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Probationer Officer Experiences: Dual Role Decision-Making for Probationers with Mental Illness

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Walden University

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Myra Fields

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Probationer Officer Experiences:

Dual Role Decision-Making for Probationers with Mental Illness

by

Myra Fields

MS, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

BS, Radford University, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

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May, 2023

Abstract

Probation officers play a major role in maintaining public safety by balancing their dual roles of care and control. The number of individuals within the United States community corrections system is significantly growing. This has increased the need for probation officers to make decisions for probationers with mental illness. However, there is a gap in understanding how active-duty probation officers make decisions for probationers. This study examined how probation officers balance their dual roles while decision-making for probationers with mental illness. An interpretative phenomenological analysis design was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants who met inclusion criteria to participate in this study. A review of data produced three primary themes: shifting expectations affected probation officers' ability to balance their dual roles, officers experienced internal barriers when decision-making for probationers, and officers experienced external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. Findings were then analyzed using current literature and fundamentals of game theory to address implications for social change. Probation officers, agencies, and communities can use findings of this study for positive social change to develop new training methods, enhance employee retention, and assess community resources to target mental health and reduce recidivism. Results of this study form a foundation for future research to build upon and better understand experiences of probation officer decision-making for probationers with mental illness.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my husband and sons. To my husband, who has always been my biggest supporter, I could not have completed this without you. For my sons, may you never stop learning and achieving great things.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Criminal justice reform in the United States most often focuses on policing, equality in sentencing, and deinstitutionalization. One area frequently left out of the spotlight is community corrections, a division of the criminal justice system that functions as critical support to all three branches of the criminal justice system and their overall design. Community corrections, more commonly known as probation or parole supervision, have had little to no changes since its modern inception in the 1900s (Phelps & Curry, 2017). Evidence-based practices within the correctional system has led to new supervision techniques that address individual needs of probationers and parolees. Previous studies have identified the importance of community corrections and their impact on successful re-entry, reduction of recidivism, and general increase in community safety (see Ricks & Eno Loudon, 2015).

There is a lack of personal perspectives of probation officers who are responsible for those individuals within community correction programs. Special focus is given to the probation officers tasked with supervising probationers with a mental illness, as studies continue to show the overrepresentation of this population within community corrections (see Epperson et al., 2014; Weaver et al., 2019). Understanding of officer decision-making can aid administrators in developing more effective training methods that can increase staff retention, improve officer decision-making, advance outcomes for supervisees, and ultimately create stronger communities for all. This chapter includes the groundwork for this study, starting with an overview of background literature gathered over the last 5 years. Foundations of the methodology are addressed as well as the

problem statement, purpose, and research questions. I explain the theoretical framework, nature of the study, key definitions, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations. This chapter is followed by the significance of the study. While each section is a brief overview of the study in this chapter, the progressive chapters to follow will provide a more detailed picture of this study's evolution.

Background

A brief review of research is presented on probation officer decision-making and their experiences balancing a dual role while working with probationers that have a mental illness. Kita (2015) explored how probation agents experienced their work by interviewing retired probation agents in California and found they struggled with the tensions between their dual role mandates of working as members of law enforcement and case managers. Agents were exposed to intense affective experiences, developed both positive and negative coping strategies for stress, and felt overwhelming strain due to the dynamics of their administration (Kita, 2015). Ricks and Eno Louden (2015) explored perspectives that probation officers who emphasize one role over the other can affect supervision outcomes. A strong focus on control or the role of law enforcement can yield stricter enforcement of supervision rules that limit officers' ability to address individual needs (Ricks & Eno Louden, 2015). Only focusing on casework or care roles can lead officers to overlook problematic behaviors that can compromise rehabilitation and community safety (Ricks & Eno Louden, 2015).

The critical need to balance their dual role is most evident when officers are working with probationers that have a mental illness. In proper balance, better outcomes

are yielded for probationers with mental illness when they feel supported during the treatment process (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Probationers are often court-ordered to participate in treatment services, or their probation officer mandates them to attend. A strong therapeutic alliance helps ensure that both officers' and probationers work towards the same treatment goal (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Weaver et al., 2019). Probation officers who are warm, empathetic, respectful, and non-blaming are the most effective at maintaining the balance in their dual role, and are thus more successful at reducing recidivism (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019).

The significance of appropriately managing probationers with mental illness is found in the continued overrepresentation of individuals within community corrections who have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness (Epperson et al., 2014). However, community corrections has no standard representation for this specialized population's management (Epperson et al., 2014). Through qualitative interviews, Epperson et al. (2014) noted that understanding probation officers' beliefs in the relationship between crime and mental illness, purpose of probation, and their approach to supervision can lead to best outcomes for probationers with mental illness. Officers who hold a core belief that centers on the importance of balancing their dual role between authority and assistance often have the greatest success in terms of reducing recidivism for probationers with mental illness (Epperson et al., 2014). Proper application of officer discretion during cases where mental health needs are found led to a stronger foundation for probationer success (Epperson et al., 2014). When officer discretion is limited and a stronger reliance is placed on the role of control, and traditional probation supervision risk methods,

probationers with mental illness are more likely to recidivate (Epperson et al., 2020). Intervention methods that promote a stronger development of the therapeutic relationship through engagement and shared decision-making can aid officers in terms of balancing their roles and encouraging rehabilitation (Epperson et al., 2020).

Probation officers are afforded a large amount of autonomy regarding management and decision-making during the supervision process (Ricks et al., 2016). When probationers are non-compliant, it is the responsibility of the officer to impose sanctions for rule violations. The ultimate decision for most officers is when a rule violation should result in the issuance of immediate incarceration through a probation warrant. Traditional methods of supervision have incorporated use of risk-needs-responsivity for officer decision-making (Ricks et al., 2016). Officers who rely too heavily on their law enforcement and control role tend to overestimate the risk of low-level probationers (Ricks et al., 2016). Decision-making can also be affected by perceptions that probationers with mental illness are more at risk for recidivism (Eno Louden et al., 2018; Weaver et al., 2019). For a small population of officers, attitudes toward mental illness affect violation outcomes and officer willingness to use intermediate sanctions (Eno Louden et al., 2018). The research demonstrates the importance of understanding probation officer decision-making for probationers with mental illness. A greater understanding of this process and officers' dual role balance can create many social change opportunities involving community corrections.

Problem Statement

Often, the public places a strong emphasis on the concept of safety when they are asked specifically about their expectations for community corrections (Skeem et al., 2017). In the U.S., approximately 60% of all individuals within corrections were under probation supervision during 2018 (Maruschak & Minton, 2020). Consistent research shows that roughly 20% of those probationers would qualify for a diagnosis of a serious mental illness (Ditton, 1999; Manchak et al., 2019; Steadman et al., 2009). Researchers have previously explored the cost-benefit of traditional supervision methods or specialty mental health supervision for probationers with a mental illness (Skeem et al., 2017; Skeem et al., 2018).

Community safety expectations fuels the dual role probation officers are charged with managing while balancing probationer needs for rehabilitation (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015). The art of balancing these dual roles can affect decision-making for probation officers when the role of risk management conflicts with offender care, specifically for specialized populations such as probationers with mental illness (Eno Loudon et al., 2018; Kita, 2015). With no standard for how probation officers should supervise this population, longitudinal data were collected and assessed to identify the costs of traditional versus specialized supervision for probationers with mental illness (Skeem et al., 2017). Data produced significant outcomes involving reducing the number of new arrests for this population when probation officers supervised them with targeted knowledge and training in mental health (Skeem et al., 2017). This led to stronger public safety outcomes for specialized supervision of probationers with mental illness (Skeem et

al., 2017). However, researchers felt a considerable gap existed in terms of understanding decision-making process individual officers have when addressing non-compliance of this population (Skeem et al., 2017).

Researchers then built upon previous findings regarding the financial costs of supervising probationers with mental illness. They had two primary goals, to compare the unit cost of supervision type and evaluate the cost-effectiveness of supervision style across two years (Skeem et al., 2018). Specialty probation produced a cost reduction of \$12,000.00 for probationers with mental illness (Skeem et al., 2018). The cost-effectiveness of this supervision style netted taxpayers a savings of approximately 51% (Skeem et al., 2018). Savings were found in the reduction of emergency room visits, inpatient treatment, and residential treatment programs (Skeem et al., 2018). Specialized probation officers increased use of outpatient behavioral health costs as compared to traditional probation officers. However, there is still a gap in understanding how balancing dual role supervision affects probation officer decision-making for probationers with mental illness.

Purpose of Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to advance the general understanding of probation officer experiences with balancing their dual role when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. Research has shown varying gaps in terms of understanding how probation officers make decisions for their probationers while balancing their dual roles and addressing specific needs of probationers with mental illness. The insight gained by this study can facilitate positive social change by

providing administrators with knowledge of how active-duty officers are making decisions for probationers, balancing their critical dual roles, and addressing specific needs of probationers with mental illness. This will lead to better professionals within the field, improving outcomes for probationers, decreasing costs and increasing community safety for all.

The selected approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provided the opportunity to explore the in-depth deliberation of officers' lived experiences (Alase, 2017). Active duty probation officers were interviewed to understand better how they make decisions for probationers with mental illness. This approach addressed the gaps noted by Eno Louden et al. (2018), Epperson et al. (2014), Kita (2015), and Gochyyev and Skeem (2019) regarding the understanding of dual role balance and officer decision-making for probationers with mental illness.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study:

RQ₁: What is the experience of probation officers' decision-making when balancing their dual role?

RQ₂: What experiences do probation officers' have with decision-making when balancing their dual role for probationers with mental illness?

Theoretical Framework

Game Theory was selected as the theoretical framework for this study (Peterson, 2017; Stickels, 2007; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). This theory is a sub-type of decision theory, where decision-making depends on other decision-makers' outcomes

(Peterson, 2017). Game theory was created to analyze individual choice in a situation of risk where game players can not control or do not know the probability distribution of all variables to build a strategy and win the game (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). Previously, the basics of game theory were used to provide a foundation for improving probationer outcomes while on traditional probation supervision by enhancing relationships between officer and probationer (Stickels, 2007). Using the game of the prisoner's dilemma, a probationer has two choices once placed on supervision; they can cooperate or not with their probation officer (Peterson, 2017; Stickels, 2007). The same can be said for the probation officer; they can aid in probationer success or not (Peterson, 2017; Stickles, 2007). As more information is obtained about the supervision relationship, concepts from game theory are used to understand probation officer decision making while balancing a dual role. Furthermore, it is used to address how the officer's decision-making evolves with the addition of information during supervision, such as mental health status.

Nature of Study

The nature of this study was qualitative due to the selected approach of IPA (Tuffour, 2017). This method provides a detailed account of how someone makes sense of their lived experiences through a structured and systematic approach (Tuffour, 2017). IPA allowed me to explore specific officer experiences involving dual role supervision and how they make decisions based on the psychological process for how the officer establishes meaning attributed to their experiences. Qualitative methods are necessary for the needed in-depth analysis of the probation officer experience that can not be captured

via quantitative methods such as a survey or longitudinal data collection (Alase, 2017).

The qualitative method was the most suitable method for this study. I achieved the study's primary purpose of addressing research gaps by gaining insight into how probation officers experience their dual role decision-making for probationers with mental illness.

Definition of Key Terms

Probation Supervision: A specific form of sentencing that allows the individual to remain living within their community under a particular set of conditions set forth by the court and monitored by a probation officer (Epperson et al., 2020; Stickels, 2007).

Probationer: The individual sentenced by the court to be monitored for a specific period of time on probation supervision within the community under a detailed set of conditions (Stickels, 2007).

Probationer with Mental Illness: A probationer who experiences the signs and symptoms of any diagnosable mental health disorder (Epperson et al., 2020).

Probation Officer: The individual monitoring and supervising a probationer to ensure they are following the conditions of supervision set forth by the court (Stickels, 2007).

Probation Violation: Any behavior that goes against the conditions of probation supervision set forth by the court or any conduct that is non-compliant with the directions given by the probation officer (Kita, 2015; Stickels, 2007).

Assumptions

The major assumption that I assumed, in general, probation officers lack a significant understanding of mental illness. This concept was often highlighted

throughout the research gathered for this study (Eno Louden et al., 2018; Epperson et al., 2020; and Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Without a strong understanding of mental health or common signs and symptoms of mental illness, a traditional probation officer can often overestimate the risk a probationer has while on supervision (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Officers can also struggle to develop the necessary therapeutic alliance with a probationer to increase rates of success while on probation supervision (Epperson et al., 2020). Therefore, probation officers can struggle with decision-making while balancing their dual roles for probationers with mental illness.

As this study was based on self-reporting through individual interviews, there was a concern participants might not be honest or forthcoming regarding their personal experiences. This was especially considered because all participants were currently employed as active-duty probation officers. They may have been influenced to respond in a specific manner that was deemed socially acceptable according to their current district employers, agency, or their need to please myself. Therefore, I assumed that by building a strong rapport with participants, they responded more openly about their experiences. Also, I assumed that by making clear their responses were individually focused and not in any way a reflection of employers or agency expectations, they were more honest about their experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study centered around probation officers' experience with decision-making. Participants were all adults and, active-duty probation officers with more than 2 years of on-the-job training, held powers of arrest, and had experience

working with probationers with a mental illness. No vulnerable populations were recruited. All participants recruited were lived in the Commonwealth of Virginia, creating a unique cultural dynamic. Their experiences may not be generalizable to other geographic areas or similar structures of community supervision. Thus, I did not explore how experiences might impact probation officer decision-making in other locations.

