

Federal Probation

Probation Officers' Role Perceptions and Attitudes
Toward Firearms

*Richard D. Sluder
Robert A. Shearer
Dennis W. Potts*

Family Violence: Challenging Cases for
Probation Officers

Meredith Hofford

Role Negotiation: Sorting Out the Nuts
and Bolts of Day-to-Day Staff
Supervision

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Polysubstance Abuse: The Interaction of
Alcohol and Other Drugs

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The Design and Implementation of
r-Assisted Sentencing

*Eric Simon
Gerry Gaes
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George C. Kiser

Single-Cell Occupancy in America's
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This Issue in Brief

Probation Officers' Role Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Firearms.—The issue of whether probation officers should carry firearms has tremendous implications for the future of probation. Despite the importance of the issue, however, there has been little empirical investigation to determine whether probation officers' opinions about firearms are related to their role perceptions, individual characteristics, or other work-related factors. Using data collected from a population of probation officers attending a state-wide probation training academy, authors Richard D. Sluder, Robert A. Shearer, and Dennis W. Potts explore relationships between those variables and officers' opinions as to whether they should be permitted or required to carry firearms in the performance of their duties. The authors discuss findings from the study, as well as implications for the delivery of probation services.

Family Violence: Challenging Cases for Probation Officers.—Author Meredith Hofford presents data on the frequency and seriousness of domestic violence and offers suggestions and guidance as to how the courts and probation officials can improve their supervision of the perpetrators of domestic violence. The article presents the proposition that domestic violence is much more widespread—and its consequences much more serious—than has been generally accepted. The author points out that with adequate and effective probationary supervision, the recurrence of domestic violence, the frequency of violent crime stemming from domestic violence, and the intergenerational effects of spousal abuse on children can all be significantly decreased.

Role Negotiation: Sorting Out the Nuts and Bolts of Day-to-Day Staff Supervision.—As organizations become larger and more complex, the need for cooperation and coordination between managers and staff increases significantly. Authors Jud Watkins and Robert A. Luke, Jr., describe a structured way for people who work together to sort out their day-to-day needs and arrive at an interpersonal contract, or agreement, that promotes the mutual efficiency and job satisfaction of both negotiators. The authors detail

the procedure of role negotiation, cite examples of its application in the probation and pretrial services setting, and suggest alternative uses such as group nego-

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Probation Officers' Role Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Firearms

BY RICHARD D. SLUDER, ROBERT A. SHEARER, AND DENNIS W. POTTS*

Introduction

WITHIN RECENT years, the number of persons placed on probation has increased at a rapid rate. Between 1984 and 1988, for example, probation caseloads rose from 1.74 million persons to 2.36 million persons—a 35.4 percent increase (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1989). But while the number of probationers has dramatically risen, many authorities have also observed that the probation population is increasingly comprised of serious offenders who often present a high risk of threat to the community and to probation officers (Guynes, 1988; Petersilia, Turner, Kahan, & Peterson, 1985; Snider, 1986). This shift in the type of offender under supervision has fueled the debate which questions both the philosophical mission of probation and the role of probation officers in that mission.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of this debate is whether probation officers, in the performance of their jobs, should be permitted or required to carry firearms. Much of the controversy lies not only in the administrative definition of agency mission, but also in officers' individual role perceptions. Consequently, no matter what firearms policy decisions are reached by individual agencies, the outcomes of this debate have tremendous implications for the future of probation and potentially divisive effects for probation agencies (Keve, 1979). The issue of whether to arm probation officers has thus shown itself to be of considerable importance to criminal justice practitioners, legislative policymakers, and to society in general.

For all its importance, however, the link between probation officers and firearms has only recently emerged in the literature, and commentary has been relatively straightforward. For example, most published articles have described firearms policies (Brown, 1990; Keve, 1979; Welch, 1989), presented a historical analysis (Brown, 1990), provided evaluative pro/con discussions (Jones & Robinson, 1989; Lozito, 1988; Parrish-Hanson, 1990; Zinsmeyer, 1988), or addressed the broader issue of "worker safety" (Parsonage, 1990).

