CAREER KIT

# Probation Officer Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

*How to Become a Probation Officer*

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

# At a glance

Most probation and parole officers have a bachelor's degree, usually in criminal justice, social work, psychology, or a related field, then pass an agency's written exam, interview, and background check. After hiring you complete a government training program, and you may work as a trainee for up to a year. Rules differ between county, state, and federal agencies, so check the agency you want to join.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Timeline** | 4–5 years (bachelor's degree plus hiring and training) |
| **Typical cost** | $0–$100,000+ (mostly the bachelor's degree) |
| **Education** | Bachelor's degree, typically in criminal justice, social work, psychology, or a related field |
| **License** | No license; agency or state training and certification after hiring (varies by state) |
| **Median pay** | $66,270 per year |
| **Job outlook** | +3% (2025–35), about as fast as average; about 7,900 openings a year |

SECTION 2

# Step-by-step path

### 1. Understand probation vs. parole and pick your level

*Time: 1–2 weeks*

Probation officers supervise people sentenced to community supervision instead of, or in addition to, jail or prison. Parole officers supervise people released from prison. Some states combine both roles in one job, often called a probation and parole officer or community supervision officer. Jobs exist at the county, state, and federal levels, and each employer sets its own hiring rules.

### 2. Earn a bachelor's degree

*Time: About 4 years · Cost: $20,000–$100,000+*

BLS lists a bachelor's degree as the typical entry-level education. Criminal justice, social work, psychology, sociology, and criminology are the most common majors, and some agencies list the specific fields they accept. Courses in counseling, substance use, and report writing are useful because much of the job is case management and writing court reports.

### 3. Get related experience

*Time: 6 months–2 years*

Internships with a probation department, court, jail, juvenile facility, or community treatment program make you a stronger candidate. Paid work in case management, substance use treatment, youth services, or crisis work also counts with many employers. Federal probation officer jobs at higher grades ask for specialized experience gained after your degree.

### 4. Apply and pass the hiring process

*Time: 2–6 months*

Expect a written or competency exam, an oral interview, a psychological evaluation, drug testing, and a full criminal background check. A valid driver's license is often required, and some agencies require you to be at least 21. Positions that carry firearms or peace officer status may add medical and physical fitness standards.

### 5. Complete agency training

*Time: Several weeks to several months*

Most new officers complete a government-sponsored training program and may need to pass a certification test at the end. In California, for example, probation officers complete a Probation Officer Core course under the Board of State and Community Corrections plus the PC 832 peace officer course. New federal probation and pretrial services officers attend a six-week program at the Federal Probation and Pretrial Academy at FLETC in Charleston, South Carolina.

### 6. Finish your trainee period

*Time: 6–12 months*

BLS notes that new officers may work as trainees for up to one year before getting a permanent position. You will carry a smaller caseload, shadow senior officers, and learn risk assessment tools, court report formats, and your agency's case management system.

### 7. Specialize or move up

*Time: Ongoing*

With experience you can move to specialized caseloads such as sex offense, mental health, domestic violence, gang, or drug court supervision, or become a supervisor. Some officers move to federal probation, which pays on its own court salary scale, or into correctional treatment specialist roles.

SECTION 3

# Costs & requirements

## Estimated costs (USD)

| Item | Low | High | Note |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bachelor's degree (public in-state to private) | $20,000 | $100,000 | Typical range, varies by school; financial aid and community college transfer can lower it |
| Associate degree in criminal justice (first two years) | $3,000 | $15,000 | Typical range, varies by school; transfers into a bachelor's program |
| Agency training academy | $0 | $0 | Usually paid by the hiring agency |
| Civil service exam and application fees | $0 | $100 | Many agencies charge nothing; some civil service systems charge a small fee |
| Exam study guides | $0 | $60 | Optional |
| Psychological, medical, and drug screening | $0 | $0 | Normally paid by the agency |
| **Total** | **$23,000** | **$115,160** | |

