

## **Basic Fundamental Skills Training for Juvenile Probation Officers-- Results of a Nationwide Survey of Curriculum Content**

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**THE JUVENILE JUSTICE** system has experienced significant changes in the past 15 years. A period of increase in violent juvenile crime coupled with the responses by legislatures dramatically altered traditional juvenile justice practice. Changes throughout the system have impacted all aspects of the juvenile justice system, including juvenile probation practices. Juvenile probation covers a broad array of services, from the investigation and supervision of youth involved with the juvenile court, to the initial intake screening of juveniles charged with crimes (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2000). Just as the juvenile justice system has changed, the juvenile probation caseload has changed and juvenile probation officers are seeing challenging cases that prove difficult to supervise. Present challenges to juvenile probation officers include such issues as their own safety, more personal crime offenders on their caseloads, and overall larger caseloads to supervise (Torbet, 1996). With the changing face of juvenile probation, the issue of training juvenile probation officers to do their jobs has assumed greater importance. How do we train juvenile probation officers for such an increasingly challenging job?

Although research on this topic is virtually non-existent, previous research by the authors examined the national trends and patterns regarding juvenile probation officer training practices and found that 36 states mandate some type of juvenile probation officer training, while many remaining states recommend training. In assessing the state of mandatory fundamental basic skills training, 26 states responded that they mandate basic fundamental skills training. The hours of training range from 8 to 195, with most states requiring completion of the basic fundamental skills training within the first year of employment (Reddington & Kreisel, 2000). Obviously, this is a wide variation in the training hours required for basic fundamental skills training. This discovery raises the research question: Is there consistency throughout the basic fundamental skills curriculums? What curricula are being used to train juvenile probation officers and are there patterns of consistency, or perhaps more important, inconsistency within them?

The first project of the Juvenile Probation Officer Initiative (JPOI), a component of the Technical Assistance to the Juvenile Court Project at the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ), resulted in the publication of the Desktop Guide to Good Probation Practice in 1993 (Torbet, 1993). The first edition of The Desktop Guide to Good Juvenile Probation Practice was published by the NCJJ through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and was designed to accomplish four goals:

- "To demonstrate that there does exist an accumulation of policy and procedure which the field believes is good practice;
- To present that practice in a manner which will be immediately useful to the beginning probation officer;

- To provide the context within which the professional practice of probation is grounded; and
- To capture and record, at this point in time, the essence of good probation practice upon which professional development in the field will continue to grow" (Torbet, 1993, p. iii)

The NCJJ also developed a second publication in 1993 based on the Guide, entitled Fundamental Skills Training Curriculum for Juvenile Probation Officers. This follow-up publication suggested that the training of juvenile probation officers should "provide an opportunity for juvenile probation officers to acquire the essential skills and knowledge required to effectively perform their jobs and provide needed services" (Thomas, 1993, p. 3). While recognizing that juvenile probation departments differ widely in organization, number, size and sometimes philosophy, the NCJJ recommends that "certain skills and knowledge are fundamental to good probation practice" (Thomas, 1993, p.3). Towards that belief, The Curriculum offered by the NCJJ holds these specific training goals:

- "Improve the ability of juvenile probation officers to meet the needs of youths and to serve the community.
- Enhance career options for juvenile probation officers.
- Increase the status and stature of the field of juvenile probation nationally.
- Increase the level of knowledge and skills held by entry-level juvenile probation officers; veteran juvenile probation officers in need of a refresher course, and those wishing to enter the field" (Thomas, 1993, p. 4).

The recommended Curriculum consists of the following topics and descriptors of the suggested subject matter:

**Juvenile Justice System Overview:** This topic's discussion focuses on national and local juvenile justice system perspectives, as well as reviewing the philosophy and operation of various juvenile justice systems.

**The Probation Profession:** This training topic entails a discussion of juvenile probation employees as professionals and promotes a continuing quest for excellence in service.

**Appreciating Cultural Diversity:** This training topic explores the nation's cultural differences and, in particular, their impact on juvenile probation in the United States.

**Adolescence and Delinquency:** Juvenile probation officers learn to assess youth behavior as well as to understand adolescent development.

**Interpersonal Communication Skills:** This training demonstrates verbal and non-verbal communication techniques to use with juveniles and includes practice and application.

**Probation Officer Safety:** This training topic discusses the various communication and other techniques used to promote officer safety.

**Assessment Skills:** The theory and practice of effective assessment of risk and needs of juveniles is emphasized in this area of training.

