



OJJDP

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March 1996

J U V E N I L E J U S T I C E B U L L E T I N

Juvenile Probation: The Workhorse of the Juvenile Justice System

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In 1993 nearly 1.5 million delinquency cases were handled by juvenile courts. Virtually every one of those cases had contact with a probation officer at some point. Probation departments screened most of those cases to determine how they should be processed, made detention decisions on some of them, prepared investigation reports on most of them, provided supervision to over a half million of them, and delivered aftercare services to many of the juveniles released from institutions. Since 1929, when the first *Juvenile Court Statistics* report was published using 1927 data, probation has been the overwhelming dispositional choice of juvenile and family court judges. In 1993, 56 percent of all cases adjudicated for a delinquency offense received probation as the most severe disposition, compared with 28 percent that were placed in some type of residential facility, 12 percent that were given some other disposition (e.g., fines, restitution, or community service), and 4 percent that were dismissed with no further sanctions.

Over the past several years, the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) has produced reports, parts of which describe the profession of probation or the youth on probation (see References). This information is compiled here to present the most comprehensive picture of juvenile probation activity in the Nation.

Generally, juvenile probation officers are college-educated white males, 30–49 years old, with 5–10 years of experience in the field. Typically the officers earn \$20,000–\$39,000 per year and receive standard benefits packages, but not necessarily annual salary increases. The average caseload is 41 juveniles. Although probation officers have some arrest powers, they do not normally carry weapons.

Some of the typical problems juvenile probation officers face are a lack of resources, not enough staff, and too many cases. Although they chose this line of work “to help kids,” their greatest sources of frustration are an inability to impact the lives of youth, the attitudes of probationers and their families, and difficulties in identifying successes.

The Profession

What Is Juvenile Probation?

Juvenile probation is the oldest and most widely used vehicle through which a range of court-ordered services is rendered. Probation may be used at the “front end” of the juvenile justice system for first-time, low-risk offenders or at the “back end” as an alternative to institutional confinement for more serious offenders. In some cases probation may be voluntary, in which the youth agrees to

From the Administrator

This bulletin was prepared, in part, based upon responses to a nationwide survey of juvenile probation officers and administrators conducted in 1992 by NCJJ. The survey was part of ongoing efforts by NCJJ's Juvenile Probation Officer Initiative (JPOI) to address the needs of juvenile probation officers nationally through applied research, program development, technical assistance, and information dissemination. JPOI is a component of NCJJ's Technical Assistance to the Juvenile Court Project funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

As part of JPOI, NCJJ compiled a data base of juvenile probation officers in every county in the country. This data base is used to select random samples for surveys, analyze information about probation departments, and disseminate information to the field. Information on youth placed on probation comes from the *Juvenile Court Statistics* series, which describes data stored in the National Juvenile Court Data Archive at NCJJ. The archive, funded by OJJDP, contains the most detailed information available on youth involved in the juvenile justice system and on activities of the Nation's juvenile courts.

It is my hope that this bulletin assists the probation field in its critically important work.

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Administrator

comply with a period of informal probation in lieu of formal adjudication. More often, once adjudicated and formally ordered to a term of probation, the juvenile must submit to the probation conditions established by the court.

The official duties of juvenile probation professionals vary from State to State and can even differ between jurisdictions within a single State. Nonetheless, a basic set of juvenile probation functions includes: intake screening of cases referred to juvenile and family courts, predisposition or presentence investigation of juveniles, and court-ordered supervision of juvenile offenders.

Not all probation departments execute all three of these functions independently. For example, in some jurisdictions the prosecutor shares the intake responsibility with the probation officer, and in other jurisdictions the prosecutor has sole responsibility for the intake process. Similarly, probation responsibilities are not always limited to intake, investigation, and supervision. Some departments also provide aftercare for youth released from institutions; others may administer detention or manage local residential facilities or special programs.

How Are Probation Departments Organized?

Probation services are administered by the local juvenile court or by the State administrative office of courts in 23 States and the District of Columbia. In another 14 States, probation administration is a combination of structures, usually with services administered by the juvenile court in urban counties and by a State executive system of probation in smaller counties. In 10 States probation is administered statewide through an executive branch department. In three States, the county executive administers probation (Table 1).

While juvenile probation services continue to be predominantly organized under the judiciary, recent legislative activity has primarily transferred these services from the local juvenile court to a State court judicial department. The transfer of juvenile probation services to State judicial administration is consistent with the emerging pattern of State funding of courts.