Only a small subgroup of participants was selected for detailed analysis of their experiences due to the nature of this study. Therefore results of this study only represent the decision-making process while balancing a dual role experiences with probationers that have a mental illness for probation officers living in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is lack of generalizability. The qualitative method involves a smaller sample sizes that are specific to the selected geographical area. Thus results may not be replicatable within a larger quantitative study. The exploratory design is another limitation in terms of sampling method. Participants who have been active-duty officers for over 2 years might have become overwhelmed by specific responsibilities of dual role supervision as a probation officer. Their experiences might be shaped differently compared to those officers who are just entering the field and do not understand the job or those who are closer to retirement and might have a better grasp of their dual role. The final limitation to this study is my ability to maintain a clear separation between the role as a probation officer and my role as researcher. The qualitative research design does provide guidance for how the researcher should watch for any biases when conducting this type of research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). To

address this concern, I kept a journal and detailed notes throughout the research process to monitor any potential barriers to unbiased study analysis.

Significance

I addressed noted gaps in literature to develop better insights regarding experiences active-duty probation officers have with balancing their dual role when decision making for probationers with a mental illness. Addressing this specialized population on probation supervision has become a grievous financial burden on an overtaxed system (Skeem et al., 2017; Skeem et al., 2018). Gaining perceptions involving probation officers' experiences with decision-making for probationers with mental illness, while considering the complex nature of their dual roles, could lead to identifying training opportunities to improve therapeutic relationships between officers and probationers. A stronger therapeutic relationship between officers and probationers with mental illness can lower risks of violating probation supervision (Epperson et al., 2020). Understanding probation officer experiences with decision making can create an opportunity for positive social change for all probationers, especially those with the greatest need.

Summary

Previous studies have indicated that probationers with mental illness are overrepresented within community corrections (Epperson et al., 2014). Research on this specialized population suggests the need for a greater understanding of probation officer decision-making when addressing behavior violations (Epperson et al., 2020). Officers are tasked with balancing a dual role of care and control when determining outcomes for

each probationer under their supervision (Kita, 2015). This study involved using game theory to explore how officer balance their dual role while decision making for probationers with mental illness. IPA was selected to gain insight into how officers assign specific meanings to their dual role mandate while decision making for probationers. In the following chapters, a more detailed review of the literature and a detailed justification for the necessity of this study is provided.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Probation officers, as members of law enforcement, are vital to keeping their communities safe (Kita, 2015). In 2018, over 3.5 million people were under probation supervision in the U.S (Maruschak & Minton, 2020). Probation officers are expected to consistently evaluate probationer's risks to reoffend while simultaneously aiding in rehabilitation (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015). The balance of these two duties can affect decisions made by probation officers when community safety conflicts with probationer care (Kita, 2015). This dual role can become even more complex when the probationer has a diagnosed mental illness (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Probation officers must develop a therapeutic relationship with probationers to increase treatment support and reduce risks associated with their mental illness (Epperson et al., 2020). According to Stickels (2007), basic game theory can provide a foundation for improving outcomes for probationers while on probation supervision. Concepts from this approach were used to understand how probation officers make decisions while balancing their dual role and evolution of those decisions when adding information on probationer mental health during supervision.

A thorough review of current literature on these topics was conducted. In this chapter, I used basic game theory for conceptual understanding of probation officer decision-making when balancing their dual role. A brief history of probation supervision is provided to frame chronological emergence of this topic. Key concepts involving dual role supervision are explored in detail to illustrate probation officers' duties. The complex nature of supervising probationers with mental illness is also discussed. I justify this

study by analyzing literature as well as noting strengths and weaknesses of the current research concepts.

Literature Search Strategy

Databases

The following databases were used to locate the relevant literature on this topic: SAGE Journals, SpringerLink, APA PsychNet, PsycArticles, JSTOR, Walden University's Criminal Justice Database, and Google Scholar. SAGEJournals, APA PsychNet, and PsycArticles were used to research themes relative to the general field of psychology. SpringerLink was used for its compilation of articles on mathematics and economics. JSTOR, Walden University's Criminal Justice Database, and Google Scholar were used for investigative searches of current and past peer-reviewed journal articles and prevalent authors involving this topic. Following each database search, alerts were created to notify me of new article publications on similar search topics or key terms.

Key Search Terms

In this study, I used the following key terms: probation officers, community corrections, and probationers with mental illness. These key terms lead to identifying one of the main themes for the study, dual role supervision. The combination of keywords such as dual role supervision, probation officer dual role, and probationers with mental illness yielded the study's final main themes. Each search was narrowed when possible by requesting articles that were peer-reviewed and published between 2019-2023. To gain a historical perspective on each main theme and the selected theoretical foundation, some articles were chosen purposefully outside of this 5-year window. Additional terms used

for general searching included probation work, probationers with mental illness, probation officer decision-making, basic game theory, and games with incomplete information.

One barrier faced while conducting the literature review was the popularity of research on juvenile probation compared to adult probation supervision. Underlying purposes and practices for juvenile probation officers do not always align with the expectations for adult probation officers, thus, altering their decision-making process. Therefore all articles focused on juvenile probation were excluded from this study. Another barrier found during the literature review process involved differences in scope between criminal justice articles versus psychology articles focused on probation supervision. Each article was carefully reviewed and selected, in an attempt to address this barrier, based on their focus on probation officers or probationers with mental illness and not foundations of probation or community supervision theories.

Theoretical Foundation

Game Theory

This study's selected theoretical framework is built on Game Theory's basic principles. The mathematicians credited for game theory were John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern. They developed their idea to analyze individual choice in a situation of risk where players can not control or do not know the probability distribution of all variables to build a strategy and win the game (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). In the second edition of their book, Von Neumann and Morgenstern (1947) defined four axioms or premises that, in combination, created what is known as utility. Utility is the

purpose or outcome that players get from playing the game, also known as the payoff (Dutta, 1999; Peterson, 2017; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947). If each of the four mathematical axioms are met, then the game has value for each player, and, therefore, they are invested in its outcome (Dutta, 1999; Peterson, 2017; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947). Von Neumann and Morgenstern noted that not all games are played for money, and strategy is driven by what the player stands to win or lose from the game (Dutta, 1999). The utility function allows players to order choices by arbitrarily assigning ranks to choices or strategy, thus mathematically allowing for the calculation of the best payoff for each player (Dutta, 1999). This principle can be illustrated best in one of the most commonly known games, appropriately applied to this study, the prisoner's dilemma.

The prisoner's dilemma was first formulated by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher in 1950; however, Albert Tucker, another mathematician, is credited with the moniker of the prisoner's dilemma (Peterson, 2017). A simple representation of the game is that John and Jane commit a bank robbery and get caught by the police. They are each brought in for questioning in separate cells. The prosecutor tells each bank robber the same story. They are informed that there is not enough evidence to convict them both of bank robbery without a confession (Peterson, 2017). If both robbers confess, they will each serve 10 years, but if only one person confesses, that person will be rewarded with only one year to serve while the non-confessor serves 20 years (Peterson, 2017). If neither person confesses, they will each serve 2 years for a series of lesser offenses (Peterson, 2017). The matrix for each player's decision is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1*Prisoner's Dilemma*

| | | John | |
|------|-------------|---------|-------------|
| | | Confess | Not Confess |
| Jane | Confess | 10,10 | 1, 20 |
| | Not Confess | 20, 1 | 2, 2 |

Note. This table represents each player's choices in the prisoner's dilemma game. The numbers represent the years they could serve compared to the time the other player could serve.

John and Jane must make a decision with imperfect information, meaning they do not have a way to determine what strategy the other player will choose (Dutta, 1999; Fink et al., 1998). The best outcome for each individual is to confess and only serve 1 year, even though the best outcome is not to confess as a group (Peterson, 2017). Often individual strategy conflicts with the best strategy for the group (Peterson, 2017). Each player's outcome remains the same even if they have made a deal to both not confess; the best payoff for each player is to confess and only serve one year (Peterson, 2017).

There are many ways in which game theory can be applied to players' decision-making or behavioral patterns. For this study, game theory's basic concepts are used to evaluate the theoretical process of when players cooperate during a game versus when they defect from the game (Fink et al., 1998). As illustrated in the prisoner's dilemma, when each player cooperates, they keep quiet and do not confess. When each player defects, or confesses, they increase their risk of serving more time in prison. It is easy to assume that each player's strategy is working toward the common payoff of serving the least amount of time in prison. However, that information is not always known. Thus the

game becomes one with incomplete information, where one or both of the players do not know what the payoff or best outcome is for those playing the game (Fink et al., 1998).

Additionally, some games are played repeatedly, and each player has the opportunity to change strategies based upon their final payoff. These are known as extensive games, or stage games, that can provide patterns of information for each player to use and adjust their strategy at any given point to maximize their payoff or minimize their losses (Fink et al., 1998). For example, suppose John knows Jane will always confess, based on her past strategy to minimize her losses. In that case, his strategy could change from not confess to confess, in an attempt to maximize his payoff and reduce the amount of time to serve in prison. Through these extensive games, players must also consider the concept of discounting. Discounting compares players' ideas about payoff in the short-term versus the long-term of playing the game (Fink et al., 1998). This concept can add more information for each player to use when determining their strategy. What if Jane knew that John was already sentenced to 20 years on an unrelated criminal charge and does not care about how much time he must serve on this charge. Her best strategy is to not confess and possibly get only one year to serve, even when her typical strategy is to confess.

The focus of game theory is rooted in interdependence; each player is affected by the choices made by other players in the game (Dutta, 1999). Basic game theory has been used previously to provide a foundation for improving probationer outcomes while on probation supervision (Stickels, 2007). Placement on probation supervision is viewed by many as a deterrent and a vital rehabilitation component (Mears & Cochren, 2018;

Spelman, 1995; Stickels, 2007). However, as illustrated in game theory, not all players of probation see the continued placement on probation as a strong enough payoff to deter from crime or warrant cooperation (Mears & Cochren, 2018). Thus, creating an extensive game with one-sided, incomplete information (Stickels, 2007). Some probationers may feel that a short term of incarceration is a better payoff to probation supervision's intensive expectations (Spelman, 1995). In contrast, other probationers may prefer probation supervision to any period of incarceration (Spelman, 1995). If a probationer is not invested in probation, they are likely to violate the terms of probation supervision or defect from the game. This leaves probation officers to play the game with imperfect information as they do not always know the probationer's motivations or strategy (Stickels, 2007).

The probation game is realistically defined as an extensive game with incomplete and imperfect information (Dutta, 1999; Peterson, 2017; Stickels, 2007; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947). Concepts from the approach offer an understanding of probation officer decision-making while balancing a dual role. Furthermore, it details how, with the addition of information during supervision, such as mental health status, the officer's decision-making evolves. Using the approach from the game of the prisoner's dilemma, a probationer has two choices while on supervision, cooperate, or defect, not cooperate (Peterson, 2017; Stickels, 2007). The probation officer also has two choices during supervision, cooperate and aid in probationer success or defect and not care about outcomes (Peterson, 2017; Stickels, 2007). The probation officer cooperates with the probationer towards the group goal of successful completion from supervision. In game

theory, this is the best possible outcome for all parties (Peterson, 2017; Stickels, 2007).

Cooperation requires that the probation officer balance their dual role while strengthening the supervision relationship (Epperson et al., 2020). However, when the probation officer defects from the supervision relationship, they are overbearing in their role of risk management (Peterson, 2017; Stickels, 2007). By focusing heavily on the role of law enforcement, probation officers fail to provide the much-needed resources for probationers to succeed, or they act too quickly and incarcerate a probationer before treatment can be successful.

Like the prisoner's dilemma, the probation game is complex in its application to real-life situations. Probation officers use their experience, knowledge of the law, and the history of the supervision relationship to determine their strategy for decision-making (Epperson et al., 2020; Stickels, 2007). During the extensive game, probation officers can begin to shift from an imperfect to perfect information game by identifying a probationer's behavior pattern that could be driven by addiction, trauma, or mental health concerns. The officer can then predict the probationer's strategy, actions, or motivations during the game when those certain behavior patterns emerge across time (Fink et al., 1998). As the supervision relationship strengthens, probation officers can also shift the game from incomplete to complete information when they understand a probationer's utility or expected payoff while on probation. The in-depth exploration of probation officer experience with decision-making in the probation game can offer insight into how probation supervision can be improved to meet probationers' needs and increase community safety.

Literature Review of Key Concepts

History of Probation

In the last few decades, the role of community corrections, or probation and parole supervision, has become a focus of corrections studies. The title of probation officer can be deceiving and, for many individuals, invokes a specific picture in their mind. A probation officer's job duties are not so easily defined depending upon the jurisdiction the officer is working in. It should be noted that every locality, state, and even country has different requirements for their probation officers. For the purposes of this study, probation is defined as any term of community supervision, pre or post-incarceration, that is observed through compliance with a predetermined set of rules monitored by a probation officer (Ricks et al., 2016). The one commonality for the role of probation officer is its progression and reform of job duties throughout history.

The modern idea of community corrections in the United States materializes at the turn of the 20th century (Phelps & Curry, 2017). A product of penal modernism, when society expected the state to take responsibility for reforming criminal behaviors (Phelps & Curry, 2017). Boston businessman John Augustus first argued that some individuals, chronic drunkards, are better reformed outside of the prison and safely monitored by trusted community bondsmen or volunteers (Phelps & Curry, 2017). The concept of reform and later rehabilitation has remained a core job expectation for probation officers to perform.

During the Progressive Era, again, correctional reform gave rise to the application of the scientific model for the community supervision position to become more

professional with the diagnosis and treatment of criminal offending (Phelps & Curry, 2017). Often, probation supervision was offered as an alternative to imprisonment starting in the early 1960s, but as prison populations began to rise, so to did community supervision. Some hypothesize that the mass expansion of incarceration expanded community control for mass supervision as a continued punishment (Phelps & Curry, 2017). Mass supervision was seen as a managerial model where the probation officer's duty was to moderate the risk of criminality rather than reform (Phelps & Curry, 2017).

