

Project on American Justice Fireside Chat Summary

The Future of Corrections: The Role of Corrections and Civilianization

Overview

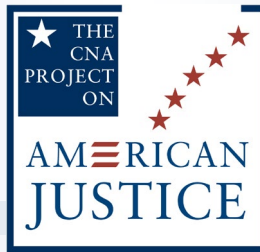
The CNA Center for Justice Research and Innovation's 2024 Project on American Justice (PAJ) focuses on the future of corrections based on current research and trends. To support this effort, CNA is working with several leading subject matter experts (SMEs) and senior advisors with research and practitioner experience in the corrections field.

In May 2024, PAJ conducted its third of several "fireside chats" with these experts to discuss the effects of civilianization on the role of corrections. Specifically, PAJ used a futures analysis framework to examine the social, technological, economic, environmental, and political (STEEP) factors that may influence corrections and the criminal justice system in the future. The PAJ team aims use this framework to identify opportunities to mitigate risks and promote successes.

To support this analysis, the PAJ team identified several overarching STEEP factors based on research and current trends. **Social** factors include Generation Y and the aging population; urbanization throughout megacities, regions, and corridors; and expanding diversity. **Technological** factors include growth in applied artificial intelligence (AI), use of robotics, and adoption of automated vehicles. **Economic** factors include the increasing US national debt and widening wealth inequality. **Environmental** factors include climate action failures and surges in ecomigration and climate refugees. **Political** factors include balkanization and a shift in global superpowers. Using the STEEP factors, the PAJ team created the following 2040 future scenario:¹

*In 2040, the number of adults outnumbers the number of children for the first time in US history, and urbanized megapolitan areas exist nationwide, including mega areas Phoenix-Tucson, **the Texas Triangle**, Columbus-Cincinnati, Tampa-Orlando, and Washington-Baltimore-Richmond. Mega areas have adopted integrated justice systems with some jurisdictions covering multiple states. As a result of the rapid growth, cities are experiencing a housing crisis and access to jobs is a growing concern. In these areas and throughout the country, AI is commonplace. Automated vehicles traverse streets, and robots are replacing the workforce. Advanced technologies are aiding the safety and security within public safety facilities **as well as providing training and educational services through increased global and community connections**. The US national debt has reached historic highs, limiting our government's ability to invest in new priorities. **Communities remain underresourced**. Economic instability and climate action failure have increased tensions between states, and there is no longer any faith in local and federal governments. Globally, the US has lost its place as the top superpower and has been surpassed by China, while the number of foreign-born individuals in the US is at a historic high and created a nationally diverse populace where no racial majority exists.*

¹ The PAJ team is using this scenario as a baseline for the conversations and does not assume that this outcome will occur. Rather, we are posing this scenario as one of many possible futures in 2040. In addition, this scenario grows and adapts after each fireside chat based on the findings from the discussion.



Using this future-state scenario as a starting point, the PAJ team identified potential risks and opportunities regarding civilianization in corrections, as well as steps to take now to mitigate those risks and promote successes. A summary of the discussion continues in the following sections.

Civilianization

While civilianization is not a foreign concept to the criminal justice system or the corrections field, approaches and implementation vary between agencies and facilities. To better understand civilianization in the corrections space, including in both jails and prisons, we engaged in a formative discussion with the SMEs. Using the following definition from the Baltimore (MD) Police Department, we discussed what civilianization looks like now and what it could look like in 2040: “Civilianization identifies existing or new work duties that may be handled by civilians rather than sworn officers. It builds staff capacity in the department on a parallel path to adding officers and maximizes limited sworn personnel resources.”

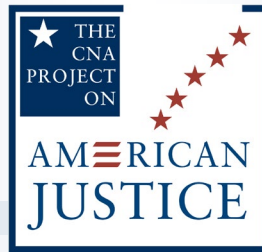
Our discussion resulted in the following points, which guided the futures discussion.

- We confirmed that civilianization referred to any nonsworn position in a government-operated correctional facility rather than privately-operated correctional facilities where the entire staff are nonsworn individuals.
- Currently, civilian roles tend to include recreational or jail staff, nonsecurity roles, members of internal affairs, and accreditation or policy staff—generally any roles that do not require direct contact with residents.
- In addition, agencies and facilities vary on whether they require civilians to be certified or not, with jails typically not requiring certifications.
- Corrections populations have become more complex over time, often with an increased need for social services and resources that require staff to have higher education and specialized training. Experts expect that this trend will continue and that more roles in correctional facilities will become civilianized to meet this demand.