While some studies have focused on probation officers' attitudes toward firearms (see Keve, 1979), there

has been little research aimed at determining whether a relationship exists between officers' opinions on carrying firearms and perceptions of their roles in the probation system.¹ Both theoretically and intuitively, one could expect to find probation officers' work orientations and their opinions about carrying firearms to be inextricably related. As Keve (1979) noted, resolution of the issue of whether probation officers see themselves as law enforcement agents or change agents implicitly raises the question of whether officers will support or oppose the arming of themselves and their peers.

But despite the importance of examining the firearms issue within the context of probation officers' work orientations, there is little available information, and many questions remain unanswered. For example, are probation officers who favor having the option to carry firearms likely to view their role as that of a control agent? Likewise, are officers who oppose the arming of themselves and their peers likely to view their role as that of a change agent? Are officers who advocate the use of a community resources brokerage approach predisposed to support or not support the carrying of firearms? Moreover, in what ways are individual characteristics and work-related factors associated with probation officers' opinions about whether they should be armed? While there are now no definitive answers to these questions, they represent fundamental issues which will exist as long as the firearms debate continues. This study is an initial attempt to explore possible answers to these and other questions relating to the probation officer/firearms issue.

Methods

Sample

The population selected for this study consisted of 159 probation officers who attended inservice training during the early part of 1990 at a statewide probation training academy.² The officers completed questionnaires anonymously and were informed that the survey was designed to determine their attitudes on many important issues related to probation work. Overall, 59 percent (n=93) of the studied officers were males and 41 percent (n=65) were females. By race/ethnicity, 61 percent (n=97) were white, 21 percent (n=34) were Hispanic, and 16 percent (n=26) were black. Given the fact that statutes in the state have established a bachelor's degree as a minimum entry-level require-

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ment,³ it was not surprising to find that 50 percent (n=79) of the respondents reported having secured an undergraduate degree. Another 23 percent (n=37) reported having completed graduate courses, and 21 percent (n=34) had been awarded either M.S. or M.A. degrees. Only 6 percent (n=9) had not acquired a college degree. Finally, the mean age of the officers was 36.8 years, and officers reported having been employed in probation work for an average of 6.2 years.

Measures—Probation Officer Work Strategies

Various authors have suggested that probation officers perform in a number of different work roles when supervising offenders under their charge.⁴ Simply put, the work strategies adopted by probation officers in caseload management can be grouped into three categories: casework, resource brokerage, and law enforcement.⁵ As a caseworker, the probation officer assumes the role of a therapeutic agent whose primary mission is to help the offender solve social and psychological problems (Dressler, 1969). Somewhat less personally involved as a therapeutic counselor, the resource broker seeks to assess the needs of the offender and connect him or her with social service agencies that can appropriately address those needs (Carlson & Parks, 1979; Dell'apa, Adams, Jorgensen, & Sigurdson, 1976). And most distant from the caseworker orientation stands the law enforcer, whose primary mission is to ensure community safety by scrutinizing the offender's activities for compliance with the conditions of probation and abstinence from further criminal acts (Cole, 1989; Van Laningham, Taber, & Diamants, 1977).

To measure the extent to which the surveyed officers supported these strategies, separate scales were constructed for casework, resource brokerage, and law enforcement orientations.⁶ The items comprising these scales are presented in tables 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The items were randomly mixed under a category in the questionnaire labeled "Probation Opinions," and respondents were asked to indicate on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Each scale was scored by summing the responses to the appropriate items.

Opinions on Firearms

Three questions were asked to determine the officers' opinions about firearms. First, officers were asked, "In your opinion, should probation officers be given the legal option of carrying a firearm while working?" Response options (Yes/No) were forced dichotomies. While this item is central to our analysis in

TABLE 1. PROBATION OFFICER SUPPORT FOR CASEWORK ORIENTATION, PERCENT DISAGREEING-AGREEING REPORTED

Items	Percent Disagree	Percent Agree
2. Spending a lot of time listening to probationer's problems and excuses is just a waste of time.*	79.9	20.1
4. Probation officers should stress a one-to-one counseling relationship between themselves and the offender.	11.3	88.7
6. The probation officer's goal should be to change the offender's behavior through a helping relationship.	10.7	89.3
10. Trying to rehabilitate probationers is a hopeless task.*	89.9	10.1
13. Probation officers should be trained in alcohol and drug counseling.	8.2	91.8
18. Counseling is the most essential part of the probation officer's job.	29.6	70.4
19. There should be a meaningful counseling-type relationship between the officer and the offender.	11.3	88.7
24. Probation officers should function as social workers.	51.9	40.9

* Items are reverse scored

the following section and discussed more thoroughly there, it is interesting to note that 59 percent (n=93) of the officers marked "Yes" to this item, while 41 percent (n=64) responded that probation officers should not be given the option of carrying a firearm.