## Requirements

| | |
|---|---|
| **Education** | A bachelor's degree is the typical requirement. Federal probation officer jobs require a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university, and some state and county agencies accept fewer years of college plus experience. Check each posting. |
| **Age** | Some agencies require you to be at least 21. U.S. federal probation officer postings set a maximum entry age: first-time appointees generally must not have reached their 37th birthday, because the job is covered by law enforcement retirement rules. |
| **Background** | A criminal background check, drug testing, and often a psychological evaluation. A felony conviction usually disqualifies you; some misdemeanors may too, depending on the agency. |
| **Exams** | Oral, written, competency, and psychological exams may be required. Many state and county civil service systems use a ranked written exam for eligibility lists. |
| **Driver's license** | A valid driver's license is often required because officers make home and field visits. |
| **Training and certification** | Completion of a state, county, or federal training program after hiring. Whether you become a certified peace officer and carry a firearm varies by state and agency. |
| **Skills** | Clear writing for court reports, interviewing, de-escalation, time management for large caseloads, and the ability to stay firm but fair with people under supervision. |

SECTION 4

# 90-Day Action Plan

*Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.*

## Phase 1: Map your path

*Days 1–30*

**Goal:** Choose county, state, or federal work and know exactly what each employer requires.

- ☐ List 5 probation or parole agencies you could work for and save their job postings
- ☐ Note each agency's degree, age, driver's license, and firearm requirements
- ☐ Check whether your degree major is on each agency's accepted list
- ☐ Review your own record, driving history, and social media for background check issues
- ☐ Sign up for job alerts on your state's civil service site and USAJOBS / uscourts.gov
- ☐ Talk to one working probation or parole officer about the job

## Phase 2: Build experience

*Days 31–60*

**Goal:** Get practical experience and skills agencies look for.

- ☐ Apply for an internship or volunteer role with probation, a court, or a treatment program
- ☐ Take or review a course in report writing or case management
- ☐ Learn the basics of risk and needs assessment tools used in community supervision
- ☐ Practice writing a one-page case summary from a news story or mock case
- ☐ Take a de-escalation or mental health first aid training if available locally
- ☐ Start a fitness routine if your target agency has a physical test

## Phase 3: Apply and get hired

*Days 61–90*

**Goal:** Submit strong applications and pass the hiring steps.

- [ ] Write a one-page resume focused on case management, writing, and work with at-risk people
- [ ] Apply to every open probation, parole, or community supervision posting that fits
- [ ] Study for the written exam using the announcement's subject list
- [ ] Practice the interview questions in this kit out loud
- [ ] Gather documents for the background investigation
- [ ] Send thank-you notes after each interview

SECTION 5

# Documents checklist

*Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.*

- ☐ Bachelor's degree diploma or proof of expected graduation
- ☐ Official transcripts
- ☐ Valid driver's license and driving record
- ☐ Birth certificate or proof of citizenship
- ☐ Resume and cover letter
- ☐ List of past addresses and employers for the background investigation
- ☐ 3–5 professional references
- ☐ Internship or volunteer verification letters
- ☐ Military discharge papers (DD-214), if applicable

SECTION 6

# Exams & how to prepare

## Agency or civil service written exam

**What it is:** Tests reading comprehension, written communication, judgment, and sometimes basic case scenarios. Your score often decides your rank on the hiring list.

**How to prepare:** Get the exam announcement, study the posted subject areas, and practice timed reading and report writing for 2–4 weeks.

## Oral board interview

**What it is:** A panel asks situational and behavioral questions about ethics, conflict, and working with people under supervision.

**How to prepare:** Prepare short stories from work or internships using the situation-action-result format and practice with a friend.

## Psychological evaluation

**What it is:** A written personality test plus an interview with a psychologist, common for officer positions.

**How to prepare:** Answer honestly and consistently; there is nothing to study.

## Academy or certification exam

**What it is:** End-of-training test required by many state agencies before you work a full caseload.

**How to prepare:** Keep up with training coursework and ask your field training officer for the learning objectives.

SECTION 7

# Interview questions

**1. Why do you want to be a probation officer?**

*Tip:* Talk about public safety and helping people change, not about 'catching' people.