Simultaneously, this era had a negative association between mass incarceration, mass supervision, and the deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities (Harcourt, 2006). Although there are varying explanations for why this occurred, one important consideration is the wider net of criminality cast by the criminal justice system that began to capture many individuals who have a mental illness (Harcourt, 2006). Regardless of the reasoning, the outcome is that probation officers were faced with supervising an increasing amount of probationers with mental illness. All probationers are subjected to a state-defined list of supervision conditions such as abstaining from drug or alcohol use, paying fines or costs, reporting to probation appointments, participating in identified programming, maintaining employment, and avoiding arrest. Based upon criminal history, crime type, or judicial decision, additional or special conditions may be added to the probationer's standard requirements. Non-compliance with these conditions can result in incarceration for violation of probation. The societal expectations for risk mitigation support the prospect of the probation officer's role to remain law enforcement focused.

In 2010, reforms again hit the criminal justice system, and a more evidence-based approach emerged. Many states have trained probation officers in the risk-needs-responsivity model to tailor a supervision plan to meet the probationer's individual needs (Ricks et al., 2016). This modernized view of probation supervision supports the original concepts of reform by offering probationers specific services to address the underlying causes of criminal behavior, known as criminogenic needs (Ricks et al., 2016). While also affording a mechanism for targeting probationers who are most at risk to reoffend and need more intensive monitoring to promote community safety. In this modern, evidence-based view of community corrections, many probation officers are left performing a balancing act between their probationer rehabilitation and risk management roles for community safety.

Current Probation Statistics. At the end of 2018, approximately 1 in 40 adults in the United States were under some form of correctional supervision (Maruschak & Minton, 2020). Nearly 7 in 10 individuals under correctional supervision were supervised in the community setting (Maruschak & Minton, 2020). Since 2008 there has been a steady decline in correctional populations; the decrease in the probation population accounts for 81% of that total decline (Maruschak & Minton, 2020).

According to data collected by the United States Justice Department, adults on probation during the 2017-2018 review period had the following characteristics (Kaeble & Alper, 2020). Males are three times more likely than females to be under probation supervision (Kaeble & Alper, 2020). Approximately one out of every two probationers reported their race/ethnicity as white (Kaeble & Alper, 2020). While one out of every

three probationers reported their race/ethnicity as Black, and one in eight probationers reported their race/ethnicity as Hispanic (Kaeble & Alper, 2020). Probation supervision consisted of 62% felony offenses and 36% misdemeanor offenses (Kaeble & Alper, 2020). The two most serious offenses handled on probation were property and drug offenses, followed closely by violent offenses (Kaeble & Alper, 2020).

By tracking the entries and exits off probation, data can show the administrative caseloads for individual probation agencies that provided data (Kaeble & Alper, 2020). Probation entries declined by 10%, and exits decreased by 7% in 2018 (Kaeble & Alper, 2020). These exits from probation include both satisfactory and unsatisfactory completion of probationary terms. For example, Virginia reported a January 1 probation population of 62,443 individuals, 31,631 entries onto probation, and 30,963 exits from probation, leaving a December 31 total population of 63,111 (Kaeble & Alper, 2020). Virginia reported a state recidivism rate of 23.4% in 2018, the lowest rate among the 43 states that publish their recidivism rates (Evaluation Unit, 2018).

Probation Officer's Dual Role

Ohlin, Piven, and Pappenfort made the initial identification of probation officer typologies in 1956 (Ricks & Eno Loudon, 2015). They offered the perspective that some officers emphasized punishment and others emphasized offender welfare (Ricks & Eno Loudon, 2015). Over time, these two typologies have evolved into probation officers who exercise authority in a law enforcement role and more supportive officers in a social worker/therapeutic role (Ricks & Eno Loudon, 2015). Studies have identified that law enforcement officers focused on utilizing supervision tools differently and do not

individualize techniques to meet the probationer's needs. Often these types of officers can place burdensome restrictions on probationers that lead to greater chances of rule violation (Ricks & Eno Louden, 2015). In contrast, officers with a social work typology may overlook problematic behaviors or grant exceptions in the hopes of supporting the probationer and not holding them accountable for their actions (Ricks & Eno Louden, 2015).

A balanced approach between the two typologies is frequently highlighted. This is necessary due to the overwhelming amount of discretion many probation officers have when performing their expected job duties. Researchers Ricks and Eno Louden (2015) worked to develop a tool to measure officer role orientation and how supervisory decisions are made. They utilized a quasi-experimental design to accomplish their goal. Participants were from community correction departments in the southwestern United States. Researchers offered two vignettes describing common probationer behaviors and instructed officers to select their most likely response from a set of seven options (Ricks & Eno Louden, 2015).

The outcome of this study noted that overwhelmingly most participants had a balanced or synthetic approach to probation supervision (Ricks & Eno Louden, 2015). This indicates that many probation officers see the benefits of utilizing both typologies to respond to initial probationer non-compliance. However, self-reported officer typology did best identify responses to instances of continued probationer non-compliance (Ricks & Eno Louden, 2015). Findings indicate that the self-reported typology affected officer

decision-making when probationers had multiple instances or continued instances of non-compliant behaviors.

Kita (2015) highlighted in her study of retired California parole agents the contradictory mandates between the roles of maintaining public safety and rehabilitating probationers. This leaves both the probationer and probation officer in a complex clinical dynamic guided by the rule of law and bound by societal expectations. A swinging pendulum metaphor often explains expectations for corrections; on one side is getting tough on crime, and the other is rehabilitation (Kita, 2015). A probation officer's role must always remain in the equilibrium position or dead center between the two concepts. She identified four themes from her qualitative interviews with parole agents that best highlight the experience officers have with dual role supervision.

The first theme centered on the targeted and critical aspects of risk management for all agents. Societal and correctional agency expectations of public safety are rooted in the historical belief that parolees must be monitored during the rehabilitation process to reduce the risk of reoffending. It is here that the primary purpose of public safety, risk management, and parolee control collides with the vision of reform, rehabilitation, and individual care. Placing each parole agent in a struggle between the dual mandates that are constantly pulling against each other. Leaving discretionary practices or decision-making to be conducted while holding the tension between each side (Kita, 2015). Many participants noted that public safety pressure during the rehabilitative process made actual rehabilitation difficult (Kita, 2015). The liability felt by the agents of being

notified one of their parolees had done something terrible or committed a high-profile crime creates anxieties around decision-making.

The second theme broadly included the participant's experience with secondary traumatic stress because of their dual role. Participants noted the emotional weight of the responsibilities and liabilities of their core job duties. They felt multiple sources of emotional intensity, such as the inability to intervene in situations even when others expected them to do so or witnessing the detrimental impact of the parole system on parolees (Kita, 2015). Participants detailed stories of:

a deadly high-speed chase, having to remove the noose from the neck of a suicidal person, learning that a parolee with whom they had experienced a close relationship had killed or raped someone, seeing the abject poverty in which many people on parole lived, having to enforce dehumanizing and undignified parole conditions, and reading countless police reports of violence crimes (p.15).

These experiences were not only witnessed but caused feelings of responsibility and concerns of liability. Participants noted the inability to rest, often working nights and weeks, being called by parolees in crisis, concerned citizens, family members, or local police officers to report crimes at all hours of the day (Kita, 2015). These participants depicted common experiences faced by individuals working in community corrections with rapidly expanding caseloads. Some can face long-term effects to their core beliefs and cognitive schemas due to their vicarious traumatization (Kita, 2015).

The third theme focused on participant strategies for coping with their job responsibilities and exposure to trauma. Many agents noted the importance of needing to wear multiple "hats" to accomplish all that is expected of them (Kita, 2015). Agents need to rapidly process various sources of information while conducting complex thinking and using discretion based on intuition to determine outcomes for each parolee they are managing while maintaining public safety for all. The casework surveillance continuum is an amalgamation of case factors, experience, and evidence-based assessments, to determine a balanced but realistic set of expectations during the supervision process (Kita, 2015). Some described the ability to use their "sixth sense" about a case when triaging immediate public safety needs while promoting lasting relationships with parolees that enhance long-term change (Kita, 2015). The knowledge and skills each agent develops help manage the traumatic stress they experience while being devoted to their dual role between care and control.

The final theme notes the organizational stress and constraints placed on agents by correctional management. The primary source of conflict for agents is majorly derived from the strain placed on them by their organization (Kita, 2015). Participants note the complex policies and practices promoted by administrators do not always align with the public's best interests or the parolees. Creating an even greater divide between the dual role agents are already struggling to accomplish. Participants noted that administrators often are the ones swinging the pendulum from care to control, leaving agents confused about the swift changes to societal priorities, again placing them in the middle of another struggle for equilibrium. For example, in an administration that is more control or risk-

focused, agents are expected to forgo rehabilitation measures, removed all of their carefully crafted "hats," and simply "lock'em up" (Kita, 2015). When agent's autonomy is limited, they are often left feeling unable to accomplish either role they are mandated to do.

These four themes together present the intricate combination that is dual role supervision. Every probation officer knows how delicate this balancing act can be, and the risks of getting it wrong are prevalent in their minds, while the reward of getting it right is what drives them to keep going. The concept of dual role supervision was selected for this study as the basis for understanding the job expectations for probation officer job duties. It incorporates the duality that modern probation officers must have to manage these two critical expectations.

Probationers with Mental Illness.

Research has shown that the dual role relationship in proper balance promotes better outcomes for probationers, specifically for probationers with mental illness (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). The customary role of a firm, fair, and consistent supervision relationship has progressed into a firm, fair, and caring supervision relationship (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). This change notes the importance of a dual role balance, emphasizing the need to refer or support probationers during the treatment process (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Researchers wanted to identify the key factors that lead to a strong dual role balance or positive therapeutic alliance.

It is important to understand that the court can mandate probationers to enter into treatment services and progress is to be monitored by probation officers (Gochyyev &

Skeem, 2019). It should be noted that a substantial portion of all individuals placed on probation supervision are legally mandated to participate in mental health services and substance abuse treatment (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Additionally, probation officers can rely on evidence-based assessments and experience to encourage probationers to attend a vast range of treatment services (Weaver et al., 2019). Once mandated or referred by a probation officer to participate in a treatment service, the officer has a secondary dual role in balancing care and control over treatment. The probationer can then face harsh consequences for not participating in treatment services.

A strong therapeutic alliance can predict participant outcomes (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). A traditional therapeutic alliance is provider client focused, where each individual is working towards the same therapeutic goal. When mandated to attend treatment services, that therapeutic alliance is altered, and each individual might not be as invested in the same therapeutic goals. Research has pointed out that relationships in mandated or assertive treatment often involve a greater need for control than those who voluntarily attend treatment services (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Weaver et al., 2019). Nonetheless, control and affiliation are independent dimensions (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Control can be applied in three manners, hostile, neutral, or affiliative; it is the manner of control that is the better predictor of treatment outcomes (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019).

Correctional agencies note that a higher dual role relationship can predict positive outcomes that reduce recidivism (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Weaver et al., 2019). Researchers pointed out that the three most important factors in predicting the dual role

relationship are caring-fairness, trust, and toughness (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). Staff who are warm, empathetic, respectful, and non-blaming are most effective in reducing recidivism (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). These traits are also important for probationers to feel secure in the therapeutic alliance and buy into the mental health treatment services offered.

Deinstitutionalization of persons with serious mental illness has led to a substantial rise in their overrepresentation in prison and probation populations (Epperson et al., 2014; Weaver et al., 2019). While it is known that a significant number of probationers have a serious mental illness, the management of those individuals is almost entirely left up to their probation officers (Epperson et al., 2014). Many researchers have represented the dichotomy of roles for probation officers on a supervision and treatment continuum that can operationalize the function of probation (Epperson et al., 2014). However, this depiction does not reflect the personal philosophy individual officers may have on managing individuals with a serious mental illness or the varying weight a particular officer may be inclined to give to each role when supervising this population.

In addition to the personal balance of duties, probation officers may also face specific expectations from their organizations on how to manage individuals with a serious mental illness. Some organizations have specialized mental health probation officers who have targeted education and training to address the unique needs of this population. While other organizations do not and often expect the traditional methods of probation supervision to address the needs of all probationers. Researchers have begun to explore the shifting of probation supervision from traditional surveillance methods to

more treatment service methods and how probation officers balance these competing needs when supervising a probationer with mental illness.

Epperson et al. (2014) conducted qualitative interviews with both specialized and traditional probation officers to explore (a) their beliefs on the relationship between crime and mental illness, (b) their understanding of the purpose for specialized and standard probation, and (c) their approaches to supervising probationers with serious mental illness. These researchers began with a perception that probation officers often function as a gatekeeper to help probationers with serious mental illness avoid repetitive or long terms of incarceration (Epperson et al., 2014).

Standard and specialized probation officers both held strong beliefs that there is not one simple reason why there is an overrepresentation of individuals with serious mental illness in the criminal justice system (Epperson et al., 2014). They both agreed that the demonstration of symptoms from serious mental illnesses within community settings is often the link to nuisance-type charges that can lead to a pattern of involvement with local authorities (Epperson et al., 2014). These beliefs from officers were noted that with proper treatment, diagnosis, and medications for each individual with a serious mental illness, the risk of criminal justice involvement is reduced.

In terms of co-occurring mental health and substance abuse, both standard and specialized probation officers identified illicit substance use as linking to increased criminality. However, specialized probation officers noted a direct link between substance use and mental illness as a means of self-medicating (Epperson et al., 2014). Standard probation officers' beliefs indicated less connection between mental illness,

substance use, and self-medicating versus a belief that the two issues were separate and substance use was more directly connected to criminal justice involvement (Epperson et al., 2014).

When questioned about their beliefs on environmental risk factors contributing to criminal justice involvement for individuals with serious mental illness, both types of officers agreed resource-poor or high-risk environments were related (Epperson et al., 2014). However, one key difference was noted between officers. Standard probation officers noted environmental factors on an individual level as concerning, for example, no high school education, criminal history, and unemployment (Epperson et al., 2014). Specialized probation officers, beliefs are more focused on the larger context or in conjunction with multi-factorial explanations (Epperson et al., 2014).