The second question asked, "In your opinion, should probation officers be legally required to carry a firearm while working?" As before, two response options (Yes/No) were provided. Twenty-six percent (n=41) of the officers marked the response option "Yes," indicating that officers should be required to carry a firearm while working. A considerable majority, 74 percent (n=115), did not believe that officers should be legally required to carry a firearm under the same conditions.

ATTITUDES TOWARD FIREARMS

TABLE 2. PROBATION OFFICER SUPPORT FOR RESOURCE BROKER ORIENTATION, PERCENT DISAGREEING-AGREEING REPORTED

Items	Percent Disagree	Percent Agree
5. Probation officers should act as brokers for services since they don't have the time or the skills to help all offenders with every problem.	23.9	76.1
7. Without a wide range of available community resources for probationers, a probation officer is very ineffective.	54.1	45.9
9. Probation officers should try and find out what's wrong and who can fix it.	10.1	89.9
12. Reintegrating offenders back into the community by linking them to community resources should be the primary aim of probation officers.	5.0	95.0
14. Probation officers should identify the problem and then refer the probationer to agencies that can address that problem.	3.8	96.2
17. Matching the needs of the offender to available community resources should be the job of probation officers.	5.7	94.3
20. Probation officers should help offenders by referring them to appropriate community resources.	0.6	99.4
22. The key to probation work is community services.	23.3	76.7

TABLE 3. PROBATION OFFICERS SUPPORT FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT ORIENTATION, PERCENT DISAGREEING-AGREEING REPORTED

Items	Percent Disagree	Percent Agree
1. The probation officer's primary concern is monitoring probationers to ensure that they are complying with the conditions of probation.	11.3	88.7
3. Probation officers are really a type of police officer.	71.7	28.3
8. The primary concern of the probation officer is to comply with court orders.	11.9	88.1
11. Probationers should "walk the line" or "do the time."	41.5	58.5
15. The probation officer's job is to control, regulate, and document.	22.0	78.0
16. The probation officer's primary responsibility should be to ensure public safety.	20.1	79.9
21. Probation officers should actively monitor the offender's activities to ensure that the conditions set forth by the court are met.	0.6	99.4
23. You should be as tough as you can with probationers and when they screw-up, make them pay.	70.4	29.6

Finally, the third item stated, "If a law was passed in the state requiring probation officers to carry a firearm while working, I would. . . ." Eighty percent (n=126) of those responding indicated that they would, "Carry a firearm as required." Another 9 percent (n=15) expressed strong opposition to such a law, responding that they would, "Refuse to carry a firearm and seek employment elsewhere." Finally, the 11 percent (n=17) who responded to the third category of "Other" were asked to specify what they would do if such a law were passed. While responses were varied

in this category, there were some observable patterns. Two officers indicated that they would not carry a firearm and would see "what happened." Four officers indicated that they would use their own judgment as to when to carry a firearm. Seven officers wrote comments indicating that they were "unsure." And, finally, the remaining responses were as follows: one officer indicated that she would try to find another job in probation that didn't require carrying a firearm; one officer would "try to talk them out of it"; one noted that his reaction would depend on the training offered; and one officer indicated that he would "seriously consider other employment" because of a perceived risk of increased liability.

Work-Related Variables and Other Individual Characteristics

In addition to information on gender, race/ethnicity, age, length of employment, and educational background, we were interested in collecting data on several work-related variables to examine their relationship with officers' opinions about firearms. First, the distinction was made as to whether officers were currently employed in either a juvenile or adult probation agency. Thirty-nine percent (n=62) of our population were employed in juvenile agencies, while 50 percent (n=80) were employed in adult probation. Some caution should be used in interpreting this variable, however, as 11 percent (n=17) of the officers failed to respond to the item.

