

Understanding the barriers that students in Further and Higher Education face when considering a career in the Probation Service

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Abstract

Despite the Probation Service having a fundamental role within the criminal justice system, staff recruitment and retention issues remain a continuing problem regarding Qualified Probation Officers. However, at present, the focus of research endeavours is placed upon those already in the service or leaving. Applying Bourdieu's notion of a 'Theory of Practice', in which the idea of Habitus plays a crucial role, we highlight the barriers faced by Further and Higher Education students in recognising a career as a Probation Officer (PO) as an option. The findings from the two concurrent mixed-methods studies reveal that students' familial structures and influences at the primary socialisation stage routinely steered their career decision-making despite recruitment initiatives. Likewise, at the secondary socialisation stage, the education system often perpetuates unhelpful stereotypes about who is best suited for this form of employment.

Keywords

Probation officers, recruitment, retention, FE, HE

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Introduction

The Probation Service continues, in comparison to its counterparts (e.g. Police), to face an ongoing identity crisis with its role and purpose on a continuous cycle of change. As a result, the roots of social work are long in the past, with an increasing focus on risk assessment and management (Davies and Durrance, 2009; Ministry of Justice, 2023). However, with this ongoing change, there has been little discussion about what this means for future Probation Officers (POs) or even if this change in identity attracts rather than deters college and university students. There appears to be a presumption that the latter would be fundamental, given the continuing problems with recruiting and retaining individuals from diverse backgrounds into the service as a PO. Last year alone, in the year ending June 2024, there were 8217 probation staff leaving the service, an increase of 411 (5.3%) compared to the year ending June 2023 (GOV UK, 2024b). This is ongoing issue, despite 238,646 individuals being under the Probation Service's supervision as of 30 June 2024, which is an increase of 0.2% compared to the previous year (Ministry of Justice and Prison & Probation Service, 2024). Consequently, we consider the findings from the two mixed-methods studies presented to be particularly pertinent in considering the perspectives of students in Further Education (FE)¹ and Higher Education (HE)² and their 'desire' to pursue a career as a PO (Brown et al., 2024). To fully explore the individual and structural barriers that students encounter, we consider the students' perspectives and experiences through the lens of Bourdieu's 'Theory of Practice,' and more specifically, the concept of 'Habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984). In the following sections, this article examines the current recruitment and retention strategies for the Probation Service, before exploring the theoretical lens and the resultant findings from our research.

Recruitment and retention within the Probation Service

There are currently three pathways for individuals wishing to pursue a career as a PO: The Graduate, Non-Graduate and Probation Services Officer (PSO) route. As the service has avoided the term 'apprenticeship', many people will be unaware that trainee officers learn and earn while gaining the prerequisite experience and knowledge needed to become fully qualified POs. Individuals on these courses encounter a combination of theory and practice, providing recruits with diverse skills and expertise to apply to their roles (HM Prison & Probation Service, n.d.). Depending on the applicant's previous qualifications, becoming a qualified PO will take 15, 21 or 27 months. The shorter external graduate routes are available to applicants who have previously completed a related undergraduate or graduate course. These courses would include Criminology, Sociology, Psychology or Law (Deering, 2010; Skinner and Goldhill, 2013). For clarity, this route differs from the internal 15-month route, which does not require a prior degree.

In the 2022/2023 financial year, 1514 Probation Officer Trainees (PQiP) were recruited, with various media initiatives and recruitment advertisements aimed at further increasing this number over the next few years. However, as noted, there has also been a 5.3% loss of probation staff compared to the year ending June 2023 (GOV UK, 2024b; HMPPs, 2024). So, despite recruiting more POs, wider retention issues persist, stemming

from the growing number of individuals leaving the service. The recent Recruitment, Training, and Retention of Frontline Probation Practitioners report from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2025) notes several key areas of concern. Many new joiners hold unrealistic expectations about this career, and managers express concern that a minority of new staff lack resilience and do not fully understand the demands of the role. The inspectorate also notes that the overall annual leaving rate for Probation Service staff as of the 30th of September 2024 was 10.4%. For POs, this was slightly lower at 7.8%, and for Probation Service Officers (PSOs)³, it was higher at 12.1% (HMIP, 2025: 10). According to the report, a continued problem with recruiting and retaining the most suitable candidates persists (Barton, 2019), despite initiatives introduced to support recruitment and ensure workplace equity, equality, diversity and inclusion.

These problems are exemplified by the findings of earlier reports from the HMIP (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021, 2023), which examined the experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic service users and staff. Less than one-fifth of ethnic minority staff believed that there were equal opportunities in recruitment practices, with recommendations focused on ensuring that the diversity of individuals is assessed and represented appropriately within the service. Other present initiatives include the Probation Employment Pathway, which offers those with previous criminal convictions a pathway into the service, and the retention of Disability Confident Leader Status in acknowledgement of the service's support for employees with disclosed disabilities (GOV UK, 2024a; Harvey, 2024).

