
FAQ FOR STUDENTS

Dear Undergraduate or Masters Student:

We at FPA are eager to help students. At this time, the only internship positions we have are for graduate students in clinical psychology. We cannot invite students to sit in on an assessment because that would be a violation of the privacy for the defendant/litigant under evaluation.

Many students in high school, college, and even graduate school are now required to interview a mental health professional as a homework assignment and often they contact our office. Also, many students who are interested in forensic psychology contact us directly by phone, email, or website inquiry, wanting to talk about their future career paths. Unfortunately, we are now receiving so many requests for these informational interviews that we can no longer oblige because they have become so time consuming. Sorry! The best we can do is to give you written answers to the most common questions we receive during these interviews:

How does one become a forensic psychologist?

Virtually all forensic psychologists have a doctorate in psychology, most commonly in clinical or counseling psychology. In today's world, most forensic psychologists also have post-doctoral training as well. The educational path looks like this:

- 4 years of college
- 4+ years of graduate school in a doctoral clinical or counseling program, usually earning a masters degree along the way followed by completing a doctoral dissertation
- 1 year of predoctoral internship (a year of working full-time in a mental health facility)
- 1 or 2 years of a post-doctoral fellowship and supervision
- completing all paperwork and testing requirements to obtain a license to practice

Even after completing all of the above, there may be additional years of training or supervision for additional specialty certifications. The post-doctoral requirements vary state-by-state.

Some psychologists choose to become both a psychologist and a lawyer, obtaining both a Ph.D. or Psy.D. in psychology as well as a J.D. in law (either in a joint degree program or one degree right after the other). Most J.D./Ph.D. graduates become professors and researchers. If your primary goal is to become a practicing forensic psychologist who conducts evaluations or performs treatment, as compared to an academic who is a researcher or develops public policy, then there is little need for the law degree.

Is your job like that of the psychologists in TV and Hollywood shows such as *CSI*, *SVU*, and *Silence of the Lambs*?

On TV and in movies, forensic psychologists are often portrayed as helping the police to apprehend a suspect. They are shown engaging in ‘profiling’ killers and rapists or using interview techniques to press a suspect into confessing to his or her crime.

This is a false portrayal of the field of forensic psychology! While a very small subdivision of the FBI Behavioral Sciences Unit attempts to create psychological profiles of serial murders and rapists to help the police to catch the criminal, virtually no forensic psychologists are employed as such. In fact, “psychological profiling” is considered so unreliable that it is not admissible as evidence of guilt or innocence during a trial – no court will allow a psychologist to testify that a defendant does or not match a profile and thus is or is not guilty. In the real world, defendants are caught by good police work and lucky breaks and not by psychological profiles.

Forget what you’ve seen on TV. It has nothing to do with the real work of forensic clinical psychologists. In the real world, forensic psychologists are almost always involved with a criminal case only *after* the arrest. We work with the lawyers and judges, not the police. We do not assist the police in investigating crimes, nor proposing who should be considered to be a suspect. We do not usually go to crime scenes, attend autopsies, or interrogate suspects to evoke a confession through convoluted and manipulative techniques.

We do, however, meet with criminal defendants in a variety of locations, such as in jails, prisons, detention centers, and psychiatric hospitals, or while they are on bond. The typical forensic psychologist in a criminal case is either engaged in treatment of the defendant or in the evaluation of the defendant to answer a question for the court.

So what are the real-life job duties of a forensic clinical psychologist?

For the moment, let’s restrict this discussion to forensic clinical psychologists who specialize in criminal defendants because that is what most students inquire about. There are many possible roles:

1. Mental health services at the jail before the trial: Many criminal defendants come to jail with an untreated mental illness or they are in withdrawal from drugs and alcohol. Crimes also often occur because people are in the midst of an emotional crisis in their lives. Some forensic psychologists provide treatment at the jails. They also design behavior modification plans for inmates who have severe conduct problems at the jail, assess what level of secure housing is needed for inmates, and help decide which inmates should be transferred to a psychiatric hospital.
2. Psychological evaluations for the trial: This is our office’s specialty. Most evaluations of

criminal defendants are paid for by the court, as most mentally ill defendants have little money. A small number of assessments are paid privately via the defense attorney, or even paid for directly by the prosecutor's office. We testify in less than 10% of the cases we evaluate. In these cases, the Court or referring attorney has a psychological question for us to answer that is relevant to a legal decision. The typical questions are as follows:

