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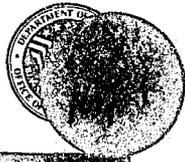
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Research in Action

James K. Stewart, Director

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Difficult clients, large caseloads plague probation, parole agencies

by Randall Guynes

American probation and parole systems now face an increasingly difficult clientele despite less adequate resources. Despite greater financial resources, personnel increases are not keeping pace with rising caseloads of clients with serious problems. These are some of the major findings of a survey of State and local probation and parole officers conducted as part of the National Assessment Program (NAP) sponsored by the National Institute of Justice.

This *Research in Action* describes survey results from 49 State probation and parole directors and 339 local offices. Of the local offices, 43 percent provide probation services only, and 21 percent are parole field offices. The remaining 36 percent are responsible for both probation and parole and are referred to as "combined" agencies throughout this publication.

The primary aim of the National Assessment Program is to identify key needs and problems of local and State criminal justice practitioners. To accomplish this, the National Institute

The Institute for Law and Justice, Inc., Alexandria, Virginia, conducted the 1986 National Assessment Program for the National Institute of Justice. Under a subcontract, the Institute for Economic and Policy Studies, Inc., conducted the survey of correctional officials, including this report by Randall Guynes on the survey of probation and parole agency directors.

of Justice (NIJ) contracted with the Institute for Law and Justice, Inc., to conduct a national survey of approximately 2,500 practitioners from a sample of 375 counties across the Nation. Included were all 175 counties with populations greater than 250,000 and a sample of 200 counties having less than that number.¹ Persons receiving surveys in each sampled county included the police chief of the largest city, sheriff, jail administrator, prosecutor, chief judge, trial court administrator (where applicable), and probation and parole agency heads. In addition, surveys were also sent to State probation and parole agencies to obtain their viewpoints.

The survey covered five general areas: agency background, criminal justice problems, caseload, staffing, and operations. The results for each of these areas are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Background

Organizational Units. Using political subdivisions to sample probation and parole agencies obviously results in a diverse set of respondents including directors of county probation departments, heads of branch offices for State agencies, and agencies responsible for several counties. Yet this reflects the diversity of organizational arrangements in probation and parole generally (see Exhibit 1).

In about 25 percent of the States, probation is primarily a local responsibility, with the State accountable only for functions such as providing financial support, setting standards, and arranging training courses. This locally based approach accounts for about two-thirds of all persons under probation supervision in the United States.²

