

Pursuing a Career in Forensic and Public Service Psychology

ALL ABOUT FORENSICS AND PUBLIC SERVICE

We depend on police and other law enforcement officials to solve crimes. Trained in investigative techniques, they can approach a situation objectively and collect “just the facts.”

However, even the savviest investigators need help when the facts are few and a broader perspective is needed to piece together what happened and why.

If you have watched criminal profiler TV shows, you’ve seen police turn to forensic psychologists to get the bad guys. Granted, the depictions of these professionals are designed for entertainment, but they have some basis in reality.

Forensic and public service psychologists are proficient in dissecting details and identifying and interpreting the psychological clues. But their background in human behavior often extends their work beyond the yellow police tape.

In fact, they offer their expertise on many legal matters, including the mental state of criminal defendants. They may be called in to examine and determine whether a defendant should be declared incompetent to stand trial or receive a reduced sentence due to temporary insanity.

Similarly, they advise on jury selection, child custody and family law, violence risk prediction, mediation and dispute resolution, discrimination, civil damages, social science research, and civil commitment — where individuals with symptoms of severe mental illness are ordered by a court into treatment.

Some forensic psychologists work in the area of threat assessment, an emerging science predicting who may be at risk of committing a violent act. And others help select police officers and train first responders. Ultimately, forging the connection between psychology and the justice system is what they do best.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Psychologists in this field may work in prisons, rehabilitation centers, police departments, courthouses, law firms, schools, government agencies or private practices. They are needed to determine whether a suspected criminal has a mental illness, for example, and are called upon to treat incarcerated individuals with substance abuse and addiction issues.

Their work also spans important legal activities that involve minors. They help children in suspected abuse cases to process and communicate their experiences truthfully and accurately, and may prepare them to testify in court or child custody disputes.

Research is a key component of a career in forensic psychology and public service, and it comes in several forms.

Forensic and public service psychologists might study criminal behavior to determine common traits among types of perpetrators. This might involve interviewing criminals, along with their loved ones and even victims. They also often study crime scenes and evaluate evidence left behind (or the lack thereof) to develop a profile of a particular criminal and narrow a list of suspects.

Forensic and public service psychologists also take the stand in court to explain possible motives behind a crime or whether they feel a defendant is guilty based on what they know about his or her behavioral history. As a result, they may influence a criminal’s sentencing.

Forensic and public service psychology applies psychological science and principles to the public safety and judicial systems. Through the lens of human behavior, practitioners work within the criminal justice system to solve problems that keep communities safe.

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Pursuing a Career in Forensic and Public Service Psychology, continued

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Individuals pursuing forensic and public service psychology careers should follow an educational path that is focused on psychology, criminology and forensics. Students can earn a bachelor's degree in psychology with a focus on criminology or criminal justice. They can also earn a bachelor's degree in criminal justice or criminology with a focus on psychology.

While there is no single model for becoming a forensic and public service psychologist, a doctoral degree, often in clinical or counseling psychology, is usually required. Such a degree takes five to seven years of graduate study to complete. After the appropriate education, training and experience, these psychologists can apply for board certification, which certifies that they have a high level of professional competence and maturity for their work in forensic psychology. Most positions in the field require board certification by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP).

The dominant model continues to be one in which an individual earns a doctoral degree in clinical psychology, and subsequently pursues a postdoctoral specialization in forensics. However, more graduate schools are adopting forensic tracks.

WHAT YOU CAN EARN

According to PayScale.com, as of October 2013, most forensic and public service psychologists made between \$33,891 and \$121,931 annually, but tenure reigns; those who stay in the field for a while can earn between \$200,000 and \$400,000.

While salaries can range greatly depending on the sector of employment, most entry-level positions for those with a doctoral degree start between \$60,000 and \$70,000 annually. Salaries for those with a bachelor's or master's degree generally start around \$35,000 or \$40,000 a year.

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