- a. Was the defendant mentally competent to waive his or her *Miranda* rights when the suspect made a statement to the police?
- b. Is the defendant currently mentally competent enough to stand trial, and if not then what type of treatment/education is needed to make the defendant fit for trial? This is the most frequently asked referral question.
- c. Was the defendant was legally insane at the time of the offense?
- d. Are there mitigating issues related to sentencing (psychological reasons to give a shorter or longer sentence) and or are there issues to rebut mitigation?
- e. What is the risk that the defendant will commit another crime in the future?
- f. What type of mental health treatment should the inmate should receive?

As an aside, in our office, the most common types of sentencing evaluations are (a) sex offenders and (b) death penalty hearings for a capital murder trial.

3. After the conviction: Forensic psychologists may provided treatment at a jail, prison, or while the defendant is on probation or parole. Sometimes they consult on appeals.

Forensic clinical psychologists most commonly deal with cases for their local state courts and the local federal courts. The JAG courts (military courts) typically use their own military psychologists for their cases and only rarely retain experts from the civilian community.

In what settings do forensic clinical psychologists work? What level of income can one expect in this field?

For the psychologists who specialize in criminal defendants, the most common places to work are in: high security mental health units in state or federally run psychiatric hospitals; juvenile detention centers; jails and prisons for adult inmates; and in private practice, seeing a mix of inmates and persons who are out on bond.

Most newly graduated clinical psychologists who get a job in the field of forensics are working in an institution, such as a jail or in a forensic mental health unit at a state hospital. They can expect a starting salary of between \$60K and \$80K in their first year of employment in

a government-funded setting. These state/federal hospital/prison jobs typically require a 40 to 50 hour work week and the peak salary for a seasoned psychologist in this sort of setting is usually a little over \$100K, if the person rises to a supervisory position. It is not uncommon for psychologists who have a day job in a institution to supplement their salary by maintaining a small private practice on the side.

For those in private practice as their main employment, the annual income can be highly variable. After all, some business are successful and some are not. A successful forensic clinical psychologist in private practice has the potential to make hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. Like any small business owner, psychologists in private practice are likely to work 60 to 80 hours per week, including nights and weekends.

A small number of forensic psychologists are in academia. They work as teachers and researchers at universities or public policy think tanks. Even the academics, however, often have side practices to keep their clinical skills sharp and to supplement their income.

How do you handle the stress of this work? Have you have been in danger?

It takes a certain temperament to work in jails and prisons with criminal defendants, remain neutral and objective in the face of highly emotional and gruesome situations, and to accept the public scrutiny of testifying. Basically, people either have the temperament for this kind of work or they stop practicing it because of the stress.

By the time the psychologist is appointed by the judge or retained by the attorney, most defendants' mental states are better than when they were arrested. If they were intoxicated at the time of their arrests, they have sobered up. Many of the mentally ill defendants have been started on medications and stabilized. In general, most inmates are motivated to be well behaved so that the psychologist sends a positive report back to the judge. The most acute security concerns have usually subsided by the time the psychologist gets to meet the criminal defendant. However, the psychologist's personal safety is always a risk and the psychologist must be mindful of this at all times. Psychologists interview clients without a guard present for reasons related to confidentiality, so the clinician must have the ability to simultaneously form rapport quickly with a wide array of individuals, monitor the defendant's mental state, and determine if the interview needs to end prematurely. In our more than 20 years in practice and after having seen literally thousands of criminal defendants, one of us has been attacked once. Please note that jails and prisons are very careful to protect their visitors. If an inmate is known to be aggressive, then the inmate might be shackled during the interview or the deputies will be nearby and ready to respond if needed while the psychologist is conducting the assessment.