Researchers then asked participants about the purpose of the probation unit. Standard probation officers felt their purpose was to provide an alternative to jail or prison, promote public safety, and rehabilitate probationers (Epperson et al., 2014). As an alternative to incarceration, standard officers felt probationers were already given a chance to get themselves back on track, and the second change can not come at the expense of public safety (Epperson et al., 2014). Specialized officers discussed their purpose was beyond the conditions of supervision, to provide crisis intervention, medication compliance, community stabilization, and links to treatment services that promote lasting integration within the community setting (Epeprson et al., 2014).

Finally, participants were asked about the approaches they used to supervision, specifically the tools and tactics they used daily for probationers with mental illness. In

general, both specialized and standard officers utilized the same monitoring techniques, such as drug screens, motivation enhancement, rapport building, and incentives (Epperson et al., 2014). However, specialized officers identified the importance of balancing their dual roles as the complex heart of their job duties. For example, specialized officers monitor treatment from a hands-on approach, frequently speaking with treatment providers, ensuring attendance and progress is being made (Epperson et al., 2014). Standard officers monitor treatment from a hands-off approach, meaning they simply check for attendance or basic compliance with services (Epperson et al., 2014).

Specialized officers also note that discretion is one of the most consistently used tools to balance their dual roles. Standard officers feel they had limited discretion when determining when to violate a probationer (Epperson et al., 2014). Specialized officers often use multiple alternative measures or sanctions before issuing a violation for a probationer with mental illness (Epperson et al., 2014). The ability to use discretion allows specialized officers to build a stronger rapport with probationers, ultimately yielding a more successful term of supervision for a probationer with a serious mental illness.

Epperson et al. (2020) continued to discover the importance of the therapeutic relationship between probation officers and probationers with a serious mental illness. They found that a strong therapeutic relationship was essential to improving mental health and criminal justice outcomes (Epperson et al., 2020). During the development of a Brief Intervention to Promote Service Engagement (BIPSE), researchers had the opportunity to discuss the implications of a probation officer dual role on the therapeutic

relationship and probationer success. Probationers with a serious mental illness have unique and complex needs that strengthen a probation officer's need to engage in more of a therapeutic approach to supervision (Epperson et al., 2020). Researchers continued to identify a gap in understanding the capacity of probation officers' ability to meet the comprehensive legal and continuous treatment needs of probationers with a serious mental illness (Epperson et al., 2020). The purpose of this study was to identify probation officer-led intervention strategies that enhance the therapeutic relationship (Epperson et al., 2020).

In comparison, probationers with a serious mental illness have a greater risk of violating the terms or conditions of probation supervision. The symptoms of their disorders often cause a significant need for intensive treatment services while simultaneously increasing their criminogenic needs (Epperson et al., 2020). Researchers continue to find a positive link between specialized mental health probation officers and a higher quality of therapeutic relationship that can yield fewer violations than traditional probation officers. Research has shown that the sole reliance on traditional surveillance or risk methods are not effective for reducing criminal justice involvement for probationers with mental illness (Epperson et al., 2020). It has been noted that specialized mental health caseloads are more cost-effective and promote stronger public safety outcomes than conventional caseloads for probationers with a serious mental illness (Skeem et al., 2017; Skeem et al., 2018).

Researchers identified two key intervention components that target the development of a therapeutic relationship, engagement and shared decision-making.

Engagement is focused on the probation officer's ability to get the probationer to buy in to the probation process and treatment programming (Epperson et al., 2020). Strong engagement can be accomplished by building rapport, demonstrating respect, seeking feedback, focusing on immediate concerns, and clarifying probation expectations (Epperson et al., 2020). Shared decision-making presents a challenge to probation officers as inherently there is a power differential between officer and probationer. The process of shared decision-making requires that both parties have complete clarification of roles and expectations. Once that is accomplished, experienced officers can identify key opportunities where probationers can be empowered to express their preferences and weigh in on decisions being made (Epperson et al., 2020).

Feedback from active-duty probation officers working with specialized mental health caseloads expressed the biggest barrier to engagement and shared decision-making is the imbalance of their dual roles (Epperson et al., 2020). For example, many officer duties surround paperwork requirements, case supervision tasks, monitoring, and providing services linked to risk management that limited the ability to build stronger therapeutic relationships that promote rehabilitation (Epperson et al., 2020).

Again, research holds that an equal balance of roles between care and control promotes the best outcomes for probationers, especially probationers with a serious mental illness. Strong therapeutic relationships provide the best results for reducing continued criminal justice involvement, indicating a reduction in risk for public safety. However, the natural conflict between law enforcement requirements and therapeutic

case management needs causes probation officers to teeter between roles consistently.

The dual role imbalance is most often evident in probation officer decision-making.

Officer Decision Making

Probation officers operate with a significant amount of autonomy daily. Typically, officers supervise probationers with various methods that include monitoring whereabouts, drug screening, employment, housing, treatment compliance, and payment of financial obligations (Ricks et al., 2016). Probation officers are responsible for imposing stricter requirements or sanctions on probationers who do not comply with supervision conditions and reduce restrictions once compliance is gained (Ricks et al., 2016). The ultimate decision a probation officer must make is when to issue a violation for the probationer's non-compliant behavior resulting in immediate incarceration.

In the United States, many correctional agencies promote the risk-needs-responsivity (RNR) model to guide probation officers to identify the appropriate level of supervision that matches the probationer's level of risk to reoffend (Andrews et al., 1990). The RNR model notes that if specific criminogenic needs are targeted properly with interventions at the appropriate level of supervision, there should be a reduction in recidivism (Andrews et al., 1990). Previous research has concluded that the probation officers' attitudes toward the probationer and the RNR model can affect supervision. For example, suppose an officer perceives greater risk than is noted in the RNR model. That officer's perceptions can lead to stricter or higher levels of supervision which is equated with increased risk for revocation (Ricks et al., 2016). Additionally, if a focus on community safety more influences probation officers, they will likely stress their law

enforcement authority over probationers and rely on higher levels of supervision (Ricks et al., 2016). Probation officers who maintain a balance of roles are more successful in addressing non-compliance behavior and reducing probation violations (Ricks et al., 2016).

Ricks et al. (2016) conducted a study to determine three things (a) how officers make decisions based on risk, (b) how officer role emphases is associated with risk and decision making, and (c) how training on a risk assessment tool effects supervision decision making based on risk. The researchers utilized an experimental design with online surveys at an adult probation department in the southwestern United States. They had seventy officers complete pre and post-training surveys, with approximately a quarter of the probation officers noting they supervised a specialized caseload (Ricks et al., 2016).

They found that most officers did make decisions based on risk information; however, officers did tend to overestimate probationer's risk to reoffend (Ricks et al., 2016). Officers did adjust their intensity of supervision to match the level of risk, meaning they would indicate the need to meet more frequently with a high-risk probationer (Ricks et al., 2016). The researchers were unable to find a statistically significant difference between role emphasis on risk perceptions and supervision decision making (Ricks et al., 2016). Nonetheless, a critical finding was that officers who had more of a law enforcement view of their role were more likely to over supervise low-risk offenders (Ricks et al., 2016). Finally, researchers did find consistency in officer decisions to address non-compliant behaviors (Ricks et al., 2016). Agency best practices

and support of RNR were noted as reasons why probation officers were consistent in their outcomes for non-compliant behaviors. However, it was still pointed out that officer perception and role emphasis did affect some decision-making during probation supervision (Ricks et al., 2016).

Probationer with Mental Illness.

Eno Louden et al. (2018) focused their research on how the stigma of mental illness could affect probation officer perceptions of risk and decision-making. Researchers presented two vignettes of moderate-risk offenders. The primary difference between the two was that one probationer was described as having a mental illness, and the other did not (Eno Louden et al., 2018). Researchers found that probation officers did not overclassify probationers with mental illness at a higher risk due to their attitudes and beliefs (Eno Louden et al., 2018). However, officers did rate probationers with mental illness at a significantly higher risk for revocation and incurring new offenses than the probationer without mental illness (Eno Louden et al., 2018).

In this study, researchers also found that probation officers' attitudes about mental illness mostly did not affect risk assessment ratings or case management decisions (Eno Louden et al., 2018). Researchers noted that risk ratings did affect risk management decisions indicating that probationers received an appropriate level of supervision as characterized by their risk (Eno Louden et al., 2018). They found a small subset of officers who rated probationers with mental illness as high risk were more likely to issue violations than using recommended compliance strategies (Eno Louden et al., 2018).

These decisions to violate early and not use graduated sanctions are contraindicated for all probationers regardless of mental health status.

Finally, researchers focused on case management decisions as related to risk and mental health status. They found that high-risk probationers without mental illness were managed with intensive supervision styles (Eno Louden et al., 2018). However, high-risk probationers with mental illness were not given increased supervision but did receive more punitive outcomes (Eno Louden et al., 2018). Researchers only allowed probation officers to select one consequence for non-compliance on their surveys, thus limiting the officers' decision-making.

Matejkowski et al. (2018) measured community corrections officers' attitudes on Shared Decision Making (SDM) for their probationers with mental illness. SDM is a process between providers and consumers of health services that involves consensus building toward the preferred course of treatment (Matejkowski et al., 2018). This process can often result in better agreement between provider and consumer toward specific goals that are more meaningful to the consumer (Matejkowski et al., 2018). Before applying SDM to the community corrections setting, it should be noted that most probationers with mental illness are required to participate in mental health treatment, and they often have difficulties complying with those special treatment conditions (Matejkowski et al., 2018).

The implementation of SDM into community corrections has many positive outcomes. For example, SDM can help reduce recidivism, support community engagement, provide the needed mental health treatment for stability, and create fewer

instances of probationer treatment non-compliance (Matejkowski et al., 2018). The process of SDM embodies the fair, firm, and caring relationship necessary for officer dual role balance. However, in practice, SDM can be hindered by agency policies or officer concerns for public safety.

Participants in the study were active-duty community corrections officers who work directly with adults who have a serious mental illness but have since been released from supervision or administrators and supervisors who set policy regarding the management of probationers with serious mental illness (Matejkowski et al., 2018). Researchers administered a survey via email that was designed to identify attitudes toward SDM. Results show that participants favored the SDM process for working with probationers with mental illness (Matejkowski et al., 2018).

However, two factors must be present before the SDM process can be appropriately applied. First, the capacity factor, meaning officers must believe their probationer can actively participate in the SDM process regardless of their serious mental illness (Matejkowski et al., 2018). Second, confidence, agencies must ensure their officers have the knowledge base to understand serious mental illness and the importance of applying SDM (Matejkowski et al., 2018). Working with this population requires a specific skill set that administrators should look for at the moment of hiring and support through specific training during employment (Matejkowski et al., 2018).

Decision-making for probation officers is complex, especially when their dual role and the probationer's mental health status are considered. In building upon the previous literature, each noted component must be explored individually and in consort

with one another. One of the weaknesses pointed out by the prior research body on these concepts is the lack of knowledge gained from the individual experiences active duty probation officers have with them. This study aims to address that gap in understanding by seeking direct feedback from the probation officers on their decision-making process and the importance of their dual role balance.

Summary

Dual role supervision continues to be an elusive concept that only probation officers can describe. Their experiences with balancing a dual role are integral to understanding the success of probation supervision for all probationers (Kita, 2015; Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019). The art of symmetry probation officers achieve is only highlighted when the dual role becomes multifaceted to address the unique needs of probationers with mental illness (Epperson et al., 2014; Epperson et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2019). While balancing their role, probation officers face challenging decisions on how to respond to non-compliant behaviors. Considering the RNR model, officer attitudes, beliefs, probationer mental health status, and role emphasis are necessary to understanding how officer decisions are made (Eno Louden et al., 2018; Ricks et al., 2016). The current study begins to address the gaps in research by exploring the individual experiences active-duty probation officers have while supervising probationers with and without mental illness.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to provide a detailed understanding of probation officers' experiences with balancing their dual role when making decisions for probationers with a mental illness. Over 3.5 million people under community correction's supervision, a significant number of them have a serious mental illness (Epperson et al., 2014; Maruschak & Minton, 2020). There is a gap in understanding the personal experiences of active-duty probation officers with their dual role when decision-making for probationers with a mental illness (Eno Louden et al., 2018; Epperson et al., 2020; Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015; Matejkowski et al., 2018; Ricks et al., 2016). IPA was used to explore the innermost deliberation of active-duty officers' lived experiences with balancing a dual role and decision making for probationers with mental illness (Alase, 2017).

This chapter includes population and sampling methods used to provide an understanding of study participants that can impact the collected data. Interview questions were developed with mindfulness of content validity in order to ensure appropriate data collection and analysis. A discussion of potential bias and researcher influence during data collection and analysis is provided for transparency of the research process. Collective procedures and instrumentation are provided for future researchers to replicate the methodology. The chapter includes an in-depth review of issues involving trustworthiness and ethical practices used to address them when necessary. Chapter 3 concludes with a brief overview of the main points.

Research Design and Rationale

Two research questions guided this study:

RQ₁: What is the experience of probation officers' decision-making when balancing their dual role?

RQ₂: What experiences do probation officers' have with decision-making when balancing their dual role for probationers with mental illness?

Phenomenon of Study

The overall phenomenon explored was probation officer decision-making when balancing dual roles of probationer care and control (Epperson et al., 2020; Kita, 2015). Specifically, the study was focused on the balance of roles for officer decision-making when the probationer has a mental illness. Meeting this specific population's needs has become a grievous burden on the overtaxed community corrections system (Skeem et al., 2017; Skeem et al., 2018). Although the total number of individuals on community supervision has decreased, this special population remains over-represented among remaining probationers (Kaeble & Apler, 2020; Epperson et al., 2014). Meeting the needs of probationers with mental illness can decrease their risk of re-offending and create safer communities for all (Epperson et al., 2020).

