

# Probation Officers and Correctional Treatment Specialists

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## Significant Points

- State and local governments employ most workers.
- A bachelor's degree in social work, criminal justice, or a related field usually is required.
- Employment growth, which is projected to be about as fast as average, depends on government funding.

## Nature of the Work

Many people who are convicted of crimes are placed on probation, instead of being sent to prison. During probation, offenders must stay out of trouble and meet various other requirements. *Probation officers*, who are called community supervision officers in some States, supervise people who have been placed on probation. *Correctional treatment specialists*, who may also be known as case managers, counsel prison inmates and help them plan for their release from incarceration.

*Parole officers* and *pretrial services officers* perform many of the same duties that probation officers perform. However, parole officers supervise offenders who have been released from prison on parole to ensure that they comply with the conditions of their parole. In some States, the job of parole and probation officer is combined. Pretrial services officers conduct pretrial investigations of criminal suspects when they are arrested by police. Their findings help to determine whether a suspect should be released before their trial. When suspects are released before their trial, pretrial services officers have the responsibility of supervising them to make sure they adhere to the terms of their release and that they show up for their trial. Occasionally, in the Federal courts system, probation officers perform the functions of pretrial services officers.

Probation officers supervise offenders on probation or parole through personal contact with the offenders and their families. Instead of requiring offenders to meet officers in their offices, many officers meet offenders in their homes and at their places of employment or therapy. Probation and parole agencies also seek the assistance of community organizations, such as religious institutions, neighborhood groups, and local residents, to monitor the behavior of many offenders. Some offenders are required to wear an electronic device so that probation officers can monitor their location and movements. Officers may arrange for offenders to get substance abuse rehabilitation or job training. Probation officers usually work with either adults or juveniles exclusively. Only in small, usually rural, jurisdictions do probation officers counsel both adults and juveniles.

Probation officers also spend much of their time working for the courts. They investigate the background of offenders brought before the court, write presentence reports, and make sentencing recommendations for each offender. Officers review sentencing recommendations with offenders and their families before submitting them to the court. Officers may be required to testify in court as to their findings and recommendations. They also attend court hearings to update the court on the offender's compliance with the terms of his or her sentence and on the offender's efforts at rehabilitation.

Correctional treatment specialists work in correctional institutions (jails and prisons) or in parole or probation agencies. In

jails and prisons, they evaluate the progress of inmates. They also work with inmates, probation officers, and other agencies to develop parole and release plans. Their case reports are provided to the appropriate parole board when their clients are eligible for release. In addition, they plan education and training programs to improve offenders' job skills and provide them with coping, anger management, and drug or sexual abuse counseling either individually or in groups. They usually write treatment plans and summaries for each client. Correctional treatment specialists working in parole and probation agencies perform many of the same duties as their counterparts who work in correctional institutions.

The number of cases a probation officer or correctional treatment specialist handles at one time depends on the needs of offenders and the risks they pose. Higher risk offenders and those who need more counseling usually command more of the officer's time and resources. Caseload size also varies by agency jurisdiction. Consequently, officers may handle from 20 to more than 100 active cases at a time.

Computers, telephones, and fax machines enable the officers to handle the caseload. Probation officers may telecommute from their own homes. Other technological advancements, such as electronic monitoring devices and drug screening, also have assisted probation officers and correctional treatment specialists in supervising and counseling offenders.

## Working Conditions

Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists work with criminal offenders, some of whom may be dangerous. In the course of supervising offenders, they usually interact with many other individuals, such as family members and friends of their clients, who may be angry, upset, or difficult to work with. Workers may be assigned to fieldwork in high crime areas or in institutions where there is a risk of violence or communicable disease. Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists are required to meet many deadlines, most of which are imposed by courts, which contributes to their heavy workloads.

