group mean for protective services (49). Correctional officers were ranked above other “blue collar” and service jobs, however, such as carpenter (39), receptionist (39), truck driver (30), and cashier (29) (see Hauser & Warren, 1996; Nako & Treas, 1994). Although the public may view COs in positive terms, national rankings of occupational prestige provide a more qualified view of this job.

The very limited research to date suggests that prison jobs are slightly below average in quality, but the public holds favorable views of the individuals who perform this work. However, does the public consider prison work attractive—a job worth taking and investing in? These issues are addressed next. Specifically, this research examines three questions: 1) To what extent does the public support prison expansion for the purpose of economic growth? 2) Are members of the public willing to take a job as a correctional officer and what do they see as the most and least attractive features of this work? And finally, 3) What factors influence perceptions of job quality and support for prison expansion? Before answers are offered to these questions, the methods used in this research are described.

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Methods

Sample and Data Collection

A telephone survey of Carbondale, Illinois, residents was conducted in February of 2002 to assess public attitudes about correctional employment. Carbondale, Illinois, is a small community of 26,000 citizens and is the economic and educational center of the southern Illinois region. The southern Illinois region is geographically isolated from the rest of the state and experienced significant economic hardship following the widespread closure of coal mines after the passage of the Clean Air Acts of 1970 and 1990. Like many other states, Illinois utilized the prison industry to support this stagnant rural economy. Since 1993, for example, the Illinois Department of Corrections opened a number of correctional facilities in southern Illinois, including Tamms Correctional Center, Pinckneyville Correctional Center, Murphysboro Youth Center, Big Muddy River Correctional Center, and Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center. Furthermore, southern Illinois communities vie for new prisons by offering generous incentives to the department of corrections, such as free property and utilities, in the hopes of attracting more correctional facilities and the jobs that they bring.

In these respects, Carbondale is similar to other rural communities that have looked to prisons for economic opportunities. As such, the sample used here should provide a fair representation of attitudes held by those most likely to be asked to support a new prison and most likely to seek correctional employment. The sample is probably less representative of public attitudes about prison siting and correctional officers generally, since the residents of Carbondale are likely to have more direct experience and knowledge of prisons and prison work than the public at large. Given the lack of research in this area, however, it is unclear whether the sample is likely to overor underrepresent support for prison construction and correctional employment. It may be that familiarity breeds contempt; it might also make a practice or a profession acceptable.

The survey was administered to a random sample of 305 adults residing in Carbondale. No answer was obtained for 119 of the numbers selected, reducing the sample size to 186. Among those contacted, 101 respondents agreed to participate in the survey, for a response rate of 54.3 percent. Dillman's "Total Design Method" (1978) for telephone surveys was followed and the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Slightly more than half of the respondents were females, more than three-fourths were Caucasian or White, and close to 60 percent had completed a college degree (associates or higher). Most of the respondents were employed and/or enrolled in school at the time of the survey (only 1 percent of the sample was unemployed), although close to half of those surveyed reported an income of less than \$20,000 per year. The average age of the sample was 39 years and, on average, the sample reported holding moderate political views. Based on U.S. Census data for Jackson County, Illinois, the county where Carbondale is located, the sample slightly under-represents males and African Americans and over-represents those with a bachelor's degree or higher level of education. The unemployment rate in Jackson County, at the time the survey was administered was 5.2 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009).

Measures

Dependent Variables. This research examined two sets of attitudes: support for expanding prisons and perceptions about the quality of jobs found in prisons. Two measures of support for expanding prisons were developed. A global measure of support for prison expansion was included to assess general support for prison construction. Respondents were asked whether they supported "building a new prison in your community." Response options included "strongly support building a new prison," "slightly support a new prison," "slightly oppose a new prison," and "strongly oppose a new prison." In addition, respondents were asked to rate how important it was for local governments to invest in and attract the following types of industry to the region: tourism, fisheries, agriculture, wineries, manufacturing, retail, medical industries, prisons, education, mining, and gambling. All of these industries had been mentioned in the media or in political campaigns as potential sources of economic growth in southern Illinois. For each item, respondents were asked whether they thought that it was "very important," "important,"

“somewhat important,” or “not important” to attract this type of industry to the region. This item allowed us to examine the relative support given to expanding prisons compared to other industries.

Attitudes about correctional employment were also assessed using multiple items. First, respondents were asked how they would rate “the overall quality of jobs found in prisons.” The response options were “very high quality,” “high quality,” “average quality,” “low quality,” and “very low quality.” Next, participants were asked how likely it was that they would take a job as a CO if they were currently looking for a job. Response options ranged from very likely to very unlikely.