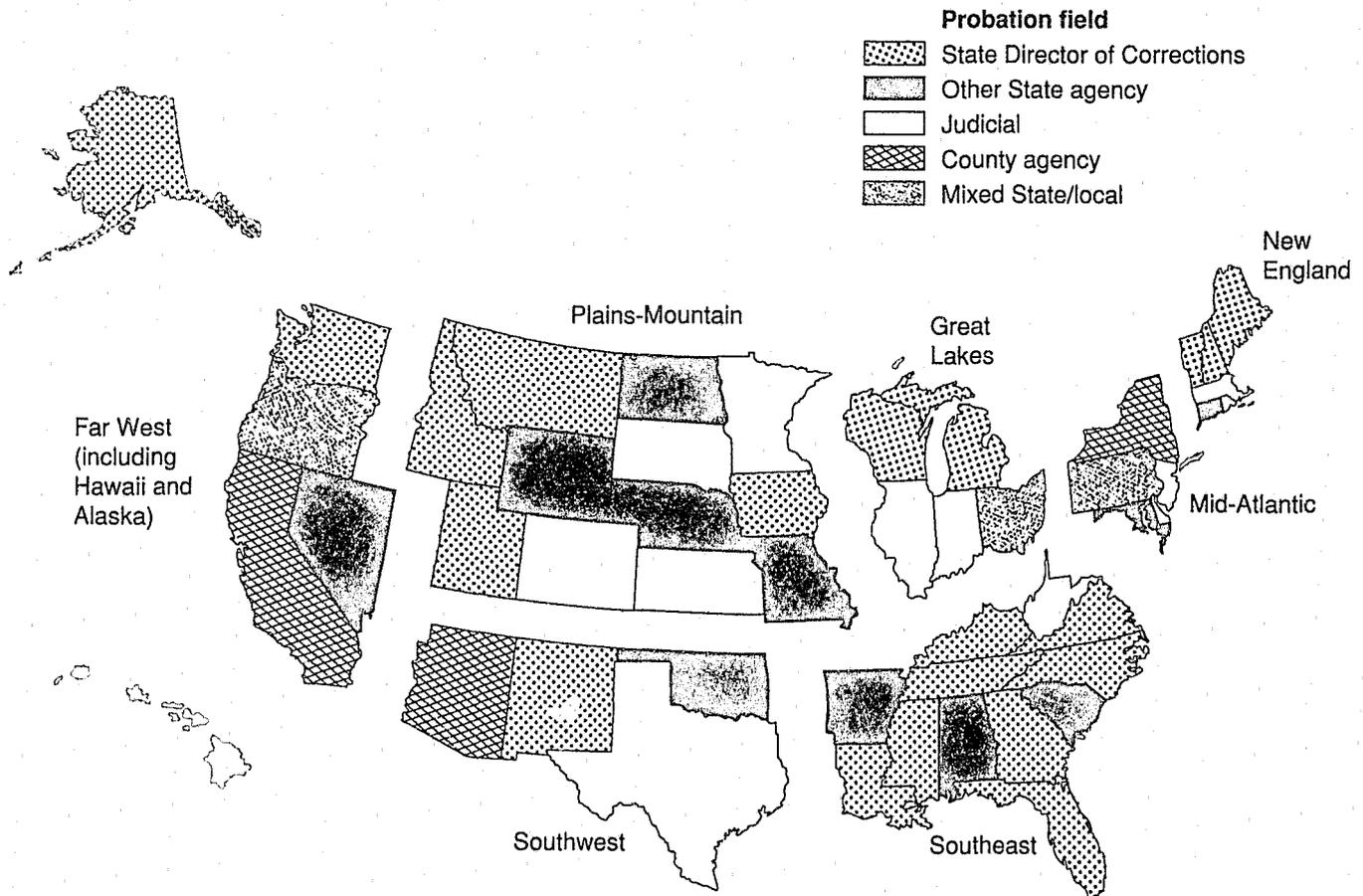
The governmental branch responsible also varies. A State or local department may be in the judicial or the executive branch of government, and supervision of probationers may cross branches or levels within branches. Despite these variations, agency functions are similar: supervising and monitoring persons; collecting and analyzing information for decisionmakers; and performing other duties such as collecting fees, fines, restitution, and child support payments.

Staffing and budgets. For the agencies responding, the median numbers of employees are 32 for combined agencies, 47 for probation, and 62 for parole. The respective medians of cases monthly are 934, 1,225, and 885. Probation directors indicate a median of 129 presentence, revocation, diversion, or other investigations monthly, compared to 75 for parole and 94 for combined agencies.

As expected, parole cases are generally classified at higher supervision levels than cases handled by either probation or combined agencies. Parole reports the highest proportion of intensive

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Exhibit 1
Probation structures, National Assessment Project



(11 percent) and maximum (35 percent) cases and the lowest median caseload (65 cases per officer). The other two groups indicated from 22 to less than 4 percent in intensive and maximum supervision categories and had correspondingly higher median caseloads (probation 109, combined 99). However, 27 percent of the parole caseload is classified as "unsupervised."

A larger proportion of parole agencies (29 percent) report budget increases in excess of 30 percent over the last 3 years than did probation (22 percent) and combined agencies (16 percent). More than two-thirds of the directors of combined offices rate their financial resources as inadequate, while 55

percent of probation respondents and 48 percent of parole respondents rate their resources as inadequate.

Criminal justice problems

Based on the previous National Assessment Survey in 1983,³ the current survey asked respondents to rank the severity of seven criminal justice problems within their systems: lack of staff skills, prison crowding, agency management, staff shortages, jail crowding, coordination among agencies, and the public's lack of understanding of criminal justice agencies. Respondents ranked these items from most serious (1) to least serious (7). Exhibit 2 shows the average ranking for

each issue by type of agency. The percentage of "number 1" responses appears in parentheses.

