

# An Examination of Probation Officer Tasks by Officer-Caseload Type

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Kelli D. Martin<sup>1</sup>  and Haley R. Zettler<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Prior research regarding probation officer roles and tasks has included statutory analyses, time studies, and computation of daily tasks in relation to risk level of offenders. However, there is limited research investigating specific proportions of probation officer tasks by officer caseload type. The current study builds on existing literature by providing an initial investigation into the daily tasks of adult probation officers of a medium-sized, tri-county probation department in a Southwestern state. For all officers, only 26% of tasks involved face-to-face contact with probationers. While regular caseload officers had the largest caseloads, specialized officers were more likely to supervise high-risk individuals. Court officers had the lowest proportion of face-to-face contact with probationers among the three groups. There were some significant differences in tasks observed between specialized and court officers and no statistically significant differences between regular officers and specialized officers. Recommendations for changes in probation practice are provided.

## Keywords

probation officers, workload, caseload, tasks, community corrections

## Introduction

Considering that probation is the most widely used sanction in the criminal justice system (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018), the empirical literature remains lacking regarding

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<sup>1</sup>Taylor Callahan & Coleman, Bexar, and Hidalgo Counties Community Supervision and Corrections Department, Abilene, TX, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of North Texas, Denton, TX, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Kelli D. Martin, Research Policy Planner, Taylor Callahan & Coleman, Bexar, and Hidalgo Counties Community Supervision and Corrections Department, P. O. Box 6848, Granbury, TX 76049, USA.

Email: [kmartin@taylorcscd.org](mailto:kmartin@taylorcscd.org)

the role, duties, and specific job tasks of the probation officer. What research does exist includes statutory analyses of probation officer roles (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Burton et al., 1992; Hsieh et al., 2015; Purkiss et al., 2003; Seiter & West, 2003), differences between the roles of adult and juvenile probation officers (Steiner et al., 2004), and role conflict of probation officers (Allard et al., 2003; Ellsworth, 1990; Sigler, 1988; Sigler & McGraw, 1984).

This study is an exploratory quantitative task analysis of adult probation officer activity by caseload type from a medium-sized, tri-county adult probation agency in a Southwestern state. The analysis is designed to examine tasks by officer-caseload type (court probation officer, regular caseload probation officer, and specialized caseload probation officer) utilizing reports and data records extracted from the department's case management system. Our research differs from other more recent studies that use self-report measures for time and workload analyses in that we use quantitative data to exam tasks and differences between officer-caseload type (DeMichele & Payne, 2018; Matz et al., 2018; Ostrom et al., 2013).

## **Literature Review**

The growth in the use of community corrections as a viable alternative to incarceration, especially probation, has increased unabated for the last three decades. Year-end 2016, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported 3,789,800 were on probation, and an additional 870,500 on parole, compared with 2,172,800 persons incarcerated in jails and prisons nationwide (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). Initially, probation sentences were generally reserved for less serious crimes, or low-risk offenders, who had not committed violent offenses and posed no serious threat to public safety (Petersilia, 1998). However, due to burgeoning prison populations resulting from punitive legislation passed in the 1980s and 1990s, probation became a way to alleviate already overcrowded prisons; hence, probation offenders were no longer mainly low-level offenders. According to Taxman et al. (2004), "probation rolls increasingly mirror the prison population" and many are convicted felons (p. 3).

In addition to the continued growth in the use of probation, the profession itself has undergone significant changes both in the types of offenders being supervised and the factors impacting the work and day-to-day activities. The advances in technology alone have had a tremendous influence on how probation officers supervise offenders (DeMichele & Payne, 2007, 2012; Friel & Vaughn, 1986). For example, the use of various types of monitoring and surveillance devices, such as global positioning satellite technology, 24-hr transdermal alcohol monitoring, camera-equipped ignition interlock devices, and hair, skin, and fingerprint substance use testing, makes the probation officer's job more complicated, albeit they do improve effectiveness of monitoring offenders (Baer et al., 1991; Bracken, 2003; Lewis et al., 2013; Moran & Lindner, 1985; Newville, 2001). Probation officers have to learn about how these technologies work, the benefits as well as flaws, then read and interpret reports, decipher any violations to report to the court. Moreover, the push to use evidence-based practices in

supervising offenders, such as motivational interviewing techniques (B. L. Burke et al., 2004; Walters et al., 2007) and client-centered communication strategies (Viglione et al., 2017), dynamic risk assessment tools (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Lowenkamp et al., 2016), and intervention strategies matched to offender characteristics and learning capabilities (Dowden & Andrews, 2004; Viglione, 2017) requires more time to be spent with offenders on these issues to help reduce recidivism (Andrews et al., 2006; Bonta et al., 2008; Bourgon, 2013; Bourgon et al., 2012).

### *Research on Probation Officer Workloads*

Officer time is of great importance due to the pressures to do more and more with fewer resources. Research in recent decades has largely focused on caseload sizes (number of offenders supervised by an officer) and attempted to address the issue of size to improve offender outcomes (Burrell, 2006). The belief in the past that smaller caseloads would give officers more time to spend with high risk offenders and therefore improve outcomes did not initially bear the results expected (American Probation and Parole Association [APPA], 1991; Byrne, 1986; Hyatt & Barnes, 2014; Turner et al., 1992). In fact, success rates declined as officers had more time to discover technical violations (Petersilia & Turner, 1993). However, later research established that smaller caseloads in combination with effective intervention strategies to address criminogenic needs could improve recidivism rates (Bonta et al., 2000; Jalbert et al., 2010). For example, Jalbert and Rhodes (2012) examined the effectiveness of reduced caseloads of 54 medium- to high-risk probationers per officer on probationer recidivism. The authors found that officers who supervised smaller caseloads made significantly more face-to-face contacts with probationers and smaller caseloads resulted in a 30% reduction of recidivism. However, the results indicated that smaller caseloads, and more frequent contact, resulted in a slight increase of technical violations.