The basic principles of game theory were used to understand officers' decision-making process in terms of the prisoner's dilemma. The interdependence of game theory applies seamlessly to probation supervision, creating an extensive game with incomplete and imperfect information (Dutta, 1999; Peterson, 2017; Stickels, 2007; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947). This involved highlighting the evolution of decision-making

processes probation officers experience throughout the term of probation supervision. Some probationers defect from probation and feel that a period of incarceration is a better payoff than following strict probation rules. Officers must respond to non-compliant behavior based on their evolving knowledge of probationers and individual or group goals. As probation continues, officers also understand probationers' needs, in terms of mental health status, housing instability, or financial struggles. Additional information is then added to the decision-making matrix to address how officers respond to future rule violations while balancing their dual roles.

Research Design

The nature of this study was exploratory, and the qualitative methodology was the most suitable approach. The qualitative design permitted me to discover how an individual makes meaning of phenomena under study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In qualitative research, inductive reasoning is used to connect themes from data analysis to larger themes involving phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In this study, there was no testing of a specific theory. Therefore, an explorative methodology was used for the research design as the purpose of this study was to explore probation officers' experiences with balancing a dual role while making decisions for probationers with a mental illness. The use of qualitative methodology allowed me to examine phenomena within the context of game theory. Research questions were exploratory and not comparative, descriptive, or relationship-based. Research questions were used to explore participants' experience with phenomena (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I directly interacted with the participants to gather in-depth information about their perception of

their dual role as probation officers and how that identity interacts with decision-making processes for probationers with a mental illness.

A quantitative methodology was considered to include a larger population and increase generalizability of results. However, this method did not align with the purpose of this study. This methodology would not allow for necessary in-depth exploration of probation officer experiences. At this time, there is no specific theory or previously established hypothesis regarding this phenomenon. Future research could involve using the quantitative method to determine if themes in this study are generalizable to larger population.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is used to investigate how participants make sense of their personal experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Jonathan Smith, a health psychologist from the United Kingdom, is credited for the origins of IPA (Miller et al., 2018). He wanted to develop a qualitative approach based on experience while honoring the varying roots of physiological disciplines (Miller et al., 2018). IPA is based on the assumptions that individuals are "self-interpreting beings" and they are "actively engaged in interpreting the events, objects, and people in their lives." (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). It incorporates fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). From phenomenology, IPA includes identifying essential components of phenomena that make experiences unique (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Researchers can then use eidetic reduction to determine the phenomena from participant experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA

contains the hermeneutic perspective to understand the participant's mindset and language that researchers use to interpret experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). With interpretative activities, researchers in IPA spotlight the how and why participants came to their sense of meaning (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Finally, IPA embraces idiography by focusing on the detailed case exploration of individual experiences and their context before making any generalizations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Thus, IPA involves taking individual experiences from participants to compare and contrast among studied populations to develop common themes about the phenomena (Miller et al., 2018).

IPA was selected for this study as it allowed me to explore how participants make sense of their individual experiences. This approach also encompasses game theory because it also applies to how meaning is established in the personal decision-making process. Probation officers have an essence, mindset, identity, and language that can shape their experiences into unique meanings (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The limited amount of research on this phenomenon and the complexity of probation officer decision-making lead to selecting IPA as the most appropriate research method to achieve this study's purpose. The use of semistructured interviews allows the research to engage participants on their lived experiences while remaining consistent across the sample of individuals (Miller et al., 2018). Previous research has indicated that how probation officers balance their dual role can affect the outcome of supervision, specifically for probationers with a mental illness (Eno Louden et al., 2018; Epperson et al., 2014; Epperson et al., 2020; Epperson et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2020; Gochyyev &

Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015; Ricks & Eno Louden, 2015). However, this study aimed to address the gap in knowledge on how probation officers dual role experiences possibly create a collective lived experience when decision-making for probationers with mental illness.

Other types of qualitative research designs were considered for this study, such as ethnography and grounded theory. Ethnography was discounted as it focused on the social group but did not include the exploration of individual lived experiences necessary for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Grounded theory was dismissed as it was too rigid in its goal to develop an explanatory theory of the social process (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The purpose of this study did not focus on the causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions of probation officer decision-making for probationers with mental illness (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). At this stage of study, a deeper understanding of the individual lived experience is needed before an explanatory theory can be developed; however, it is suggested that future research in this area consider using grounded theory.

An IPA approach allowed me to explore multiple roles, relationships and identify themes related to power dynamics, which are underlying experiences encompassed within this study (Miller et al., 2018). Probation officers have shared experiences because they all are charged with executing similar duties in similar situations; however, they all have unique backgrounds, experience, knowledge, and probationer interactions that can impact how they assign meaning to those experiences (Alase, 2017). IPA was chosen as it gave me the ability to explore, investigate, and interpret probation officers' lived

experiences of decision-making for probationers with mental illness, which aligns most closely with the purpose of this study (Alase, 2017).

Role of the Researcher

I collected, coded, analyzed the data, and noted important themes from the self-disclosed experiences of participants as expected in an IPA style of research (Alase, 2017). I had an active role in conducting interviews and engaging one-on-one with participants professionally. A semistructured interview was utilized so I could ask additional follow-up questions to gain a further understanding of their experiences (Alase, 2017). A rapport was established to facilitate strong participant engagement at the beginning of each interview, creating a trusting and honest environment for participants to engage (Alase, 2017).

I sought participants who had limited to no prior relationship with me. While participants should have no relationship with me, I am a probation officer currently working with a specialized gang population but have previous experience as an officer assigned to a mental health caseload. Careful selection of participants restricted concerns of perspective between my role of the researcher and my role of probation officer. Participants were sought outside the district with which I currently work to restrict concerns of dual relationship influence during the data collection process.

During the data analysis, I needed to be aware of any potential implicit bias and experiences so they could be set aside to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences (Alase, 2017). One possible bias I faced is prior knowledge of the in-depth challenges faced by probation officers who supervise probationers with mental illness. I

have specific past experience with the complexity of balancing dual roles while supervising a special population of probationers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I listened to the participants' experiences to fully empathize with their lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I also recognized that personal experiences can shape the research experience and how meaning can be assigned to the unique essence of the participant responses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I do hold a personal value that to be successful as a probation officer and produce the best results for a probationer and the community, the officer must always maintain a structured balance between the role of law enforcement and the role of counselor. I consistently reviewed and rechecked for any possible bias and how it could impact the analysis process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Extra attention was given to my reflexivity and how that shaped the interpretation of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I kept a reflection journal and made detailed notes and memos during the study to monitor this.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Population.

The population of interest was active-duty probation officers who have successfully completed all necessary introductory training and have been employed for more than two years in the position. The sample participants included all genders, ages, and ethnicities of probation officers who reside in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Sampling method.

The selected sampling method was purposeful, as it is the recommended sampling method for IPA (Alase, 2017). This means the sample is chosen based upon participant characteristics that reflect the population of interest and the purpose of the study (Alase, 2017). I sought to have a homogeneous sample to better gauge the overall perceptions of participants' lived experiences (Alase, 2017). This sampling method resulted in an analysis rich and descriptively deep as expected with an IPA approach (Alase, 2017). The recruitment process was convenience sampling, a non-randomized sampling method in which participants are selected based upon the access of location (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The Institutional Review Board at Walden University approved, and formal recruitment began. Participants were recruited through a professional organization for probation officers in Virginia. An email was sent to chief probation officers requesting permission to seek participants in their jurisdiction for this study. Once approved by the chief, a secondary email was sent to requesting active-duty probation officers, as members of the professional organization, consider participating in the study. All interested participants were screened to ensure the sample reflects the population of interest.

Participants.

IPA requires a small sample size to provide the necessary detailed analysis of participant responses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It is recommended that between six and eight participants be selected for an IPA study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Based upon these guidelines, this study had six participants that provided similar experiences

for me to explore. Recruitment was not restricted to any specific locations or community corrections division to better diversify the demographics of participants. It should be noted that participation was completely voluntary, and I can not ensure equal representation across demographics. However, the sampling method and recruitment process was designed to locate the most comprehensive group of participants that best suits this study's purpose.

Participants' inclusion criteria include active-duty probation officers with direct powers of arrest, who have completed all entry-level job training, and more than two years of on-the-job experience. No vulnerable populations are recruited for this study; therefore, no prescreening for vulnerable information is required. Only basic demographic information was needed to ensure participants meet inclusion criteria.

Instrumentation

The instrument for this study was researcher-developed. Alase (2017) recommended using two main questions with approximately eight subquestions focused on uncovering what I wanted to explore. This format was the guideline used for the development of the interview questions. Each interview was conducted with safety protocols that followed guidance on interactions during the pandemic. While face-to-face interviews were preferred, participants were offered the additional options of participating via video or telephone to meet their comfortability levels of interaction. I has extensive knowledge of professional interviewing and thus monitored how the interview process affected the participant to ensure ethical interview practices were employed (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Participant confidentiality was considered throughout the data collection process. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a neutral, calm environment to ensure each participant had a high comfort level throughout the process (Alase, 2017). If alternative interview methods were requested by the participant, such as video or telephone interviews, I again sought a time and private location that supported the participant's comfortability levels throughout the process (Alase, 2017). Regardless of the interview method used, I made certain a strong rapport was established with each participant as it is essential to the IPA method of data collection (Alase, 2017).

I consulted probation professionals during the question development process to ensure the language utilized targeted the two research questions. The focus of the interview was to elicit participant views and opinions on the phenomena being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each interview was audio-recorded and a verbatim transcript produced as recommended by the IPA approach (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Following each interview, participants were debriefed, and time was allotted to process their experience. Validity was monitored through multiple procedures. Member checking was used to offer participants the opportunity to comment on the accuracy of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I also employed rich, thick descriptions of the research setting to convey the interview findings and add to their validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis Plan

The IPA's data analysis process is not regimented as the process is seen as individualized to the researcher and their research method. IPA seeks to give evidence to

the participant's understanding of the phenomena while documenting the researcher's understanding of the phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It is recommended that researchers totally immerse themselves in the data and try to stand in the participant's shoes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher is advised to be flexible and creative in their thinking about the data and its meaning while following the guidelines of qualitative data analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The representation of this process was like peeling individual layers of an onion and then putting it back together (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The suggested steps allowed for data to be analyzed from specific to general with multiple levels of analysis while remaining rooted in the particular examples from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

I transcribed the interviews then re-read and listened to them multiple times during the initial steps (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Additionally, any field notes, memos, and my reflection journal were reviewed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There was a focus on content, specific language use, context, distinctive phrases, and emotional responses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The next step was to review the data and reflect on its overall meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During this process, I also looked for clarity of the data (Alase, 2017). Then I began coding the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A transition was made in focus; here, my notes guided the formulation of codes into concise phrases representing a higher generalization that is referred to as a more psychological conceptualization (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As themes emerged, I made connections between them that grouped together conceptual similarities; some themes were removed or reconsidered as they did

not meet the overall structure of the study's outcomes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Once completed, I finalized themes that best described the study's detailed findings that were directly connected to the content provided by the interview participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Coding Process.

For this study, in accordance with IPA guidance, coding was conducted by hand. IPA's coding process is focused on identifying themes that related specifically to how the participants interpreted and made meaning of their experiences with the phenomena (Alase, 2017). The expected process for coding included transcription of data, review data through immersion, identification of codes, and development of themes (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

In practice, I began by highlighting content, phrases, or language that produced a clear expression of the participant's experience or emotional response to the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Detailed notes were taken to ensure my thoughts and understanding of these highlighted phrases were recorded as well. Next, simple codes were developed from these key findings that connected content into larger overviews of the phenomenon. Again, the initial transcripts were reviewed in a new highlighted color to identify any additional responses related to the codes. These steps were completed multiple times until I gained clarity and accuracy of the data. As patterns emerged, themes emerged and helped organize data into generalizations or clusters of understanding about the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Here, the data was again reviewed, focusing on the noted themes; specific short phrases from the transcripts

were recorded, highlighted, and identified by a line number to be used as illustrations of the outcomes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The subjective nature of qualitative data results in a higher possibility of variability across identified themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, specific techniques are recommended to improve the trustworthiness of the data through credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility is focused on the data being accurate and believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two primary techniques were used to increase the credibility of this study.

Prolonged exposure is a technique that involved spending time with the participants to produce an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation is a technique that consists of using varying data points on the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, multiple participants were used to triangulate data.

Transferability is the ability to apply the study's outcome to other settings or contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Obtaining thick descriptions of the data is a technique that provides a realistic or rich understanding of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I addressed transferability through rich descriptions with large quantities of interview data that increased the authenticity of the data (Alase, 2017).

Dependability is the quality of the study's methodology of collecting the data, interpreting findings, and reporting results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The technique of presenting negative or discrepant information was used to increase the dependability of

this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This means I reported any data that ran counter to the identified themes as some participant perspectives did not perfectly align with others (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, as stated above, thick descriptions were used throughout this study to increase dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability is similar to dependability as it focuses on the accuracy of my interpretation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One technique used to address this is my self-reflection on bias to create an open and honest narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, a reflection journal was used to explore any possible bias that could have influence the researcher's interpretation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of probation officers' experience with balancing their dual role when making decisions for probationers with a mental illness. The methodology selected was IPA as it allowed for detailed descriptions of participant experiences to be explored. Research methods were presented in a manner focused on producing transparency and replication. This was attained primarily through understanding, acknowledging, and setting aside potential bias throughout the research process. The sampling method was purposeful and invoved targeting participants who provided experiences as probation officers balancing a dual role while decision making for probationers with a mental illness. Data were collected, recorded, and transcribed for coding and analyzed using IPA. Issues of trustworthiness were discussed and addressed using recommended techniques. Ethical considerations were reviewed and employed throughout this process to ensure standards were met.

Chapter 4: Results

Probationers with mental illnesses make up a significant majority of individuals under community corrections supervision (Epperson et al., 2014; Maruschak & Minton, 2020). Although the total number of individuals on community supervision has declined, this specialized population continues to be over-represented, which has placed a considerable burden on an already overtaxed system (Epperson et al., 2014; Kaeble & Apler, 2020; Skeem et al., 2017; Skeem et al., 2018). This study was focused on understanding personal experiences of probation officers who balance their dual role of care and control when making decisions for those probationers with mental illness. A gap in the literature has indicated a specific lack of understanding of the personal experiences of active-duty probation officers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness (see Eno Loudon et al., 2018; Epperson et al., 2020; Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015; Matejkowski et al., 2018; Ricks et al., 2016).