Two openended questions were also posed. First, respondents were asked to report in their own words what they thought would be the “most appealing or attractive quality” about working as a correctional officer. Next, participants were asked what they thought would be the “least appealing or attractive quality” about this type of work.

Finally, a domain-specific measure of perceived job quality was developed drawing on items contained in the General Social Survey. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a four-point Likert scale with a number of statements about correctional officers’ jobs (see [Table 1](#)). The statements measured perceptions of job security, income, opportunity for advancement, recognition and respect, leisure time, interesting work, independence, work environment, responsibility, contact with others, helping others, safety, equal opportunity for advancement, and job meaningfulness.

Independent Variables. Among the independent variables examined were age, gender (1 = female, 0 = male), race (1 = non-White, 0 = White), level of education (measured on an ordinal scale from 1 to 7), income (measured on an ordinal scale from 1 to 10), political orientation (measured on a 9 point scale with 9 equal to “very conservative,” 5 equal to “moderate,” and 1 equal to “very liberal”), employment status (1 = employed full-time, 0 = other employment status), job security (an ordinal measure ranging from 1), and job satisfaction (measured with the Quinn and Staines (1979) global job satisfaction scale; alpha = .79). These variables were included in the analysis to explore whether support for prison expansion and attitudes about correctional officers were associated with respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics and job experiences.

Historically, correctional officers have been ideologically conservative white males from rural areas with little or no post-secondary education (see Philiber 1987; Lombardo, 1981). Measures of gender, race, education, and political orientation were included to examine whether those traditionally drawn to prison work are also more likely to support prison construction, view correctional work positively, and consider becoming a correctional officer themselves. Economic and occupational variables were similarly examined to assess whether support for prisons and prison work was associated with income, job security, and job satisfaction. It seemed likely, for example, that respondents with higher levels of income, stable jobs, and jobs that are satisfying would be less likely to support correctional work because they had less need or desire for a new job. Finally, age was included as a control variable, with the expectation that older respondents are generally less willing to change jobs.

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Results

Support for Expanding the Prison Industry

The majority of the study participants indicated that they were opposed to building of a new prison in their community. Thirty-two percent indicated that they were “strongly opposed” and 30 percent said that they were “slightly opposed” to a new prison. Among the remaining respondents, 23 percent indicated that they would “slightly support” the building of a new prison and, 15 percent indicated that they would “strongly support” such a plan.

To further investigate preferences for expanding industries of all types, respondents were asked to rate the importance of attracting various industries to the area, including prisons. These results appear in [Figure 1](#), which rank-orders each type of industry by the magnitude of the item means. Respondents felt strongly that education was the most important industry to develop or expand. Ninety-eight percent reported that it was either important or very important to develop and expand education. Agriculture, mining, and medical industries all had mean ratings equal to or greater than three, which is associated with the response option “important.” At least 78 percent of the respondents indicated that agricultural, mining, and medical industries were important or very important to expand. Sixty-eight percent rated retail as important or very important; and over 55 percent of the respondents indicated that tourism, fisheries, wineries, and mining were important or very important. In contrast, 31.9 percent, 27.7 percent and 14.9 percent of the respondents said that the development or expansion of prisons in southern Illinois was somewhat important, important, and very important, respectively. The development or expansion of gambling received the least support, with 75 percent indicating that expansion of this industry was not important.

Although respondents felt strongly that it was important for the region to develop employment opportunities, little support existed for expanding prison jobs. This was true whether respondents were asked if they supported building a new prison or when asked about the relative importance of attracting more prisons to the area. It is unclear whether respondents felt that the region already had enough prison jobs or that this type of work was undesirable. The second possibility is considered below.

Perceptions of Job Quality

Previous research finds that correctional work is viewed as somewhat more prestigious than other types of “blue collar” and service occupations. A similar result was obtained here. The majority of respondents (57 percent) surveyed felt that the overall quality of jobs found in prisons was “average.” The remaining responses were normally distributed around this middle point, with 23 percent reporting that prison jobs were of high or very high quality and 20 percent indicating that such jobs were of low or very low quality.

Participants were also questioned about their own willingness to become a correctional officer. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they would be very unlikely to take a job as a CO. Just 11 percent and 3 percent, respectively, indicated that they would be somewhat likely and very likely to take a job as a CO if one was offered.