However, while there is a push for the recruitment of POs, the service is potentially at risk of pushing the problem further down the line. As a university, we experience issues in securing relevant Probation placements or shadowing opportunities for students. These issues will only contribute to the '*transition shock*' that students experience upon entering the service, as well as the number of individuals leaving (Duchscher, 2009; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025a). The findings presented within this article highlight these ongoing issues. In doing so, we aim to address the limited understanding of students' early pathways into the Probation Service. Likewise, we note the influence of our own positionality as tutors and former practitioners within this profession, including the influence of our own perceived demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender) on participants.

Review of the literature

Focusing on individuals already in the service or leaving fails to consider how we can support recruitment and inspire individuals earlier in their lives towards the PO role. The findings of previous studies reinforce the problems raised, showcasing the ongoing legacy of the Probation Service's identity crisis. Limited research exists in this area. The only related study to the one presented is Trebilcock and Griffiths (2022), who explore the career motivations of undergraduate Criminology students. However, a key limitation of this study is that it does not explicitly mention the Probation Service or the PO role. This fundamental limitation further reinforces Robinson's (2016) notion of the '*Cinderella Complex*', which describes how the Probation Service has remained out of the public consciousness, and we contend, potentially even within the education sector.

As a result, it is understandable that the service is still facing the same problems regarding recruits not fully understanding the reality of the PO role for which they signed up, and the subsequent impact on job satisfaction and retention.

To explore this phenomenon, Mawby and Worrall (2013) propose three theoretical identities: '*Lifers*', '*Second Careerists*' and '*Offender Managers*'. Firstly, '*Lifers*' are described as those who are often predominantly over the age of 40, who joined the service shortly after university, often with idealistic views and seeing the service as a vocation. Many express a lifelong commitment to their role and view the job as their primary career, one within which they discovered their passion from a young age. In contrast, '*Second Careerists*' are individuals who have sought alternative careers first, such as those in social work or the Armed Services. Not all will be graduates, but many will see the service as an opportunity to make a difference and utilise their transferable skills (Worrall and Mawby, 2014). Finally, '*Offender Managers*' are the '*new breed*' of entrants, often under the age of 40 and entered the service via the Diploma in Probation Studies route. They are overwhelmingly female and IT-savvy (Annison, 2013), with public protection central to their motivation to join the service (Burke et al., 2016), alongside the inherent job status, security and promotion routes. While the three differ slightly in their identity, they all share a range of values, such as emphasising professional relationships, a belief in the ability of individuals to change and the value of working with individuals in the community within the context of public and victim protection.

However, as mentioned, there is currently a limited understanding of what motivates students to pursue this career. Drawing on the key themes from the literature review provided by Grant (2016) highlights some evidence of the shared factors that motivate trainee and newly qualified POs to join the service. The findings from this review emphasise that most trainee POs enter the service because they want to help people change, making it a satisfying career choice. These findings further reinforce that individual values and beliefs are a primary factor in motivating people to join the service, compared to the material aspects of the job (i.e. pay, annual leave). Nevertheless, the findings of this review also raise questions about whether the push towards a service with '*public protection*' and '*risk management*' as its core business will be a significant factor in attracting those seeking to join (Ministry of Justice, 2023). As a result, the following studies apply Bourdieu's notion of a '*Theory of Practice*' and '*Habitus*' to fully understand the range of influences on a student's career decision-making.

Theory of practice

To lay the foundations of our argument, we first reflect on Bourdieu's (1984) notion of a '*Theory of Practice*', in which the idea of *Habitus* plays a crucial role. Within this seminal work, Bourdieu abandons the traditional theories of human action to offer an alternative account that addresses the shortcomings of existing approaches (Apps et al., 2019). The term '*practice*' in this setting is used to refer to both conventional and routine ways of doing something, with an individual's behaviour shaped by their dispositions (also known as *habitus*), the individual's position within the social arena (or field) that enables

them to acquire resources (or capital) (Roth, 2022). These three concepts are defined and further explored in the subsequent sections.

Habitus. An individual's dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984), more simply, a person's inherent qualities of mind and character, ultimately shape their behaviour, with an individual's behaviour filtered through and shaped by their past and present experiences (Maton, 2012). These experiences include their upbringing and educational background, which ultimately mould an individual's future practice (Bourdieu, 1980). As highlighted, an individual's behaviour will not only be shaped by agentic factors but also by the position held by that individual within a field that enables them to access resources and subsequent capital.

Field. When referring to fields, we mean the social arenas and structured systems in which individuals compete for resources and power, which in turn provide them with capital (Apps et al., 2019). These structured systems apply specific rules and practices that govern what everyone can achieve within society. Depending on the position one holds within the field, it will ultimately increase or decrease the available capital. An individual from a lower social class would often have less capital available compared to an individual from a middle or upper social class. For example, those higher up in hierarchical societal systems are more likely to be familiar with the rules of the education system, including its values, norms and preferred practices, which in turn enables them to ensure their child's success (Edgerton et al., 2013). Therefore, those at the top can exert greater influence and control over those below them, thereby sustaining social advantage and access to the available capital.

Capital. When referring to capital, we mean the economic, social and cultural capital. Social capital refers to the network of individuals a student knows who can support them in achieving their desired career goals. Cultural capital, on the other hand, is the cultural, linguistic and behavioural knowledge and skills that are often acquired during a student's family upbringing and are usually defined by class, culture and social group (O'Connor, 2011), which will ultimately help or hinder the student's future career choices. Certain forms of employment will favour specific behavioural knowledge and skills that align more closely with specific classes, cultures and social groups.

