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Probation Officers Perceptions of Probationers Economic Barriers to Successfully Complete Probation in Eastern North Carolina

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Walden University

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Dwayne Ponton

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Probation Officers Perceptions of Probationers Economic Barriers to Successfully

Complete Probation in Eastern North Carolina

by

Dwayne Ponton

MA, Boston University, 2019

BS, Elizabeth City State University, 2017

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

May 2025

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored probation officers' perceptions of the economic barriers that prevent probationers in Eastern North Carolina from successfully completing probation. Challenges such as unemployment, financial sanctions, housing instability, and debt were identified as key obstacles contributing to noncompliance and recidivism. Grounded in Merton's Strain Theory, the study addressed a gap in research by focusing on the experiences of officers who directly supervise probationers facing economic hardship. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve officers and analyzed using thematic analysis. The study was guided by two research questions: (1) What economic barriers prevent probationers from successfully completing probation in a timely manner? and (2) How do probation officers' first impressions of probationers' economic conditions affect probation outcomes? Findings revealed that financial strain, limited job readiness, and lack of support services, along with officers' early assessments, significantly influenced probation completion. Recommendations include enhanced officer training and early financial assessments. Future research should expand geographically and include probationer perspectives. This study supports positive social change by promoting more equitable and supportive probation practices in underserved communities. By identifying and addressing the economic barriers that probationers face, these improved practices can help reduce recidivism, enhance rehabilitation outcomes, and strengthen trust between justice-involved individuals and the probation system.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to God, who has been the foundation of my strength and the center of my drive throughout this journey. His grace sustained me through every long night, every challenge, and every moment I wanted to give up. It is only through His guidance and favor that I was able to persevere and reach this milestone.

To my incredible wife, Shayla, your love, patience, and constant encouragement carried me through the most difficult parts of this process. Thank you for enduring the long nights, my mood swings, and the emotional ups and downs, all while offering unwavering support. Your belief in me, even when I struggled to believe in myself, made all the difference.

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This journey would not have been possible without God and the love of my family. All glory belongs to Him.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	5
Problem Statement.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	9
Research Questions.....	10
Theoretical Framework for the Study.....	11
Nature of the Study.....	12
Definitions.....	13
Assumptions.....	14
Scope and Delimitations	14
Limitations	15
Significance.....	17
Summary	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review	20
Introduction.....	20
Literature Search Strategy.....	22
Theoretical Foundation	22
Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts.....	25
Probationer Debt and Support.....	29

Debt and Crime Relationship.....	32
Probation Officer Responsibilities.....	33
Sanctions and Debt Burdens.....	36
Offender Age and Mental Health.....	38
Public vs. Private Probation.....	40
Evolution of American Probation System.....	44
Probationer Welfare/Assistance Programs.....	49
Offender Mental Health Barrier.....	52
Probationer Drug Use.....	56
Summary and Conclusions.....	58
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	62
Introduction.....	62
Research Design and Rationale.....	64
Role of the Researcher.....	66
Methodology.....	67
Participant Selection Logic.....	67
Instrumentation.....	68
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	70
Data Analysis Plan.....	71
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	74
Credibility.....	74
Transferability.....	74

Dependability	75
Confirmability.....	75
Ethical Procedures	76
Summary	77
Chapter 4: Results	79
Introduction.....	79
Setting 80	
Demographics	80
Data Collection	82
Data Analysis	84
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	87
Results89	
Summary	102
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations	104
Introduction.....	104
Interpretation of the Findings.....	105
Limitations of the Study.....	108
Recommendations.....	110
Implications.....	111
Conclusion	114
References	115
Appendix: Interview Protocol.....	122

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographics.....	92
Table 2. Research Question 1 Summary.....	104
Table 3. Research Question 2 Summary.....	109

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The successful reintegration of individuals into society following involvement with the criminal justice system is a multifaceted process marked by numerous challenges. Among these challenges, economic barriers are significant hurdles for probationers striving to rebuild their lives and secure stable futures. Economic barriers encompass a broad spectrum of obstacles, including limited employment opportunities, financial instability, and disparities in access to resources. Addressing these barriers is crucial for promoting successful reentry into society and reducing recidivism rates among individuals under probation supervision. This introduction provides an overview of the economic obstacles' probationers face, highlighting the intersectionality of economic challenges with other factors such as mental health and the role of probation departments in addressing these barriers.

Probationers often encounter substantial challenges in securing employment due to various factors, including criminal records, lack of job skills, and discrimination due to the offender's criminal record. Link (2018) sheds light on the significant impact of financial sanctions and associated debt burdens on individuals within the prison system, which further exacerbates economic instability among probationers. Moreover, Teague (2016) underscores the offender-funded nature of the probation system, emphasizing its role in perpetuating economic barriers, particularly in disadvantaged regions like Eastern North Carolina. These financial challenges are compounded for women within the probation system, as evidenced by the research of Wilfong et al. (2021), who advocated

for targeted intervention programs to address the unique financial needs of female offenders.