Special Problems and Appropriate Response: This training topic should include the most current information on timely issues such as drug/alcohol use, chronic delinquency and juvenile sex offenders.

Pre-dispositional Recommendations: This topical discussion evolves around decision-making criteria and procedure.

Writing the Recommendation: This training emphasizes how to write quality recommendations for the juvenile court, as well as techniques to improve writing skills.

Courtroom Presentations: This training focuses on effective courtroom behavior and provides guidelines for courtroom testimony.

Supervision Skills: This includes the discussion of the comprehensive case planning process.

Managing Resources and Time: This training topic emphasizes the assessment of existing resources, the creation of needed resources and effective time management.

Enhancing the Profession: This training topic focuses on the professional code of ethics, standards in the administration of juvenile justice, professional development and training, and professional organizations for juvenile probation officers (Torbet, 1993).

Although this is not the only juvenile probation training curriculum in existence, the National Center for Juvenile Justice presents a widely accepted basic and fundamental skills curriculum. The research questions addressed in this study focus on the extent to which this specific recommended curriculum is being followed in training development in the majority of states. If it is not being followed, the study explores what topics are being taught that are not in the recommended curriculum list, and what recommended topics are being excluded with any regularity. The answers to these research questions will assist the ongoing development of curriculum designed to provide the most timely and beneficial training to juvenile probation officers.

Earlier juvenile probation officer training research resulted in a list of state contact persons (see Reddington & Kreisel, 2000). These contact people are the training administrators in juvenile justice for each state. Each state contact person received a survey questionnaire asking for information on the basic curriculum for juvenile probation officers' fundamental skills training. Initial survey questions asked for information already gathered in the first research project so that information could be updated in these findings. The survey questioned whether the state has a basic/fundamental skills training for entry-level juvenile probation officers. Follow-up questions asked if the training was mandated, how many hours it was, how often the training was offered and which segment of the juvenile population trainees would be working with.

In addition, the survey asked for a copy of the course curriculum for the basic fundamental skills training. In assessing the fundamental skills curricula collected from respondents, each curriculum topic was assessed. The researchers then categorized each respondent's training topics using the National Center for Juvenile Justice's

curriculum as a basis of assessment. This assessment was based on the authors' best judgment as to the most appropriate fit for each respondent's training topics.

The survey also asked about training funding, questioned what additional topic respondents felt should be included in fundamental skills training, and invited expression of opinion on nationally set training standards for juvenile probation officers. Follow-up phone calls were made to those who did not answer the initial survey.

## **Findings**

Survey responses were collected from 35 different states for a response rate of 69 percent. All returned surveys provided usable data for the analysis. Of the 35 respondents, a majority (82.9 percent or 29 states) reports that their state provides some form of basic fundamental skills training for their juvenile probation officers (JPOs). However, six of these respondents report that the state does not provide the fundamental skills training for their juvenile probation officers prior to giving new employees job responsibilities. First, we discuss the extent of mandatory training, the amount of training and how often that training is offered by each state.

### **Mandated, Recommended or Voluntary JPO Fundamental Skills Training**

The 29 states that responded positively that their juvenile probation officers were offered fundamental skills training were asked whether their training is mandated, recommended, or voluntary. If the training is mandated or recommended, respondents were then asked to identify the mandating or recommending body. In a majority (69 percent) of states the fundamental skills training is mandated. State law or statute most commonly mandates it (in 34.5 percent ( 10) of the states), while 27.6 percent ( 8) of the states respond that it is mandated by administrative order or agency policy. In two other states, the training is mandated for juvenile probation officers by court rule (see Table 1).

As Table 1 indicates, there are two states in which the state statute or law recommends fundamental skills training for their juvenile probation officers. Another seven states--or nearly one-quarter of the respondents with training--voluntarily offer fundamental skills training to their juvenile probation officers.

### **The Extent of the Fundamental Skills Training**

States were asked to provide the number of hours of fundamental skills training offered to their newly employed juvenile probation officers. The total hours of training in the fundamental skills curriculum for various states range from 8 to 200 hours. The mode or most commonly reported number of training hours in the core curriculum is 40 hours, reported by seven different states, while six other states report a basic training curriculum consisting of 80 hours. The mean number of training hours reported in the fundamental skills curriculum is 77.2 hours. It is worth noting that two different states offer at least 200 hours of fundamental skills training to their juvenile probation officers (see Table 2).