In contrast to caseload size, workload of probation officers refers to the amount of effort and time needed to complete various tasks, not how many offenders are being supervised by the officer, although these two are correlated. The foundational research for workload and time studies in probation and parole includes numerous collaborative studies conducted by the National Center for State Courts in various states (Bemus, 1990; Tallarico et al., 2007, 2009, 2010). Building on this scholarship, DeMichele et al. (2011) advocated for workload studies to educate those outside of the profession about what it is that probation officers do, to use as a tool for managers, to inform policy makers and as a source for accountability. Moreover, DeMichele and Payne (2018) conducted a recent study to understand how probation officers spent their time in their daily activities, as well as to understand how the demographics, risk levels, offenses, and the tasks at hand influenced the amount of time officers spend on tasks. Throughout their study they were able to compile a comprehensive task list, which found officers spend a significant portion of their time engaged in paperwork/administrative type activities rather than in-person activities with offenders.

Montana Probation and Parole Division participated in a statewide time and workload analysis for probation and parole officers utilizing task lists and time study instruments whereby officers would estimate the amount of time it took to complete common tasks associated with supervising offenders. The study found the most frequent activity reported was meeting in person with offenders, and ranked number one in terms of total minutes of how they spent their time (Matz et al., 2018). This led to recommendations for caseload sizes based on levels of supervision, as well as insights into the division continuing to have issues from moving from a control/surveillance-oriented division toward more evidence-based practices.

In addition, there is evidence that probation officer tasks vary by caseload type. Due to the nature of specialized caseload clients who are generally assessed as higher risk to reoffend and who have more criminogenic needs, theoretically more effort is needed on the part of the probation officer to supervise these offenders (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Lowenkamp et al., 2006). Thus, officers who supervise specialized caseloads are likely to spend more of their time on face-to-face activities than nonspecialized officers.

It is not only important to understand how officer workload is associated with probationer outcomes, but also how it relates to officers' job satisfaction. A number of studies cite excessive paperwork as a stressor or source of burnout for probation officers (Brown, 1987; Simmons et al., 1997; Thomas, 1988; Whisler, 1994). Increasing administrative tasks are associated with higher caseload numbers and can leave a probation officer to feel as though they do not have time to get their job done (Finn & Kuck, 2003, 2005; Simmons et al., 1997).

### *Qualitative Versus Quantitative Research on Officer Workload*

Most prior research on probation officer workload and task analysis uses standard job analysis methods, time tracking of tasks, and feedback surveys to understand the amount of time officers spend on certain tasks, that is, how much time is spent in face-to-face contact with offenders and engagement in other administrative duties (DeMichele & Payne, 2007). In our review of the literature, many studies used self-report measures and there are few studies that utilize quantitative data to evaluate the breakdown of day-to-day activities. Self-report methodology may be influenced by respondents' desires to present themselves in a favorable manner significantly distorting the information gained from such research, known as the social desirability bias (Arnold & Feldman, 1981) and is a limitation of prior studies on this topic.

Furthermore, prior probation officer workload analyses may lend itself to the "Hawthorne Effect," a term first coined after the well-known research study of productivity in the Western Electrical Company's Hawthorne Works in Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s (Mayo, 1933). This term refers to actions of workers improving because they are aware they are being studied (Mayo, 1933; Sonnefeld, 1985). Thus, in relation to probation officer workload analyses, officers recording the time they

spend performing daily tasks may improve their efficiency in carrying out said tasks because they are aware of being “watched.”

## **Current Study**

As probation agencies have evolved to address the changing nature of persons placed on community supervision, more research is needed to explore how these changes have impacted probation officer daily tasks and how agencies can incorporate this information into decision-making with workload issues, policy, and procedure modifications that impact face-to-face supervision, and eventually supervision outcomes. The current study addresses this gap in the literature on probation officer day-to-day task activity by investigating administrative and face-to-face tasks documented in the department’s computerized case management system. First, we examined officer tasks and caseload characteristics for a population of adult probation officers. Next, we determined what percentage of tasks documented in the system were administrative-paperwork tasks compared with tasks that require face-to-face contact with offenders; then we ascertained the percentage of administrative and face-to-face activities by caseload type. Finally, we examined whether there are any statistically significant differences between proportions of types of tasks by caseload type.

## **Method**

### **Data**

Secondary data were provided by a medium-sized, adult county-level adult Community Supervision and Corrections Department (CSCD) in a Southwestern state which covers three counties, the county seat, and two other smaller counties included in the judicial district. The jurisdiction has a total population close to 175,000 with nearly 3,500 offenders under community supervision. In fiscal year 2019, the agency supervised an average total of 2,479 felons and an average of 787 misdemeanants (those receiving Direct and Indirect supervision).<sup>1</sup> A 2019 fiscal year-end Direct offender profile report revealed 48% of felony offenders are under supervision for an alcohol or drug-related offense, 24% for an assaultive offense, 18% for a theft/property offense, 10% for other offenses. Misdemeanor population offense distribution reveals 54% are under supervision for an alcohol or drug-related offense, 17% for an assaultive offense, and 13% for theft/property offense, and 16% for other offenses.

The jurisdiction also operates a state-funded 9-month residential Substance Abuse Treatment Facility (SATF) with a 60-bed capacity for males, including a 12-month outpatient aftercare program component. The CSCD annual budget is US\$6,265,292 and the department employs 89 people, including the 24-hr residential staff for the SATF, 35 of these staff are certified probation officers. Data to objectively measure staff activity and tasks within the case management system were obtained and included chronological case note entries by officer, cases accessed by officer, and archived documents by officer. These metrics were chosen as documentation and paperwork are

significant components of a probation officer's job, and the case management system has built-in reports for these measures.

## Measures

**Caseload type.** Caseload is the traditional method of work assignment in the discipline of probation and is defined as the number of offenders supervised by an officer (Burrell, 2006; DeMichele, 2007). Thus, we included all certified probation officers with offenders assigned to their supervision ( $N = 29$ ). Probation officers were then placed in different categories based on the type of caseload supervised. For the current study, categories established include court probation officers, regular caseload probation officers, and specialized caseload probation officers.

