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# Probation Officers and Correctional Treatment Specialists

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## Significant Points

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

## Nature of the Work

Many people who are convicted of crimes are placed on probation instead of being sent to prison. People who have served time in prison are often released on parole. During probation and parole, offenders must stay out of trouble and meet various other requirements. Probation officers, parole officers, and correctional treatment specialists work with and monitor offenders to prevent them from committing new crimes.

*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 offenders and create rehabilitation plans for them to follow when they are no longer in prison or on parole. *Parole officers* perform many of the same duties that probation officers perform. The difference is that parole officers supervise offenders who have been released from prison, whereas probation officers work with those who are sentenced to probation instead of prison. *Pretrial services officers* conduct pretrial investigations, the findings of which help determine whether suspects should be released before their trial.

Probation and parole 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. Probation and parole 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. In some States, the jobs of parole and probation officers are combined.

Probation officers also spend much of their time working for the courts. They investigate the backgrounds of the accused, write presentence reports, and recommend sentences. They review sentencing recommendations with offenders and their families before submitting them to the court. Probation officers may be required to testify in court as to their findings and rec-

ommendations. They also attend hearings to update the court on offenders' efforts at rehabilitation and compliance with the terms of their sentences.

Correctional treatment specialists work in jails, prisons, or parole or probation agencies. In jails and prisons, they evaluate the progress of inmates. They may evaluate inmates using questionnaires and psychological tests. They also work with inmates, probation officers, and other agencies to develop parole and release plans. Their case reports, which discuss the inmate's history and likelihood of committing another crime, 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 and 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 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.

Pretrial services officers conduct pretrial investigations, the findings of which help determine whether suspects should be released before their trial. When suspects are released before their trial, pretrial services officers supervise them to make sure they adhere to the terms of their release and that they show up for trial. In the Federal courts system, probation officers perform the functions of pretrial services officers.

**Work environment.** 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,



Most probation officers and correctional treatment specialists work in State or local government.

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 court-imposed deadlines, which contribute to 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 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.

Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists generally work a 40-hour week, but some may work longer. They may be on call 24 hours a day to supervise and assist offenders at any time.

### Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Qualifications vary by agency, but a bachelor's degree is usually required. Most employers require candidates to pass oral, written, and psychological examinations.

**Education and training.** A bachelor's degree in social work, criminal justice, psychology, or a related field is usually required. Some employers require a master's degree in criminal justice, social work, psychology, or a related field for candidates who do not have previous related experience. Different employers have different requirements for what counts as related experience. It may include work in probation, pretrial services, parole, corrections, criminal investigations, substance abuse treatment, social work, or counseling.

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. Most probation officers and correctional treatment specialists work as trainees or on a probationary period for up to a year before being offered a permanent position.

**Other qualifications.** Applicants usually take written, oral, psychological, and physical examinations. 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 of-

ficers and correctional treatment specialists should have strong writing skills because they are required to prepare many reports. They should also have excellent listening and interpersonal skills to work effectively with offenders.

**Advancement.** A typical agency has several levels of probation and parole officers and correctional treatment specialists, as well as supervisors. Advancement is primarily based on length of experience and performance. A graduate degree, such as a master's degree in criminal justice, social work, or psychology, may be helpful for advancement.

### Employment

Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists held about 94,000 jobs in 2006. Most jobs are 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. In the Federal Government, probation officers are employed by the U.S. courts, and correctional treatment specialists are employed by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Prisons.

### Job Outlook

Employment of probation officers and correctional treatment specialists is projected to grow as fast as the average for all occupations through 2016. Job opportunities are expected to be excellent.

**Employment change.** Employment of probation officers and correctional treatment specialists is projected to grow 11 percent between 2006 and 2016, as fast as the average for all occupations. Mandatory sentencing guidelines calling for longer sentences and reduced parole for inmates have resulted in a large increase in the prison population. However, mandatory sentencing guidelines are being reconsidered in many States because of budgetary constraints, court decisions, and doubts about the guidelines' effectiveness. Instead, there may be more emphasis in many States on rehabilitation and alternate forms of punishment, such as probation, spurring demand for probation and parole officers and correctional treatment specialists. Additionally, there will be a need for parole officers to supervise the large numbers of people who are currently incarcerated and will be released from prison.

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.

### Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-2016	
				Number	Percent
Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists.....	21-1092	94,000	105,000	10,000	11

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

**Job prospects.** 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. This occupation is not attractive to some potential entrants due to relatively low earnings, heavy workloads, and high stress. For these reasons, job opportunities are expected to be excellent.

### **Earnings**

Median annual earnings of probation officers and correctional treatment specialists in May 2006 were \$42,500. The middle 50 percent earned between \$33,880 and \$56,280. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$28,000, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$71,160. In May 2006, median annual earnings for probation officers and correctional treatment specialists employed in State government were \$42,970; those employed in local government earned \$43,100. Higher wages tend to be found in urban areas.

### **Related Occupations**

Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists counsel criminal offenders while they are in prison or on parole. Other occupations that involve similar responsibilities include social workers, social and human service assistants, and counselors.

Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists 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>