Now that we have defined these terms and begun to link them to the research presented, the next section will explore how the notion of '*Habitus*', which has been applied across various disciplines in the past, including in terms of criminology, sociology, anthropology, education and even in terms of explaining consumer culture (Alloul, 2021; Carfagna et al., 2014; Hassanin and Light, 2012; Radogna, 2019; Tan and Liu, 2022). By doing so, we can acknowledge the strengths and limitations of this theoretical framework and contribute to its development.

The notion and use of habitus

Bourdieu's (1984) work has long been applied across disciplines to draw attention to how unequal social structures shape individual experiences, with the '*game of life*' being dependent upon who has the most and least capital and resources within society (Grenfell and James, 1998). Those with the most capital are more likely to achieve success in various aspects of their life, including employment, health outcomes and social interactions (Gregory and Weinstein, 2004). Therefore, we apply the same concepts of Habitus to consider how the social systems students encounter within our research, and their perceptions of them, influence students' career decision-making (Vilhjálmssdóttir and Arnkelsson, 2013). The students' individual experiences of these social systems will result in various appearances, tastes and lifestyles, and offer different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Hendry et al., 1998; Tomanović, 2004), which will either align with or oppose a career as a PO.

However, as noted by King (2000), we emphasise that the notion of Habitus may not be as deterministic. For instance, students may not be inevitably '*puppets of structures*', with many of the students within our studies emphasising the notion of the '*conditions of possibility*' and seeking to reshape the very institutions of modernity constraining their aspirations (Giddens, 1991; Sweetman, 2003). Therefore, exploring the various forms of capital that students hold and have inherited from their families is essential to fully understanding their career options and choices. As well as how these decisions are influenced and shaped by broader social structures to reflect and sustain social advantage (Jackson, 2022). Therefore, through the presentation of the students' narratives, we aim to acknowledge the limitations and build upon the notion of Habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). The following sections will explore the key components of Habitus, first in terms of familial influence, and then in terms of education.

Influence of family. Previous research exemplifies the awareness children have concerning the impact of their familial capital and their family's position within society. Also known as '*familial habitus*', the '*family structure resources*' and '*family process resources*' provide children with the financial, social connections and relationships, as well as the competence necessary to navigate adulthood and employment (Amato and Ochilree, 1986). Early on in childhood, these resources can encompass the possession of books, as well as engagement with activities outside of school, which can offer cultural and social capital and inherently shape the student's knowledge, skills, tastes and behaviour (Bourdieu, 1979), depending on the family's values and beliefs (Gemar, 2023). For some students, these resources will be abundant in terms of quality, quantity and availability; however, for others, they will be limited. Hindering the student's access to subsequent opportunities in adulthood and a child's ability to achieve social mobility and fulfil their future career aspirations.

Therefore, there are clear connections between the primary socialisation provided by parental aspirations and children's academic success (Gaddis, 2013), with a young person's hopes, behaviour and inclination towards studying being just as crucial. Also referred to as students' '*academic habitus*', as raised by De Moll et al. (2024), this concept is underexplored. However, we consider this concept fundamental, as issues may

arise when a young person judges one career path as a future goal, only to find that they appear unattainable to them. In such cases, their support network may act as a buffer, spurring them to pursue a career they otherwise perceive as unattainable, and ultimately (re)shape their aspirations and behaviours (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Alternatively, where there is a misalignment between family expectations and the young person's expectations, it becomes a factor of contention. For example, when they have identified a career of interest within the immediate cultural environment (i.e. the media) that does not align with the rest of the family's expectations. As a result, the education system, as the secondary form of socialisation, will either seek to encourage the student to pursue their aspirations or remould the student's career trajectory to align with societal and family expectations.

Influence of education. Consequently, society's power system is culturally inherited, reproduced and sustained by societal systems (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), the education system providing secondary socialisation, where the professional trajectories of children and young people are moulded. As mentioned, students from different social backgrounds will have varying levels of social and cultural capital, with the '*hidden curriculum*' – the unspoken rules, expectations and values – favouring students from privileged backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1989). For example, students exhibiting studious behaviours and high academic achievement may be guided towards university study and professions like medicine or law (Barone, 2006; Calarco, 2011; Tramonte and Willms, 2010; Wildhagen, 2010). At the same time, students whose dispositions align more with practical, hands-on work and learning will be guided towards apprenticeships.

As a result, we consider it problematic that the PO training is not advertised as an '*apprenticeship*', which may mean individuals with the required skills and knowledge will not be guided towards this career opportunity. This phenomenon, as raised by Bourdieu (1984), can lead to symbolic violence whereby the dominant vision of what society perceives for a particular demographic group (i.e. female and male occupations) ultimately guides the career advice and options a student has available to them. These practices can lead to students being denied opportunities to pursue a particular career based on assumptions about the social category to which they belong (Hester and Moore, 2018). However, this is particularly problematic when the very students with the life experience to be a PO are not exposed to the opportunities and information needed to pursue this career avenue.