Only officers who had been employed in the jurisdiction for more than 1 year were included. Officers with less than 1 year of employment were excluded as they are onboarded with lower caseloads at the beginning of employment and would therefore have fewer documentation entries and task data available compared with officers with a longer period of employment. Also, there were two transfer technicians with caseloads of offenders that had been transferred out of the jurisdiction, but these caseloads were excluded from analysis as these staff do not perform many face-to-face activities with offenders and they are not certified probation officers.

**Court officer caseloads.** The first category of officers included court probation officers ( $N = 7$ ). Court probation officers are generally assigned to handle duties of a specific court or courts (Czajkoski, 1973; Purkiss et al., 2003). This particular jurisdiction has four felony courts and two misdemeanor courts, including a Court Supervised Release Program (CSRP) for defendants released on bond supervision overseen by the probation department. Court probation officers are responsible for conducting all presentence investigation reports in the jurisdiction, attending all court hearings, dockets for new probation pleas, modification hearings, and probation revocation hearings scheduled for their assigned court, and meeting with defendants recently placed on probation to explain conditions of probation. They are required to complete amended orders and other court paperwork, proofread all court documents produced, staff violation reports with the assistant district attorney, serve as a liaison between community supervision officers and the district attorney's office and the courts. Moreover, they supervise pretrial release offenders, supervise offenders with a motion to adjudicate/ revoke<sup>2</sup> pending with the courts, supervise offenders completing up-front jail time on new probation pleas, and other duties as assigned. In this jurisdiction, there are no caseload size caps in place for court probation officers, but caseload sizes range anywhere from 60 to 90 offenders.

**Regular caseload officers.** The next category, regular probation caseload officers ( $N = 7$ ), was defined as those officers supervising a cross section of general cases, or offenders that have not been identified as having special needs or those of a specific type of crime deemed as specialized (Burrell, 2006; Latessa et al., 1979). Officers

with regular caseloads are tasked with the day-to-day supervision until the offender either successfully completes supervision or fails on supervision. Typical duties and activities of regular officers include completing risk/needs assessments with offenders present and developing supervision plans, conducting office visits with offenders on a regular basis to discuss progress and compliance, or lack thereof, with conditions of supervision, and referring offenders to various resources in the community to address needs. Also, in this jurisdiction regular officers obtain urine samples from offenders and prepare chain of custody forms, conduct home visits to assess the environment in which offenders live to determine possible barriers to success, and meet with offenders' social support system or treatment provider(s). These caseloads comprised a mixture of both felony and misdemeanor offenses, and of varying types of crimes such as burglary, theft, engaging in organized crime, driving while intoxicated (DWI), drug possession, and robbery. If at some point during the course of supervision, an offender is identified as having a special need or meets eligibility criteria for supervision on a specialized caseload, he or she can be transferred to a specialized officer for supervision (e.g., offender found to have a mental impairment). Regular probation caseload sizes in this jurisdiction can range anywhere from 85 to 120 offenders.

*Specialized caseload officers.* Specialized caseload probation officers ( $N = 15$ ) are those who specifically handle one type of offender, that is, drug addicts, the mentally ill, sex offenders, or violent offenders (Latessa et al., 1979), and they conduct the same types of tasks that regular officers do just with a special population. The department under review included officers with the following specialized caseloads: domestic violence ( $N = 1$ ), DWI interlock compliance cases ( $N = 2$ ), high/moderate reduction ( $N = 2$ ), mentally impaired ( $N = 2$ ), substance abuse ( $N = 4$ ), surveillance- Global Positioning System (GPS) monitoring ( $N = 2$ ), and sex offender ( $N = 2$ ). Various state-level requirements and grant conditions stipulate caseload sizes for each type of specialized caseload in the jurisdiction.

The domestic violence caseloads have a cap of 60 offenders, must be on supervision for domestic violence or a domestic violence-related offense, and can be either a felony or misdemeanor domestic violence offense. They must be court ordered to complete a Batterer Intervention and Prevention Program (BIPP) or the Family Violence Education Class. All offenders must be assessed as high risk using the prescribed risk assessment tool utilized by the department. Officers are to conduct at minimum two (2) face-to-face contacts with the offender each month. At the end of the 12 months, the offender is assessed to determine whether the specialized supervision can be terminated and the individual placed on a lower level of supervision.

Next, the DWI interlock compliance caseloads require offenders to have specialized conditions of probation pertaining to alcohol use and abuse. For instance, offenders are ordered to refrain from purchasing and/or having under their control any alcoholic beverage, to refrain from entering any establishment that primarily serves alcohol, to attend and participate in any chemical dependence education or substance abuse counseling program, and to have an interlock device installed on any motor vehicle operated. The DWI interlock compliance caseload is capped at 60 offenders

and comprises both felony and misdemeanor cases. Contact requirements include three (3) face-to-face contacts with offenders each month: one (1) in the office, one (1) in the field, and the third can be either in the office or the field.

High/moderate-risk caseloads have a cap of 60 offenders and comprise both felony and misdemeanor cases. Placement onto this caseload is a result of progressive sanctions, a direct court order, or an alternative to revocation or shock supervision. All caseload participants have documented special risk(s) or need(s) which are included in the department's profile of offenders historically committed to prison. Contact requirements include three (3) face-to-face contacts with offenders each month: one (1) in the office, one (1) in the field, and the third can be either in the office or the field. High/moderate-risk offenders are supervised for 18 months on the caseload with an early release from the caseload at 12 months for compliant offenders, at which time they are transferred to a regular caseload.

Mentally impaired caseloads consist of probationers with documented mental impairments which may interfere with their ability to successfully complete supervision, and whom have been court ordered onto the caseload or identified through an assessment/screening process. Specifically, offenders must be diagnosed with schizophrenia, major depression, bipolar disorder, or are seriously impaired in their functioning due to a mental condition and have a Global Assessment Function (GAF)<sup>3</sup> level of 50 or below. The caseload size is limited to 25 to 40 high/moderate-risk probationers on supervision for either a felony or misdemeanor offense. Officers are required to make a minimum of two (2) face-to-face office visits per month and two (2) field visits per month for a minimum total of four (4) face-to-face visits per month. In addition, one (1) monthly contact with the local mental health authority case manager or treatment provider is required, as well as one collateral contact<sup>4</sup> every 3 months.