Defendants who are on bond are more variable. Most were only granted bond after the Court reviewed the situation and considered them stable enough for release. Even so, sometimes we see agitated and aggressive mentally ill defendants at our outpatient office, and periodically someone will show up to an interview clearly intoxicated on a substance. We use common sense

plus a variety of security measures in our office building to minimize the risk of harm to our staff.

This is the simple reality: if one's career involves face-to-face interviews with mentally ill and physically violent criminal defendants, then one must accept that there's always the risk of being harmed. Having said that, however, we know of very few forensic psychologists with a specialty in criminal cases who have been struck by a defendant and only one who sustained a broken bone. On the whole, civil child custody litigants pose a more real and unpredictable threat to the safety of psychologists than do criminal defendants.

What are the most common types of crimes you encounter?

By far, the most common offenses are drug-related. This includes drug possession, drug distribution, and property crimes that were committed to get money to pay for drugs. Next are mild crimes of interpersonal violence, for example a misdemeanor assault or a robbery that did not involve harm to the victim -- frequently committed while the perpetrator was drunk or high. Our office has specialities in sex offender evaluations and treatment, murder and death penalty cases, and the insanity defense, so we see a large number of more serious crimes as well.

The most common mental illnesses in the criminal system are various types of psychosis, mania, depression, and Intellectual Disability (formerly called Mental Retardation). Some of the high profile cases our staff have worked on include Lorena Bobbitt (who cut off her husband's penis), Darryl Atkins (the case the U.S. Supreme Court used to decide that mentally retarded defendants cannot be executed), Lee Boyd Malvo (the 17-year-old D.C. sniper), and Ahmed Muse Salad (a Somali pirate who participated in shooting four Americans to death on a yacht off the coast of Africa).

Some defendants are not mentally ill and instead fake their symptoms, which is called malingering. However, we see far more genuinely mentally ill defendants than malingers. There are procedures to help check for malingering and to be blunt, most criminal defendants are not very good at malingering.

This FAQ has focused on forensic psychologists in criminal cases. Do forensic psychologists get involved with other types of cases?

Yes. "Forensic" simply means "having to do with the law." Thus, a forensic psychologist could assist many types of courts and agencies by providing psychological information that will help the court or agency make a legal decision determination even on non-criminal matters. For example:

- Civil law - meaning, court cases about non-criminal issues:
 - Forensic psychologists evaluate parents and children engaged in custody disputes in order to assist the Court in deciding which parent should have the children, or

- the details of visitation and custody.
- Sometimes a court must determine if an elderly or mentally ill individual is competent to execute a will, or whether the individual should have a guardian or conservator appointed to make decisions on their behalf. The psychologist evaluates the person regarding their mental capacity to make decisions for himself/herself.
- If people sue for “mental damages,” for example from emotional injuries or even brain damage secondary to a trauma like a car accident, a forensic psychologist is often needed to evaluate the plaintiff. However, such law suits are rare.
- Administrative determinations - for agencies that must make a decision according to a set of rules:
 - For a Child Protective Services or similar agency, forensic psychologists evaluate parents who have been accused of abusing their children to see if the parents are psychologically fit to retain or regain custody of their children. Or, the psychologist may be called upon to assess the children.
 - Applicants for certain types of jobs (police officers, correctional officers, nuclear power plant employees) often have to undergo a forensic evaluation to ensure their mental stability before they can be hired. Or, if a police officer has been involved in a critical incident at work (such as shooting a suspect or the officer displayed emotional instability on the job), the officer’s psychological fitness to return to duty could be assessed by a forensic clinical psychologist.
 - Forensic psychologists may be called upon to evaluate an employee who has made a threat at work, to decide whether treatment is needed or whether the employee should be fired under special provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act.
 - Persons applying for workers compensation or for disability benefits on the basis of a mental health problem often require a forensic psychological evaluation to see if they are eligible.

Are there other sources of information about a career in forensic psychology?

Search for following websites:

1. American Psychology-Law Society
2. Careers in Forensic Psychology
3. Psi Chi - What is Forensic Psychology?
4. All-About-Forensic-Psychology

Good luck in your career!

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