Therefore, it is essential to consider the potential role of Career Advisors and '*Pracademics*' within this space (McLaughlin, 2024), who can inspire the next generation of POs. Real-life practitioners, also known as pracademics, are increasingly being called to participate in delivering various forms of HE and vocational training; for example, Dickinson et al. (2020) recommend that HE recruit those with practitioner backgrounds as academics. In particular, the unique skills and knowledge held can provide firsthand insight into the industry and the sector's needs (Obembe, 2023), in collaboration with Career Advisors. They are also able to leverage their industry connections to offer guest lectures and speakers that further enhance student knowledge and understanding. As raised by Ainslie and Riley (2024: 1), probation pracademics '*bridge the praxis between*

theory and practice, while also filling what we consider to be a significant gap in Primary and Secondary Habitus.

Methodology

To fully understand the social systems students encounter, we employ a mixed-methods approach in both studies, with distinct phases for the FE and HE students as illustrated by Figures 1 and 2 (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). A survey was sent to students undertaking a Criminology or Law qualification to understand the range of Criminal Justice careers they were presently interested in, including in the areas of Law, Probation, Prison and the Police. These students included Year 12 students from College 2 and Year 12 and 13 students from College 1 and 3, along with 50 university students. To ensure awareness of all careers of interest, the students could select as many as applicable. However, as the University students had already received input and information on the Probation Service during their degree, we decided to deliver a workshop to the FE college students about the Probation Service before conducting the interviews and focus groups (Figure 1). Given the age and safeguarding requirements of the FE project, only Focus Groups were undertaken, as a member of staff from the colleges needed to be present during these interviews. As a result, we gave the HE students the option of either individual interviews or Focus Groups to account for learning needs, with all expressing a preference for individual interviews following contact over email, with an Invitation Letter, Information Sheet and Consent Form attached (Figure 2). Any student expressing interest in an interview via the voluntary questions contained within the survey was extracted and assigned to a focus group. We undertook this process to ensure diversity within each group and to examine key demographic differences, with each group comprising between three and five students (Krueger, 2014).

Before collecting any data, we obtained ethical approval from our institution, ensuring compliance with relevant ethical guidelines and policies (British Society of Criminology (BSC), 2015; Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee, 2020). To ensure concerns regarding informed consent were addressed, the initial survey included an information and consent section that outlined the study's purpose and provided a downloadable Participant Information Sheet. Therefore, consent was an ongoing process, with students able to withdraw from either study at any time by providing their unique three-word identifier. This practice ensured participants' anonymity and facilitated the tracing of the students' responses through each phase of the FE and HE projects (Israel, 2014).

All students involved in the studies were recruited and purposively sampled from local sixth-form colleges within the surrounding university area, as well as those enrolled on the university's single-and joint-degree courses (Etikan et al., 2016; Fernandez et al.,

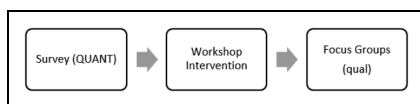


Figure 1. Study design (colleges).

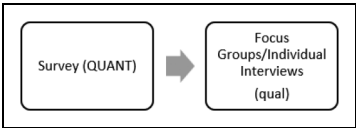


Figure 2. Study design (university).

2021). This sampling method led to the involvement of three local colleges and 50 undergraduate students at Sheffield Hallam University. Students received the initial survey at set intervals between 10 March 2023 and 15 January 2024 to avoid conflicting with assessment dates. Any student who participated in the survey was automatically entered into a prize draw to win a £10 gift voucher, and any student who participated in an interview/focus group automatically received a gift voucher in return for their time and input. The survey data from both projects were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 and descriptive statistics (Holcomb, 2016). We achieved a response rate of 71.25% for the survey and 56.3% for the interviews, which we consider to be excellent, as according to Holtom et al. (2022), the average response rate has risen from 48% in 2005 to 53% in 2010 to 56% in 2015 and 68% in 2020. Tables 1 to 3 present the response rates and demographic information of all survey and interview participants.

Sixteen students from College 1, 18 students from College 2, 28 students from College 3 and 24 university students expressed an interest in participating in an interview or focus group. After analysing the survey responses, we conducted two focus groups with College 1 and five with College 3. Unfortunately, we were unable to return to College 2 to conduct the focus groups due to the data collection process conflicting with the students’ exam season. However, eight further interviews were undertaken with university students. During the interviews, we utilised a sensitive questioning style, ensuring that we did not ask any personal questions concerning the students’ contact with the Criminal Justice System and to help prevent the disclosure of sensitive information, with any concerns disclosed to the safeguarding leads for the Colleges and University (Israel and Gelsthorpe, 2016). All interviews were transcribed confidentially by an external transcriber before being uploaded into NVivo 12 for analysis.

NVivo and the six-phase thematic analysis framework were used to analyse the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Following the six-phase framework, we familiarised ourselves with the qualitative data through reading and re-reading before the initial coding process occurred, given the use of an external transcriber. Once the initial coding was complete, the merging of the codes enabled the formation of themes and sub-themes, which were then reviewed and refined.

Findings

Family’s values and beliefs drive the desire to pursue a career as a PO

As discussed, ‘*Familial Habitus*’ has a significant influence on the career trajectories of children and young people, as it provides the financial, social connections and

Table 1. Profile of survey participants.