Game theory was the framework for exploring lived experiences of probation officer decision-making while balancing their dual role for probationers with mental illness. Two research questions guided this study.

RQ₁: What is the experience of probation officers' decision-making when balancing their dual role?

RQ₂: What experiences do probation officers' have with decision-making when balancing their dual role for probationers with mental illness?

This chapter includes setting and participant demographics as well as data collection and analysis methods. Evidence for data trustworthiness is reviewed, followed by a presentation of study results.

Setting

Due to the pandemic, participants were offered two ways to complete their interviews, face-to-face or virtually. Two of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private office that was publicly available, as agreed with each participant. The space was not overly large but spacious enough for social distancing, as discussed with each participant. During interviews, there were no interruptions. However, upon review of audio recordings, it was discovered that the air-conditioning unit was very loud when it turned on and off during recordings. This did not seem to distract participants or me during the in-person interviews. The remaining four interviews were conducted virtually over the telephone in a private setting as agreed with each participant. There were no interruptions during these four interviews. I occasionally noted some background noises in a few interviews, but they did not seem to affect the overall positive rapport that was developed with participants. No known external factors could have influenced or impacted participants during interviews, as I did not offer any incentive for their participation.

Demographics

A total of six active-duty probation officers participated in this study. All participants met minimum qualifications for participation; they had direct powers of arrest, completed all introductory probation officer training, and were employed for over

2 years as a probation officer. All genders and ethnicities of probation officers were included in this study, and no formal demographic details were collected. However, when questioned about meeting the minimum qualification for participation, it was discovered that the years of service for participants ranged from just over 2 to 15 years. Participant responses indicated that many participants had worked with varying types of caseloads, including general and specialized. All participants had significant experience with probationers with mental illness regardless of their current caseload type.

Data Collection

Before data collection, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (05-31-22-0986204) was granted for this study. Each of the six participants returned the informed consent form before I conducted semi-structured interviews. Then, each face-to-face or virtual interview was audio recorded in the same manner. The average interview lasted 40 minutes but was scheduled for 90 minutes. I followed the semi-structured interview format described in Chapter 3 by asking one main question and two subquestions. However, as expected in IPA, additional follow-up questions were sometimes asked when seeking an in-depth understanding of participant experiences. This process allowed interviews to remain consistent, but I ensured participants' essence, language, mindset, and unique meanings were accurately captured. Each participant provided direct answers when specifically asked about their own experiences but took a significant amount of time and provided detailed stories about their experiences with probationers. This pattern of responding is consistent with previous studies that have noted the tension held between the dual role probation officers must face daily (Kita, 2015). Compared to the scheduled

length, the shorter average for interviews did not produce a shortage of context when evaluating probation officer experiences.

After each interview, participants were reminded about available mental health resources listed on the informed consent form if they felt any discomfort due to participating in the study. I also used the member checking process and informed participants they would receive an emailed interview transcript. Each participant was emailed a copy of their transcript; however, only three participants responded. Participants who responded to the member checking email all stated the transcript accurately captured their experiences. There were no discrepancies between the data collection process and the outlined description provided in Chapter 3.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed IPA guidelines, as noted in Chapter 3. The audio recording from each interview was transcribed by me and printed for review. Transcripts were then reviewed individually, multiple times, to begin immersion into the data. During this process, a reflection journal was used to ensure researcher bias or beliefs were not influencing understanding of participant lived experiences. This initial stage of the review was completed for the purpose of establishing codes. During the initial phase of reflection, the ink color green was used for noting keywords as a starting point for code development; a list was made with all keywords. From this list of keywords, specific ink colors were used to establish codes. As this process was conducted several times, initial codes were sometimes modified to better reflect emerging themes.

Once each individual data set was coded, another list was made to begin theme development. It was organized and assessed for similarities and differences between participant responses. The data produced three primary themes and five subthemes (see Table 2). After collecting all data and completing the analysis process, participants met saturation requirements.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

| Themes | Subthemes |
|--|--|
| Shifting expectations affect probation officers' ability to balance their dual roles. | -Stringent agency requirements -Larger caseloads |
| Officers experience internal barriers when decision-making for probationers. | -Decision-making under specific constraints -Experience helps focus decision-making |
| Officers experience external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. | -Public safety, a secondary dual role |

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data were established as evidence of trustworthiness. To establish credibility, prolonged exposure was utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the interview phase, a rapport was created with the participants to ensure an in-depth understanding of their experiences.

Triangulation was used to ensure that multiple participant experiences were gained to achieve data saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Member checking was also used to ensure participant responses were accurate and that the data reflected their personal experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was

addressed with rich and thick descriptions of the data gathered during the interviews. Utilizing thick descriptions increases the authenticity of the data and is represented by direct participant quotes for readers to examine (Alase, 2017). Dependability was detailed in the strict following of methodology as outlined in Chapter 3. This process allows other researchers to review the data collection process and identify any negative or discrepant information between participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The detailed thick descriptions increase the dependability when combined with a clear representation of discrepant participant experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, conformability was monitored using a researcher reflection journal (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The reflection journal was used following each interview, transcription, and through the multiple levels of data analysis to ensure an open and honest narrative free from bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

This study aimed to explore probation officers' experiences with balancing their dual role of decision-making for probationers with mental illness. Two face-to-face and four virtual semi-structured interviews were completed and audio recorded. The average length of the interviews conducted was approximately 40 minutes. The interview questions were researcher developed and designed to investigate these two research questions:

RQ₁: What is the experience of probation officers' decision-making when balancing their dual role?

RQ₂: What experiences do probation officers' have with decision-making when balancing their dual role for probationers with mental illness?

At the completion of the data analysis process, three major themes were developed: shifting expectations affect probation officers' ability to balance their dual roles, officers experience internal barriers when decision-making for probationers and officers experience external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. These themes were present across all participant responses in some manner. Five subthemes were developed from those themes: stringent agency requirements, larger caseloads, decision-making under specific constraints, experience helps focus decision-making, and public safety, a secondary dual role. There were no major discrepancies noted in this data set. The information presented here adds to the current body of literature on this topic because it provides the perspective of active duty probation officers to report their experiences in real-time.

Theme 1: Shifting expectations affect probation officers' ability to balance their dual roles

These participants all indicated that they took on the role of a probation officer because they were driven to help others. However, they were a bit surprised by all of the duties they were assigned to complete and the dual roles that they needed to balance. P1023 described a typical month for probation officers, "you have 20 working days in a month, and every PO spent three days in court; now you are down to 17. We spend another day doing meetings; now you are down to 16 days. You spend another day doing training, and now you have 15 days. You have three reports to write, and now you are

down to 12- 10 days to manage a caseload of 100 people. All that time chips away at your time from being able to work with your clients."

A few participants started their job expecting some level of balance between the roles of law enforcement and being a counselor. When asked about their experience with probation officer duties, many participants described their expectations coming from society, the agency, themselves, and the community. P208 responded, "you know, there are always society expectations you see in movies and stuff like that." The participant continued describing agency expectations as "using graduated sanctions and trying to meet people where they are." P186 noted personal expectations as a "real law enforcement driven position." The participant also felt there was a "social work component to it almost; you are connecting people with services." However, most participants did not fully grasp the level of expectations others would place on them as probation officers.

In looking at, what would be expected of them in the role of law enforcement, most participants had a clear vision of what that would be. P125 stated, "I expected that it would be a lot of contact, a lot of check-ins or check-ups with them, holding them accountable to what they required to do with probation." However, many lacked a full comprehension of how much more work the role of counselor would include. P55 noted unexpected casework duties that included "reading court orders, putting the information in the system, finding resources, building community relationships, building relationships with probationer's family and actually documenting the work you do."

The most telling example of understanding the balance of an officer's dual role is that multiple participants indicated that you had to be in your role for approximately two years to understand the fundamentals of your job. P208 stated, "To the point that I was comfortable, it was probably about two years in." These participants, with a vast range of prior work experience, different stages of life, and varying educational backgrounds, all agreed that the essence of a probation officer could not just be trained from a book. P125 said, "there's no black and white; it's so much gray area in everything you do."

Subtheme 1.1: Stringent Agency Requirements.

The most pervasive topic that emerged throughout all the interviews is that probation officer experiences include more balancing acts between expectations than their dual role mandates. Participant experiences indicated the balance between their dual roles could only be possible with the counterbalance of all other job expectations, including sometimes failing at one expectation to achieve success in another. P55 stated, "expectations are being passed down, and things that we need to do or we need this training done, sent to me today, and you need to get it done by the end of the week. It makes it hard to focus on your people and supervising them, ensuring you're providing support and accountability at the same time." This participant continued, "There's a lot being thrown at probation officers every day with policy changes and implementation of new programs." Many participants noted that agencies had high expectations for how interactions with probationers were documented. Participants indicated that one contact with a probationer often resulted in double that time in documentation. P1023 stated, "30

minutes to put my log notes in to make sure I am doing everything that they want, spending 30 minutes doing all that for a 15-minute contact. Those things are frustrating."

Subtheme 1.2: Large Caseloads.

The most challenging expectation probation officers experienced was maintaining these standards when there were extremely high caseloads. High caseload numbers can result from many things; participants commonly noted high caseloads due to the level or type of supervision, the size of the probation district, and probation officer turnover. P186 said, "Our caseloads were just enormous. I guess some people might slip through the cracks almost. General supervision caseloads are like 170." While P208 stated, "Smaller districts, you have caseloads of 70 or 80; bigger districts, we have 140." When looking at agency requirements, the participant continued, " You know, it can just be unrealistic because they kinda do the training with just one client, and you know that is three hours worth of work with one client, but you have 20 people scheduled for one day to try to meet all of your deadlines."

Each participant expressed exasperation over the feeling that they wanted to help every probationer but were often unable to do so based upon the larger number of people they were expected to supervise. A secondary cause for larger caseloads was due to officer turnover. P208 indicated, "Another barrier could be staffing because obviously with more vacancies, people have more clients and less time to devote to the client." Turnover presented participants with a significant challenge as they were often asked to take on extra probationers to supervise. However, once the vacancy was filled, the new officer would also require assistance with training and understanding of their new role.

Again, most participants felt it takes approximately two years of experience to fully understand the core responsibilities of being a probation officer. This would leave the more experienced officers with a larger caseload for a significant time. P208 gave an example of staffing issues "We had 12 vacancies in April, and now we have four. People keep leaving."

Theme 2: Officers experience internal barriers when decision-making for probationers.

Many participants identified the experience of internal emotional consequences of their decision-making when taking the time to break down their decision-making process. P125 stated,

"I know that when I arrest someone, I am changing so many aspects of not only their lives but their family's lives, and when I go before the court, and I testify against somebody knowing that they are about to sit in jail for a long time, they are going to lose their job, they might lose family support, they might lose housing, or even just arresting someone and knowing that like they are not going to have their ID on them their phone is going to get taken away, someone's going to steal like their bike that they use, I guess those are the things that kind of things that weighed on me a little bit more."

All participants echoed the internal struggle with decision-making when looking at the vast ramifications for the probationer, their families, and the communities around them.

P1023 remembered the first time issuing a warrant for someone's arrest, "I found it fairly

upsetting, you know, here I am depriving someone of their freedom." Four participants specifically identified the emotion of guilt when performing this aspect of their required job duties. P208 stated, "I did have more difficulty with it cause sometimes I would feel guilty 'cuase you would see that these people were trying, but they were just kind of falling short, and it's just unfortunate that when some people get to a certain point, you don't really have a choice you know, you would rather know that their safe and that their loved ones are safe." Most participants also noted the collateral consequences of placing a probationer in jail. P125 stated, "they are going to be losing their job because of this, and I know how hard they worked to get that job."

When decision-making with their cases, participants illustrated the complexity of their dual role balance. P55 felt "sometimes it is tuff with what to tell the court and what not to tell the court; in what we can handle in house." The participant reiterated, "Basically, if you violate a piece of your probation, sure, I should send you back to court. But the other side of me wants to dig and figure out the why. In hopes that if we dig in and figure out the why, then the likelihood of you violating your supervision again decreases." Some participants also noted that following a court intervention, an important component of decision-making is that the probationer is likely to return to supervision and, most often, to the same supervising officer. P208 described, "Unfortunately, it can diminish your relationship with the probationer. You know a lot of people will be coming back out and right back onto your caseload." The participant continued, "we are here to help, but we sent you to jail, so they will no longer see us as help anymore."

P55 illustrated the difficult process many probation officers face when determining what to do with a probationer, "where the courts getting notified that's because I have exhausted all options that are available to me and then my hands get tied and that point the court needs to have some intervention in this." When faced with the critical decision of when to issue a warrant for a probationer, each participant provided a clear list of items they considered. In total, twenty-nine different groups of criteria were provided as a basis for probation officer decision-making. On average, each participant provided eight specific items they considered before issuing a warrant based on a probationer's behavior. For example, P23 provided the following category list: (a) the previous offense, (b) the nature of the information, (c) violent or non-violent, (d) harm to others, (e) harm to probationer, (f) community safety, (g) balance of community and individual safety, and (h) treatment status. In comparison, P186 provided the following category list: (a) type of crime, (b) type of drug, (c) risk of overdose, (d) personal history, (e) history of absconding, and (f) supervision history. Of all the criteria provided, participants made it clear that one single source of information was insufficient to make an ethical decision for arrest.

Although each participant provided a specific list of criteria, every list changed depending on the probationer's situation. Each officer appeared to display a unique decision matrix based on the individual probationer they were addressing. P23 explained, "this is going to sound terrible, but you know it depends on the person. You know, like some people you want to save and others you see the handwriting on the wall that they're not going to make it." Many participants expressed concern over their internal battle to

make the right decisions for each probationer case. No matter the officer or probationer's barriers, every decision is carefully made. This participant noted, "if I am unsure, I go to get some insight from someone else. Usually, more than one person. So I may go to a supervisor, but I may also go to just a regular old coworker."