**2. How would you handle someone who keeps missing appointments?**

*Tip:* Show a step-by-step response: find the cause, document, warn, and follow agency policy on violations.

**3. What would you do if a person under supervision offered you a gift?**

*Tip:* Decline it and report it; this tests ethics and boundaries.

**4. How do you balance enforcement and helping people?**

*Tip:* Explain that accountability and support work together, with examples.

**5. Tell me about a time you dealt with an angry person.**

*Tip:* Describe how you stayed calm, listened, and set limits.

**6. How do you manage a heavy workload with deadlines?**

*Tip:* Name your system for tracking tasks and court dates.

**7. What would you do if you found out a coworker was too close to a client?**

*Tip:* Say you would report it to a supervisor; integrity matters.

**8. How would you handle a home visit that feels unsafe?**

*Tip:* Leave, call for backup, and follow safety policy. Never take unnecessary risks.

**9. What do you know about evidence-based supervision?**

*Tip:* Mention risk-needs-responsivity, motivational interviewing, and assessment tools.

**10. How would you write a report for a judge?**

*Tip:* Be factual, organized, objective, and on time.

**11. How do you work with people from different backgrounds?**

*Tip:* Give a concrete example of respect and clear communication.

**12. Where do you see yourself in five years?**

*Tip:* Mention specialized caseloads, training others, or a supervisor role.

SECTION 8

# Resume bullet examples

*Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.*

- Completed a 400-hour internship with a county probation department, assisting officers with caseload of 60+ clients
- Drafted pre-sentence investigation summaries under officer supervision
- Conducted intake interviews and entered case notes into the department's case management system
- Coordinated referrals to substance use treatment and employment programs
- Supported youth in a residential program using de-escalation techniques
- Tracked compliance with court-ordered conditions for assigned cases
- Earned a B.S. in Criminal Justice with coursework in corrections, counseling, and report writing
- Completed Mental Health First Aid and crisis intervention training

SECTION 9

# Common mistakes to avoid

1. Choosing a degree major that your target agency does not accept
2. Not being fully honest on the background questionnaire
3. Missing the federal maximum entry age if you want federal probation
4. Applying with no internship or related experience
5. Weak writing skills; court reports are a core part of the job
6. Ignoring county jobs, which often hire more often than state or federal agencies
7. Treating the role as only law enforcement and forgetting the case management side

SECTION 10

# 13-week progress tracker

*Fill this in by hand each week.*

| Week | Focus | Done? | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | | | |
| **2** | | | |
| **3** | | | |
| **4** | | | |
| **5** | | | |
| **6** | | | |
| **7** | | | |
| **8** | | | |
| **9** | | | |
| **10** | | | |
| **11** | | | |
| **12** | | | |
| **13** | | | |

SECTION 11

# Resources, salary & disclaimer

## Resources

- **BLS: Probation Officers and Correctional Treatment Specialists**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/probation-officers-and-correctional-treatment-specialists.htm

- **U.S. Courts: Careers**

https://www.uscourts.gov/careers

- **American Probation and Parole Association**

https://www.appa-net.org

- **USAJOBS**

https://www.usajobs.gov

## Salary

| Bottom 10% | Median | Top 10% |
|---|---|---|
| Less than $46,840 | **$66,270 per year ($31.86 per hour)** | More than $107,790 |

**Outlook:** BLS projects employment to grow 3% from 2025 to 2035, about as fast as average, with about 7,900 openings each year, mostly to replace workers who leave. There were about 93,700 probation officer and correctional treatment specialist jobs in 2025. Pay depends heavily on whether you work for a county, a state, or the federal courts.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, Probation Officers and Correctional Treatment Specialists, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/probation-officers-and-correctional-treatment-specialists.htm

**Disclaimer.** Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.