Secondly, it was thought that opinions about firearms may be related to the size of the caseload managed by individual probation officers. For our purposes, caseload size was arrayed as a five-category, ordinal-level variable. Thirty-three percent (n=47) of those surveyed reported having caseloads of 25 persons or fewer, while 25 percent (n=36) had caseloads ranging from 26 to 50. Another 13.9 percent (n=20) of the officers had caseloads ranging from 51 to 75; 18.1 percent (n=26) reported caseloads of 76 to 150 offenders; and 10.4 percent (n=15) had caseloads exceeding 150 offenders.

Third, we inquired as to whether respondents had served in the military, hypothesizing that probation officers who had at least a basic acquaintance with the use of firearms in a structured setting would be more likely to support the arming of themselves and their peers. In our study, 22.3 percent (n=35) of the officers had prior military experience, while a majority, 77.7 percent (n=122) had no prior military service.

The fourth work-related variable we examined was designed to determine whether those officers who had sought out their positions in probation as a career differed in their opinions on the firearms issue as compared to those having pursued employment in the field for other reasons. Hence, one item in the survey asked, "Please choose the one best statement that describes the reason that you obtained employment in your present position. . . ." Approximately 43 percent (n=67) marked the response reading, "I chose probation as a career and plan to remain in this field." Another 20.6 percent (n=32) indicated that they were using the job as a stepping stone and marked the response that read, "I plan to use the experience that I get in this job so that I can secure employment in some other part of the criminal justice system." Two other response options were provided for the item. The first read, "I am interested in remaining in the area where I am living and am using my job as a means of

staying there," and the other stated, "I needed a job and this position was available." For purposes of our analysis, these latter categories were collapsed; we concluded that responses to either signified incidental reasons as to why officers initially obtained employment in probation. Fully 36.1 percent (n=56) marked one of these two categories.

Fifth, since we were interested in determining whether officers' career goals were related to their opinions about firearms, one question asked, "What are your career goals?" Twenty-one percent (n=33) responded to the option that read, "To stay in my present position." The next two response items respectively read, "To become a probation supervisor" and "To become a probation administrator." Both of these response options were collapsed with the rationale that they served as indicators of advancement initiative. Forty-six percent (n=73) of the officers marked one of these two options. Officers selecting a fourth response option of "Other" were asked to provide a statement as to their career goals. Thirty-two percent (n=50) marked this option and provided a variety of goals that included "to continue my education," "social worker," "teach," and "go on to federal level." Given the significant proportion of officers marking this category and the variety of statements that were provided, we were reluctant to exclude these persons from the analysis. The category, therefore, was left intact, and caution should be used in interpreting this variable in the analysis.

Finally, a variable was created which was designed to measure the age at which a respondent became a probation officer, since Philliber (1987) noted that one risks confounding the effects of experience (time on the job) and officers' ages if these two variables are not controlled for. In order to address this possibility, we subtracted the number of years a respondent had been employed as an officer from his or her age. While this procedure does not solve the problem of officers who may have left probation for another occupation and then returned to probation work, it has the advantage of separating officers' years working in probation from their years as a member of the general public (Cullen, Cullen, & Wozniak, 1989).

Findings and Analysis

Probation Officer Work Strategies

We begin our analysis by examining the scales measuring officers' support for casework, resource brokerage, and law enforcement orientations. First, Cronbach's Alpha was computed for each of the scales to check for internal reliability. Alphas for the casework (.602), resource broker (.686), and law enforcement (.653) scales were all within acceptable limits.

Next, we were interested in examining the support expressed by officers for each of the three work orientations. An examination of the mean scores for each of the scales suggests that the surveyed officers expressed the most agreement with the resource broker scale (mean=36.35, s.d.=4.62), followed quite closely by the casework scale (mean=36.03, s.d.=4.57). The least support was garnered for the law enforcement scale (mean=32.76, s.d.=4.97). One-way analysis of variance computed for the three scales, followed by a posteriori comparisons using Tukey's HSD, revealed statistically significant differences between mean scores for the casework and law enforcement scales ($q=8.73$, $p<.001$) and between the resource broker and law enforcement scales ($q=9.58$, $p<.001$). Mean differences between the resource broker and casework scales ($q=.86$, $p>.10$) did not approach statistical significance.