In addition to economic challenges, probationers often face mental health barriers that further complicate their reintegration process. Bryson et al. (2019) highlighted age and mental health as significant barriers impacting the treatment utilization patterns of older adults on parole and probation. Epperson et al. (2017) further emphasized the inadequacies in addressing mental health barriers within probation programs, pointing to the complex interplay between economic instability and mental health issues among probationers. Addressing these intersecting barriers is critical for promoting holistic rehabilitation and reducing recidivism rates among individuals under probation supervision.

Perhaps, because of the importance of recognizing economic barriers, probation departments play a pivotal role in providing support and resources to probationers. Rogers (2018) compares private and public probation services, highlighting their influence on financial barriers probationers face and underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems within probation programs. Reichert and Gleicher (2019) stress the importance of training probation officers (PO) to effectively assist offenders in overcoming economic hurdles and facilitating their successful reintegration into society. By addressing economic barriers through targeted interventions and supportive services, probation departments can play a vital role in promoting financial stability and reducing recidivism rates among probationers.

Chapter 1 of this study begins by introducing the significant challenges probationers face during their reintegration into society, particularly the economic barriers that serve as substantial hurdles. These barriers, including limited employment opportunities, financial instability, and disparities in access to resources, are highlighted as critical factors that must be addressed to reduce recidivism rates among probationers.

The background section provides context by discussing existing literature on probationers' economic difficulties. It emphasizes how these challenges are exacerbated by the offender-funded nature of the probation system, which further strains individuals who are already financially vulnerable. This leads to the problem statement, which clearly outlines the specific issues that prompted the research—namely, how these economic barriers, such as debt burdens and employment challenges, hinder probationers from completing their probation terms.

The purpose of the study is articulated as an effort to understand these economic barriers through the perceptions of probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. This study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature, as limited research focuses specifically on this region. The research questions that guide the study seek to explore what economic barriers prevent probationers from completing probation promptly and how the perceptions of probation officers regarding these barriers influence outcomes.

Merton's Strain Theory provides the theoretical framework for the study, positing that societal pressures to achieve culturally approved goals, coupled with a lack of legitimate means, can lead to deviant behavior, including the challenges faced by probationers. The study employs a qualitative, phenomenological research design to

explore the perceptions of probation officers, using structured interviews to collect data and thematic analysis to interpret the findings.

To maintain clarity and consistency, the chapter includes definitions of key terms used throughout the study. It also discusses several assumptions, such as the expected challenges probationers with mental health issues face and the critical role economic barriers play in affecting probation outcomes. The scope and delimitations of the study are defined, focusing on adult probationers in Eastern North Carolina while acknowledging that the findings may need to be more generalizable to other regions.

The limitations section addresses potential issues related to the study's validity, reliability, and ethical considerations, emphasizing the importance of peer review and the need to acknowledge any biases. Finally, the significance of the study is highlighted, noting the potential implications for positive social change. By gaining a deeper understanding of the economic barriers probationers face, the study aims to inform the development of more effective support systems and intervention programs, ultimately leading to improved outcomes and reduced recidivism rates.

In summary, Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the study by providing a comprehensive overview of the research problem, its significance, and the methodological approach. It sets the stage for exploring the economic barriers that hinder probationers' successful reentry into society, to contribute valuable insights that can drive meaningful change in the probation system.

Background

Individuals on probation are experiencing economic disadvantages due to their criminal history (Kimberly et al., 2018). Kimberly noticed that the probationers face issues with finding employment, which hinders their ability to provide for the probationer's wellbeing. A qualitative study was conducted to provide better insight into the barriers probation officers and clients experience during supervision regarding debt and the support clients need (Beek et al., 2022). It also speaks on the perceptions of the probation officer and what they believe the financial barriers of probationers could be. The study seeks the perceptions of probationers, something of which my study would not cover.

While there has been considerable research on the challenges probationers face, particularly those related to economic barriers, there needs to be more focus on understanding these issues from the perspective of probation officers. Specifically, limited research explores how economic barriers, such as financial instability, debt burdens, and limited employment opportunities, directly impact a probationer's ability to successfully complete their probation. This gap is particularly evident when considering the probation officers' viewpoints, who are directly involved in supervising and supporting these individuals. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the probationers' failure or success in meeting their probation requirements.

The study is particularly needed because there is a scarcity of research on this topic within North Carolina, especially in the eastern part of the state. While broader

studies might touch on similar issues, they often overlook Eastern North Carolina's unique economic and social conditions, where probationers may face distinct challenges. By focusing on this specific geographic region and incorporating the insights of probation officers, this study aims to provide valuable, region-specific insights that can inform local policies and interventions. Such research is essential for developing targeted strategies to help probationers overcome economic barriers, ultimately leading to higher rates of successful probation completion and reduced recidivism in this underserved area.

Problem Statement

The situation or issue that prompted me to search the literature is when discussing probationers' barriers, it refers to the aspects of probationer's lives that will further prevent the completion of probation. Those barriers include education, mental health, job skills, communication skills, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Link, 2018). Due to the debt burden that most probationers face before and after being released from jail or being sentenced to probation or parole, most probationers are already destined to fail due to the debt burdens (Link, 2018). With the battle between public and private financing of probation today, it is becoming more evident that today's probation system is starting to be funded more so by probationers (Finkel, 2019). Studies have shown that income disparities between men and women play a factor in who would be more successful completing probation (Wilfong et al., 2021).