Staff shortage is clearly the dominant problem for all agencies. It has the highest average rank for probation and combined agencies and second highest for parole. Prison crowding also rates high among parole agencies and combined agencies. Similarly, State probation and parole directors (not shown in Exhibit 2) rank prison crowding and staff shortages as the most significant issues.

After staff shortage, probation respondents see the criminal justice system as being troubled almost equally by

coordination problems, a lack of understanding by the public, and both jail and prison crowding. Coordination is significant to probation officers because the regular performance of their duties requires them to work with judges, law enforcement personnel, jail managers, and sometimes prison officials. As for crowding, probation officers are affected by both jail crowding, as local governments attempt to control jail populations with probation supervision, and prison crowding, as courts and legislatures attempt to control prison populations through increased probation.

In most of the remainder of the survey, respondents were asked to rate problems and needs on a scale of 1 to 4 with a rating of 1 representing "Not at all" and 4 representing "Major" problem or need. In the discussion that follows, the ratings of 3 and 4 combine to indicate a significant problem or need.

Agencies were asked to rate the degree to which eight factors had contributed to increased caseloads over the past 3 years (see Exhibit 3). All respondent groups identified increased supervision needs of offenders as the first or second greatest reason for caseload increases. Other significant contributors to caseloads were jail and prison crowding, slow growth in residential options, and time required for investigations and reporting. Increased supervision terms were rated low by all groups. In general, directors of parole field offices rated all contributing factors higher than did directors of other agencies. Parole and combined agencies reported prison crowding and early parole release as important contributors to caseloads—a result in agreement with their views on significant criminal justice problems.

Reflecting their different perspectives, 63 percent of parole directors, but only 28 percent of probation directors, gave a high rating to the related issue of early parole release. State agency

Exhibit 2

Most serious criminal justice problem (average ranking by type of agency)

| Average rank | Probation only agencies | Probation and parole agencies | Parole only agencies |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1.0 | | | |
| 2.3 | | | |
| 2.4 | | | Prison crowding(41%) |
| 2.5 | | | |
| 2.6 | | | |
| 2.7 | Staff shortage(48%) | | |
| 2.8 | | Staff shortage(38%) | |
| 2.9 | | | |
| 3.0 | | | Staff shortage(30%) |
| 3.1 | | Prison crowding(25%) | |
| 3.2 | | | |
| 3.3 | | | |
| 3.4 | | | |
| 3.5 | Coordination(9%) | | Jail crowding(6%) |
| 3.6 | Jail crowding(16%) | Jail crowding(10%) | |
| 3.7 | Lack of public understanding(13%) | | |
| 3.8 | Prison crowding (11%) | Lack of public understanding(11%) | |
| 3.9 | | | |
| 4.0 | | | |
| 4.1 | | | |
| 4.2 | | Lack coordination(10%) | |
| 4.3 | | | Lack of public understanding(10%) |
| 4.4 | | | Lack coordination(1%) |
| 4.5 | | | |
| 4.6 | | | |
| 4.7 | | | |
| 4.8 | | Management(8%) | Management(10%) |
| 4.9 | | | |
| 5.0 | | | |
| 5.1 | | | |
| 5.2 | Lack staff skill(4%) | | |
| 5.3 | | | |
| 5.4 | Management(1%) | Lack staff skills(3%) | |
| 5.5 | | | Lack staff skills(3%) |
| 5.6 | | | |
| 7.0 | | | |

Note: The number in parentheses is the percentage of persons assigning rank of 1 to the problem.

For example, among probation and parole agencies, "staff shortages" was given an average seriousness of 2.8 on a scale of 1 down to 7, but 38 percent ranked it as a number 1 problem.