These findings suggest, at least among the officers surveyed, there is greater support for helping offenders on probation than there is for merely attempting to control their behavior by ensuring that they comply with court orders and refrain from engaging in further criminal activity. These findings are significant since they indicate continued support for reformation ideologies, despite a considerable amount of literature which suggests that probation is increasingly oriented towards punitive and control ideals.

We were also interested in determining whether officers expressing support for one work orientation would support or oppose other orientations. We hypothesized from the outset, for example, that officers exhibiting a high level of support for the casework strategy would, at the same time, express a low level of support for the law enforcement orientation since they appear to have somewhat conflicting fundamental purposes. Pearson's r was thus computed to examine possible relationships between each of the three strategies. The only significant correlation was between the law enforcement and resource broker scales ($r=.264$, $p<.0001$), a moderate but weak relationship which suggests that officers supporting a law enforcement orientation also see the need to use client referral in delivering probation services.

Finally, correlation coefficients were computed between each of the three work strategy scales and other variables (officer's age, number of years employed in probation, and age at which subject became a probation officer). Statistically significant, yet weak relationships were found between two of the variables and the law enforcement scale. Officer's age was negatively correlated ($r=-.20$, $p=.027$) with the law enforcement work strategy, as was the number of years employed as a probation officer ($r=-.20$, $p=.027$). These findings tend to imply that both older officers, and

those with more experience in probation, are somewhat less likely to support law enforcement-type strategies in managing offenders.

Weak, yet statistically significant relationships were also found between the casework scale and two of the variables. The number of years employed as a probation officer was negatively correlated with the casework scale ($r=-.15$, $p=.027$), but, unexpectedly, the age at which a person became a probation officer was positively correlated with the same scale ($r=.18$, $p=.013$). Although these findings appear contradictory, we would tentatively suggest that they indicate that the longer a person is employed in probation, the less likely he or she is to support a casework strategy in managing offenders. On the other hand, it would appear that those persons who enter probation work as older employees are somewhat more likely to support such a casework strategy.

No statistically significant relationships were found between the three variables and the resource broker scale.

Attitudes Toward Firearms—Optional

Most of the controversy surrounding the firearms issue centers upon whether probation officers should be given the *option* to carry a weapon while working. Past and present legislative efforts in the state, for example, have been oriented toward securing approval for the optional arming of probation officers (Probation Chief Wants Safe Officers, 1990). We begin, therefore, by examining responses to the question: "In your opinion, should probation officers be given the legal option of carrying a firearm while working?" Overall, 59 percent ($n=93$) of the officers surveyed responded affirmatively, while 41 percent ($n=64$) indicated that officers should not be given such an option. In sum, a solid majority of our population approve of being granted the option of carrying a firearm while working. These findings are similar to those of Longmire and Wilson (1987), who found that 66.4 percent ($n=286$) of the parole officers surveyed in the same state favored a bill authorizing probation and parole officers to carry firearms, while 30.4 percent ($n=131$) were opposed to such a bill.

Examining differences between those officers supporting the option to carry firearms and those who do not reveals some interesting patterns. Those in our study who supported the optional arming of probation officers were more likely to have a law enforcement work orientation. That is, officers who responded "Yes" to the firearms option question had mean scores of 33.75 on the law enforcement scale, while those responding "No" had mean scores of 31.44—a statistically significant difference ($t=2.93$, $df=155$, $p=.004$). Despite expectations to the contrary, however, no sta-

tistically significant differences were found between the two groups' mean scores on either the casework or resource broker scales.