	College 1		College 2		College 3		University 1	
	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)
Gender identity								
Male	3	15%	9	18%	37	49%	9	18%
Female	16	80%	40	80%	37	49%	40	80%
Prefer not to say	1	5%	0	0%	1	1%	0	0%
Prefer to self-describe	0	0%	1	5%	1	1%	1	2%
Total	20	100%	50	100%	76	100%	50	100%
Ethnicity								
White	17	85%	30	60%	44	58%	43	86%
Asian/Asian British	1	5%	5	10%	19	25%	2	4%
Mixed multiple ethnic groups	1	5%	3	6%	6	8%	2	4%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	0	0%	0	0%	2	3%	2	4%
Any other ethnic group	1	5%	3	6%	0	0%	1	2%
Total	20	100%	41	82%	71	94%	50	100%
Qualifications of immediate family								
No formal education	0	0%	1	2%	0	0%	1	2%
Secondary Education	7	35%	6	12%	21	28%	5	10%
Further Education	9	45%	23	46%	27	36%	19	38%
Undergraduate	3	15%	9	18%	11	14%	18	36%

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	College 1		College 2		College 3		University 1	
	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)
Postgraduate	1	5%	10	20%	16	21%	7	14%
Other	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	20	100%	49	98%	75	99%	50	100%
Intent to apply for university								
Yes	17	85%	39	78%	57	75%		
No	3	15%	10	20%	19	25%		
Total	20	100%	49	98%	76	100%		

Table 2. Response rates.

	College 1		College 2		College 3		University 1	
	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)	No. of students (n)	Percentage of sample (%)
Survey response rate								
Number of potential survey participants	20	100%	60	100%	80	100%	697	100%
Number of actual survey participants/Response rate	20	100%	50	83%	76	95%	50	7%
Overall average survey response rate (%)	71.25%							
Interview response rate								
Number of potential interview participants expressing interest within initial survey	16	100%	18	100%	28	100%	24	100%
Number of actual interview participants/Response rate	8	50%	-	-	24	86%	8	33%
Overall average interview response rate (%)	56.3%							

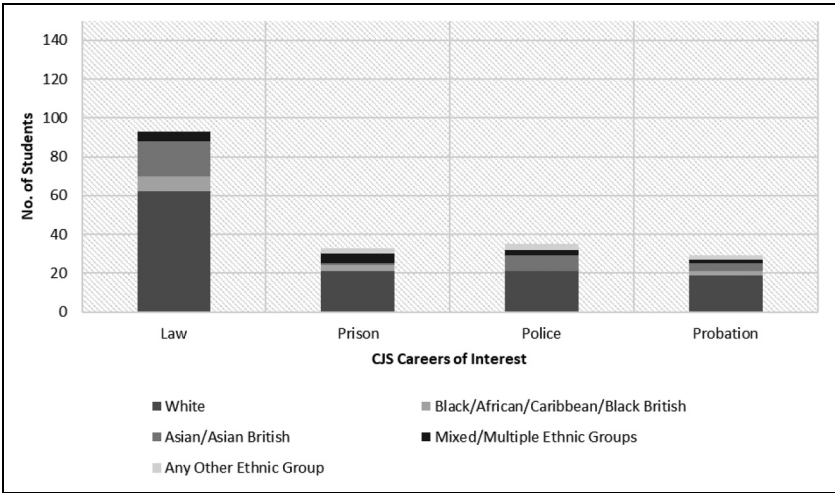


Figure 3. Ethnicity – which of these careers interests you? (college students).

relationships necessary to navigate adulthood and employment (Amato and Ochiltree, 1986). However, ‘*Familial Habitus*’ was often absent from the narratives of students considering a PO career, given the lack of familial social connections and relationships to the service compared to other criminal justice agencies, such as those linked to the Legal Sector and the Police Service. This lack of social capital inherently shaped the student’s knowledge, skills, tastes and behaviours (Bourdieu, 1979; Gemar, 2023). Consequently, both the college and university students raised the need to pick a career aligned with their family’s values and beliefs, given that conflict arose where there was misalignment between family expectations and the young person’s. For some students, the latter was a significant influence, and at times, a barrier to considering a career as a PO (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011).

For example, students from an Asian/Asian British background were routinely steered by family members towards a career in Law, given the financial and social capital offered by this line of work (Bourdieu, 1979), which was argued not only to support the desired lifestyle of the students but also their current and future families. Looking after the family is a core value and tradition that was reinforced within the students from an early age and often emulated by their older siblings. For instance, 19% of college students considering a career in law (n=18) and 23% of college students considering a career in the Police Service (n=8) were Asian/Asian British (Figure 3), which contrasts with the 3% considering a career in the Prison Service (n=1) and 14% in the Probation Service (n=4). Nevertheless, the PO role offers a competitive salary starting at around £26,475 in 2025, which many students were surprised by when informed of the potential income upon becoming a fully qualified PO of £35,130, as well as the potential for progression within management to a salary of between £35,130 and £42,000. However, only 4% of Asian/Asian British university students were considering the Probation Service as a