Substance abuse caseloads target offenders who have serious alcohol and/or drugs issues and need a higher level of supervision. These caseloads consist mainly of felony offenders, but misdemeanor offenders can be served on a limited basis not to exceed 20% of offenders served on the caseload at any given time. The caseload is designed to divert offenders with a documented alcohol and/or drug problem needing outpatient substance abuse treatment from the state penitentiary to the community in a controlled setting. All caseload participants have documented alcohol and/or drug needs which historically leads to offenders being committed to prison. The caseloads are capped at 75 offenders supervised for 12 months with an early release from the caseload at 9 months as an incentive for compliance.

Surveillance caseloads provide an intense level of nonresidential supervision for high-risk felony offenders diverted from the state penitentiary and are capped at 45. Offenders can be court ordered to the caseload at the time of sentencing, referred to the caseload because of a documented pattern of serious noncompliance while on a less restrictive caseload, or be referred after committing a new offense while already under supervision.<sup>5</sup> Program length is for a minimum of 90 days and a maximum of 180 days. In Phase I of the program, offenders are seen in the office twice per month and in the field twice per month, for a total of four contacts. In Phase II, they are seen in the office 4 times per month and in the field 4 times per month, for a total of eight

contacts. GPS monitoring is a supervision strategy used through the surveillance caseloads and is ordered for offenders meeting certain criteria (e.g., in lieu of jail as a condition of supervision, as a condition of an appeal bond).

Sex offenders placed on community supervision for a felony or misdemeanor sex offense and ordered by the courts to receive counseling for sexually deviant behavior are eligible for this caseload and must be assessed as high risk. Sex offender caseloads do not have caseload caps, but generally have around 50 offenders on each caseload. Contact requirements include a minimum of three (3) contacts per month—one (1) at home, one (1) in the office, and one (1) with a collateral contact.

*Chronologicals.* The state oversight agency requires all probation departments to develop and maintain a case record management system for offenders using a problem-oriented record-keeping system to include, among other things, a chronological listing of all supervision case activity, criminal justice staff decisions, services rendered, assessments, offender behavior, actions, and compliance with conditions of supervision. These are normally referred to as “chronos.” Thus, at the core of a probation officer’s work is not only meeting with offenders face to face, but also documenting interactions and various other activities with offenders into the official court record. As other research has examined administrative activities in various probation officer time studies (DeMichele & Payne, 2012, 2018; Matz et al., 2018), we too wanted to examine these tasks and obtained a large file from the computerized case management system listing every type of chronological case note entered by each certified officer for fiscal year 2019. This file showed 244,983 chronos were entered by officers ( $N = 29$ ).

It should be noted that chronological case notes entered into the case management system by probation officers are official, legal court records. Falsification of such records could result in action against staff including but not limited to termination and up to criminal charges. Officers receive training on case documentation, ethics, legalities, court policies, among other things, and are required to be certified by the state within 1 year of obtaining employment as an officer. They must take and pass a state certification test to be a certified probation officer, similar to the requirements of police officers. Similar to police officers’ reports arrest and incident reports corroborated by other evidence, probation officers’ written records are viewed the same way. Probation officers must accurately document all activities and information associated with a probationer; this documentation serves as the evidence for courts including information for probationer and officer activity, general supervision, compliance with conditions of supervision, changes in behavior, positive progress, officers’ use of progressive sanctions and interventions, the probationer’s response to sanctions and interventions leading to behavioral change, successful, or unsuccessful completion of the supervision sentence (Arcaya, 1974; Jaffe, 1989). Based on officer behavior (or lack thereof) chronos were placed into two categories: (a) administrative chromos,<sup>6</sup> which included all actions taken by staff in the case management system (e.g., batch emails, batch letters, batch text messages, assessment completed), which trigger an automatic chrono entry into the offender’s case

record, and paperwork-related chronos—documenting progress reports, letters, emails, phone calls, preparation of documents, and (b) face-to-face activity chronos documenting an office, home, field, or employment visit with the offender, an acquaintance of the offender, or a service provider or criminal justice professional. The appendix describes how chronos were categorized by entry type. Chronological entries used exclusively by nonprobation officer staff were not included in the analyses.

*Number of times cases accessed and total number of unique probationers records accessed.* One measure reviewed in this study included the total number of times cases were accessed by certified officers during 2019. The “Case Tracking Monitor Log” report was run for each officer in the study which lists each individual case accessed, the name and ID number of the offender, and the time the case was accessed. As a result, we were able to determine the number of unique probationer records accessed for each officer. Each time a staff member conducts a search in the computerized case management system and then opens a record to document in the record, schedule an appointment, update demographic or other data, select an offender to provide a drug test, and so on, the access is recorded by the computerized case management system, including a time stamp of when the case is accessed.

*Risk level.* Risk level was calculated using the Texas Risk Assessment System (TRAS), a statewide risk assessment tool that was modeled after the validated statewide Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS; Latessa et al., 2010). We calculated the percentage of probationers supervised at each risk level (high, moderate, low/moderate, low) for each officer to determine whether probationers’ risk level varies by caseload type and whether risk levels were correlated to types of tasks.

*Number of archived documents.* A measure assessing the total number of archived documents was included.<sup>7</sup> This department is “paperless” meaning no paper files or hard copy of documents are kept for offenders by the probation department (official court documents such as the judgment and sentence, conditions of probation, and other signed court orders are kept on file with the District Clerk’s office). All paperwork needing a signature in the day-to-day supervision of offenders is scanned into the system, attached to the person’s electronic case record, and shredded, whereas other documents not requiring a signature are just archived electronically in the person’s record. A file containing records of every document scanned and/or attached by staff was obtained and analyzed.

*Task type.* To examine any difference(s) in types of tasks completed by caseload type, the same typology used for chrono entry codes was applied to officers’ task types and included (a) *administrative tasks* and (b) *face-to-face tasks*. Next, we calculated the % of *administrative tasks* and % of *face-to-face tasks* for each officer.