How Many Juvenile Probation Officers Are There in the Country?

There are an estimated 18,000 juvenile probation professionals impacting the lives of juveniles in the United States.

Eighty-five percent of these professionals are involved in the delivery of basic intake, investigation, and supervision services at the line officer level; the remaining 15 percent are involved in the administration of probation offices or the management of probation staff.

**Table 1:
Probation Supervision Tends To Be Administered by
Local Juvenile Courts or by a State Executive Branch Agency**

| State Administration | | Local Administration | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Judicial Branch | Executive Branch | Judicial Branch | Executive Branch |
| Connecticut | Alaska | Alabama | California |
| Hawaii | Arkansas | Arizona | Idaho |
| Iowa | Delaware | Arkansas | Minnesota |
| Kentucky | Florida | California | Mississippi |
| Nebraska | Georgia | Colorado | New York |
| North Carolina | Idaho | District of Columbia | Oregon |
| North Dakota | Kentucky | Georgia | Washington |
| South Dakota | Louisiana | Illinois | Wisconsin |
| Utah | Maine | Indiana | |
| West Virginia | Maryland | Kansas | |
| | Minnesota | Kentucky | |
| | Mississippi | Louisiana | |
| | New Hampshire | Massachusetts | |
| | New Mexico | Michigan | |
| | North Dakota | Minnesota | |
| | Oklahoma | Missouri | |
| | Rhode Island | Montana | |
| | South Carolina | Nevada | |
| | Tennessee | New Jersey | |
| | Vermont | Ohio | |
| | Virginia | Oklahoma | |
| | West Virginia | Pennsylvania | |
| | Wyoming | Tennessee | |
| | | Texas | |
| | | Virginia | |
| | | Washington | |
| | | Wisconsin | |
| | | Wyoming | |

Note: Bolded States indicate that probation is provided by a combination of agencies. Often larger, urban counties operate local probation departments, while the State administers probation in smaller counties.

Source: Hurst, H., IV, and Torbet, P. (1993). *Organization and Administration of Juvenile Services: Probation, Aftercare, and State Institutions for Delinquent Youth*. In Snyder, H. and Sickmund, M. (1995). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: A National Report*. NCJ 153569.

How Large Are Probation Officers' Caseloads?

Survey results of those officers who reported an active field supervision caseload indicate that the size of caseloads within departments ranged between 2 and more than 200 cases, with a typical (median) active caseload of 41. The optimal caseload suggested by respondents was 30 cases (Table 2).

A comparison of caseloads across geographic areas (urban, suburban, and rural) revealed substantial differences. The median caseload for urban officers was greater than the median caseload for suburban officers, which, in turn, was greater than the median caseload for rural officers. Similarly, urban and suburban juvenile probation officers reported a higher optimal caseload than rural officers. Rural officers are more likely than their urban or suburban counterparts to carry a mixed caseload of both adult and juvenile cases.

How Do Urban Counties Compare in Terms of Department Size?

Table 3 presents manpower rates for several urban jurisdictions. All have specialized juvenile probation departments; therefore, mixed caseloads of adults and juveniles are not an issue.

At first glance it appears that New York is understaffed relative to Chicago. However, the upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction in New York is 15; it is 16 in Illinois. Even though rate calculations control for upper age differences, older juveniles generate more delinquency referrals than younger juveniles. While 16-year-olds constitute about 14 percent of the population aged 10–16 nationwide, they account

for more than 25 percent of delinquency referrals to courts in jurisdictions with an upper age of 16. The exclusion of 16-year-olds from juvenile jurisdiction has a dramatic effect on the need for juvenile probation staff.

In addition to mixed caseloads and upper age differences, other variables that impact department or caseload size include the range of functions performed by juvenile probation, the range of juvenile behaviors prohibited by law, and the number of crimes excluded from juvenile court jurisdiction. Moreover, the extent to which laws are enforced and crimes are cleared with an arrest varies between jurisdictions, as does the involvement of prosecutors and the use of diversion or informal handling.

How Much Do Juvenile Probation Officers Earn?

Over three-quarters of all survey respondents earned less than \$40,000 per year. More than half (53 percent) of line staff earned less than \$30,000 per year, but 13 percent earned \$40,000 per year or more. Nearly 30 percent of the administrators earned more than \$49,999 per year. Very few line staff reported earning salaries higher than that.

