**Is forensic psychology the career for you?**

Forensic psychology is a fascinating career combining psychology and the legal system. Generally, forensic psychologists focus on the application of psychological theory and practice to the offender, court, and corrections systems. Forensic psychologists work closely with the criminal justice system because the application of many legal concepts requires understanding psychological principles, such as state of mind, memory and perception. Before deciding on this career, you should know that success as a forensic psychologist requires developing important skills.

**Important skills for becoming a forensic psychologist**

*Research*

Research skills (e.g., the ability to search for, find, collect, analyze, interpret, and evaluate information) are necessary whether conducting experimental research or when in court and verifying the conclusions of an opposing expert witness (a person who is permitted to testify at a trial because of special knowledge or proficiency in a particular field that is relevant to the case).

*Critical thinking*

Forensic psychologists need to understand individuals and circumstances (i.e., evaluating the recidivism risk of an offender, determining witness fitness to stand trial). A forensic psychologist must be capable of creative and innovative thinking.

*Communication*

The ability to clearly explain complex ideas to judges, legal counsel and juries is important for a forensic psychologist, because much of what they do involves interpreting concepts for individuals who do not understand a particular psychological concept or theory.

*Keen observation*

The better observation skills a forensic psychologist has, the better advice and conclusions they can provide to their clients, whether that client is a legal counsel, judge, or panel of jurors. These skills range from active listening to perceiving non-verbal behavior or other cues that convey the meaning behind what is happening.

**Earning potential**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Australia | Canada | United Kingdom | United States |
| Median salary | $73, 891 | $80,643 | £41K | $80,370 |
| Range | $61K-$103K | $30K-$197K | £31K-£52K | $39K-$102K |

\*Source: PayScale.com

**Career basics**

Forensic psychologists are often licensed psychologists that specialize in the forensic concentration. Forensic psychologists often serve as an expert witnesses. In this role, they explain a complex psychological concept to the jury, provide consulting advice to legal counsel about a person’s state of mind or evaluate a defendant to determine whether they are fit to stand trial. Forensic psychologists also conduct research (i.e., understanding how juries decide verdicts, or why eyewitness testimony is unreliable

Forensic psychologists also work outside the court system. They are often employed in corrections (i.e., jails and prisons), providing rehabilitative treatment and education to inmates in preparation for their release from prison. Forensic psychologists also work with police departments as consultants during criminal investigations. Finally, forensic psychologists conduct research on criminal behavior and the development of effective clinical approaches.

Due to the specialized nature of the work, most jobs in the forensic psychology field minimally require a master's degree. Those interested in running a private practice or achieving a senior position should pursue a Ph.D. or Psy.D. Specific concentrations include civic and family or criminal forensic psychology. At the graduate level, individuals need practical experience, state licensure, and professional certification. They must also complete the required curriculum to practice as a psychologist in the United States.

**Career pathway options**

(1) Earn a bachelor’s degree

The most common path to become a forensic psychologist begins with earning a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university. At the undergraduate level, the typical major is psychology with a minor in criminal justice, criminology, or pre-law. A limited number of colleges may offer an undergraduate program in psychology that focuses on forensic psychology, with studies in the legal aspects of the field.

Importantly, a four-year bachelor’s degree does not guarantee acceptance into a graduate program. It is recommended to strive to attain the highest GPA possible and prepare for any graduate school prerequisites and admissions requirements. A suggested GPA of 3.0 or higher is recommended. Students will also be required to submit letters of recommendation (typically three from persons who are familiar with your academic and professional potential), and other supplemental essays (e.g., why do you want to become a forensic psychologist) as well as standardized exam scores (i.e., the Graduate Record Examination in the United States). Although graduate program emphasis on standardized examinations is decreasing (Kent, & McCarthy, 2016; Sackett, & Kuncel, 2018; Galla, et al., 2019).