*Analytical plan.* To assess differences in probation tasks completed in the case management system by caseload type, population parameters were run on the entire

population and for the population stratified by caseload type. Next, to assess whether probation tasks vary by caseload type, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to investigate differences between regular officers and court officers, regular officers and specialized officers, and court officers and specialized officers. Data were checked to meet the assumptions of ANOVA; non-normally distributed variables were transformed and outliers were excluded from the analyses.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the entire population and by caseload type. For the entire population ( $N = 29$ ), the average caseload size was 85, the average total number of unique probationer records accessed in annual year 2019 was 590, and cases were accessed an average of 8,602 times. Just more than half (54%) of probationers supervised by officers were moderate or high risk, with 46% of probationers classified as low/moderate or low risk. Regarding caseload chronologicals, most were administrative (74%), with face-to-face tasks only accounting for just over one fourth of all tasks (26%).

Next, we examined tasks stratified by officer type. Regular officers had the highest average caseload size (112). Court officers had the highest average number of unique probationer records accessed ( $N = 1,036$ ) and accessed cases an average of 8,225 times. Court officers are responsible for initial contact with *all* new individuals placed on probation, as well as supervising probationers who have a pending motion to adjudicate/revoke, which may explain this finding.

Regarding probationer risk level, specialized officers had the highest percentage of high-risk probationers (36%). This can be explained by the fact that probationers are typically placed on specialized caseloads due to criminogenic needs, such as severe substance use or antisocial attitudes/orientation, and placement on the specialized caseloads require offenders to be assessed as high risk. Regular officers' tasks measured in the case management system were 75% administrative and 25% face to face. Court officers had the highest percentage of documented administrative tasks (83%) and the lowest percentage of face-to-face tasks (17%). Specialized officers had 69% of tasks classified as administrative and 31% classified as face to face.

### *Bivariate Analyses*

To answer whether or not tasks varied by caseload type, one-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare tasks between regular and court officers, regular and specialized officers, and court and specialized officers. Table 2 reports the results from the ANOVAs regarding task differences by officer type. There was a statistically significant difference in the percent of face-to-face activities by officer type,  $F(2, 26) = 7.75, p = .002$ . A Tukey post hoc test found that specialized officers had a significantly higher percentage of face-to-face activities as compared with court officers

**Table 1.** Population Parameters and Descriptive Statistics by Caseload Type.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Study population ( <i>N</i> = 29)				
Regular caseload	0.24	0.44	0	1
Court caseload	0.24	0.44	0	1
Specialized caseload	0.52	0.51	0	1
Caseload size	84.66	33.52	26	155
Total times cases accessed	8,602.76	2,774.74	3,671	15,267
Total no. of unique probationers	590.14	331.01	135	1,362
% High-risk level	0.27	0.15	0.01	0.58
% Moderate-risk level	0.27	0.08	0.15	0.44
% Low/moderate-risk level	0.16	0.05	0.07	0.29
% Low-risk level	0.30	0.14	0.01	0.57
Total no. of archived documents	1,346.17	817.96	238	3,091
% Administrative tasks	0.74	0.09	0.56	0.89
% Face-to-face tasks	0.26	0.09	0.11	0.44
Regular officer ( <i>n</i> = 7)				
Caseload size	112.14	24.92	83	155
Total times cases accessed	8,594.28	3,090.17	5,176	14,497
Total no. of unique probationers	436	119.09	239	633
% High-risk level	0.14	0.07	0.01	0.24
% Moderate-risk level	0.26	0.03	0.21	0.31
% Low/moderate-risk level	0.22	0.04	0.16	0.29
% Low-risk level	0.38	0.06	0.28	0.45
Total no. of archived documents	1,900.28	714.02	677	2,464
% Administrative tasks	0.75	0.05	0.67	0.84
% Face-to-face tasks	0.25	0.05	0.16	0.33
Court officer ( <i>n</i> = 7)				
Caseload size	92.57	28.7	44	131
Total times cases accessed	8,225.71	3,411.611	3,671	13,539
Total no. of unique probationers	1,036	327.52	594	1,362
% High-risk level	0.23	0.04	0.18	0.28
% Moderate-risk level	0.35	0.05	0.29	0.40
% Low/moderate-risk level	0.13	0.05	0.07	0.2
% Low-risk level	0.28	0.11	0.17	0.46
Total no. of archived documents	1,035.86	385.69	622	1,708
% Administrative tasks	0.83	0.04	0.77	0.89
% Face-to-face tasks	0.17	0.04	0.11	0.23
Specialized officer ( <i>n</i> = 15)				
Caseload size	68.13	30.42	26	126
Total times cases accessed	8,782.73	2,492.33	5,289	15,267
Total no. of unique probationers	454.00	189.59	135	836
% High-risk level	0.36	0.16	0.08	0.58
% Moderate-risk level	0.23	0.08	0.15	0.44

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)**

Variable	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
% Low/moderate-risk level	0.15	0.04	0.09	0.24
% Low-risk level	0.27	0.15	0.01	0.57
Total no. of archived documents	1,232.40	916.69	238	3,091
% Administrative tasks	0.69	0.10	0.56	0.83
% Face-to-face tasks	0.31	0.10	0.17	0.44

(contrast = 0.14, *SE* = 0.04, *p* = .002). There was a statistically significant difference in the percent of administrative activities by officer type,  $F(2, 26) = 8.41, p = .002$ . A Tukey post hoc test found that specialized officers had significantly fewer administrative activities as compared with court officers (contrast = -0.14, *SE* = 0.03, *p* < .001). Looking at the total number of times cases were accessed, there was no statistically significant difference between groups,  $F(2, 26) = 0.09, p = .912$ . In addition, there was no statistically significant difference between groups in the number of archived documents,  $F(2, 26) = 2.03, p = .133$ .