To provide additional insights into the public’s perceptions about the desirable and undesirable aspects of prison work, respondents were asked what they thought would be the most and least “appealing or attractive quality of working as a correctional officer.” In response to this openended question, “the salary” or “money” was the most frequently mentioned appealing quality, cited 32 times by respondents. “Good benefits” were also noted 18 times and helping inmates and participating in rehabilitation efforts were cited 15 times. Job security was another frequently reported response, which was mentioned nine times. Other qualities mentioned included social status or respect, providing a public service, performing interesting work, gaining knowledge of the criminal justice system, structured work, having the uniform provided, and “running a tight ship.” A substantial number of respondents (17 percent), however, said that they found “nothing” appealing or attractive about this type of work and another 9 did not respond to this question.

Among the least desirable job qualities cited were danger and risk, which were noted 36 times. Working with inmates was also seen as an unappealing feature of prison work (mentioned 25 times) as was the prison environment (reported 19 times). Other unappealing qualities of prison work included the hours, the co-workers, the unpredictability of the work, boredom, stress, and the prison administration. A number of respondents also referred to a more generalized quality of hopelessness, negativity, moral and ethical ambiguity associated with prison work, or as one respondent put it “bad vibes.” Finally, three respondents felt that “everything” about the job was unappealing.

Responses to these open-ended questions were largely confirmed when respondents were asked, later in the survey, to indicate their level of agreement on a four-point Likert scale with 15 statements that tapped specific domains of job quality (see [Table 1](#)). On average, participants agreed more strongly with the idea that CO jobs require lots of responsibility, are meaningful, useful to society, and provide the opportunity to help others. Substantial agreement was also expressed for the view that COs have a lot of contact with others while on the job, that this is an interesting job, and that CO jobs are characterized by a high amount of job security. Respondents also tended to agree that “COs are in an occupation that is recognized and respected,” “All people who are qualified have an equal opportunity to become a correctional officer,” “COs have opportunity for advancement,” and “COs receive high incomes for the work that they do.” The community respondents tended to disagree with the view that COs have opportunities to work independently, have lots of leisure time, work in safe and healthy environments, and work in pleasant work environments.

These results indicate that members of the public consider prison work meaningful and useful—clearly positive attributes. The public also felt that this work involved high levels of responsibility, although whether this is seen as desirable or not is unclear. The work environment and the perceived risk associated with prison work were viewed as the least desirable aspects of the job.

Sources of Variation in Attitudes

Communities often vie for new prisons in order to provide additional employment opportunities for their residents. This position assumes that residents will support such a policy, at least in part, because the jobs are desirable. This study explored the relationship between perceptions of job quality, the willingness to become a CO, and support for building additional prisons. In addition, the study considered the extent to which attitudes are shaped by respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics and their own employment experiences. These results are presented in [Table 2](#).

The model predicting perceptions of job quality explained approximately 20 percent of the variation in this variable, a statistically significant result. Politically conservative respondents held more favorable attitudes about the quality of prison jobs than liberals, whereas respondents with higher levels of education and those with higher levels of job security were less likely to view these jobs as high quality.

Only level of education was significantly related to the likelihood of taking a job as a CO, although the overall model was not statistically significant. The more educated the respondent, the less likely he or she was to consider becoming a correctional officer. Perceptions of job quality, job security, job satisfaction, age, gender, income, race, and political ideology were unrelated to a willingness to become a CO.

Support for building a new prison, in contrast, was predicted by gender, perceptions of job quality, and willingness to take a job as a CO. Women were more likely to support building a new prison. In addition, those who held favorable attitudes about the quality of jobs found in prisons and those who were more willing to become a CO were more supportive of prison construction. The overall model was statistically significant and explained close to 24 percent of the variation in the dependent variable.

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Discussion

Is This a Good Job?

Although popular portrayals of correctional officers are often highly negative, members of the public appear to take a more sanguine view of prison work. Most respondents felt that the jobs found in prison are not particularly good or bad, but of average quality. Perceptions did not

differ substantially by gender, race, age, or income, although those with higher levels of education held less favorable views of prison work than others.

These findings have implications for understanding what type of employee may be attracted to correctional work, and in turn help us better understand correctional officers. Importantly, age, race, and gender were unrelated to respondent's views of job quality and their willingness to become a correctional officer. This finding indicates that efforts to diversify prison work will not be met with resistance by potential employees. Still, the results provide evidence that efforts to "professionalize" the correctional workforce by attracting employees with higher levels of education may be challenging. Respondents with more education were significantly less likely to view correctional work positively or consider taking a job as a CO.