In order to examine other possible differences between the two groups, t-tests were computed for each interval or above-level variable. While some patterns were observed, no statistically significant differences were found. Although officers who supported being given the option to carry a firearm were younger (mean=36.14) than those who did not (mean=38.00), the difference was insignificant ($t=-1.16$, $df=153$, $p=.246$). Those who supported the firearms option had also been employed in probation for about 1 year less (mean=5.9 years) than those who opposed the idea (mean=6.8 years), yet the difference was insignificant ($t=-1.16$, $df=155$, $p=.246$). Likewise, those who supported having the option to carry firearms were somewhat younger when they became probation officers (mean=30.26 years) than those who opposed the idea (mean=31.12 years). Once again, however, the difference was not statistically significant ($t=-.65$, $df=153$, $p=.516$).

Chi-square tests of significance were also computed for each of the nominal or ordinal level variables to examine possible differences between those who supported and those who opposed being given the option to carry a firearm. The only variable that approached our established .05 level of significance in the analysis was the officers' level of education. Sixty-five percent of those surveyed with a bachelor's degree or less supported having the option of carrying a firearm, while 52 percent of those with some graduate education or a graduate degree supported the idea (chi-square=2.72, $df=1$, $p=.099$). Hence, while those with less education were more likely to support having the option of carrying a firearm, the difference was not statistically significant.

Importantly, officers did not differ in their opinions as to whether they should be given the option to carry a firearm by work assignment (juvenile versus adult probation), caseload size, gender, race/ethnicity, military background, the reason that they obtained employment in probation, or their career goals.

In sum, outside of law enforcement orientation, officers in our sample did not differ on their opinions as to whether they should be given the option to carry firearms on what were believed to be a number of key variables. These findings are indicative that, with the exception of the work strategy that one brings to the job, officers either unilaterally support or oppose having the option to carry a firearm while working.

Attitudes Toward Firearms—Required

We are unaware of any formal proposals which would require probation officers to carry a firearm

while working. Nonetheless we included the question: "In your opinion, should probation officers be legally required to carry a firearm while working?" as a means to examine two general issues. First, we were interested in officers' overall response to such an idea, partly because the item obviously taps much more strongly held opinions on the firearms issue. Secondly, we were also interested in examining officers' responses to such an idea in conjunction with other variables in the dataset.

Once again, we split officers into two groups by whether they agreed or disagreed with the item. As with the firearms option question, officers who responded "Yes" to the present item had significantly higher scores on the law enforcement scale than those who responded "No." Those who agreed that probation officers should be required to carry a firearm had an average score of 34.20 on the law enforcement scale as compared to a mean score of 32.37 for those who opposed the idea—a statistically significant difference at the $p<.05$ level ($t=2.04$, $df=154$, $p=.043$). As before, no significant differences were found between the two groups' mean scores on either the casework or resource broker scales.

Those who indicated that officers should be required to carry firearms were significantly younger (mean age=33.7 years) as compared to the majority (mean age=38.08 years) who opposed the idea ($t=-2.46$, $df=152$, $p=.015$). In addition, officers who supported the firearms requirement had entered into probation work at a significantly ($t=-2.17$, $df=152$, $p=.031$) younger age (mean=28.13 years) than those who did not support such a requirement (mean=31.53 years).

Two of the categorical variables in the dataset approached our established level of significance, but did not quite meet it. First, 80.6 percent of the female officers surveyed opposed a firearms requirement, as did 68.8 percent of the males. While statistically insignificant (chi-square=2.68, $df=1$, $p=.10$), this finding indicates that female officers feel somewhat more strongly opposed to any idea that would require probation personnel to carry a firearm. Secondly, those officers who had completed higher levels of education were somewhat more likely to oppose any firearms requirement. Eighty percent of those officers who had either taken coursework beyond the bachelor's degree or completed a master's degree were opposed to a firearms requirement, as compared to 68.6 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or less. Although statistically insignificant (chi-square=2.59, $df=1$, $p=.11$), these findings tend to indicate that officers with higher levels of education are less likely to support either providing their peers with the option of carrying a firearm, or requiring them to do so.

