**FAQ for Students Interested in Forensic Psychology**

**Developed by the North Carolina Psychological Association’s**

**Law and Psychology Committee**

1. **What types of schools or programs do I need to attend to have a career in forensic psychology?  What degrees do I need?**

A forensic psychologist is usually a licensed psychologist, meaning they have a doctorate in psychology (Ph.D. or Psy.D.). One could also obtain a doctorate in forensic psychology or criminology; however, those programs are not accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA). In the field of psychology in general, it is important to choose an APA-approved program. A law degree in addition to a doctorate in psychology is a useful combination, and some programs offer dual-doctorate programs in law and psychology. One can also obtain a master’s degree in Forensic Psychology and then go on to obtain their doctorate. Although any of these approaches can prepare you for a career in forensic psychology, issues of funding may be important in your choice. Although there is variability, Ph.D. programs are more likely to provide tuition support and a stipend for graduate students than Psy.D. or master’s degree programs.

1. **What do you think students should know about a career in forensic psychology that they may not realize?  Or, what did you not know when you started out that you wish you would have known?**

Professionals may have many answers to this question, but it can be helpful to understand more about the different activities that forensic psychologists might do – what they do on a day-to-day basis. There are different types of forensic psychology jobs! Some work in government agencies, prisons, or mental health facilities, but many work in private practice, diagnosing mental health conditions or evaluating competency in legal cases. They also consult with attorneys and judges about psychological issues or regarding sentencing.

It is important to understand that there are different areas of forensic psychology, too. This can include family law, child protective services, immigration, adoption, criminal, personal injury, worker’s compensation, and disability.

It can be very stressful work. You are working in a situation where people are often trying to disprove your work, and not everyone has the same goal for a client or a case.

In many areas of forensic psychological practice, much of your time is spent reading files, reports, and other related documents. You may also be asked to write reports. An important aspect of most, if not all, forensic work is a commitment to keeping current on research, case law, and changes in the field.

1. **Is your job like I what I see on Criminal Minds or other television programs?**

Forensic psychology is not like what is represented on most television dramas. They are not detectives or crime scene investigators. They actively seek to avoid dual roles.

Forensic psychologists often conduct psychological evaluations (assessments) of individuals involved in legal matters. This means much time is spent conducting clinical interviews, psychological testing, reviewing records, speaking with collateral sources, and writing reports. One must also testify in court about the findings. Forensic psychologists may work for government agencies, police departments, forensic hospitals, private practice, or other settings.

1. **What is a typical day like for a forensic psychologist?**

The daily activities of a forensic psychologist can vary widely. The work one does will depend largely on the setting and the type of cases on which one works. One day could involve varying degrees of interviewing, testing, record review, speaking with attorneys, writing reports, consulting, and testifying. Record reviews can often be extensive, and include reading court documents, medical and psychiatric treatment records, school records, and police reports. Testing can involve administering measures to assess intellectual functioning, personality and characteristics of mental health conditions, and historical and clinical information to inform violence risk assessment.

For those who also conduct therapy, this can involve working with children, adolescents, and adults. It may involve individual or group therapy as well.

Some settings where forensic psychologists work (e.g., psychiatric hospitals, prisons) have training programs for graduate or postgraduate trainees, in which case a typical day may include supervision of clinical work or providing didactic training.

1. **What types of skills are needed for a career in forensic psychology?**

An ethical approach to your work is important, as your professional integrity may be questioned in court. Strong problem-solving and research skills, as well as good observation and analytical skills, are helpful. Strong written and verbal communication skills are very important, as you will need to explain psychological concepts in courtrooms or to other types of professionals. Patience and emotional stability are also important, as you may face frustrating situations and disturbing content. This includes the need for self-care and good coping skills. And although it has been listed last here, compassion for the individuals with whom you work is extremely important. Many people end up in the legal system for a variety of reasons, and every person deserves to have their case examined fairly. An appreciation for the need to be fair, neutral, and objective are also extremely important.

1. **What types of experiences should I seek out in addition to academics?**

Experience in research labs, clinics, hospitals, prisons, and service-learning placements all look good on applications and provide you with training in some of the skills important for forensic psychologists. If possible, find some volunteer work in a setting that is similar to the one in which you may wish to work.

1. **What advice do you have for someone wanting to enter the field?**

Talk to as many professors, psychologists, and professionals as you can. Find out what they do and ask them how they arrived at their position. Persevere through your undergraduate and graduate programs! Build up thick skin now!

A good forensic psychological approach is built upon a solid clinical foundation. Learn the clinical work as diligently as the forensic work.

1. **Is it difficult to find practica or internship experiences?**

Most good programs offer substantial support in helping you with placements. It is important to assess the quality of any graduate program carefully. Ask about how students find these placements, and also ask how many students are successfully placed. If a program cannot answer these questions to your satisfaction, consider whether that program is right for you. To be a skilled forensic psychologist, you must first learn and apply general clinical skills. That said, you will need to actively participate in your program’s placement activities and do all that is recommended. It is a good idea to ask directly if the program has current relationships with practicum sites in the types of settings you are looking for (prisons, detention center, court-mandated treatment, etc.). Many programs are open to developing new practicum site opportunities, but this can be a long and difficult process depending on institutional rules.