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Exhibit 3
Caseload contributors

| Reason | State agencies | Probation agencies | Parole agencies | Combined agencies |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Increased supervision needs | 75% | 82% | 80% | 79% |
| Staff increases not keeping pace | 73 | 79 | 74 | 73 |
| Prison crowding | 79 | 68 | 86 | 79 |
| Local jail crowding | 63 | 62 | 61 | 63 |
| Time for reports and investigations | 60 | 59 | 57 | 64 |
| Early parole release | 55 | 28 | 63 | 61 |
| Residential options not keeping pace | 53 | 57 | 64 | 52 |
| Increased supervision terms | 42 | 37 | 51 | 35 |

directors considered slow growth in community residential beds as less significant than did directors of local offices. However, State directors gave more emphasis than other respondents to investigation and reporting time as a contributor to caseloads.

There were significant regional variations in how much crowding, early parole release, and increased supervision terms affect caseload. From 80 to 100 percent of probation or parole directors in the Southeast and Plains-Mountain regions considered prison crowding an important factor in increasing caseloads. They were joined by parole agencies from New England and probation agencies from the Southwest. The greatest concern with early parole release was expressed by Southeast (93 percent) and Southwest (78 percent) parole directors.

As shown in Exhibit 3, increased supervision terms is rated lowest as a contributor by all groups of respondents. However, an interesting regional variation is that respondents from the Southeast and Southwest consider longer supervision terms as a very significant contributor to caseload increases (93 and 100 percent respectively). Generally, respondents from

the Southeast and Southwest express greater concern on more items affecting caseloads than those from other regions.

Responses to caseload management problems

Respondents were asked to list projects in their jurisdictions that have improved personnel and operational problems. Projects listed to improve caseload management speak to changing times in probation and parole. Responding agencies exhibited creativity in managing increased and more difficult caseloads with little or no increases in human resources. Almost one-third of the projects mentioned involve differential supervision, including intensive, minimum, and unsupervised. Another third were examining their workloads or developing liaisons with other key criminal justice system actors (usually court officers) as precursors to reducing supervision levels.

About 10 percent of the respondents who listed projects used early terminations and about 25 percent relied on alternative program assignments (e.g., pretrial diversion and drug treatment programs). Other approaches included streamlining paperwork assignments while acknowledging that presentence

investigations consumed considerable time. Interestingly, only one respondent cited reduction in service levels as a solution.

The two major reasons for increased caseloads were disproportionate growth in increased supervision needs of offenders and staffing levels. These reasons imply that personnel and case management issues will continue to be major operational concerns for probation and parole agencies.

Operations and procedures

Agencies were asked questions about their needs to improve operations and procedures in five general categories: classification, community resources, scheduling, management information systems, and private sector contracting. As explained in the sections that follow, the last three are the most salient concerns for the respondents.

Classification. When asked to list projects that have improved classification, almost half the respondents stated that they had developed an evaluative technique incorporating risk. Less than 40 percent of each respondent group indicated a need to improve initial and subsequent classification of offenders' risks or needs.

Scheduling. Since field services organizations are dependent on others to complete many of their tasks, it was hypothesized that scheduling with other criminal justice agencies might be a problem. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which scheduling is a problem for each of the following groups or activities:

- Court hearings (sentence and revocation hearings).
- Prison officials (investigations).
- Timing for sentence investigations.
- Clerk of court (fines and fees).

From this list, only scheduling problems with regard to sentencing and revocation hearings were rated high. More than 50 percent of local directors and 47 percent of State directors noted this as a problem. Combined agencies indicated this was a more severe problem (68 percent) than the other agencies.

Management information systems.

The analysis of the questions on management information systems suggests that the use of these systems is limited. Only about 15 percent of the agencies have automated systems to support classification. The overwhelming majority of respondents either (1) did not have a system in place, (2) were just in the process of developing such a capability, or (3) limited the use of their system to minor applications such as word processing.

Respondents generally wanted historical data, such as criminal record and substance abuse information on their clients, to be computerized. The computerized system would further enhance the classification procedures and make the client information readily available for other uses. A need was also expressed for information on referrals for service to be used in the ongoing management of cases. Greater concern for referral information was reported by probation offices in the New England, Mid-Atlantic, and Far West areas. Interestingly, most groups did not place a priority on improving information on management supervision assignments and levels.