Officers' Responses to Requirement

We end our analysis by reporting the results of a question in the survey that read, "If a law was passed in the state requiring probation officers to carry a firearm while working, I would. . . ." Eighty percent of the respondents in our population indicated that they would comply with such a law. Nine percent indicated that they would refuse to carry a firearm, and 11 percent marked the "Other" category. As with the analysis of the previous two questions, those who indicated that they would comply with such a requirement had higher scores on the law enforcement scale (mean=33.21), than those who indicated that they would refuse to comply with such a requirement (mean=30.33, $t=2.10$, $df=139$, $p=.037$). The only other statistically significant finding with respect to this item was related to gender. While only 15 percent of the male officers indicated that they would refuse to comply with a firearms requirement, 28.1 percent of the females surveyed indicated that they, too, would refuse—a statistically significant difference (chi-square=3.99, $df=1$) at the .05 level.

Summary and Conclusions

The debate surrounding the topic of probation officer role perceptions and the issue of whether and when they should carry firearms resides in a cloudy mix of opinions which can leave everyone asking, "What are we doing and why are we here?" Perhaps that is the key question since nothing so greatly affects a probation agency's mission as the presence or lack of clearly defined goals, and, on a personal level, the same can be said of the officers who pursue those goals. And few policies so clearly highlight goal differences as do those which deal with the arming of probation officers—a decision that is insightful to some and repugnant to others.

Our study has decidedly examined one facet of the probation goals issue; the opinions held by probation officers as to the caseload management strategies they believe will facilitate the achievement of whatever goal(s) they have defined for their work. Among those surveyed in our study, there is clear support for treatment and reform-oriented goals, as reflected in the preference expressed by officers for casework and resource brokerage caseload management strategies. These findings both contradict and support ideas communicated in the contemporary literature on probation. The findings are contradictory in the sense that there is a considerable body of literature which suggests that probation should, or has, become much more oriented toward offender punishment and control. Our findings, however, have much more in common with Harris, Clear, and Baird's (1989) and Ellsworth's

(1990) research which indicates that those working in the probation system continue to support treatment ideologies.

But there may be an infusion of pragmatism; our study indicated a positive, if weak, correlation between the resource broker and law enforcement strategies, indicating the possibility of a future shift away from treatment as the "proper" goal of probation supervision. The philosophical flexibility that this shift implies is attractive; the type and increasing number of persons placed on probation may be well served by officers who can offer an integrative approach. But it may be that any such shift will result solely as a function of the time available to probation officers to supervise their charges; approximately 28 percent of the officers included in the study reported caseloads in excess of 75 offenders. These cases necessarily generate paperwork proportional to their number and may well limit the involvement of the supervising officer to referral and control. Regardless, a resource broker/law enforcer orientation may, by default, preserve the necessary balance between service to the offender and responsibility to the general public.

Another interesting facet of our study was the indication that officers' age and length of service in probation were negatively related to control strategies. At the same time, however, the age at which a respondent became a probation officer was positively related to the casework strategy. Although our cross-sectional data do not permit fuller exploration of these findings, two possibilities seem worthy of mention. First, it may be that older officers' opinions in both instances are byproducts of societally induced norms. That is, older officers' opinions as to the value of treatment may have been strongly colored by their maturational and educational experiences of the 1960's—a period in our history characterized by its endorsement of the rehabilitative ideal (Jones, 1987). A second explanation for these findings might be found in organizational influences—a factor not taken into account in the present study. While speculative, perhaps the state's probation services, in general, are treatment-oriented. If this is the case, the results may reflect an inability of probation officers who hold conflicting orientations to remain in the job. That is, the treatment orientation may result, at least in part, from *ideological attrition*.

The questions surrounding the optional or required arming of probation officers provided equally interesting results. A majority of our population, 59 percent, support the idea of being given the option to carry a firearm while working. Importantly, the only significant factor affecting opinions on this item was work orientation; those who supported provisions for the optional arming of probation officers expressed much higher levels of agreement with law-enforcement-type

caseload management strategies than those who were opposed to the idea. Neither the individual officer characteristics nor the work-related variables that we examined were found to be related to this item.

Other variables entered into the picture, however, when the question changed to one of whether probation officers should be required to carry firearms while working. Overall, the 26 percent of our population who supported this idea were differentiated from their peers by their youth, entry into probation work at earlier ages, and higher levels of support for law-enforcement-type caseload management strategies. There were also indications that both female officers and those with higher levels of education were less likely to support such a requirement.