A one-way ANOVA was run to determine whether average caseload size differed by officer type. There was a statistically significant difference between groups,  $F(2, 26) = 5.90, p = .007$ . A Tukey post hoc test found that caseload size was significantly lower for specialized officers compared with regular officers (contrast = -44.01, *SE* = 13.20, *p* = .007). There was a statistically significant difference in the number of unique probationers by officer type,  $F(2, 26) = 11.05, p < .001$ . A Tukey post hoc test found that the number of total unique probationers was significantly higher for regular officers compared with court officers (contrast = 0.85, *SE* = 0.23, *p* < .001) and the number of total unique probationers was significantly lower for specialized officers compared with regular officers (contrast = -0.02, *SE* = 0.19, *p* < .001).

Next, a series of one-way ANOVAs were run to assess differences in probationers' risk levels by officer type. There was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of high-risk probationers by officer type,  $F(2, 26) = 8.29, p = .002$ . A Tukey post hoc test found that the percent of high-risk probationers was higher for specialized officers compared with regular officers (contrast = 0.22, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .002). There was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of moderate risk probationers by officer type,  $F(2, 26) = 9.48, p < .001$ . A Tukey post hoc test found that the percent of moderate-risk probationers was higher for regular officers compared with court officers (contrast = 0.09, *SE* = 0.03, *p* = .032) and significantly lower for specialized officers compared with court officers (contrast = -0.12, *SE* = 0.03, *p* < .001). There was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of low-moderate-risk probationers by officer type,  $F(2, 26) = 9.03, p < .001$ . A Tukey post hoc test found that the percent of low-moderate probationers were significantly lower for specialized officers compared with regular officers (contrast = -0.07, *SE* = 0.02, *p* < .001) and for court officers compared with regular officers (contrast =

**Table 2.** One-Way ANOVA Results by Officer Type.

Variable	SS	df	MS	F	Prob > F
Percent face-to-face activities					
Between groups	0.09**	2	0.05	7.75	0.002
Within groups	0.16	26	0.01		
Percent administrative activities					
Between groups	0.09**	2	0.05	8.41	0.002
Within groups	0.15	26	0.01		
Total number of times cases accessed					
Between groups	1,482,257.23	2	741,128.62	0.09	0.91
Within groups	214,094,698	26	8,234,411.46		
Number of archived documents					
Between groups	2.03	2	1.01	2.22	0.13
Within groups	11.87	26	0.46		
Average caseload size					
Between groups	9,822.25**	2	4,911.12	5.90	0.007
Within groups	21,630.30	26	831.93		
Total number of unique probationers					
Between groups	3.98	2	1.98	11.05	0.000
Within groups	21,630.30	26	831.93		
Percent high risk					
Between groups	0.25**	2	0.25	8.29	0.002
Within groups	0.38	26	0.015		
Percent moderate risk					
Between groups	0.07**	2	0.04	9.48	0.001
Within groups	0.10	26	0.00		
Percent low-moderate risk					
Between groups	0.03***	2	0.02	9.03	0.00
Within groups	0.04	26	0.00		
Percent low risk					
Between groups	0.06	2	0.03	1.81	0.18
Within groups	0.45	26	0.02		

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance.

-0.08,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was no significant difference in the percentage of low-risk probationers by officer type,  $F(2, 26) = 1.81$ ,  $p = .183$ .

## Discussion

Probation officers are responsible not only for helping offenders make positive changes in many aspects of their lives, but also for keeping communities safe through surveillance and “law enforcement”-oriented measures (Taxman et al., 2004); this presents

role conflict and makes the job of probation officers difficult (DeMichele & Payne, 2007). The extant literature is replete with studies pertaining to statutory analyses of the role of the probation officer (Burton et al., 1992; Hsieh et al., 2015; Purkiss et al., 2003; Steiner et al., 2004) and role conflict (Allard et al., 2003; Lawrence, 1984), but more research is necessary to examine the day-to-day activities of probation officers to understand what probation officers actually do and what proportion of their time throughout the day involves interacting face-to-face with offenders as that is considered the “crux” of probation work.

Although not about workload (which would include a measure of time spent on various tasks), the current research addresses a gap in the literature by examining probation officer job tasks by officer-caseload type using chronological data, archived documents, and cases accessed for all probation officers in a mid-size tri-county adult probation jurisdiction for fiscal year 2019. Overall, the results suggest that regardless of caseload type, the highest percentage of tasks are administrative. Face-to-face tasks accounted for only 31% of for specialized officers, 25% for regular officers, and 17% for court officers. Thus, a significant amount of probation officer tasks are activities that require administrative or clerical work, and we did not include activities unrelated to documenting in the case management system such as attending training or professional conferences, sitting in court, and attending staff meetings. When taking into consideration these additional activities, further investigation into the proportion of officer tasks and time devoted to face-to-face interaction with offenders is needed as probation officers are tasked to be agents of change utilizing evidence-based practices and motivational interviewing and other effective techniques with offenders (Viglione et al., 2017; Walters et al., 2007).

The disproportionate number of administrative tasks compared with face-to-face contact with offenders may be why the field of probation continues to struggle to reduce recidivism rates and revocations due to technical violations (non-law violations) even after improving probation officer skills (Trotter, 2013) and implementation of other evidence-based practices (Lowenkamp et al., 2006). Latessa and Lowenkamp (2005) state that “most researchers who have studied correctional interventions have concluded that without some form of human intervention [or services] there is unlikely to be a significant effect on recidivism from punishment alone” (p. 521). The importance of face-to-face contacts is further highlighted by Zettler and Medina (2020) who found that probationers who missed appointments were more likely to be rearrested during supervision. Thus, our research is a first step in examining probation officer tasks by officer-caseload type (and illustrates the need for further investigation into the amount of time spent on various tasks in connection with probationer outcomes, which we did not do in our research).

Next, some differences were observed between the type of officers in our study. Specialized officers completed a significantly higher percentage of face-to-face tasks and significantly lower percentage of administrative tasks compared with court officers. Specialized officers supervise offenders with special needs and are required by

caseload guidelines to have more face-to-face contact with offenders due to their high criminogenic risk factors. In the jurisdiction under study, court probation officer duties are largely paperwork-administrative related, such as conducting presentence investigation reports, attending all court hearings scheduled for their assigned court, completing paperwork for new probation pleas, amended orders, and other court paperwork. One factor that may be contributing to the lower number of face-to-face contacts made by court officers is the low number of revocations in the jurisdiction. Supervision is transferred to court officers for those with a pending motion to adjudicate/revoke. In fiscal year 2019, there were only a total of 513 revocations for both felony and misdemeanor offenders, for an average of 73 offender revocations per court officer.