Respondents were asked how often in a year basic fundamental skills training is offered. The number of training sessions offered ranged from one per year to 26 per year. The most commonly reported or mode training offering was biannually and quarterly. The mean frequency at which fundamental skills training sessions are offered each year is slightly more than quarterly (4.5 times per year) (see Table 3).

### **Focus of JPO Fundamental Skills Training**

In addition to inquiring how often the training is offered to new juvenile probation employees, the states were asked to respond to whether the fundamental skills training is for juvenile employees only or is combined with staff from the adult criminal justice system.

A large majority (82.1 percent) of the respondents reported that the basic fundamental training is for juvenile staff only. However, five states responded that training is shared with personnel employed in the criminal justice system.

Juvenile probation officers around the country work with a variety of juvenile offenders. Therefore, respondents were questioned as to the types of juveniles that juvenile probation officers in their state are trained to supervise. Nearly all (96.4 percent) of the respondents report that their juvenile probation officers are trained to work with juvenile delinquents. Juvenile probation officers in 71.4 percent of the responding states are trained to work with status offenders and 39.3 percent of the states train their juvenile probation officers to work with abused and neglected children. Five states report that specialized training is given to their juvenile probation officers in such areas as "juveniles who receive adult sentences but are too young to go to the adult system," aftercare for juveniles living in residential placement, victim services and contracted probationary services (see Table 4).

### **Fundamental Curriculum Content Using the NCJJ Fundamental Skills Training Curriculum**

Each responding state was asked to provide the curriculum content of their fundamental skills training for newly employed juvenile probation officers. Using the recommended Fundamental Skills Training Curriculum for Juvenile Probation Officers developed by the NCJJ (Thomas, 1993) as a categorization tool, each state was analyzed on each juvenile training topic outlined in the recommended Curriculum. The recommended Curriculum encompasses 14 different topic areas as outlined in the literature review. Only one state offers fundamental skills training that includes all 14 different Curriculum training areas. One other state offers all the recommended training topics except Adolescence and Delinquency. Eight is the mode number of recommended Curriculum training topics offered among the respondents and six recommended Curriculum training topics is the average number offered by the respondent states.

As Table 5 indicates, Probation Officer Safety is the topic most likely to be addressed (in 75.9 percent of the responding states). That is followed closely by Supervision Skills (offered in 69 percent of the responding states). The topic least likely to be addressed in fundamental skills training is Pre-dispositional Recommendations and Managing Resources and Time, offered by only 31 percent of the responding states.

### **National Training Standards for Juvenile Probation Officers**

Survey respondents were asked if they believe there is any need for national standardization for training juvenile probation officers. An overwhelming majority (87.1 percent or 27 respondents) agreed that national training standards for juvenile probation officers are needed. One respondent stated, "Excellent idea. I've been searching for one for years." Another respondent commented that "Perhaps a core competency curriculum" may be a good idea. One other respondent commented that "JPOs have

been neglected in the area of training standards. Even ACE [American Correctional Association] doesn't have much on them."\*

However, most of these respondents added that latitude in training standards would be crucial to accommodate individual state differences. Fourteen respondents added written comments concerning state variations in juvenile systems and cautioning that training standards would have to be flexible. In addition, three of the four respondents dissenting with national standards offered written comments suggesting that the complexity of standardizing 51 different state juvenile justice systems would prove too difficult.

### **Desire to Meet with Other JPO Training Specialists and Suggested Discussion Topics**

Respondents were asked if they would be interested in meeting with other state professionals involved in training juvenile probation officers. All but one respondent expressed the desire to meet with other juvenile training professionals to discuss training issues. In addition, respondents provided 66 suggested topics for discussion if such a meeting were to occur (see Table 6). A discussion of training in general was the most frequently suggested meeting topic (41 percent or 27 respondents). More specifically, suggestions included discussions of national standards, safety and best practices. Ten specialized topics were suggested, including victims' programs, female offenders, juvenile gangs, conducting a national conference, ideas on skills, policy issues, firearms, professionalism, conflict management and screening/intake.

### **Conclusions**

We will first address the issues associated with training and then we will address several curriculum issues.

First, the research found that most state respondents (69 percent) mandate, and the others highly recommend, training of newly employed juvenile probation officers. One week (40 hours) of fundamental skills training is found to be the most common length of training. However, the average number of training hours exceeded that, at 77.2 hours, which is nearly two weeks of training. Beyond the fundamental skills training, several states also provide on-the-job-training (JOT) before giving juvenile probation officers a full caseload. This average amount of training for juvenile probation officers is somewhat lower than the average for adult probation officers, which is 125 hours (ACA, 2000) or for law enforcement officers (Edwards, 1993; Langworthy, Hughes & Sanders, 1995). The lengthiest juvenile probation training was 200 hours, found in two states.