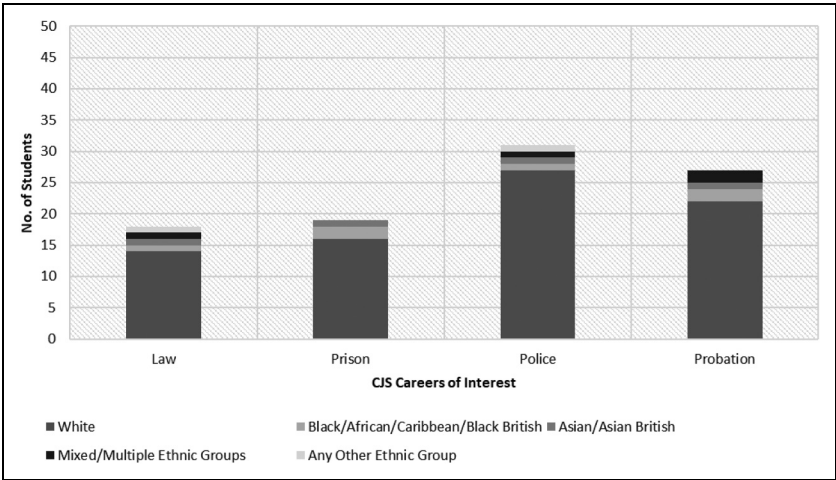


Figure 4. Ethnicity – which of these careers interests you? (university students).

potential career when considering the transition from FE to HE (Figure 4). This finding is significant, given the 2021 thematic inspection by the HM Inspectorate of Probation, which examined the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic service users and staff, including the follow-up inspection findings in 2023 (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021, 2023). Recommendations from the report focus on ensuring that the diversity of individuals is assessed and represented appropriately within the service. Therefore, we were keen to expand upon this finding during the interviews.

We actively encouraged students to ask questions, seeking to explore the alignment and barriers in terms of their familial values and beliefs, with those of the role of a PO (Grant, 2016). The students’ various appearances, tastes and lifestyles offer different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Hendry et al., 1998; Tomanović, 2004), as they are acutely aware of, with students seeking to fully explore their dispositions (habitus), their potential position within the social arena of the Probation Service (field), and the available resources (capital) (Roth, 2022). Certain forms of employment will favour specific behavioural knowledge and skills that align more closely with specific classes, cultures and social groups. Below, we have outlined illustrative examples of the statements students made concerning the influence of their familial background:

I think it goes from person to person, like what kind of background they have ... It’s all based on like the role models you’ve had, I think. (College 3: Focus Group 4)

My parents would look for me to get a good job, like a higher-paying job, because, like, they’re Asian. They want me to get a good job ... (College 1: Focus Group 2)

It’s kind of been present in my life (...) that sort of behaviour (...). I’ve had people, family, that have just been involved, so it would have just been nice to make a change (...). It is a very

negative opinion in my family (...) because you don't want your parents not wanting you to do what you dream to do. (University Student: Interviewee 3)

But people around me were terrified at some point, so I do respect that. And I do take that in consideration, that someone you know, in my close environment might be not like, not feeling safe about, you know, where I work or what I do. It really depends what it would be. (University Student: Interviewee 2)

Nonetheless, given the limited social capital available in terms of prior social connections with the Probation Service, greater emphasis must be placed on exposing the role of a PO to help students understand how their dispositions (*habitus*) align with the social arena of the Probation Service (field) and the vast resources available (capital) (Roth, 2022). However, this also requires FE and HE to address present misconceptions about the dispositions that are most aligned with the PO role, with many students expressing concern about the education system reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Societies' dominant vision of the probation officer influencing FE and HE

As raised, society's power system is culturally inherited, reproduced and sustained by societal systems (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), such as the education system. As a result, the education system will either seek to encourage the student to pursue their aspirations despite familial tensions or remould the student's career trajectory in alignment with societal and family expectations based on societal stereotypes. This can lead to symbolic violence when the dominant vision of what society perceives as a particular demographic group's role (e.g. male-dominated occupations) ultimately guides the options available to a student (Bourdieu, 1984). The survey data revealed that most college and university students considering a career in the Probation Service were female (Annison, 2013); for example, 59% of female college students ($n=17$) compared to only 31% of male students ($n=9$) (Figure 5). The percentage of female university students considering this career avenue is even higher at 93% ($n=25$) compared to only 7% of male university students ($n=2$) (Figure 6). These findings align with the theoretical identity of '*Offender Managers*' proposed by Worrall and Mawby (2014), with the supposed '*new breed*' of entrants being overwhelmingly female, with recent statistics suggesting that 68.1% of staff in senior probation roles are female (HM Prison & Probation, 2024).

However, most people on probation are overwhelmingly male (Ministry of Justice and Prison & Probation Service, 2024). Currently, there is a misconception held by students that this form of employment is more fitting for a female due to being caring-oriented, as many students refer to their family role models, such as not being able to see their father in the role, but they could see their mother. As a result, we asked students to describe a PO to pick up on any stereotypes that might be present. Many college and university students described a young female in her 20s or an older female in her 40s or 50s, pointing to the researchers in attendance who represented both demographic categories. When asked



Figure 5. Gender identity – which careers interest you? (college students).