The needs expressed for management information reflected different collection strategies. Historical data on criminal records and substance abuse generally depended on information from other criminal agencies and the clients, supplemented by information from families and friends. In contrast, referrals for service and associated dates could generally be found within the agency—at least during the

Exhibit 4

Needs for new or improved community resources

| Community resources | State agencies | Probation agencies | Parole agencies | Combined agencies |
|------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Residential programs | 80% | 72% | 83% | 73% |
| Housing referral services | 57 | 63 | 80 | 62 |
| Job readiness training | 65 | 68 | 73 | 69 |
| Mental health services | 72 | 60 | 71 | 67 |
| Drug programs | 81 | 63 | 79 | 62 |
| Employment referral services | 50 | 70 | 66 | 61 |
| Alcohol programs | 62 | 50 | 73 | 54 |
| Vocational education | 62 | 61 | 74 | 56 |
| Adult basic education | 31 | 33 | 60 | 33 |

supervision period—and were easier to maintain within a system.

Community resources. Probation and parole rely on public and private resources outside their agencies to supply many services to offenders. Directors were asked to rate the degree to which they see the need to improve or create nine types of community services (Exhibit 4). In general, parole agencies rated the items as more significant needs than the other groups.

One-half or more of the directors reported that the number of residential options were not keeping pace with offenders' needs, and at least three out of four believed increased supervision requirements were contributing to caseload management problems. Given the higher levels of supervision now required, one respondent from the Northeast argued that halfway houses and other options were needed to "restore probation and parole as legitimate sanctions." In addition to current needs for residential programs, one director noted that the challenge of the next 3 years will be "development of new programs to divert those currently in jails awaiting transfer to prison custody—to the extent that the community is not jeopardized."

Other differences appeared to reflect the stage of the criminal justice process at which offenders were referred. For example, 80 percent of parole agencies reported a need for housing referral services, compared to about 62 percent of other field offices. In contrast, there were few differences among agencies regarding the need for job readiness training, which was cited by 65 to 73 percent of the field offices. Vocational education services were reported as a need by 74 percent of parole and 61 percent of probation agencies, and 56 percent of combined agencies.

There were several regional variations in perceived need for improved or expanded community resources. Although adult basic education was the lowest priority for everyone, directors in the Great Lakes, Mid-Atlantic, and Southwest rated the problem considerably higher than their colleagues. Drug programs were of more concern to parole directors in the Mid-Atlantic, Southwest, and Far West than in other parts of the country. Probation offices in New England (83 percent) and the Far West (91 percent) reported a greater need for mental health services than probation offices overall (60 percent).

Contracted services. Residential, drug, job readiness, and mental health

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Exhibit 5
Recruitment problems

| Issue | State agencies | Probation agencies | Parole agencies | Combined agencies |
|---------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Low salaries | 33% | 50% | 53% | 68% |
| Shortage of minority applicants | 48 | 44 | 41 | 50 |
| Locating qualified staff | 31 | 46 | 52 | 49 |
| Hiring freeze | 29 | 47 | 38 | 40 |
| Poor image of corrections | 21 | 27 | 43 | 37 |
| Entrance requirements too high | 17 | 22 | 28 | 19 |

programs can be provided internally or through arrangements with public or private service providers. Recent attention given to contracting in corrections and the reduction in government-supported social service programs suggests that the demand for privately sponsored arrangements may increase. Probation and parole officials were asked to indicate whether they currently purchase none, some, most, or all of eight specific services.

The most prevalent service currently provided under contract is staff training. At least four-fifths of the respondents contract for some or all of their staff training. In contrast, emergency food is provided under contract to fewer than one-third of parole agencies and in less than 15 percent of other field offices.

The private sector is used less overall in the Southeast than in other regions. All local directors in the Southeast report fewer purchases of drug testing and medical services. Single-function agencies contract for staff training less frequently than combined agencies. Only 7 percent of local parole offices and a lower percentage of combined agencies use the private sector for residential centers or emergency housing.