Second, the most common reply to the question about the frequency of offering fundamental skills training was biannually or quarterly. This response raises the concern about how often new juvenile probation officers are hired. If the answer is not "in syncopation with the trainings," that could mean juvenile probation officers supervising juveniles before they have had proper training. This appears to be the case with at least six states that routinely do not offer the basic fundamental skills training until a juvenile probation officer is well into employment. Allowing untrained individuals to supervise juveniles should raise some liability concerns for those states.

Third, five states responded that juvenile probation officers receive their training in common with the training of employees in the adult criminal system. This may be problematic due to the vast differences between most states' juvenile and criminal codes. Historically, juvenile training topics are secondary in emphasis and time to the topics regarding the adult criminal justice system.

Fourth, all but one state responded that they train their juvenile probation officers to work with delinquent offenders. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents train for work with status offenders and much fewer (39.3 percent) focus on training probation officers to work with abused and neglected children. The fact that there is little education about abused and neglected children arouses concern because research has found a direct correlation between victimization in the home and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Osofsky, 2001; Kaufman & Widom, 1999).

#### Fundamental Curriculum Content

As the research delved into each state's juvenile probation officer fundamental skills training curriculum, the NCJJ's Fundamental Skills Curriculum (Thomas, 1993) was used as a baseline measure. Only one state provided all types of training as outlined by the Curriculum. States prioritize Probation Officer Safety, as it is the most commonly offered training. Over 75 percent of the states offer this training in the basic fundamental skills package. The topic of Comprehensive Case Planning was the second category to be emphasized in training.

Also, an Overview of the Juvenile Justice System was offered in only 62-percent of the respondents' fundamental skills training. This is the foundation of truly understanding one's position as a juvenile justice employee. By not offering a system overview, states are assuming new employees understand the philosophy, function and process of the juvenile justice system. The average juvenile probation officer is college-educated (Torbet, 1996) and 86 percent of the 50 states minimally require a bachelor's degree or at least some college education for juvenile probation officers (ACA, 2000). Therefore, juvenile justice employers may be assuming that new employees have been exposed to the juvenile justice system process in college.

This may be a faulty assumption because first, not all new juvenile probation officer hires are criminal justice majors. Second, even if new hires are criminal justice majors, there is no guarantee they are educated on juvenile issues. Kreisel, Reddington and Haase (2002) reported that a majority of criminal justice programs across the country offer a juvenile justice course in their criminal justice curricula; however, most criminal justice programs do not require their students to take that course. In essence, there is no guarantee that new juvenile probation officers understand the foundations of the system in which they will be working unless they receive specific education about that system in the fundamentals skills training.

Five different recommended Curriculum training areas are offered by less than 50 percent of the respondents: The Probation Profession (48.3 percent), Adolescence and Delinquency (37.9 percent), Interpersonal Communication Skills (37.9 percent), Pre-Dispositional Recommendations (31 percent) and Managing Resources and Time (31 percent). Three of these categories, The Probation Profession, Interpersonal

Communication Skills and Managing Resources and Time, focus on the personal work skills of the juvenile employee, thus making the job easier. While these skills may be important for the satisfaction and betterment of the juvenile probation officer, these training categories may not be viewed as essential when training time and resources are limited.

Two of the other recommended training categories not regularly offered by states, Adolescence, and Delinquency and Pre-Dispositional Recommendations, are interrelated to each other. First, the job may be less frustrating for juvenile employees if they better grasp adolescent behaviors and development. Second, Torbet (1996) reports that 85 percent of juvenile probation professionals are involved in the delivery of basic intake, investigation, and supervision services. Therefore, since a majority of juvenile probation professionals are making pre dispositional decisions for the juvenile, it should be considered crucial to understand the biological, physiological and psychological development and the appropriate behavior of adolescence. Third, it is important that Juvenile Probation Officers understand the appropriate dispositional options available to the juvenile court.

Overall, states are offering juvenile probation professionals fundamental skills training utilizing some topic areas that are suggested by the NCJJ Curriculum. If this Curriculum is nationally recognized as the suggested baseline training, then the question must be asked whether more of the states should be offering a more comprehensive training curriculum.