Only 28 percent of the respondents indicated that they routinely received annual salary increases; 30 percent replied that they received none; and 42 percent indicated that it varied whether they received increases. Of those that did receive annual salary increases, 50 percent received increases of less than 4 percent annually, 47 percent received increases of 4–6 percent, and fewer than 3 percent received increases in excess of 6 percent.

Youth on Probation

What Is the Volume of Cases Placed on Probation?

In 1993, 35 percent (520,600) of all formally and informally handled delinquency cases disposed by juvenile courts resulted in probation. Probation was the most severe disposition in over half (56 percent) of *adjudicated* delinquency cases, with annual proportions remaining constant for the 5-year period 1989–1993.

The 1.5 million delinquency cases handled by juvenile courts in 1993 represented a 23-percent increase from 1989. Similarly, the number of juvenile cases placed on probation (either formally or informally) increased 21 percent, from 428,500 in 1989 to 520,600 in 1993. The growth in probation caseloads was directly related to the general growth in referrals to juvenile courts. The likelihood of a probation disposition did not change, because judges did not increase the rate at which they used probation as a disposition. During this same period, the number of *adjudicated* cases placed on *formal* probation increased 17 percent, from 216,900 to 254,800, and the number of cases involving a person offense (homicide, rape, robbery, assault, kidnaping, etc.) resulting in formal probation increased 45 percent (Table 4).

What Is the Profile of Cases Placed on Probation?

Most cases (54 percent) placed on formal probation in 1993 involved youth adjudicated for property offenses; 21 percent involved person offenses; 18 percent involved public order offenses; and 7 percent involved drug law violations (Table 5). Even though most of the cases placed on probation are for property offenses (because most cases seen by juvenile courts are property cases), the offense profile of cases placed on formal probation changed slightly between 1989 and 1993, with an increase in the proportion of cases involving person offenses. Probation caseload changes reflected overall delinquency caseload changes in terms of growth and offense profile—the majority of cases processed by juvenile courts remained property offenses, but the court also experienced an increase in cases involving person offenses. To the extent that probation is a mirror of what juvenile courts are facing, it is not surprising that probation

Table 2:
Probation Officers Report Differences in Their Actual and Optimal Caseloads

| Caseload | Urban | Suburban | Rural | Overall |
|----------|-------|----------|-------|---------|
| Current | 47 | 40 | 30 | 41 |
| Optimal | 35 | 35 | 25 | 30 |

Source: Thomas, D. (1993). *The State of Juvenile Probation 1992: Results of a Nationwide Survey*. NCJ 159536.

**Table 3:
There Are Major Differences in the Number of Probation Officers in Urban Jurisdictions**

| City | 1990 Census Population 10–Upper Age | Upper Age | Officers Reported 1993–1994 | Duties | | | | Officers/ 10,000 Youth 10–Upper Age |
|-------------------|--|--------------|--------------------------------|------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------|--|
| | | | | I = Intake | V = Investigation | S = Supervision | A = Aftercare | |
| New York, NY | 536,300 | 15 | 175 | I | V | S | | 3 |
| Chicago, IL | 469,000 | 16 | 318 | I | V | S | | 7 |
| Houston, TX | 288,300 | 16 | 208 | I | V | S | | 7 |
| Detroit, MI | 212,100 | 16 | 100 | I | V | S | | 5 |
| Los Angeles, CA | 943,500 | 17 | 404 | I | V | S | | 4 |
| Orange, CA | 242,000 | 17 | 148 | I | V | S | | 6 |
| Phoenix, AZ | 225,400 | 17 | 275 | I | V | S | D | 12 |
| Miami, FL | 201,900 | 17 | 191 | I | V | S | A | 10 |
| Philadelphia, PA | 158,800 | 17 | 190 | I | V | S | A | 12 |
| Cleveland, OH | 142,500 | 17 | 105 | I | V | S | | 7 |
| Seattle, WA | 137,100 | 17 | 95 | I | V | S | | 7 |
| Oakland, CA | 120,500 | 17 | 120 | I | V | S | | 10 |
| Memphis, TN | 95,600 | 17 | 65 | I | V | S | A | 7 |
| Cincinnati, OH | 92,200 | 17 | 34 | | V | S | | 4 |
| Minneapolis, MN | 91,700 | 17 | 82 | I | V | S | A | 9 |
| Fairfax, VA | 88,100 | 17 | 95 | I | V | S | A | 11 |
| Newark, NJ | 83,000 | 17 | 38 | | | S | | 5 |
| Baltimore, MD | 70,500 | 17 | 142 | I | V | S | A | 20 |
| Oklahoma City, OK | 64,600 | 17 | 25 | I | V | S | | 4 |

Note: "Officers Reported 1993–1994" count includes local juvenile probation administrators, supervisors, line staff, and special program staff (e.g., community service and drug and alcohol program officers).