From a macro perspective, our findings seem to suggest a professional tolerance, if not a personal acceptance, of firearms (and all that they imply) as a necessary tool in the probation officer's tactical arsenal. Tolerance could be seen in the majority of officers who supported optional arming, but that tolerance dissipated quickly when the option became a requirement. Within the limits of our study, it appears reasonable to suggest that officers who would not, by choice, employ firearms in probation work enjoy some philosophical distance when arming is optional and can therefore support it. But when the carrying of firearms is mandated, and they are forced to violate their perceptions of who and what they are, the same officers express opposition.

Another problem, which lies somewhere beyond the scope of this article, is that 80 percent of the officers indicated they would comply if they were required to carry firearms, *even though a majority was clearly opposed to doing so*. Whether arming the officers is optional or required, such policies can commit the officers to a range of duties and force options which did not previously exist. That may change both public and probationer perceptions about the role of the probation officer, and the advocate may then be seen as an adversary, whether armed or not. Thus, officers who have difficulty accepting the presence of firearms may put little effort into firearms training and may present a danger to themselves or others.

Finally, we note that while the present study sheds some light on the probation officer/firearms issue, the findings reported here are not without their limitations. Future research is obviously needed to explore whether the findings here are characteristic of probation officers working in different regions of the United States. It should also be noted that given the exploratory nature of the present study, analyses were confined to examining several bivariate relationships. Future research might examine the simultaneous in-

teraction among variables through the application of multivariate analytical techniques.

We close our discussion as it opened, observing that the introduction of firearms into probation work, particularly where it did not exist before, is quite controversial and touches many strongly held opinions. It is an area that begs for inquiry beyond what we have attempted. The topic is complicated, largely because of the interplay between the mission of the probation agency, the individual role perceptions of the officers, and the way that each is perceived by the public, probationers, and policymakers. And its complexity is only compounded by the fact that firearms contribute little to traditionally treatment-oriented probation work except an extension of the continuum of force options—an extension that begins with the subtle coercion of their mere presence and ends with death by their fullest use.

NOTES

¹Two studies are notably omitted here. Sigler and McGraw (1984) and Sigler (1988) examined the relationship between probation officer role conflict and weapons usage. Our study focuses on role perceptions by examining caseload management strategies—a theoretically related, yet conceptually distinct approach.

²The authors express their appreciation to Sheri Huffstetler and Cecilia Marquart of the Probation Academy at Sam Houston State University for their cooperation and assistance in collecting data for the study.

³The state statute governing employment requirements mandates that probation officers have a bachelor's degree and either 1 year of graduate studies in the social sciences or 1 year of experience in a correctional setting. In some cases, waivers are permitted for the graduate education or experience requirements. Currently employed officers lacking a bachelor's degree were "grandfathered" in when the statute was passed. See del Carmen, Witt, Caywood, and Layland (1989).

⁴Mangrum (1975), for example, has suggested that the probation officer's identity is determined by the various "functions" that he or she performs: law enforcement, legal, casework, counseling, referral, and problem solving (pp. 57-61). Van Laningham et al. (1977) categorized the roles that probation officers could conceivably fulfill into eight different groupings: referral, advice and guidance, court consultant, psychotherapy, law enforcement, environmental manipulation, conduct establishment, and an unclassified category. Strong (1981) has listed 11 work roles: detection, broker, advocate, evaluator, mobilizer, enabler, information manager, mediator, educator, community planner, and enforcer. In their work, Allen et al. (1979) suggest that there are four role typologies in probation: punitive/law enforcement officer, welfare/therapeutic officer, protective/synthetic officer, and passive/time server officer (p. 58). Our intent in this study is not to attempt to measure all of the roles that a probation officer might conceivably perform, but rather to identify the predominant strategies relied on by officers in managing offenders under supervision.

⁵For a brief, well-written overview that integrates these three work strategies into the historical evolution of probation, see Cole (1989), pp. 605-607. For a more thorough discussion, see Abadinsky (1987), pp. 285-296.

⁶Scales used in the present study were developed and pretested at the Criminal Justice Center, Sam Houston State University in 1988 and 1989. Data on reliability, validity, and test norms compiled

from a sample of 338 undergraduate criminal justice students are available from the authors upon request.

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