The decision-making process for probation officers is a critical component of their success and the success of their probationers. P55 notes, "if you know they go out and commit a heinous felony in the community, well, that is when, unfortunately, support has to go out the door to intervene at that time for their safety and for the public safety." Participants all indicated that an arrest is often not only the least preferable option, but it is driven for one specific purpose: safety. At this moment, the balance between officers' dual roles is shifted to the law enforcement side. P208 responded, "So once I am at the point that I am contemplating sending them to jail or not, I am a lot more law enforcement focused at that point, I am thinking public safety, and I am thinking the safety of that individual." Ultimately, the ability to make a decision at a rapid pace and within a short amount of time maintains public safety for all.

Subtheme 2.1: Decision-making Under Specific Constraints.

Many participants made a note of particular restrictions on their decision-making abilities. Four participants specifically addressed a decision-making constraint in the form of zero-tolerance policies. P55 stated, "Some courts may order down there is a zero tolerance for alcohol or drugs the probation office has the expectation that on one positive they are to be you know either arrested or violated on that." For participants who identified zero-tolerance policies as a restriction on their decision-making, it was the limit

on their ability to help that most affected them. The participant continued, " which is hard for me sometimes, you know, because I want to try to if they haven't had the opportunity for treatment to give them that opportunity."

Additionally, four participants noted agency restrictions on their decision-making abilities. P186 described this constraint, "somebody might be on a certain level who has a lot of needs, you know, but because they're in a low level, maybe you don't see them as much or because of protocols like it says you need to see this person six times per month the other person is seen once every month. You know what I mean? You had to balance doing what the state's asking of us." The participant continued, "So you are doing your six contacts, kind of checking off boxes that could be a barrier just trying to maintain the balance of some things." Again, officers note that the limit in their ability to help probationers with high needs due to agency expectations had the greatest effect.

Many of these officers alluded to guilt at not being able to help every probationer on their caseload as they felt they should be able to. Officers felt constraints from the high number of probationers placed on their caseload and the lack of time to complete expected duties. P125 noted, "Well, there are a lot of clients, and there is only one of me." The participant continued, "I guess the biggest barrier is time and caseload." Participants continued to show in their decision-making that they lead first with their drive to help others, an internal force noted by every participant.

Subtheme 2.2: Experience Helps Focus Decision-Making.

When comparing the newest probation officer's response to decision-making and the longest-serving probation officer's response to decision-making, a clear distinction

was noted in the ability to balance their dual role. P125, who had the least years of experience, stated, "there's no black and white it's so much gray area and everything you do like there's different sanctions that you can do, and different ways to handle it and no case is exactly the same. There is no textbook answer for any of those cases." The participant continued, "For supervision, everyone you supervise slightly different because of their risk factors are going to be slightly different." P125 provided this depiction of supervision decision-making,

" these people you've formed bonds with, and you know they have, they have told you all of their trauma, they have cried in front of you about things that they've gone through, and you have celebrated their successes when they do really well when they stop using drugs or when they get a job. You formed this professional bond, and it is hard sometimes to then switch and put on a law-enforcement cap and be like but you are getting arrested today, but you're going to court because you are investing in their success and failure."

This participant also noted, "day-to-day, you are always having to think critically about it; it is not a simple yes or no." P125 said, "I guess a barrier could be that there is no right answer, you know, it's always kind of subjective of what you should or could allow them to do."

In following the progress of experience, officers who had over five years identified that although you may have a plan for a probationer on supervision, being able to quickly alter your decision matrix is necessary. P55 responded, " it could be someone

who is just released on supervision, and then two weeks later, they go out and commit a serious felony that would require court notification and intervention; you have to skip all the steps of what we're here to try to do. Because of a concern for the safety of others at that time, and that they need to be off the street." During this middle progression of experience, participants began to focus more on the importance of decision-making with their dual role balance. P186 felt, "I guess work with somebody being empathetic give them a chance, give somebody chances not just lock them up immediately." The participant continued, "have some flexibility work with a person, but in the same side you have to be able to hold a person accountable I think it's important to have that balance."

When asked about decision-making, P1023, who had the longest years of experience, responded, "Is it beyond a reasonable doubt that they're in violation of their probation, that would be one. Two, are they a risk to the public safety or to themselves. Three, is there any other options to minimize these risks and address them in the community." This officer also fully grasped the importance of decision-making when balancing their dual role. The participant stated, "If I had to break it down, I would say 15% law enforcement, 85% coach." The participant continued, "The challenge would be I want to be 100% sure I am doing the right thing if I am going to lock someone up." This response indicates that with more years of experience, the ability to make decisions becomes highly focused.

Probation officers who develop the longevity to stay in the position must first identify that they have a dual role. After learning the basics of the job, they then shift to learning how to balance that role, specifically when making decisions for probationers.

However, once they are truly experienced on the job, they focus on decision-making in the context of the bigger picture. P1023 ends with, "am I making the correct one, the correct decision based on policy, but also the morally correct decision as well."

Theme 3: Officers experience external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness.

For all participants, the knowledge of a mental illness or even suspecting the possibility of a mental illness did change how decisions were made for a probationer's case. When asked how a probationer's mental health status affects decision-making, P23 noted, "Oh, a lot; it affects, I would say, 95%." All participants clearly understand their role as a supporting connector to treatment services. Once the need for treatment is identified and the willingness to participate in treatment is gained, it is often the burden for the officer to find the resources that best fit the probationers' needs. This case caused severe problems as five participants noted the lack of available mental health resources as the biggest barrier to their job. P1023 stated, "we have no other option, for now, he is in jail." Only one participant indicated that resources were readily available for their probationers' needs. P125 explained, " You shouldn't lock someone up due to their mental health. You obviously have other approaches you can take before then; if they continue to put themselves and others at risk without those resources, then yes, like an arrest is warranted."

When participants were asked about decision-making for probationers with mental illness, eighteen different criteria were provided. On average, each participant provided five specific items they considered before issuing a warrant based on a

probationer's behavior. For example, P186 provided the following category list: (a) danger to themselves, (b) danger to others, (c) medication compliance, (d) treatment status, and (e) treatment participation. In comparison, P125 provided the following category list: (a) knowledge of mental health status, (b) treatment options available, and (c) community referrals. Of all the criteria provided, participants again made it clear that one single source of information was insufficient to make an ethical decision for arrest.

Participants added that for probationers with mental illness, external factors played a significant role in their decision-making. Most participants noted the reliance on others to help officers make decisions for this population. P23 stated, " We are not the experts in certain things; we're the expert in probation. And being that middle person between the probationer and court, but as far as you know, specialized mental health training, we have to depend on someone else." All participants noted a lack of knowledge or the need for more knowledge of mental health as a significant barrier to completing their required job duties. P55 described this, "knowing your case and what to expect and what their diagnoses are. Because they may not be forthcoming with them."

Other external factors were addressed by participants, most confirming a lack of resources as a driving factor for decision-making. P208 best illustrated this,

"a lot of times they may lose funding, lost job, Medicaid fell through, and now they are not on their meds anymore now the psychosis is starting to occur, but you know this is not their fault. They want to take their meds.

They want to be medicated, but they get to a point that they can't function.

And then you are sending someone to jail who wants to function in society, but they don't have the means."

This participant continued by identifying more external barriers, "we refer them to do that but do they have transportation to do that. There are several barriers that come into play. They face more barriers than other clients." All participants expressed a struggle when trying to identify the best decision-making process for mental health probationers.

Another key criterion that most participants indicated is necessary when decision-making for a probationer with mental illness is knowing your probationer. P23 felt, "if you spent even just six months with an individual, you know their mental health status. And what they're capable of and what they're not capable of, and you know that potentially locked them up or issuing a warrant for their arrest could be detrimental to their mental health. It could really send them back." P186 echoed, "you just have to kind of know a lot about the person. How they might respond to certain things." This participant continued, "Basically, is this person going to jail really going to, is it going to help or hurt this person."

The final key criterion that some participants identified is incarceration's effects on the probationer. P125 said, "It depends on what resources your jail has. Cause if they aren't able to get the help they need, or they're unwilling to do it outside the jail, but you know they can get connected with people in jail. It's a safe environment for them, and I mean there's the pros of them going to jail at that moment to get on the right track, get medicated." Additionally, this participant found, "assessing are they in the capacity to start working on it themselves or do they need more intensive help and can they get that

by being incarcerated." Lastly this participant described, "if they can not get that by being incarcerated then you are just prolonging the problem, if anything you are making the problem worse."

Subtheme 3.1: Public Safety, A Secondary Dual Role.

The only consistent phrase utilized by every participant multiple times was "public safety." This term took on varying meanings and purposes to each participant across all questions asked in the semi-structured interviews. When contemplating an arrest for a probationer with mental illness, most participants focused on this secondary dual role balance: the safety of the community versus the safety of the probationer. For most participants' when decision-making for probationers with mental illness, public safety was less about the community and more focused on the individual.

Interestingly, all participants, through their experiences with mental health probationers, only considered the necessity of incarceration as a temporary solution to an immediate or dangerous situation. P208 stated, "Mental health crisis. If I don't feel they can cope, unfortunately, we have to send them in where we can give them proper meds and try to get them stable," The participant continued, "I would rather them hate me than go out and kill themselves. Sometimes that is what you have to live with. You have to send them to jail to know that they are safe." A few participants noted that this type of crisis decision-making for probationers with mental illness is extremely difficult for them.

Nonetheless, some participants identified that their work only began after an emergency incarceration due to a probationer's mental health status. P1023 described

decision-making at this stage, "is this guy going to pose a risk in this proposed setting, or is the risk minimal in this proposed setting. " The participant continued, "We ensured public safety and still presented an opportunity for rehabilitation without prison." P55 agreed and reported, "to have them removed from that until we can get them into either another type of programming or another facility where they are able to have those needs addressed."

Summary

Two research questions guided this exploratory study. The purpose was to better understand probation officers' experiences with balancing their dual role of decision-making for probationers with mental illness. A sample of six active-duty participants with direct powers of arrest, who had completed all introductory training and had been employed for over 2 years as a probation officer, was obtained. The data analysis produced three major themes: shifting expectations affect probation officers' ability to balance their dual roles, officers experience internal barriers when decision-making for probationers and officers experience external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. Five subthemes were developed from those themes: stringent agency requirements, larger caseloads, decision-making under specific constraints, experience helps focus decision-making, and public safety, a secondary dual role. There were no major discrepancies noted in this data set. In Chapter 5, these results are explored further to include an in-depth interpretation of results, the strength and limitations of the study, implications of social change, future recommendations, and final conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore probation officers' experiences with balancing their dual role while decision-making for probationers with mental illness. Probationers with mental illness continue to be overrepresented even during the decline of individuals placed on community supervision (Epperson et al., 2014; Kaeble & Apler, 2020; Skeem et al., 2017; Skeem et al., 2018). There is a gap in literature related to the specific understanding of probation officer's experience with decision-making while balancing their dual role for probationers with mental illness (see Eno Loudon et al., 2018; Epperson et al., 2020; Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015; Matejkowski et al., 2018; Ricks et al., 2016). I used an IPA approach to explore the personal experiences of six active-duty probation officers to gain an in-depth understanding of their decision-making process for probationers with mental illness. Semistructured interviews were conducted with the participants to respond to the following research questions:

RQ₁: What is the experience of probation officers' decision-making when balancing their dual role?

RQ₂: What experiences do probation officers' have with decision-making when balancing their dual role for probationers with mental illness?

Results yielded three themes: shifting expectations affect probation officers' ability to balance their dual roles, officers experience internal barriers when decision-making for probationers and officers experience external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. Five subthemes were developed from those themes: stringent agency requirements, larger caseloads, decision-making under specific

constraints, experience helps focus decision-making, and public safety, a secondary dual role. This chapter includes interpretation of results, application for future research, and implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this study, three main themes were recognized across all participants concerning how probation officers balance their dual role when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. Each theme is further explored in the following subsections in relation to foundational literature. This provides an opportunity to discuss meanings interpreted from results and how these themes can fill the literature gap concerning how probation officers make decisions for probationers with mental illness. Additionally, I explore the applications of game theory to results of this study.

Theme 1: Shifting expectations affect probation officers' ability to balance their dual roles

Previous research has noted that probation officers often struggle to balance their dual roles of maintaining public safety and supporting rehabilitation (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015; Stickels, 2007). Findings of this study confirm that as well. Participants all agreed they became probation officers to help others but did not fully understand the role of probation officers until they had worked in that position for a while. Consensus between participants was that one had to hold the probation officer role for at least 2 years before fully understanding the dual role and learning how to balance it. Other studies indicate that probationer success is linked to their officer's ability to make decisions while balancing their dual roles (Ricks & Eno Loudon, 2014).

Participant responses also corroborate this through their understanding of their decision-making and its profound effects on individual probationers, their families, and communities. All participants took the responsibility of critical decision-making seriously and used multiple levels of processing before making a final decision. The weight of responsibility when decision-making is a consistent theme across this study and previous research (see Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015; Ricks and Eno Loudon, 2014; Stickels, 2007).

However, this study saw an emergence of other balancing acts required of probation officers. This produced 2 subthemes for investigation were, stringent agency requirements, and large caseloads. Participants reported having to balance their dual roles while counterbalancing agency requirements. For example, they had to determine when to support a probationer in need or complete required hours of documentation expected by agencies. Situations like this presented significant barriers to officers who wanted to help a probationer. These findings are paralleled by other research on retired probation agents who reflected on being held liable for their decision-making (Kita, 2015). Participants expressed apprehension about completing agency requirements while feeling they had accomplished their dual role balance. Participants did not specifically address liability but expressed remorse when they could not accomplish everything they had been tasked to complete.