The most attractive quality of prison work appears to be its economic benefits: pay, health insurance, a pension, and job security. Little support was expressed for the more intrinsic qualities of prison work, although a number of respondents indicated that helping rehabilitate inmates appealed to them. Moreover, the job was viewed as meaningful and socially beneficial. Respondents tended to hold stronger views about what they saw as the occupation's downside. Namely, the risk associated with prison and the work environment were seen as significant drawbacks to correctional employment. Efforts to attract new recruits to corrections should take account of these factors. In addition, these results suggest that COs are likely drawn to prison work for practical, economic reasons.

Prison Expansion and Prison Work

As noted above, prison expansion—particularly in rural areas—has been supported in part because it is thought to promote prosperity, or at least economic stability (but see Hooks, Mosher, Rotolo & Lobao, 2004; King, Mauer & Huling, 2003). Among other things, this assumes that prison jobs are desirable to potential employees. This study indicated that members of the public who are willing to take a job as a CO and those who hold favorable views about the quality of jobs found in prison are more willing to support building a new prison in their community. Moreover, this was true even after controls were introduced for a number of socio-demographic and work-related variables.

It is reasonable to expect, then, that support for prison expansion will be highest in those places where prison work is viewed as desirable. Low levels of job security and political conservatism are indirectly related to support for prison expansion, through their relationship to perceived job quality. The analysis was not particularly successful, however, in identifying the factors that influence the willingness to become a CO. This result may be due to a combination of a small sample size and lack of variation on this variable.

Although the desirability of correctional work was related to support for prison expansion, it should be recalled that respondents expressed little support for expanding prisons and few respondents said that they themselves were willing to become a CO if they needed a job. Despite broad agreement about the need to develop employment opportunities in southern Illinois, respondents placed little importance on the need to develop additional prison jobs; only gambling received less support. Instead, respondents favored attracting educational, medical, and manufacturing industries to the region. Thus, although prison work was not necessarily viewed as a job of last resort, given a choice, most respondents indicated that they would prefer that their community develop other job opportunities.

Remaining Questions

Several questions regarding citizens' attitudes about correctional employment and prison expansion remain. These questions may be classified into two broad categories: those dealing with the quality of prison work and those dealing with the use of prisons as a source of economic growth. In the interest of improving prisons and correctional work, researchers might ask: How do public attitudes affect support for correctional officers and their own feelings about work? How do beliefs about prison work affect recruitment efforts, job training, and work

performance? Do attitudes about correctional work, particularly those held by family and friends, affect job retention, work stress, or other work-related outcomes? How do public attitudes about correctional officers differ from those about other protective service occupations?

The desire to improve the quality of correctional work should not prevent us from looking critically at the “prison industrial complex” (or vice versa). Some of the questions in this regard are difficult and controversial. We may ask, for example, whether it is appropriate for a democracy to pursue correctional policies in part to employ some segments of society at the expense of others. On a less philosophical note, researchers should ask whether these are the types of jobs that communities want and whether prisons in fact contribute to the economic well-being of a community. How do prison closures affect local economies? Similarly, what effect do the local economy and the availability of jobs have on people’s willingness to take prison jobs and support prison expansion? Are residents of rural areas more likely to support (or tolerate) prison construction and oppose prison closures? What role do trade unions play in promoting various views of prison work and the need for additional prisons?

In short, remarkably little is known about the public’s views of correctional officers, prison expansion or retraction, and the quality of jobs found in prisons. As governments grapple with the ramifications of cutting budgets in the context of a global economic downturn, there is a pressing need to prioritize public spending. For the first time in decades, states are taking concerted efforts to reduce the use of incarceration and close prisons in an effort to fill budget shortfalls. There is a real need for research to help inform these decisions to ensure the economic well-being of communities and provide meaningful, rewarding occupational opportunities to their citizens.

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Tables

[Table 1](#)

[Table 2](#)

Table 1.				
Domain-Specific Perceptions of CO Job Quality				
Job Characteristic	Response Options			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
COs Have Very Little Responsibility*	41.4	54.5	2.0	2.0
CO Work is Meaningless*	38.0	59.0	2.0	1.0
Job Not Very Useful to Society*	28.7	56.4	5.9	8.9
COs Can Help Others	2.0	12.1	67.7	18.2
A Lot of Contact With Other People at Work	1.0	12.5	72.9	13.5
Uninteresting Jobs*	12.4	66.0	19.6	2.1
High Level of Job Security	3.4	30.3	56.2	10.1
Recognized & Respected Occupation	6.1	36.4	52.5	5.1
Equal Opportunity to be a CO	11.2	27.0	56.2	5.6
High Income	5.9	43.5	45.9	4.7
Little Opportunity for Advancement*	8.6	37.0	49.4	4.9
Opportunity to Work Independently	12.0	61.4	20.5	6.0
A Lot of Leisure Time	6.3	70.0	23.8	0.0
Workin Safe and Healthy Environment	23.2	53.7	23.2	0.0
Pleasant Work Environment	40.8	52.0	7.1	0.0

* Item is reverse scored; all means are based on the reverse scored variable such that higher scores represent more favorable attitudes toward CO jobs.

