Probation Officers, Role of

What We Know

› The global practice of probation began over 150 years ago\textsuperscript{(18,21)}
  • John Augustus, a boot maker in Boston, came upon a man who was being charged by a judge as a drunkard and took pity on him. Augustus asked the judge to release the man to his care. The judge agreed, making Augustus the first American probation officer\textsuperscript{(18)}
  • From then on, respected citizens could act as “trusted bondsmen” to supervise offenders, provide moral guidance, and assist them in finding lodging and employment. The probation movement grew as more citizens volunteered to oversee offenders
  • In Europe, volunteer organizations were founded to provide supervision for individuals in lieu of prison time in the nineteenth century\textsuperscript{(21)}
  • By the mid-twentieth century, probation had become formalized and was overseen by professional counselors. However, many probation officers had high caseloads and were underfunded\textsuperscript{(18)}
  • In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a movement toward shifting resources away from institutions such as prison and to community alternatives such as probation\textsuperscript{(18)}
  • Although probation began as a philanthropic movement focused on helping individuals, since the 1980s there has been a shift away from rehabilitative efforts toward offender management and punishment\textsuperscript{(20)}
  • The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) defines probation as “a court-appointed period of correctional supervision in the community, generally as an alternative to incarceration.”\textsuperscript{(3)}

Probation sometimes takes the form of incarceration followed by supervision in the community\textsuperscript{(3)}

• Parole is different from probation. Parole is “a period of conditional supervised release in the community following prison. It includes parolees released through discretionary or mandatory supervised release from prison, those released through other types of post-custody conditional supervision (serving a sentence in the community instead of prison) and those sentenced to a term of supervised release”\textsuperscript{(3)}

• In 2015, 4,650,900 individuals in the United States (1 in 53) were under community supervision, which includes probation and parole.\textsuperscript{(4)} Of those, 3,789,800 were on probation\textsuperscript{(3)}

› In 2014, there were approximately 91,700 probation officers and corrections specialists in the United States\textsuperscript{(5)}

› The role of probation officers includes the following duties:
  • Probation officers work with both youths (juvenile probation) and adults
  • Probation officers are responsible for helping offenders obey the law (to prevent further crimes), rehabilitating offenders, and keeping society in general safe\textsuperscript{(8,19)}
    – The responsibilities of the probation officer vary depending on local laws, the perceived risk of the probationer, and the severity of the offense
    – During the initial assessment, the probation officer reviews the offender’s case file to estimate the offender’s risk of recidivism based on the pre-sentence investigation
The probation officer decides the type of supervision the offender will receive using risk assessment tools with the information from the report. The probation officer uses standardized risk-assessment tools to determine the likelihood of recidivism. Both “static” information and “dynamic” information may be used in assessing the offender’s risk of reoffending. The static information is information about the individual such as sex, age at first conviction, number of previous prison sentences, and type of offense. The dynamic risk factors considered are education, training, and employability; residence; relationships; lifestyle; drug and alcohol misuse; and emotional well-being. Results from a 2016 Dutch study support the use of risk and needs assessment tools (e.g., Recidivism Inschattings Schalen [RISc]) to create comprehensive case management plans focused on risk factors associated with recidivism. Researchers found that utilizing cognitive-behavioral and social learning strategies that include the offenders’ goals in the plan improves the motivation to change and reduces delinquent behavior.

The levels of monitoring vary depending on each case. Probation officers can work on a regular basis with offenders by seeing them weekly and developing a case-management plan to help them establish employment and find housing. If needed, probation officers may also make referrals to mental health services. Some cases may require a probation officer to make unscheduled visits to an offender’s home or workplace and to monitor him or her using a GPS ankle bracelet. Some cases (for lower-level offenses) do not even require that the probation office check in with the offender.

Probation officers have a variety of educational backgrounds.

- In the United Kingdom, a diploma of probation studies is offered specifically for individuals who want to become probation officers.
- Probation officers in South Africa have social work backgrounds and have the skill set to provide rehabilitative services to individuals (as opposed to making referrals to local services for counseling, employment help, etc.).
- In the United States, probation officers typically have a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. They also receive training in investigation guidelines, report writing, substance abuse and mental health treatment, firearms, and safety.

Although social work and criminal justice often overlap, there are few master’s-level social work programs in the United States that include criminal justice content. Researchers found that only 18% of master of social work (MSW) programs in the United States offer a dual-degree program combining an MSW with either a law or a criminal justice degree. 43% offered at least one criminal justice course as part of their MSW offerings.

Of a sample of 257 students in the United Kingdom working toward their diploma in probation studies, 70% were female, 73.8% were non-Hispanic White, and 91.1% were heterosexual. The individuals in the study reported that they wanted to be probation officers because they wanted to help people, exercise their abilities to solve problems, exercise control and authority, wear a uniform, and be personally fulfilled.

Researchers have described the psychosocial effects on probation officers of their work.

- Individuals working in justice occupations experience stress and burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion).
- In a 2013 study, investigators found that burnout, role conflict (when incompatible demands are placed on an employee), and work stress are predictors of depressive symptoms among probation officers. Depressive symptoms can affect work performance and cause absenteeism.

What We Can Do

- Develop an awareness of your own cultural values, beliefs, and biases and develop knowledge about the histories, traditions, and values of your clients. Adopt treatment methodologies that reflect the cultural needs of the client.
- Social workers should practice with awareness of and adherence to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence; and become knowledgeable of the NASW ethical standards as they apply to the role of probation officers and practice accordingly.
- Learn about probation officers and their work so you can accurately assess your clients’ needs as related to probation; share this information with your colleagues.
Partner with probation officers when working in various contexts with juveniles (e.g., child welfare, group homes, schools) and with adults (e.g., in courts, providing psychological assessments for offenders)\(^{(16)}\)

Advocate for organizational changes that can alleviate stress and burnout among probation officers

Advocate for more inclusion of criminal justice offerings in social work programs and field placements for master of social work candidates within the criminal justice system (e.g., in prisons, in probation services) to increase their knowledge of the criminal justice system, skills in assessing risk of recidivism, and ability to write court reports\(^{(6,9,16)}\)

If in a therapeutic setting, provide probation officers with strategies to deal with work-related stress and burnout (e.g., relaxation techniques, establishment of boundaries between work and personal life)
### References