Growing caseloads also presented officers with additional needs to balance. For example, officer vacancies lead to continuous barriers for active-duty probation officers. They have to balance their own caseload as well as vacant caseloads. Some participants

balanced added responsibilities to train newly hired staff who will not fully understand their role until a few years into their position. These findings are consistent with previous research, especially when looking at the growing number of probationers who have a mental illness. Large caseloads can hinder officers' ability to successfully intervene and address probationers with mental illness effectively (Skeem et al., 2017).

Theme 2: Officers experience internal barriers when decision-making for probationers.

When asked about potential "barriers" to their expected job duties, most of the participants described obstacles they had to overcome to better serve their probationers in need. These responses were consistent with previous studies involving this population (Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015; Ricks & Eno Loudon, 2014; Stickels, 2007). Epperson et al. (2017) found that probationers who felt their officers cared and supported them were more likely to develop a stronger therapeutic relationship with their probation officer and thus have a greater chance of completing probation successfully. Participants in this study indicated that as probation officers they care about their probationer outcomes while on supervision. For example, the lack of readily available mental health treatment services was a common obstacle faced by participants. However, probation officers met many of those obstacles by seeking the needed services in alternative or creative ways.

The weight of the probation officer's responsibility to protect the public while supporting the probationers' individual needs for rehabilitation is often found in the pride they take in the success of each probationer in their care (Kita, 2015; Epperson et al.,

2017). Again these results were upheld in this study. Many participants explained that felt guilt about probationers not being successful and significant pride in the little moments when a probationer made lasting changes. Participants indicated that the professional relationship was important to everyone's success, especially probationers suspected to have or who identified with mental illness. Participants described the important role communication and understanding played in successful supervision with probationers.

Two subthemes emerged involving this topic that is important to note: decision-making under specific constraints and experience helps focus decision-making. Participants explained specific instances where others constrained their decision-making abilities via zero tolerance policies. Participants felt that zero tolerance policies imposed by others significantly affected their ability to manage cases. Having the ability to create working relationships to learn and monitor probationer behavior is key to supervisor success (Epperson et al., 2017). Here again, participants expressed feelings of guilt involving their inability to work with probationers and find individualized plans which lead to success. The second subtheme was unique in its depiction of participant familiarity with decision-making. I noted how quickly the most experienced participant made a decision with focused clarity on what matters most. By contrast, least experienced participants felt stagnant in the gray area of options for what to do with each probationer case. The participants who had years of service in the middle made faster decisions but still sought clarity in specific situations.

Theme 3: Officers experience external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness.

The complexity of working with a probationer who has a mental illness has been clearly expressed across previous research (Epperson et al., 2014, Epperson et al., 2017; Epperson et al., 2020; Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Kita, 2015; Ricks and Eno Loudon, 2014). The findings in this study support the previous research. However, the qualitative exploration of this phenomenon produced a distinctive depiction of the decision-making layers probation officers have when addressing a probationer with mental illness. I noted that participants had significant external barriers to making decisions for this population; for example, open communication with a known treatment provider, gaining enrollment in a new treatment service or finding advice on how to best manage a probationer's mental health symptoms. All of these external barriers present challenges to officer decision-making and gravely affect probationer outcomes.

Community corrections is one of the largest segments of the criminal justice system and thus has a significant overrepresentation of individuals with mental illness (Kaeble & Apler, 2020). Epperson et al. (2020) took a look at the collaboration necessary to build a therapeutic relationship and the fundamental need for officer and probationer to work together toward a shared goal. This study upheld those findings and indicated the importance of caring about probationer outcomes and how external barriers affect both officer and probationer success. It is here the subtheme public safety a secondary dual role emerged. Officers expressed fears for public safety due to a lack of community mental health support. However, when evaluating the term public safety officers often

depicted stories of probationer safety from suicidal, homicidal, or extreme substance use ideation, for which little or no resources were available to address. Leaving officers to reincarcerate probationers for their own safety while alternative resources could be found.

Game Theory

Game theory, in its most basic concept, is an evaluation of individual choice in situations of risk where the players do not have all the information they need to build a strategy to win the game (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). The theory's core is based on interdependence, as each player is affected by the choices of the other players in the game (Dutta, 1999). The application of game theory to probation supervision is an extensive game with incomplete and imperfect information (Dutta, 1999; Stickles, 2007; Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947). This means probation officers are expected to shift their decision-making while balancing their dual roles and continuously gathering information about the probationer or responding to the choices made by the probationers that create risk situations.

Previous research indicates that a positive rapport between the officer and probationer and the officer's knowledge of incentives for the probationer will increase the successful completion of probation supervision (Stickles, 2007). The results from this study support this finding as well. Many participants noted how much they want to help their probationers and often seek alternative strategies to incarceration. Most participants indicated that incarceration is the last option they wish to use when decision-making unless the risk to community safety is too great. I noted that participants in this study all spoke of a positive relationship with their probationers. Decision-making was termed as a

concerted effort with the probationer. A significant lack of participants indicated that they were seeking compliance by solely relying on their law enforcement role.

Officers never detailed any experience about their own successes with balancing their dual role. In conformity with other studies, the officers took pride in the extensive detailing of the probationer's success (Kita, 2015). Most even expressed the small things that mattered, for example, a probationer having a hard conversation with their family over dinner or being honest about a relapse with illicit substances. To explain in terms of game theory, very few probationers chose to defect from the game, thus leading officers to continue cooperating through risky situations with them (Stickles, 2007). Study findings indicate that participants did not defect from the game unless they had no alternative strategy. This led me to conclude that participants in this study were successful in balancing their dual roles while making decisions for probationers.

One area of pause to these findings was found when officers faced one specific piece of information, the probationer's mental health status. All participants noted that the presence of a mental illness presented an extra layer to their decision-making. The results show that the presence of mental illness was not a concern. However, the unexpected factor that affected officers' decision-making was the lack of available mental health treatment resources. This specific external factor affected all but one participant. Participants expressed helplessness when faced with critical decisions for probationers with mental illness. The lack of mental health resources vastly shifted officer decision-making strategies. These risky situations left officers deciding to incarcerate much earlier

than expected to keep the probationer alive, create a safe location for evaluation, or provide imminent protection to the public.

Limitations of the Study

The current study was not without limitations. A common limitation of qualitative research is that they are not as generalizable as quantitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Given the small sample size of six participants, the results of this study are not generalizable outside of the active-duty probation officers within the Commonwealth of Virginia. IPA methodology recommended a small sample size which is why a small number of participants were utilized in this study. Nonetheless, the participants still reported similar themes and identified similar experiences. The homogenous sample size allowed me to capture better the lived experiences of active-duty probation officers (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Another limitation of this study is the potential for sampling bias. It is possible that the probation officers who were willing to participate in the study may have a better insight into the dual role balance officers face when decision-making for their probationers as compared to those officers who did not participate. The officers who participated might have other unknown factors that drove them to participate that officers who did not participate might not have. For example, participants might be more aware of the need to balance their dual roles. Additionally, based on the sample, decision-making for officers is affected by the local resources available, the legal systems, and the communities the officers are protecting.

The final noted limitation is my own experiences that may impact the study. A reflection journal was utilized throughout the study, and semistructured interviews to avoid any bias in the data collection and analysis. I am aware of the daily expectations participants face and has empathy for the struggle officers face when balancing their dual role while decision-making for probationer cases. However, it is also possible that my empathy allowed participants to feel more comfortable disclosing their own experiences.

Recommendations

One recommendation for future research would be to explore the theme of officers' experience with external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. This information could strengthen current academic literature on how to best manage probationers with mental illness and how officer decisions are made when treatment supports are available. Understanding the connection between resources and officer decision-making for probationers with mental illness could support social change and better guide agency resource allocation. Stronger supports for this special population can aid in increasing probationer success at successful completion of probation supervision and reduce recidivism.

Another area for future research would be to explore how officer turnover and large caseloads specifically effect decision-making for probationers with mental illness. While the current study indicates overturn gravely effects officer decision-making it does not explore how overturn and increasing caseloads effects that process for probationers with mental illness. Creating a strong professional relationship between probationer and officer is one key to successful completion of probation (Epperson et al., 2014; Epperson

et al., 2017; Epperson et al., 2020; Gochyyev & Skeem, 2019; Stickles, 2007). However, when that relationship is terminated or constantly changing is not a common area of exploration and needs to be understood to support officer decision-making more effectively for probationers with mental illness.

Although it was only a small notation from this study, officer experience with decision-making is another important area for future exploration. While the findings of officer experience with decision-making were limited in this study, future studies can expand on how experience supports or limits decision-making for probationers with mental illness. These results could again help guide agencies in their allocation of resources or in supportive areas for officer training programs.

A quantitative study could add to current research by looking at the study's findings on a larger scale. Randomized sampling from a larger population would reduce the impact of unknown participant bias and make the results more generalizable. It would expand the scope of understanding officer decision-making across locations with varying levels of community resources for probationers with mental illness. It could also increase reliability and validity to the findings, as those are certain attributes of a quantitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Exploring factors that impact probation officer decision-making for probationers with mental illness can assist with better trainings for new officers, community allocation of resources, increased in officer retention, and a decrease in officer caseloads. All of these outcomes could support a reduction in recidivism and better outcomes for probationers with mental illness.

Implications

The findings of this study have three major implications, each individual implication will be further explored below. Together all three implications could create a shift in the cultural understanding of what community corrections is, how it functions, and why it is necessary for everyone to be involved. A stronger community corrections program is not just about public safety, but in broader terms it is about supporting the individuals within the community that are at the greatest risk of harm. Together these implications could lead to many areas of positive social change.

The first major implication from this study is the need to retain staff long enough for them to best understand their dual role balance as a probation officer. This study's participants noted a two-year benchmark that can be utilized as a starting point. With experience, probation officers can better determine interventions and outcomes for probationers that support individualized needs for the probationers in their care. The ability to balance their dual role mandates increases over time allowing probation officers to target their time and resources towards probationers who are at a greater risk to violate the conditions of their probation supervision. Thus, supporting the current criminal justice reforms of deinstitutionalization.

The second major implication from this study is the need to remove internal barriers of decision-making for probation officers. Not only can this be achieved through supportive training for new probation officers but reoccurring positive support for experienced officers as well. The reduction of zero tolerance policies that interrupt the development of a positive professional relationship between officer and probationer could

increase chances for community interventions. Additionally, the decrease in officer guilt could support officer retention and a greater chance for lower caseloads. Ultimately, creating more opportunities for successful completion of probation supervision.

The final major implication from this study is the need to increase the availability of community resources for probationers with mental illness. The theme of external barriers effecting officer decision-making for probationers with mental illness highlights the overall lack of treatment support officers and probationers have from their surrounding communities. As criminal justice reform continues to seek shorter sentencing, and mass deinstitutionalization, a reallocation of mental health treatment is needed to support officer decision-making. With proper mental health supports officers can provide community interventions at an earlier stage that prevents reincarceration due to a violation. Addressing a probationers need within the community and keeping them within that community is the ultimate goal for public safety.

Summary

Findings of this study add knowledge to the current body of literature on probation officer dual role decision-making for probationers with mental illness. It expanded the literature by exploring the lived experiences of active-duty probation officers. The themes identified in this study were: shifting expectations affect probation officers' ability to balance their dual roles, officers experience internal barriers when decision-making for probationers and officers experience external barriers when decision-making for probationers with mental illness. Five subthemes were developed from those themes: stringent agency requirements, larger caseloads, decision-making

under specific constraints, experience helps focus decision-making, and public safety, a secondary dual role. These themes and subthemes can guide future research on probation officer dual role decision-making for probationers with mental illness. This information can help agencies and communities understand officer dual role decision-making and support better outcomes for probationers with mental illness. Understanding officer dual role decision-making for probationers with mental illness can create safer communities for all.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- 1) I would like you to think back to when you decided to apply for your position as a probation officer. What is it about you, your personality, life view, education, previous work experiences, etc., that lead you to apply for this job?
 - a) After you accepted the position, what expectations, if any, did you have for the daily operations/ or duties?
 - b) Were your expectations met? If so, how and if not, what was different...?
- 2) Now focus on your time after basic skills training, once you were operating your caseload and finding your own way to be a probation officer. What job expectations, if any, did you struggle with?
 - a) Where did most barriers, if any, come from?
 - b) What unexpected differences did you experience in comparison to your training?
- 3) In your own words, can you explain your understanding of community safety or risk management for a probation officer?
 - a) Can you describe what your experience has been with risk management as a probation officer?
 - b) What barriers do you face to managing community safety or risk management?
- 4) Can you explain, in your own words, what your understanding of offender rehabilitation, treatment, or care is for a probation officer?
 - a) Can you describe what your experience has been with offender rehabilitation as a probation officer?
 - b) What barriers do you face to offender rehabilitation, treatment, or care?

- 5) Can you describe your experience with the dual role between risk management and rehabilitation (or care and control) in probation work?
 - a) Do you feel one is more important than the other or easier to achieve?
 - b) How do you personally balance these roles?
- 6) What situations, if any, cause difficulty for you in managing the balance between community safety and offender treatment?
 - a) In your experience, does anything prevent you from achieving a role balance within your typical daily job duties/ expectations?
 - b) What barriers do you personally face to managing the balance of roles?
- 7) What supports, if any, would help you balance your dual role as a probation officer?
- 8) When making decisions, such as issuing a warrant versus a sanction for a probationer, what information do you consider?
 - a) How do you balance your dual roles when making decisions?
 - b) What challenges, if any, do you face when making important decisions about probation cases?
- 9) What supports, if any, do you feel would help you make better decisions for probationer cases?
- 10) If you are looking at the same decision, such as issuing a warrant versus a sanction for a probationer, how does their mental health status affect the outcome of that decision?
 - a) How do you balance your dual roles when making decisions for a probationer with mental illness?

- b) What challenges, if any, do you face when making important decisions about a probationer with mental illness?
- 11) What supports, if any, would help you make better decisions for probationers with mental illness?
- 12) Is there any additional information I need to know about the topics we have discussed?