Source: Hurst, H., IV, and Vereb, P. (1995). Special Analysis of the Juvenile Probation Officer Initiative Database.

officers are finding more violent youth in their caseloads. Moreover, while there has not been a change in judicial use of probation as a disposition, the increase in violent youth on probation may very well be a result of a lack of secure beds for these offenders. Probation is the only alternative.

Challenges to Probation

The field of probation is staffed by dedicated individuals who believe that young persons who break the law can change their behavior in favor of law-abiding activities. Probation departments cannot, however, limit their intake of probationers like private providers or State training schools, which routinely operate

over capacity and often have caps on admissions. In that sense, probation is the "catch basin" of the juvenile justice system and is being confronted with increasing and, as indicated below, more dangerous caseloads.

In fact, one of the biggest issues facing the field of juvenile probation is on-the-job safety. There is a growing perception that the work of juvenile probation is increasingly dangerous. Almost one-third of the survey respondents reported that they had been assaulted on the job at some point in their careers. When asked whether, during the course of their duties, they were ever concerned about personal safety, 42 percent of the respondents reported that they were usually or always concerned.

Balancing juvenile probation officers' safety and the safety of the public with probationers' needs is a major challenge. Many departments have developed creative and successful intensive supervision and school-based programs that target special populations of probationers; however, there is increased pressure to do much more community-based programming.

Indeed, in the face of rising caseloads, fixed resources, public demand for more accountability, and serious safety concerns, the mission of probation will need to evolve even further to respond not only to juvenile offenders but also to the community.

**Table 4:
Probation Caseloads Are Growing**

| Offense | Number of Adjudicated Cases Placed on Formal Probation | | |
|--------------|---|---------|----------------|
| | 1989 | 1993 | Percent Change |
| Delinquency | 216,900 | 254,800 | 17% |
| Person | 37,200 | 53,900 | 45 |
| Property | 126,300 | 136,600 | 8 |
| Drugs | 17,600 | 17,500 | 0 |
| Public Order | 35,900 | 46,800 | 30 |

Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding. "Percent Change" calculations are based on unrounded numbers.

Source: Butts, J., et al. (1995). *Juvenile Court Statistics 1993*. NCJ 159535.

References

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This bulletin was prepared using the following reports produced by the National Center for Juvenile Justice:

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Hurst, H., IV. and Torbet, P. (1993). *Organization and Administration of Juvenile Services: Probation, Aftercare, and State Institutions for Delinquent Youth*.

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* Documents available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, 800-638-8736; all others available from NCJJ.

This bulletin was prepared under grant number 95-JN-FX-K003 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), U.S. Department of Justice.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

**Table 5:
Offenses Against Other
Persons Make Up a Growing
Proportion of Probation
Officers' Caseloads**

| Offense | 1989 | 1993 |
|---|---------|---------|
| Person | 17% | 21% |
| Property | 58 | 54 |
| Drugs | 8 | 7 |
| Public Order | 17 | 18 |
| Total | 100% | 100% |
| Cases Resulting in Formal Probation: | 216,900 | 254,800 |

Note: Detail may not total 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: Butts, J., et al. (1995). *Juvenile Court Statistics 1993*. NCJ 159535.

An emerging issue for probation departments seeking some reasoned relief from juvenile justice policies that shift between just deserts and treatment philosophies is whether to embrace a paradigm that encompasses yet another philosophy. The "balanced approach" and "restorative justice" concepts evoke new ways of looking

not only at the delivery of probation services, but also the continuum of services available to respond to juvenile offenders in the community. The balanced approach (see Maloney, Romig, and Armstrong, 1988) espouses the potential value in any case of applying, to some degree, an entire set of principles—community protection, accountability, competency development, and/or treatment—along with individualized assessment. Restorative justice (see Umbreit, 1989) promotes maximum involvement of the victim, offender, and community in the justice process. These two concepts have been combined into the "balanced and restorative justice" model, which suggests that justice is best served when the community, victim, and youth receive balanced attention, and all gain tangible benefits from their interactions with the juvenile justice system. Future bulletins will address these issues in an attempt to support juvenile justice professionals on the front lines in finding new solutions to emerging problems. An upcoming OJJDP Program Summary will highlight the American Probation and Parole Association's program for early identification of and appropriate intervention for drug-involved youth.

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