Risks and Opportunities

While discussing the 2040 future-state scenario, SMEs identified several risks related to civilianization in corrections and the criminal justice system:

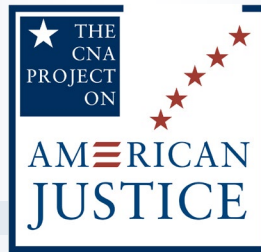
- **Division among staff:** As the workforce becomes increasingly diverse and uses more varied applications of AI, greater civilianization in correctional facilities could create further challenges in the workforce population of correctional facilities. Experts have observed division between sworn and nonsworn staff caused by a lack of inclusivity in each group. For example, sworn staff experience levels of respect and recognition that nonsworn staff do not, (e.g., during “law enforcement week”).
- **Lack of knowledge of correctional facilities and operations:** To meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and complex correctional population, correctional facilities will seek civilian roles such as social service providers in greater numbers. This presents a training and onboarding challenge. Experts warned that although civilians may bring varied expertise into correctional facilities, they will lack knowledge on the day-to-day functions and procedures of the facility and corrections as a whole. This learning curve may hamper civilians’ ability to engage in their work at maximum capacity and, in turn, may delay the positive effects that civilian roles bring.



- **Lack of staff certifications:** Because megapolitan regions and their respective jurisdictions are growing, more correctional facilities may be required. An increase in correctional facilities complicates efforts to implement national standards because individual facilities and jurisdictions will impose their own certification regulations for civilian staff. Experts suggested that some agencies may even hire civilians to circumvent existing training standards for sworn members. This poses a risk for both staff and residents because trainings are imperative to understanding how to respond to and engage with residents.
- **Negative impact for sworn staff:** An increasing proportion of civilian staff in correctional facilities poses the risk of negatively impacting sworn staff. For example, increased civilian roles reduce alternate work opportunities for sworn staff that often provide relief from the monotony that comes with the corrections environment; instead, their jobs are limited to the most difficult roles, which increases burnout. Similarly, the need for sworn staff may decrease, contributing to an expected lack of access to jobs by 2040.

In addition, SMEs identified opportunities in relation to increased civilianization in 2040:

- **Supplemental support:** Because of national debt and limited resources, civilianization should be viewed as a tool that will help with various duties in correctional facilities. Experts stated that there may always be a need for sworn staff to perform security functions, but suggested that civilianization could help sworn staff perform other functions that may not be prioritized otherwise.
- **Focus on rehabilitation:** A growing population suggests a growing correctional population and a higher number of the latter transitioning back into society. Integrating civilians with varied educational backgrounds can help correctional facilities keep up with evidence-based programs rooted in therapeutic, rehabilitative practices. Experts claimed that a focus on rehabilitation is imperative for successful reentry.
- **Multidisciplinary teams:** As the US becomes a nationally diverse populace with a historically high number of foreign-born residents, the corrections field will still be tasked with more complex issues. Civilianizing various roles encourages the corrections field to develop multidisciplinary teams whose members have different training and educational backgrounds and can collaborate on and address these complex issues with comprehensive responses.



Ideas to Take Action On

The SMEs recommended several steps to take now to address the concerns and opportunities identified throughout the discussion:

- **Evaluate what can be civilianized:** Experts advised that comprehensive evaluations of workloads and tasks guide civilianization efforts. This relates to our emerging technologies discussion, in which experts urged criminal justice practitioners to identify tools for assistance, not replacement.
- **Obtain buy-in from current staff and be transparent at every level:** Experts recalled prior experiences when roles became civilianized, but insufficient communication from leadership led to confusion and contention among the staff, particularly as sworn staff experienced benefit reductions.
- **Focus on retention efforts:** Experts warned that burnout occurs quickly in the corrections field and argued that it is necessary to enhance staff working conditions and find value in all areas of their work.
- **Implement diversity, equity, and inclusion with a particular focus on inclusion:** Experts emphasized that correctional professionals must care about the work they are doing and that the system must care about its staff. This is vital for correctional facilities' recruitment and retention efforts.

"I think that ultimately our goal should be to carry out the mission...We should be returning our community members back in with the best circumstances that they can go back to."

—PAJ SME José Gurulé

Overall, PAJ's third fireside chat on civilianization resulted in fruitful discussions about its potential risks and opportunities, as well as considerations of steps to take now to reduce the above-mentioned risks and promote successes. The next fireside chat will cover leadership and culture.

About CNA

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For more information, please contact:

Melissa Gutierrez, Sr. Research Specialist, Center for Justice Research and Innovation | gutierrezm@cna.org

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