Fewer than 35 percent of Great Lakes parole directors contract for any staff training, urinalysis, mental health services, emergency food, or housing. Approximately the same percentage of probation agencies in the Great Lakes, Mid-Atlantic, and Plains-Mountain regions contract for medical services. Only about two-fifths of the Far West offices responsible for both probation and parole purchase any medical or halfway house services.

Staff recruitment and retention

As reflected in Exhibit 2, staff shortages were rated high as a problem by all three groups of agencies. The results from the recruitment and retention sections of the survey provided insights into this problem.

Recruitment. Among the most significant recruitment problems are low salaries, locating qualified professional staff, shortages of qualified minority applicants, hiring freezes, and poor image of corrections work.

In general, State directors saw fewer recruitment problems than did local officers and considered a shortage of minority applicants the most important recruitment issue (Exhibit 5). In contrast, 50 percent of the local

probation directors, 53 percent of the parole directors, and 68 percent of the combined agency directors considered low salaries an important recruitment problem. Approximately 45 percent of local agencies reported problems recruiting minorities.

Restrictions on hiring significantly affect recruitment for more than 47 percent of local probation directors, but only 38 percent of their counterparts in parole. In contrast, the poor image of corrections work was a significant problem for 43 percent of local parole agencies.

Retention. Agency directors were asked to rate the degree to which seven items contribute to staff turnover: salary increases, burnout, inability to use leave time, poor image of corrections work, substance abuse, inadequate career incentives, and excessive overtime. Career incentives were considered the number one staff retention issue by State directors (58 percent), local parole (70 percent), probation (60 percent), and combined agencies (71 percent). Salary increases and burnout were cited as serious by 40 percent or more of all four groups, with the remaining problems receiving substantially lower ratings. The salary problem was considered a major issue by 68 percent of the combined agencies.

Forty-seven percent of the probation offices and 67 percent of both parole field offices and combined agency directors rated burnout as a serious retention problem. "Burnout" is used to encompass a variety of situations, from personal crises unrelated to occupation, through systemic dysfunctions in organizations, to uncertain environmental conditions. Its causes may be personal, organizational, environmental, or (more frequently) a combination. Within the limits of this survey, it was not possible to determine the specific causes of burnout at the local level. Interestingly, from other survey

responses, burnout is apparently not being caused by excessive overtime (rated as a problem by only one respondent in five) or employee substance abuse (rated as a problem by less than 2 percent of all respondents).

Responses. It is clear that compensation, including "career incentives," is perceived as essential for both attracting and holding probation and parole staff. What is unclear is whether salaries are considered inadequate relative to similar occupations and other public service jobs in terms of skill levels required and risks involved.

Addressing these staffing issues tests the ingenuity of agencies facing increased demands with constrained resources. Few agencies, for example, cite new funding as the way they are trying to solve their personnel problems. Instead, evaluation and reorganization of workload are used as the major way of alleviating staffing burdens. Frequently cited recruitment methods (reported by over one-half of all those responding) included special minority recruiters and outreach in the community and at colleges.

Training. Respondents were asked to rate their agencies' interest in several training topics (Exhibit 6). Consistent with the finding that "increased supervision needs" increased caseload problems, at least 76 percent of all groups reported they need to upgrade staff skills to handle special problem offenders. Six other topics interested at least half of all local agencies: offender monitoring techniques, counseling, stress management, legal liability, report writing, and caseload management.

While overall training needs were high (with parole reporting the highest overall), responses varied substantially by agency function. Consistent with high burnout, stress management training was a greater need in parole and combined agencies, with almost 70 percent of agencies significantly

Exhibit 6
Training needs

| Training area | State agencies | Probation agencies | Parole agencies | Combined agencies |
|------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Handling special problem offenders | 79% | 80% | 86% | 76% |
| Caseload management | 49 | 63 | 71 | 61 |
| Offender monitoring | 57 | 57 | 58 | 58 |
| Liability issues | 53 | 57 | 67 | 55 |
| Report writing | 41 | 54 | 63 | 53 |
| Stress management | 54 | 52 | 68 | 69 |
| Counseling techniques | 61 | 52 | 56 | 57 |

interested. Probation agencies rank handling special offenders highest (80 percent), followed by case management (63 percent), offender monitoring (57 percent), and liability (57 percent).