There were no significant differences between specialized and regular officers regarding face-to-face and administrative tasks. We found that regular officers had significantly higher caseload sizes, compared with specialized officers. Mainly this is attributed to the fact that higher risk probationers with special needs can be placed on specialized caseloads, including the high/moderate reduction caseload. Furthermore, most specialized caseloads in this jurisdiction stipulate that a probationer be assessed as high risk to be placed on a specialized caseload. Specialized cases are theorized to take more of the officer's time and effort because of the high risks and needs, so caseload sizes are smaller (Burrell, 2006; Petersilia & Turner, 1993). Our findings also suggest that probationers' risk assessments are helping to place them on the correct caseloads to be supervised at the appropriate level. In our population, higher risk offenders were more likely to be supervised on specialized caseloads, moderate-risk probationers were more likely to be on court officer caseloads, and low-moderate-risk probationers were more likely to be on regular caseloads.

Our findings have significant policy implications. First, probation administrators should understand that smaller caseloads for specialized officers do not necessarily translate into fewer tasks, as certain types of tasks required for supervision of these offenders increase (i.e., more offenders on electronic monitoring/GPS, more offenders in correctional or treatment programming, which translates into more paperwork—progress reports to document, phone calls to treatment providers, etc.). Our findings revealed there were no significant differences between regular and specialized officers' face-to-face or administrative-related chronological entries in the system. Thus, having lower caseloads for higher risk and specialized offenders does not necessarily translate into more face-to-face interaction with these offenders, a finding that has been corroborated by other research (DeMichele & Payne, 2018; DeMichele & Payne, 2007).

Probation administrators should consider whether their internal policies, processes, or procedures for various caseload types are inefficient or require unnecessary paperwork or administrative tasks that detract from face-to-face activities needed to adequately supervise offenders and possibly impact offender success (DeMichele & Payne, 2018). Prior research on officer-offender relationships and successful completion of supervision found that offenders were 58% more likely to complete supervision

successfully if administrators would change one internal department policy which created additional paperwork for officers and required offenders to be switched to a different probation officer for supervision (Clark-Miller & Stevens, 2011). The importance of the rapport built between offender and officer was shown to be critical for offender success and was unnecessarily impacted by a department policy, although the policy was initially designed to help offenders.

In addition, judiciary and probation department philosophy toward offenders can impact department policies and procedures (Burrell, 2006; Rudes & Viglione, 2013), which ultimately affect probation officer activities as well as offender outcomes (May, 1990). For instance, policies regarding handling violations of probation may be severe and unyielding, not allowing for a second chance or not appropriately utilizing progressive sanctions and interventions for violations. This, in turn, may require probation officers to take immediate action, generating more paperwork such as preparing violation reports for the court, completing warrant documents, and typing motions to adjudicate or revoke (P. B. Burke, 1997). The use of progressive sanctions in itself, however, can generate additional administrative tasks such as increasing offender reporting, increasing drug testing, additional referrals for treatment, or educational classes to address criminogenic needs. Despite the need for these sanctions and interventions, probation officials can examine incorporating the use of technology to automate certain administrative activities, by creating automatic form generators for referrals, reducing or combining required forms for various actions taken, and evaluating whether numerous forms are needed for one action.

Next, our research highlights the importance of using quantitative measures to examine task activity in when considering caseload sizes for officers across caseload type to be used in conjunction with time tracking of task activity. In many departments, caseload sizes are determined in an arbitrary fashion, with no data or analyses to support the ideal number of offenders to be supervised while considering tasks in relation to workload. Burrell (2006) developed standards for adult probation caseload sizes based on criteria such as assessed level of risk, offense types, and criminogenic needs to ensure offenders are matched with the appropriate level of supervision and services. It was recommended that intensive caseloads have a ratio 20:1, moderate to high risk 50:1, and low risk 200:1. Most of the specialized caseloads in our study had caseload sizes well above these recommended standards. For instance, the domestic violence, DWI, and high/moderate reduction caseloads had triple the number of offenders (60) compared with the recommended standard of 20. Utilizing more officers with smaller caseloads, coupled with revision of local policies and improved use of technology, can balance task activity which is tied to workloads which may ultimately improve offender outcomes.

### *Limitations*

The current study is limited to 29 probation officers from one mid-size tri-county adult probation department in the Southwestern United States; thus, its results cannot be generalized outside of this population. Research utilizing probation officer

data from departments in large urban areas in different states is needed to corroborate these findings. The current study did not capture actual length of time spent carrying out specific tasks, but instead extracted data from the computerized case management system and examined the proportion of types of tasks completed by officer/caseload type. Future research should examine the actual time spent completing administrative versus face-to-face supervision tasks to pinpoint if there are any specific tasks that monopolize valuable time that can be eliminated for various officer-caseload types. Further research is necessary to consider other officer characteristics that might impact officer tasks, such as demographics, education, and years of experience. In addition, probation officers face conflicting goals of enforcing the law and providing rehabilitative assistance (Clear & Latessa, 1993; Ellsworth, 1990; Whetzel et al., 2011); therefore, future research should examine how officer orientation (e.g., surveillance-oriented or rehabilitation-oriented) may be associated with probation officer tasks.

Second, our results at first glance seem to support prior research that reducing caseload sizes does not automatically decrease workload (Jalbert & Rhodes, 2012), as administrative tasks accounted for 69% of tasks for specialized officers, who have the lowest caseload numbers, but as we were not able to gather the amount of time spent in these tasks, more investigation is needed. However, specialized caseloads in the jurisdiction do not quite meet recommended industry standards for specialized caseload sizes, and the majority of the caseloads in this jurisdiction were triple (60) the recommended size (20) (Burrell, 2006). While it was beyond the scope of the article, more research is needed to examine the relationship between probation officer tasks, time spent performing various tasks, and probation revocation outcomes.