1. **What do you like best about your job?  Least?**

Many psychologists would have different answers to this question. Many enjoy solving psychological puzzles and helping individuals who are struggling with psychological problems get help or resolution to their case. Meeting interesting people and being challenged in an adversarial setting can be exciting. Less enjoyable activities may include tedious review of records, long waits associated with the legal system, and being subject to material and information related to heinous crimes.

There are also good and bad attorneys, just like every person and profession. It can be difficult to deal with an attorney who seems more interested in money or winning a case than doing what’s best for all those involved.

In some areas of forensic work, there are times when it is virtually impossible to predict your schedule or control your workday. This happens most often when involved in court cases. You cannot control the pace of the court or when you might be called to testify.

1. **What is the average salary for a forensic psychologist?**

The APA conducts surveys regarding salaries on a regular basis. You can find the most recent summary of salary information for forensic psychologists here: <https://www.apa.org/action/science/forensic/education-training>

As with all professions, those at the beginning of their career tend to make less than those with many years of experience. Here are some resources regarding salaries, pay attention to starting and median salaries.

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/09/psychologists-earn>

<https://www.apadivisions.org/division-41/education/students/careers>

1. **What were some of the most valuable skills you developed early on in your career?**

Research and communication skills are invaluable in all psychology-related jobs. Developing them early means they will always be available to you as you move through your career. Soft skills are at times more important than even your academic abilities. You have to be able to build rapport with clients, attorneys, and be found credible by judges and juries. People want to be understood, and even when they are fighting, most people want to feel compassion for their situation.

1. **Where do you see the industry of forensic psychology going in the future? (Is there projected growth?)**

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects growth for psychology careers in general (<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/psychologists.htm>), but this may be even more true for forensic psychology. There is a growing realization that mental health issues are involved in a variety of legal issues, and a doctorate is currently required for psychological assessments. Because there is also a range of career paths that stem from a degree in forensic psychology, the degree has broad utility.

1. **Working in forensic psychology, how do you separate your work from your personal life? (How do you refrain from carrying the things you see/hear home?)**

Making an active choice to engage in particular cases may help maintain a sense of equilibrium in the face of disturbing material and remembering the end-goal of helping to resolve a case can help with motivation. Some are less disturbed by negative content; it is good to consider your own threshold for troubling information. Boundaries and good self-care help, too. Also, consulting with peers, either formally or informally, can help you problem solve and deal with work-related stress.

1. **What type of accomplishments are valued in this career?**

Becoming certified in forensic psychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology is well respected (and also difficult!). Forensic psychologists also do presentations or conduct trainings in their specialty areas, and academic forensic psychologists publish research. There are various areas in different fields of psychology that require certification, such as sex offender treatment or Parenting Coordination.

1. **What is a good entry level job to begin a career in forensic psychology?**

Working in a forensic unit of a psychiatric hospital, a substance abuse facility or prison is a good starting place. You may also find some community programs such as probation and parole hire at the BA/BS level. You may also find a position as a research assistant in a forensic psychology laboratory.

1. **Do you only do forensic evaluations, or do you practice clinical psychology as well? If so, how do you find your clients?**

Except for those in strictly academic settings, forensic psychologists are clinical psychologists with specialized training and/or experience in forensic issues. Some psychologists only conduct forensic evaluations, but many forensic psychologists also do psychotherapy (with individuals, groups, or families). Others do co-parenting counseling for separated or divorced families, consulting, or coaching. Finding clients often occurs through networking with other clinicians or attorneys as well as good marketing.

1. **How much flexibility do you have in your job? (i.e. hours, vacation time, residence, etc.)**

Some positions are highly flexible, such as private practice. But it is important to understand that your salary will depend on your “billable hours.” A salaried position (for a government agency like the VA, for example) would likely have more stability in salary but somewhat less flexibility.

1. **What type of hours do you typically work?**

Many work a typical 9:00 am to 5:00 pm job. However, some settings require on-call or weekend/evening hours.

Depending on the type of forensic work in which you become involved, the hours might be longer and more unpredictable. If one does work around the country, they may need to accommodate their schedule to those with whom they work. You can be asked to travel to a different state or time zone to consult or provide testimony.

1. **Do you ever have to take your work home?**

This too will vary depending on one’s work setting. There are times when a court deadline looms, and testimony preparation is necessary. In those cases, work may be extended. For therapy cases, there are frequently calls to be made or emails to be sent that occur outside of regular work hours.

1. **Are there forensic psychologists who are willing to talk to me about what they do?**

Yes! If you are interested in talking to someone, you can contact the co-chair of the Law and Psychology committee, Dr. Katrina Kuzyszyn-Jones at [drkatrina@kkjpsych.com](mailto:drkatrina@kkjpsych.com). She can provide a list of available psychologists.

**Some other resources include:**

<https://forensicpsychologist.blogspot.com/2014/09/forensic-psychology-is-it-career-for-me.html>

<https://www.apadivisions.org/division-41/education/programs>