Table 2.**Determinates of Perceptions of Job Quality, Willingness to Take Job as CO, and Support for Prison Expansion**

Variable	Quality of Prison Jobs		Take CO Job		Build New Prison	
	b		b		b	
Age	-.002	-.037	-.002	-.037	.003	.056
ConservativePoliticalOrientation	.104*	.295	-.060	-.126	.028	.055
Female	-.201	-.140	-.142	-.073	.395	.188*
Income	-.026	-.093	.073	.193	-.037	-.091
LevelofEducation	-.103*	-.246	-.162*	-.289	.070	.115
Non-White	.005	.071	-.008	-.075	-.007	-.069
JobSecurity	-.254*	-.203	-.164	-.098	.190	.104
JobSatisfaction	-.034	-.048	-.015	-.016	.031	.031
QualityofPrisonJobs	—	—	.265	.197	.386	.265*
TakeCOJob	—	—	—	—	.366	.338*
Model Statistics	R ²		R ²		R ²	
	.209*		.127		.235*	
*p .05						

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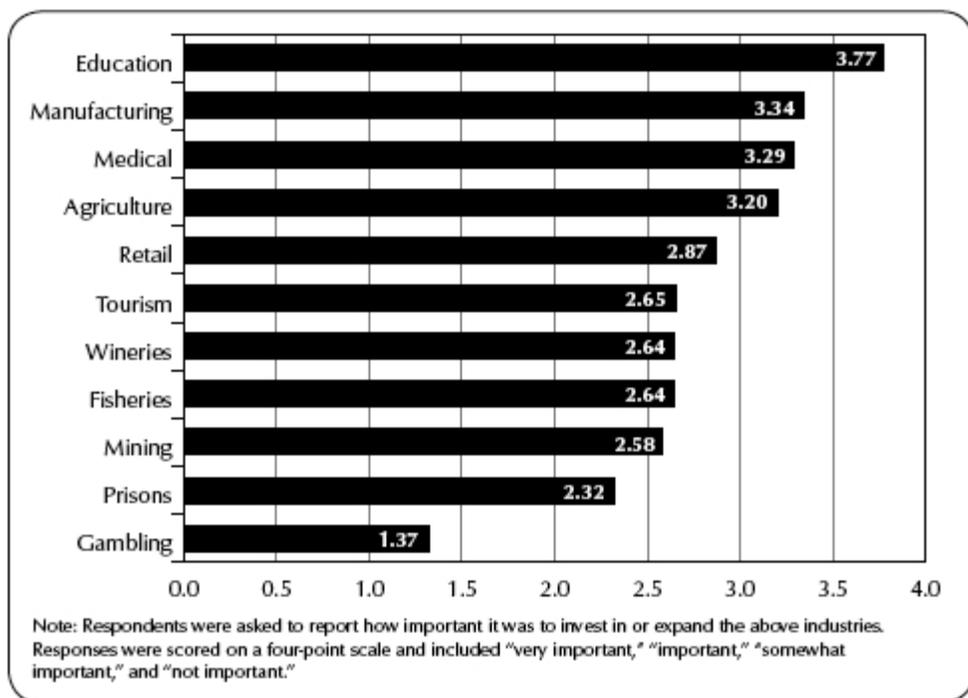
Figures

[Figure 1](#)

Figure 1.

FIGURE 1.

Mean Level of Importance Given to Expanding Specific Industries



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care staff (A total amount of \$45million for the biennium) to the Texas Legislature.

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2. These data include those employed in community corrections, prisons, and jails.

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Sexual Victimization and Requests for Assistance in Inmates' Letters to the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission

1. The views contained and expressed in this document do not represent the position of the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission. All views and interpretations contained herein are those of the authors alone.
2. It should be noted that the correspondence reviewed in this analysis is only a subset of correspondence received at the Commission from inmates. Correspondence received prior to June 2004 and after February 2008 is not included. Additionally correspondence from individuals who are not inmates is not included in the analysis.
3. Additionally, 42.4 percent of correspondence included supplementary materials. These supplementary materials included court documents, legal letters, affidavits, inmate grievance complaints with identifying information, hearing dispositions, news articles, declarations, inmate/parolee appeal forms, and official complaints filed against correctional personnel.

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