#### National Standards

When asked about their desire for national standards, respondents were overwhelmingly positive. This relates to the previous question about the need for a more comprehensive training curriculum for all state juvenile probation officer fundamental skills training. There appears to be a desire to coordinate training efforts and to receive some guidance as to the appropriate training for juvenile probation professionals.

Respondents answering negatively or positively to national standards have similar concerns. Those concerns focused on the adaptability of national standards to each state. Thus, national standards for juvenile probation officer training would need to be flexible and ever evolving to accommodate the differences in each state's juvenile justice system.

#### Additional Research

This research suggests additional topics, for study. A nationwide assessment of juvenile probation officer training as perceived by juvenile probation officers themselves is one obvious topic. They alone can tell us with authority some of the missing training pieces. How effective was their training as they began their jobs, and how effective does it appear years down the road? What training information did the officers find essential, and what did they not really use? What training do they not receive that might prove beneficial?

In addition, research is currently being conducted that replicates this and the first project,(see Reddington & Kreisel, 2000) with juvenile parole or aftercare specialists.



Paralleling the interest in adult prisoners' reentry is a renewed national (OJJDP) interest in the follow-up care given our juveniles as they reenter society from our institutions. We believe that it is imperative that we update the literature about the training juvenile aftercare specialists receive to prepare them for their jobs as juvenile justice professionals.

**TABLE 1 Training Status With Respect to Mandated, Recommended or Voluntary**

Legend for Chart:

B - Frequency  
C - Percentage

| A   | B  | C     |
|---|----|-------|
| Mandated by state statute or law                            | 10 | 34.5% |
| Mandated by court rule                                      | 2  | 6.9%  |
| Mandated by administrative order or agency directive/policy | 8  | 27.6% |
| Recommended by state statute or law                         | 2  | 6.9%  |
| Voluntary   | 7  | 24.1% |

**TABLE 2 Total Hours of Basic/Fundamental Skills Curriculum**

Legend for Chart:

A - Training hours  
B - Frequency  
C - Percentage

| A       | B | C     |
|---------|---|-------|
| 8-36    | 4 | 15.4% |
| 40      | 7 | 27.0  |
| 55-75   | 3 | 11.5% |
| 80      | 6 | 23.1% |
| 100-200 | 6 | 23.1% |

Numbers may not equal 100 due to rounding.

**TABLE 3 The Number of Fundamental Skills Training Sessions Offered**

Legend for Chart:

A - Number of times training is offered per year  
B - Frequency

A B

1 5  
 2 6  
 3 3  
 4 6  
 5 1  
 8 1  
 9 1  
 12 2  
 26 1

Mode=2&4  
 Mean=4.5

**TABLE 4 Focus of Training with Respect to Type of Juvenile**

Legend for Chart:

A - Type of offender  
 B - Frequency  
 C - Percentage

A B C

Delinquent offenders 27 96.4%  
 Status offenders 20 71.4%  
 Abused and neglected 11 39.3%  
 Other training focus 5 17.9%

**TABLE 5 Fundamental Training Curriculum Content Following the JCJJ Curriculum**

Legend for Chart:

A - NCJJ Curriculum Category  
 B - Frequency  
 C - Percentage

A B C

Probation Officer Safety 22 75.9  
 Supervision Skills 20 69.0  
 Courtroom Presentations 19 65.5  
 Juvenile Justice System Overview 18 62.1  
 Enhancing the Profession 18 62.1  
 Special Problems and Appropriate Responses 16 55.2  
 Writing the Recommendation 16 55.2  
 Appreciating Cultural Diversity 15 51.7  
 Assessment Skills 15 51.7  
 The Probation Profession 14 48.3

|                                    |    |      |
|------------------------------------|----|------|
| Adolescence and Delinquency        | 11 | 37.9 |
| Interpersonal Communication Skills | 11 | 37.9 |
| Pre-Dispositional Recommendations  | 9  | 31.0 |
| Managing Resources and Time        | 9  | 31.0 |

**TABLE 6 Suggested Meeting Discussion Topics**

Legend for Chart:

A - Suggestion

B - Frequency of Suggestion

| A   | B  |
|---|----|
| Training in general   | 27 |
| National standards  | 11 |
| Specialized topics (victims, female offenders, gangs, firearms, etc.) | 10 |
| Safety  | 6  |
| Best practices  | 4  |
| Certification of officers   | 2  |
| Outcome measures & competencies                                       | 2  |
| Financial resources   | 2  |
| Caseload management   | 2  |

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