There were also interesting differences between State and local perceptions of training needs. State directors reported a somewhat greater degree of interest in training in counseling techniques (61 percent) than did local offices (about 50 percent). Forty-one percent of State directors favored training in report writing, compared to 53 percent of local directors. Caseload management skills were among the most wanted training for local respondents, but among the least significant for State directors. If training policy and resource allocation were influenced primarily by State officials, these results suggested a need to reconcile local and State perspectives.

There are also some notable regional variations. Report writing was considered significant by parole in the Mid-Atlantic region and by parole and combined agencies in the Plains-Mountain States. Sixty-seven percent of directors responsible for both probation and parole in the Great Lakes region considered training in investigative techniques a significant need.

Legal liability training was deemed more serious by both probation and

parole in the Plains-Mountain, Southwest, and Far West, where from 83 to 100 percent of agency directors considered this an important training topic.

What makes these results more striking is that monitoring, counseling, and report writing are fundamental to probation and parole functions. Along with investigations (a high priority only for parole respondents), there are the set of activities generally labeled "case management." Yet, probation and parole officials generally reported a significant need for training in these basic skills areas.

When acute basic skills deficiencies are considered along with workload, recruitment, and retention problems, they make a gloomy scenario for probation and parole. Staffing levels are not keeping pace with a growing caseload. At the same time, supervision needs are increasing. Recruitment is made difficult by low salaries that will not attract enough qualified applicants, and, once hired, employees are discouraged by poor career incentives, small salary increases, and burnout.

Conclusion

In broad strokes, the NAP survey painted a picture of America's probation and parole systems as facing

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unprecedented challenges. Despite recent budget increases of more than 20 percent for many agencies and major improvements in risk management, more than 75 percent of all agencies said staff increases are not keeping pace with the number of offenders.

Compounding this increase in staff-to-client ratio is the fact that at least three-fourths of the respondents believe offenders' supervision needs are greater now than in the past. Thus, not only are the numbers larger, the offenders are also a more difficult group to manage.

Fifty to sixty-eight percent of all local probation and parole offices report that salaries are too low to attract qualified applicants. Once hired, personnel did not find financial and other incentives sufficient to stay in positions where burnout is a major problem.

Employees in general have extremely high training needs, even in such basic skills as counseling, report writing, offender monitoring, and caseload management. Fifty-five to seventy-five percent of all local directors rate one or more of these as a significant need. In addition to training in basic skills, training in handling special problem offenders, stress management, and legal

liabilities are also needed by the majority of respondents.

Unlike institutions, probation and parole agencies depend on a supply of community resources to carry out their core responsibilities. Today, over half the local offices report a need to expand or improve all types of community resource efforts, including drug programs, residential programs, housing referral services, vocational education, job readiness training, and mental health services.

Over the last 15 years, probation and parole agencies have expanded their domain from primarily presentence investigations and offender supervision to pretrial diversion, halfway houses, alleviating institutional crowding, and a host of other activities. "Dealing with an increased number and variety of alternative programs in an effective manner" was cited by one director as the most serious management problem over the next few years.

Data submitted by these 388 professionals suggested that not only must this type of growth stop or slow dramatically, but also that serious questions must be raised about the system's present capacity to absorb additional

offenders. Large and difficult caseloads coupled with a lack of staff and a shortage of community resources reflect a criminal justice subsystem strained to its limits.

Notes

1. The random sample was drawn from counties with populations greater than 50,000 and less than 200,000.
2. *Juvenile and Adult Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies, and Paroling Authorities*, College Park, Maryland, American Correctional Association, 1987.
3. The 1983 National Assessment Survey was conducted for the National Institute of Justice by Abt Associates, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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