From My Perspective...

A Diversified Career in Corrections—and More

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The field of forensic psychology—broadly defined as any area where mental health and justice intersect—is relatively young. Being part of a rapidly evolving discipline means many things, but beyond my interest in this area, a piece that attracted me was the pace at which the field was growing, developing, and changing. The manifestations of this rate of development are many, but saliently, it means new and different opportunities for practice, training, research, and administration have and will continue to appear on the horizon. Relatedly, the diversity of career options available under the rubric of forensic psychology are myriad. If you asked 10 practitioners in forensic psychology what they worked on in a year, I suspect you’d get 10 different answers ranging from consulting on jury selection to providing treatment in correctional facilities, evaluating competency for criminal matters, assessing child custody alternatives, or assisting with homeland security and counterterrorism efforts. To put it simply, practitioners of forensic psychology have the opportunity to have a major impact on the world in so many different ways.

Like many people working in forensic psychology, my interests began early. While I was still an undergraduate, I had my first clinical experience by working in juvenile probation as an intern/counselor. I supervised a small caseload of juvenile sex offenders and developed presentence materials. At that time (and even now, more than 15 years later), research on juvenile sex offenders was limited, and I enjoyed working in a cutting-edge area where the newest approaches were being tried. I was also fascinated by the overlapping mental health and legal systems. As I went on to graduate school, I pursued interests in malingering detection, service provision for jail detainees, police officer employee selection, and criminal responsibility assessment. I also taught, conducted research, and worked as a clinician. While much of my work involved corrections in some way, some of it did not. The most unhelpful feedback I received was that my differing interests could be construed as “unfocused” and that I should consider having one clear interest area. What terrible advice!

Fortunately, the flexibility of forensic psychology has allowed me to explore my divergent interests, and I have been able to work on all those topics and more. While I have made corrections my broad area of expertise, I have continued to find new areas of interest within this specialty field, and have worked in direct service provision, management, and administration. In this essay, I share my experiences with you to show how forensic psychology study can reap rich career rewards for someone who likes variety.

While I was in graduate school—a master’s program at Missouri State University and a doctoral program at the University of Alabama—I honed my skills and built my resume by completing training rotations in a small county jail, a drug-treatment prison, a state forensic hospital, and a private neuropsychology practice. I taught courses in introductory and experimental psychology, and published papers on ADHD interventions, substance abuse prevention, and the state of correctional mental health research. When the time came to select an internship, I had set my sights on working in corrections, but continued to seek variety within that setting. I chose to spend my year at the United States Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri, where I was able to engage in both criminal forensic assessment and incarcerated offender treatment. I also participated in such unique activities as activating one of the first intervention programs for personality and behaviorally disordered inmates and training incarcerated persons to be hospice workers and supporting their efforts.

Upon completion of my internship and other PhD requirements, I accepted a position as a Staff Psychologist at a federal prison complex that housed both male and female inmates. If it was variety I was seeking, I hit the gold mine with this job. I provided individual and group therapy to incarcerated men and women of different security levels. I conducted suicide risk assessments, crisis intervention sessions, and segregated housing reviews. I learned basic law enforcement emergency response techniques, and I trained both staff and inmates on the prevention of suicide and the monitoring of self-injurious patients. Finally, I provided Employee Assistance counseling and referral to staff and led the institution’s reentry planning efforts, facilitating the return of inmates to the community upon the expiration of their sentence. Every day brought new challenges, whether in the presentation of an inmate’s symptoms or the presentation of a new task or scenario.

As a staff psychologist, I became aware of a subset of the inmate population that seemed to function less well than other inmates and to require more intensive services and staff resources—those with cognitive impairments such as traumatic brain injuries and intellectual deficiencies. I grew interested in identifying the commonalities among this group, and was eventually given the opportunity to develop a treatment program for them. In addition to being a new challenge in terms of the focus of my work, this position was the first time I was responsible for the management of other staff. My team and I began accepting inmates into our unique modified therapeutic community, which existed inside a medium-security prison. As we became more skilled in understanding the interface between cognitive impairments and criminal behavior, we were able to develop training for staff, and to modify extant intervention protocols to fit the needs of our treatment population. In creating these program criteria, I had my first exposure to policy development.

Although I remained interested in the criminal manifestations of cognitive disorders, I began to seek new opportunities once the program was fully operational and demonstrating a positive impact. I enjoyed the management aspects of my position, and tried to explore what it would be like to lead service delivery planning in a forensic setting. Within a few years, I moved to a new role as chief psychologist covering two prison facilities and a small pretrial detention unit. In this position, I had oversight for the planning and implementation of all mental health activities for an entire department—but I continued to serve as a clinician as well. I also oversaw specialized drug treatment programming and a practicum program. In these capacities, it was necessary not only to stay current with the literature, but also to consider how new innovations were relevant to my job and to apply them.

I had no particular plans to leave my position as chief psychologist, but my curiosity was piqued when a law was passed allowing for the federal civil commitment of sexually dangerous persons. In 2010, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of this statute (*United States v. Comstock*). Because I believed that my past experiences with forensic assessment, correctional treatment, and policy development would make me an asset, I applied for and accepted a position on the Federal Certification Review Panel. In this role, I was responsible for reviewing cases of incarcerated sex offenders, and in consultation with mental health and legal colleagues, making evaluation referrals and eventually decisions as to whether clinical and legal requirements were met for civil commitment. I was able to develop training on sexual dangerousness determinations and conduct research on this population. My office also worked with agency field staff providing treatment to those adjudicated sexually dangerous and developed policy on this topic.

I was not looking for a new position when an opportunity arose to participate in a unique executive development program within the Department of Justice. This program required completion of an executive experience at another agency. My broad background of research and teaching, service provision and management, and corrections and other justice work made me an ideal candidate for a leadership position at the National Institute of Justice. I spent more than half a year acting as the Associate Director of the agency, supervising multiple divisions, and working to enhance criminal justice practice by applying scientific evidence. I worked with such diverse portfolios as policing and forensic biology, and learned about the interface among state, local, and federal justice systems.

Recently, I was selected for a new position as the Administrator of the Female Offender Branch with the Bureau of Prisons. In my new role, I am able to return to my earlier experiences and interests in program development—but this time on a national scale. I am able to bring together all my diffuse experiences in research, practice, and administration to create a program that cuts across disciplines—psychology, criminal justice, law, case management. As we learn more about the unique needs of female offenders, as well as what they have in common with their more frequently studied male counterparts, I will be working to ensure the agency provides services commensurate with the standards of these multiple fields.

As I reflect on my career to date, my advice to students is, follow your interests within forensic psychology. It is more than acceptable if they do not converge around a single topic. In fact, this is a field where multiple interest areas can serve you well, as I hope I have illustrated. This does not mean one can practice outside an area of competence—in fact, the opposite is true. Working in legal settings means performance must be of the highest caliber and will be exposed to greater scrutiny than in other settings. Thus, having basic, general competence in forensic psychology is essential, but having multiple, varied interests, specialties, and experiences can lead to an exciting career journey. This is a vibrant field, and I look forward to my second decade practicing in it.

**Dr. McLearen** is a licensed clinical psychologist who received her PhD in clinical psychology and the law from The University of Alabama in 2003. She has held positions of increasing responsibility with the Federal Bureau of Prisons since 2002, and currently serves as Administrator of the Female Offender Branch. In her spare time, she likes to spend time with her daughter and husband and be outdoors, preferably near the beach, as often as possible.