*What courses should I take?*

Helms, and Mayhew, (2006) surveyed 177 individuals at the American Psychology-Law Society conference about undergraduate curriculum preparation. Fifty of their participants were directly involved in selecting students for graduate study in forensic psychology. The survey requested participants to indicate whether they would make a course a requirement, a recommendation, optional, or not necessary in reference to helping students prepare for graduate study in forensic psychology. The ranking in terms of order of importance for good preparation for forensic training are listed below. As you can see a foundation of research and statistics is considered among the most important course preparation areas.

|  |
| --- |
| Table 1: Mean Course Preference Ratings for Participants Involved in Graduate Student Selection |
| Rank | Course | Mean (Standard Deviation) |
| 1 | Research Methods  | 2.98 (.14) |
| 2 | Statistics  | 2.96 (.20) |
| 3 | Abnormal Psychology  | 2.44 (.71) |
| 4 | Experimental Psychology  | 2.29 (.71) |
| 5 | Introduction to Forensic Psychology  | 2.24 (.69) |
| 6 | Social Psychology  | 2.18 (.70) |
| 7 | Psychological Testing  | 1.98 (.87) |
| 8 | Personality Psychology  | 1.92 (.78) |
| 9 | Developmental Psychology  | 1.90 (.80) |
| 10 | Cognitive Psychology  | 1.88 (.73) |
| 11 | Learning  | 1.58 (.70) |
| 12 | Child Developmental Psychology | 1.54 (.76) |
| 13 | Physiological Psychology | 1.50 (.86) |
| 14 | Perception | 1.26 (.75) |
| 15 | History and Systems | 1.06 (.73) |

SOURCE: Helms, and Mayhew, (2006) <http://www.teachpsych.com/resources/Documents/otrp/resources/helms06.pdf>

(2). Earn a master’s degree in forensic psychology

Most master’s degree programs consist of about 35 to 40 credits plus a practicum or internship requirement. Courses will typically cover basic forensic psychology topics; however, there will be opportunities for students to gain more specialized forensic psychology knowledge and instruction. Most doctoral programs in psychology do not have a dedicated forensic psychology program. Instead, the PhD or PsyD will be in psychology with a concentration in forensic psychology. To boost their specialized knowledge, students may wish to pursue the master’s degree in forensic psychology.

(3). Earn a law degree

In the United States, under the American Bar Association (ABA) rules, a law student must complete no fewer than 83 credit hours in order to graduate from an ABA-approved law school. At least 64 of these credit hours must be in courses that require attendance in regularly scheduled classroom sessions or direct faculty instruction. Although not a mandatory degree, a Juris Doctor can provide legal instruction on concepts and procedures of the court, as well as qualify an individual to sit for the bar and become an attorney. Some schools offer joint degrees, combining a JD degree with a master’s or doctorate degree.

(4). Earn a doctorate degree in psychology

A doctoral program is good for any student who is intent on becoming a forensic psychologist and wants to be able to maximize their professional potential. The PhD in psychology is great for those who are research-oriented, while the PsyD is best for those who focus on treatment of patients. Depending on the school, the curriculum may not be that different between the two degrees. If you have a professional goal, such as evaluating criminal defendants or conducting research, there might be a reason to choose one degree over the other. The typical doctorate forensic psychology program has two to three years of courses, a comprehensive examination (or two), research requirements, practicum/internship requirements and a dissertation. It must be noted that PsyD degree curriculums are more likely to not have a dissertation but have a practicum or internship instead.

(5). Obtain licensure

Although licensure is not required to become a forensic psychologist, it is recommended for several reasons. Some courts might consider an unlicensed psychologist as unsuitable to provide fitness for trial reports. Licensure can also enhance marketability. The major components often include a doctorate degree, several years of relevant experience and passing of the Examination for Professional Practice of Psychology.

In the United States, if a forensic psychologist wants to evaluate individuals on behalf of the court or serve as an expert witness regarding competency, a state license will be needed. Psychologists must meet different licensing requirements depending on the state in which they want to practice. To begin the licensing process, candidates must meet the educational criteria. Most states require candidates to hold a doctoral degree in psychology from a regionally accredited college or university. Many states also require students to complete a psychology degree that features accreditation from the American Psychological Association or a related programmatic accrediting agency. Each state oversees its own licensing requirements, but most states will require a doctorate degree, passing the Examination for Professional Practice of Psychology and having a certain amount of relevant experience.

(6). Become certified

Certification is not a crucial prerequisite for forensic psychologists, but it is essential to improve marketability, demonstrate experience and boost credibility in the courtroom. Certifications areas vary based on the expertise of the forensic psychologist.

In the United States, forensic psychologists may wish to apply for professional certification with the American Board of Forensic Psychology (ABFP). Overseen by the American Board of Professional Psychology, the Diploma in Forensic Psychology from the ABFP is the only postdoctoral certification for forensic psychologists recognized by the American Psychological Association. ABFP certification candidates must hold a doctoral degree from a professional psychology program, be licensed in their jurisdiction of practice, and complete at least 100 hours of formal education and 1,000 hours of practical experience in the field.

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