Figure 6. Gender identity – which careers interest you? (university students).

why a female, the students referred to the societal stereotypes that still exist around certain types of employment:

It's a very like caring, almost nurturing role, isn't it? I think that it's stereotypically something you would see women as doing. I think it's the same as teaching. When you think of a teacher, I think that most people would say a middle-aged woman. (College 1: Focus Group 1)

I mean, stereotypes have got to hold up to a certain degree ... If you look at police officers, they're still quite a public protection role ... However, obviously, a Probation Officer, they are obviously going to have a highly supportive aspect of their job, and so that is probably realistically why so many young women are going into it, isn't it? (College 3: Focus Group 3)

I think that it might deter boys from wanting to get into that, because they don't see it as a role that they should be doing"(College 3: Focus Group 4)

I honestly think it would be more women. I don't know why but I just feel ... I think a lot of men unfortunately in my experience lack that kind of emotion and they lack that sympathy for them and the selflessness, to want to be like 'Let me help you'. (University Student: Interviewee 3)

These stereotypes deterred, particularly male students, from pursuing this career due to the dominant female stereotype associated with POs. Therefore, while efforts are being made to attract a diverse workforce, many of these efforts will be futile unless we address the stereotypes that are ingrained in students during their primary and secondary socialisation. However, as raised above, we emphasise that the notion of Habitus may not be as deterministic (King, 2000), with students seeking to shape the very institutions of modernity, constraining their aspirations (Giddens, 1991; Sweetman, 2003). Students proposed changes to the Probation Service and the Education Sector that would ultimately support the recruitment and retention of POs from diverse backgrounds.

Reshaping the probation service and education sector as social structures and the conditions of possibility

In response to the limitations raised by King (2000) and Giddens (1991), we highlight the present barriers but also identify the conditions of possibility raised within the students' responses, which could help the current recruitment and retention issues associated with POs. The responses provided by students aimed to eradicate perceived symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984), with 48% of college students ($n = 70$) wanting to see images and hear stories of how people like them had trained to become POs (Figure 7). Likewise, a further 70% of university students ($n = 35$) chose this option, with the percentage choosing this response even higher than for the college students (Figure 8).

This narrative emerged strongly in the interviews, particularly among those students who had developed an interest in becoming a PO during the sessions with us. For example, students wanted to see individuals like us (referring to the benefits of pracademics with lived experience of the role and demographic diversity) delivering input to students like them (Ainslie and Riley, 2024; McLaughlin, 2024). We found this finding interesting as it may have stemmed directly as well from the composition of our own research team, being predominantly female and White. As raised, pracademics can help facilitate a smooth transition from academia to industry (Obembe, 2023). In particular, the industry connections were argued to enhance student knowledge and understanding. Below are just a few of the comments from students:

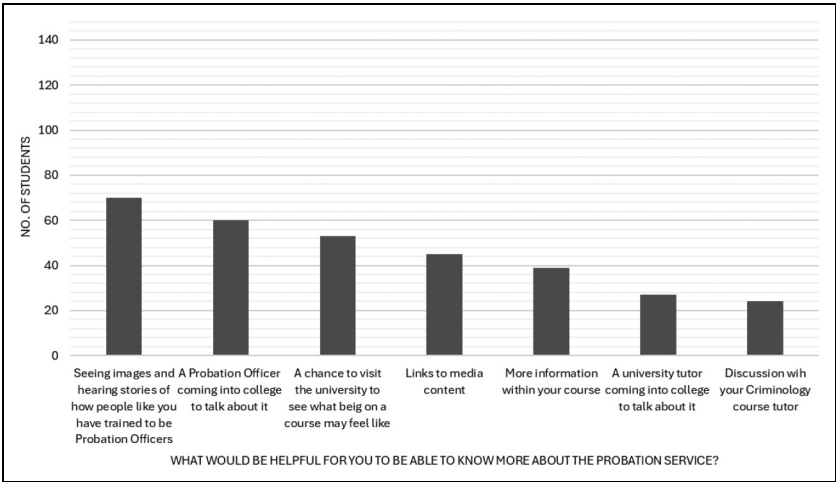


Figure 7. What would be helpful for you to be able to know more about the Probation Service and how you can train to become a Probation Officer (college students).

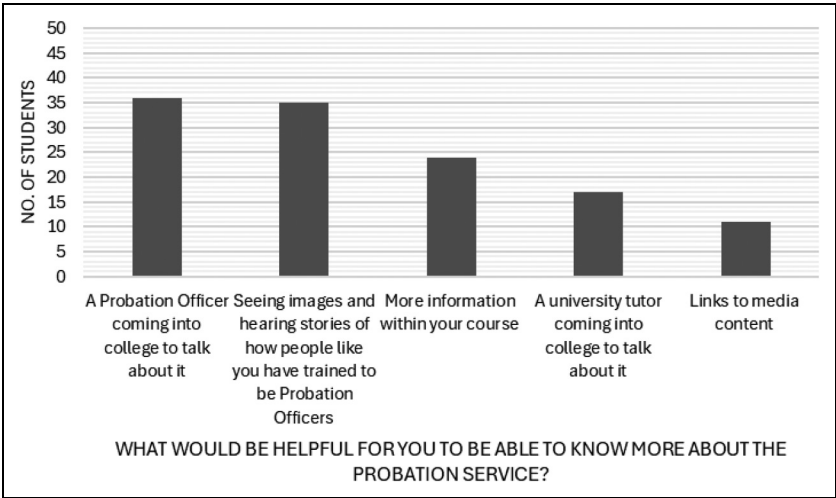


Figure 8. What would be helpful for you to be able to know more about the Probation Service and how you can train to become a Probation Officer (university students).