As the data were secondary, historical data for the previous fiscal year, there was no way for researchers to determine whether an officer forgot to make a chronological entry for certain activities, such as a phone call received or made or a letter or progress report received or sent. However, the jurisdiction does have an Audit Unit which evaluates officer work bi-annually and can determine on some occasions through contextual clues in the chronologicals if other entries may not have been entered. We did not have this information. In addition, the jurisdiction in this study has a “duty officer” system in place meaning when a probation officer is out of the office due to illness, emergency, training, or some other reason, a coworker or “duty officer” will conduct an office visit with offenders and handle other pressing business for the absent staff. The duty officers document in the computerized case management system these activities performed for other staff. We did not investigate this aspect in the data we received; therefore, numbers for various tasks by officer or caseload may be impacted by this. Likewise, numbers could be skewed for tasks when taking into consideration empty caseloads after an officer resigns or is terminated.

Researchers were unable to determine how many reports were ran by each officer in the case management system, which would provide more insight into the time,

effort, and administrative tasks needed to manage caseloads (e.g., report for offenders eligible for early release, listing of offenders needing to complete community service restitution, offenders due to expire from probation, offenders delinquent fee report, risk reassessments due). The case management system utilized by this county has numerous capabilities for managing caseloads, including approximately 72 reports used by line officers to keep track of things such as offenders needing case review for early termination, time credits to apply to probationers' sentences in accordance with state statutes, offenders with risk re-assessments due, offenders expiring from supervision, and so on.

Another limitation of these data is that we did not examine other probation officer tasks outside of the case management system, including but not limited to training, attending conferences, professional association meetings, staff meetings, sitting in court, and so on. Participating in these tasks are also a critical part of a probation officer's job, but were beyond the scope of the current study. Additional research is needed examining these tasks to gain a more complete understanding of probation officers' tasks.

The current study adds to the empirical literature by providing an exploratory examination of probation officer tasks by caseload type using quantitative measures, while also examining risk level compared with prior studies that relied on surveys and other self-report measures. Overall, there is evidence that probation officers in this jurisdiction, regardless of caseload type or risk level, have a high proportion of administrative tasks as opposed to engaging in actual face-to-face activities with offenders, which many view as the crux of the probation officer's job. Officers across caseload types had an average of 26% face-to-face tasks compared with 74% administrative tasks, scanned large amounts of documents into probationer electronic case records, and were accessing case records numerous times throughout the month. Therefore, the current study suggests the need for probation departments to examine how internal policies might be driving task activity and workload, how local judiciary and department penal philosophies may influence workloads, and how state regulations and statutes are contributing to a disparate amount of paperwork and administrative type tasks. More empirical research is needed to determine whether there are any differences between caseloads and officer-caseload types with a high rate of administrative tasks compared with a higher rate of face-to-face activities. Strategies that will allow for more face-to-face activities with probationers should be developed to improve probationer outcomes, such as reducing revocations and recidivism. It is especially important for probation departments to examine how specialized officers are spending their time, as they are expected to provide more intensive, face-to-face supervision with higher-risk, potentially dangerous offenders than other officers.

## Appendix.

### Chronological Entries by Category.

Administrative	Face-to-face
<b>Staff-Entered</b>	Court Contact
Administrative Hearing	Collateral Contact
Confidential/Medical	Court Staffing
Email Received	Field Collateral
Email Sent	Field No Contact
Failure to Report	Field Visit
Letter Received	Home Collateral
Letter Sent	Home No Contact
Mail-in Report	Home Visit
Other	Initial Intake
Office Visit—Delinquent Fee Report	Jail Visit
Phone Call	Office Collateral
Phone Collateral	Office Visit
Polygraph	Office Visit-Delinquent Fee Report
Progress Report	Staffing
Special Conditions	
Transfer Summary	
Violation	
<b>Auto-Generated</b>	
Appointment Deleted	
Appointment Scheduled	
Batch Email	
Batch Letter Sent	
Batch Session Entry	
Batch Text Message	
Condition Discharged	
Condition Entry	
Drug Test	
Failure to Report (FTR) for Appointment	
Imported Document	
Program Deleted	
Program Entry	
Scanned Document	
Termination Entered	
Time Credit	
Transfer Document Sent	
Transfer Transaction	
TRAS Assessment	
TRAS Case Plan	
TRAS Screener	
Violations Entry	
Web Report	

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## ORCID iD

Kelli D. Martin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3456-2672>

## Notes

1. Direct supervision cases report face-to-face in the jurisdiction and those classified as Indirect have been transferred out of the jurisdiction for various reasons, but the court of original jurisdiction maintains authority over the case.
2. A motion to adjudicate is a legal court document filed alleging violations of the terms and conditions of a deferred adjudication probation sentence, while the motion to revoke is the document filed for offenders under an adjudicated probation sentence.
3. Global Assessment Function (GAF) is used to rate how serious a mental illness may be American Psychiatric Association (2013).
4. A collateral contact is someone other than the offender and can include family members, significant others, housemates, friends, or employer, and so on.
5. Generally, the new offense arrest is a minor charge, not a serious felony.
6. Auto-generated and other paperwork-related chronos were collapsed into one administrative category as auto-generated chronos are entered into the case management system as a response to other paperwork-related tasks.
7. The variables Number of Archived Documents and Total Number of Unique Probationers were non-normally distributed; thus, they were log-transformed prior to analyses.

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### Author Biographies

**Kelli D. Martin** is the research policy planner for Taylor Callahan & Coleman Counties CSCD, Bexar County and Hidalgo Counties CSCDs. She has 26 years' experience in the field of community corrections, 14 of those years in management including Training Academy Director, Sex Crimes Unit Supervisor, and Research Director. Some of her recent publications can be found in *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *Journal of Gang Research*, and *Federal Probation*.

**Haley R. Zettler** is an assistant professor at the University of North Texas. Her primary research interests focus on corrections, substance abuse, mental health, and recidivism. She is a former adult probation officer. Recent publications can be found in *Youth Violence & Juvenile Justice*, *International Journal of Offender Therapy & Comparative Criminology*, *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, and *Aggression & Violent Behavior*.