In addition, extensive travel and fieldwork may be required to meet with offenders who are on probation or parole. Workers may be required to carry a firearm or other weapon for protection. They generally work a 40-hour workweek, but some may



*Through personal contact with offenders and their families, probation officers supervise offenders who are on probation or parole.*

work longer. They may be on call 24 hours a day to supervise and assist offenders at any time. They also may be required to collect and transport urine samples of offenders for drug testing. All of these factors make for a stressful work environment. Although the high stress levels can make these jobs very difficult at times, this work also can be very rewarding. Many workers obtain personal satisfaction from counseling members of their community and helping them become productive citizens.

### **Employment**

Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists held about 84,000 jobs in 2002. Most jobs are found in State or local governments. In some States, the State government employs all probation officers and correctional treatment specialists; in other States, local governments are the only employers. In still other States, both levels of government employ these workers. Jobs are more plentiful in urban areas. Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists who work for the Federal Government are employed by the U.S. courts and the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Prisons.

### **Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

Background qualifications for probation officers and correctional treatment specialists vary by State, but a bachelor's degree in social work, criminal justice, or a related field from a 4-year college or university is usually required. Some employers require previous experience or a master's degree in criminal justice, social work, psychology, or a related field.

Applicants usually are administered written, oral, psychological, and physical examinations. Most probation officers and some correctional treatment specialists are required to complete a training program sponsored by their State government or the Federal Government, after which a certification test may be required.

Prospective probation officers or correctional treatment specialists should be in good physical and emotional condition. Most agencies require applicants to be at least 21 years old and, for Federal employment, not older than 37. Those convicted of felonies may not be eligible for employment in this occupation. Familiarity with the use of computers often is required due to the increasing use of computer technology in probation and parole work. Candidates also should be knowledgeable about laws and regulations pertaining to corrections. Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists should possess strong writing skills due to the large numbers of reports they are required to prepare.

Most probation officers and correctional treatment specialists work as trainees or on a probationary period for up to a year. After successfully completing the training period, workers obtain a permanent position. A typical agency has several levels of probation and parole officers and correctional treatment specialists, as well as supervisors. A graduate degree, such as a master's degree in criminal justice, social work, or psychology, may be helpful for advancement.

### **Job Outlook**

Employment of probation officers and correctional treatment specialists is projected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through 2012. In addition to openings due to growth, many openings will be created by replacement needs, especially openings due to the large number of these workers who are expected to retire over the 2002-12 projection period.

This occupation is not attractive to some potential entrants due to relatively low earnings, heavy workloads, and high stress.

Vigorous law enforcement is expected to result in a continuing increase in the prison population. Overcrowding in prisons also has increased the probation population, as judges and prosecutors search for alternate forms of punishment, such as electronic monitoring and day reporting centers. The number of offenders released on parole also is expected to increase to create room in prison for other offenders. The increasing prison, parole, and probation populations should spur demand for probation and parole officers and correctional treatment specialists. However, the job outlook depends primarily on the amount of government funding that is allocated to corrections, and especially to probation systems. Although community supervision is far less expensive than keeping offenders in prison, a change in political trends toward more imprisonment and away from community supervision could result in reduced employment opportunities.

### **Earnings**

Median annual earnings of probation officers and correctional treatment specialists in 2002 were \$38,360. The middle 50 percent earned between \$30,770 and \$50,550. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$25,810, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$62,520. In 2002, median annual earnings for probation officers and correctional treatment specialists employed in State government were \$38,720; those employed in local government earned \$39,450. Higher wages tend to be found in urban areas.

### **Related Occupations**

Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists counsel criminal offenders as they reenter society. Other occupations that involve similar responsibilities include social workers, social and human service assistants, and counselors.

Probation officers and correctional treatment also play a major role in maintaining public safety. Other occupations related to corrections and law enforcement include police and detectives, correctional officers, and firefighting occupations.

### **Sources of Additional Information**

For information about criminal justice job opportunities in your area, contact your State's Department of Corrections, Criminal Justice, or Probation.

Further information about probation officers and correctional treatment specialists is available from:

- ▶ American Probation and Parole Association, P.O. Box 11910, Lexington, KY 40578. Internet: <http://www.appa-net.org>
- ▶ American Correctional Association, 4380 Forbes Blvd., Lanham, MD 20706. Internet: <http://www.aca.org>