Getting people like you guys in because obviously not a lot of people even know anything about probation. It just seems like a bad thing. I think that it's better to hear from someone who has actually done it, rather than just hearing it from like a movie. (College 1: Focus Group 2)

Like obviously you're coming today and you're coming to other classes, but if you didn't do the classes, like you didn't go into them, then people probably wouldn't know about it. Additionally, I believe that people are more informed about the police and their operations. They know about those jobs, because they experience it like in real life. (College 3: Focus Group 2)

I'd like having someone and describe like day-to-day probation (...) because as I've said, I know more about the rest of it and can put myself in those shoes, like you said, whereas a Probation Officer, it's kind of a blank spot for me. Yeah, because it's just not talked about much (...) the actual doing of it. The lived experience of being a Probation Officer, not a clue. (University Student: Interviewee 8)

Therefore, we likewise support earlier calls from Dickinson et al. (2020) and Ainslie and Riley (2024), as the unique skillsets and knowledge held can provide firsthand insight into the industry and the sector's needs (Obembe, 2023), in collaboration with Career Advisors. They would also be able to leverage their industry connections to offer guest lectures to both college and university students, which would further enhance student knowledge and understanding.

Discussion

While there has been considerable discussion about recruiting the next generation of POs, there has been limited attention directed towards asking young people how the social structures they encounter shape their understanding of the service and role (Bourdieu, 1984). This approach appears to be a mistake, as evidenced by the findings from these two studies, as the students' familial structures and influences at the primary socialisation stage routinely steered their career decision-making despite recruitment initiatives (Bourdieu, 1979). Likewise, at the secondary socialisation stage, the education system often perpetuates unhelpful stereotypes about who is best suited for this form of employment. So, while considerable effort is being invested in attempts to recruit POs from diverse backgrounds, we argue that this may come too late, as the students' professional trajectories will have already been heavily moulded by their upbringing and education. Such initiatives may catch the attention of the occasional student who is critical of the societal structures they encounter (Giddens, 1991; Sweetman, 2003), but for some students, the familial and educational influences will be too strong. As a result, these students will perceive a misalignment between their dispositions (*habitus*) and their position within the social arena of the Probation Service (or field), as well as the available capital within the role of a PO (Roth, 2022). To address these ongoing issues, we propose the following recommendations. To build upon the recommendations of the recent HMPPS (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025b) Recruitment and Retention Thematic Review, to provide an assessment of the need for an integrated approach between HMPPS, academic researchers and FE providers to ensure enduring partnerships can be established to address the lack of exposure to the work of the Probation Service within the transitions between FE and HE.

Conclusion

In conclusion, within the two studies presented, we highlight the importance of understanding what motivates FE and HE students within their career decision-making, including the fundamental societal barriers that exist at present through the lens of Bourdieu's '*Theory of Practice*,' and more specifically, the concept of '*Habitus*' (Bourdieu, 1984). In doing so, we address the existing gap in the literature regarding the understanding of what motivates students to consider joining the Probation Service and pursue a career as a PO. Currently, our understanding relies solely on the narratives of POs who are already in service or are leaving. For us, this is a significant mistake as our findings highlight that there are presently stereotypes ingrained at both the primary and secondary socialisation stages, which hinder individuals from specific minoritised backgrounds from pursuing this career option.

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Ethical considerations

The Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee reviewed and approved the ethical aspects of the research projects under ER60156348 (Study 1: College Students) and ER60576830 (Study 2: University Students).

Consent to participate and for publication

All participants provided consent via the initial online questionnaire, and verbal consent was also gained during the interview component of the projects to ensure no student felt coerced into continuing their participation. For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version of this paper arising from this submission.

Author contributions

Tom Brown is the Principal Investigator and has been involved in the project management, data collection, data analysis and final write-up. Zoe Rodgers was a Research Assistant who has been involved in the data collection, analysis and final write-up. Jeni Hudson is the Co-Investigator and has been involved in the project management, data collection, data analysis and final write-up. Blade D'Arcy is a Student Researcher who has been involved in the data collection, analysis and final write-up.

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Notes

1. FE: Within the United Kingdom, FE refers to any education and training undertaken following the completion of secondary education. Often students will attend a college (also known as sixth form), where they will complete qualifications that will enable them to attain employment or secure a place to study at a university. FE usually involves those between the ages of 16 and 19.
2. HE: Whereas, within the United Kingdom, HE often involves university study and is usually attended by those aged 18 and over. The courses completed can range from diplomas to post-graduate degrees. HE is offered by various universities, colleges and other specialist institutions, such as art schools.
3. PSOs: A role within the Probation Service that supervises individuals serving community and prison sentences who are considered low or medium risk; often considered an entry route role for individuals wishing to pursue a career as a PO, which offers an opportunity to get on-the-job training and experience of working within the Probation Service.

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