The research conducted by Link (2018) on financial sanctions and associated debt burdens faced by individuals in the prison system underscores the significant barriers encountered by prisoners, including those related to employment, income, and race.

These barriers contribute to the challenges individuals face transitioning back into the community upon release (Link, 2018). Bryson et al. (2019) further emphasize the importance of understanding the mental health needs of probationers, highlighting age and mental health as significant barriers that impact reintegration into society (Bryson et al., 2019). Rogers (2018) adds to this discussion by comparing private and public probation services, indicating that regardless of the system, both contribute to the financial barriers experienced by probationers.

Teague (2016) provides insight into the offender-funded nature of the probation system, shedding light on the economic barriers faced by individuals under supervision, particularly in Eastern North Carolina (Teague, 2016). This financial strain disproportionately affects women within the probation system, as highlighted by Wilfong et al., (2021), who called for targeted intervention programs to address the unique financial challenges faced by female offenders. Moreover, Epperson et al. (2017) explored the intersection of mental health and probation, emphasizing the inadequacies in addressing mental health barriers within probation programs.

In addressing these barriers, Reichert and Gleicher (2019) stress the role of probation departments in providing necessary support and training to probation officers. They suggest that through adequate training, probation officers can better assist offenders in overcoming barriers and facilitating successful reintegration into society (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019). Thus, collective research underscores the multifaceted challenges individuals face within the probation system and highlights the importance of addressing these barriers to promote successful reentry into the community.

Society must learn to look at individuals engaged in the criminal justice system differently, especially if the probationers are striving to leave behind an offending identity. Research has found that individuals that are on probation are more likely to be successful when relational co-production is present to support probationers' resistance (Nicholson & McKeown, 2021). Through additional training of probation officers, probation departments could have probationers tackle financial barriers head-on (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019). Based upon the initial contact the probation officer conducts, the information that is put into the system can then determine the offenders' supervision level. Based upon the supervision level, the probation officer (PO) could have a better understanding of the probationers' barriers for, which PO believes will hinder the offender from completing probation successfully, at least in a timely manner set out by the initial judgement. This study will examine the economic barriers that probationers face through the perceptions of the probation officers that are tasked with supervising them; the potential data that will be collected through interviews will hopefully shed some light on reasons and or ways to better tackle these barriers that the probationers face.

The need to address the identified gap in the research literature is both logical and urgent, given the current relevance of the issue within the discipline of criminal justice and the area of probation practice. As the problem statement in the study highlights, probationers face a myriad of barriers that impede their ability to complete probation, with economic challenges being among the most significant. These barriers, including debt burdens, limited job skills, and financial instability, are exacerbated by the current

structure of the probation system, which increasingly places financial responsibilities on probationers. Despite the precise impact of these economic obstacles, there needs to be more research focused on why these barriers prevent probationers from fulfilling their probation requirements, particularly from the perspective of probation officers who are intimately involved in the supervision process.

This knowledge gap is particularly pressing because probation officers are in a unique position to observe and understand the specific economic challenges that probationers face daily. Their insights could provide critical information on how these barriers directly contribute to probationers' struggles, yet this perspective has been largely overlooked in existing research. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing a more nuanced understanding of the probation process, which can inform more effective interventions and support systems. In the context of Eastern North Carolina, where economic disparities are pronounced and the probation system is under significant strain, this research is relevant and necessary. By focusing on the probation officers' perspectives in this region, the study aims to provide actionable insights that could lead to improved practices and policies, ultimately enhancing the success rates of probationers and reducing recidivism. This makes the research highly pertinent to the current challenges faced within the criminal justice system, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aims to understand the economic barriers present amongst probationers through the perceptions of probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. This

study could highlight the fact that there is little to no research conducted within NC Probation that highlights the potential barriers that probationers face within Eastern NC. The twelve topics covered by Probation/Parole Officer Basic Training include that of: “Administrative Matters, firearms training, defensive protection, courtroom processes, case processing and management, arrest procedures, basic life support, employee wellness, professional ethics, personal and professional conduct, contemporary correctional theory, and administrative matters” (ncdps.gov, 2021). The significance of this study is that the state of North Carolina could ensure that there is an implementation of either programs, training or a re-evaluation of probation conditions that could impact the economic barriers of probationers, hence probationers not successfully completing probation in a timely manner.

Research Questions

In this study, I will explore why the economic barriers of probationers could prevent them from finishing probation promptly. I seek to understand the reasons for probationers’ economic barriers through the perceptions of probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. Ultimately, this knowledge could further help the North Carolina Community Corrections Division further understand and provide further assistance to probationers whose economic barriers are seemingly preventing them from completing probation in a timely manner. This study’s research questions ask:

RQ1: What economic barriers prevent probationers in Eastern North Carolina from successfully completing probation in a timely manner?

RQ2: How would a probation officer's first impressions of a probationers' economic barriers affect the successful completion of probation in a timely manner?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

For the theoretical framework of this study, I will use strain theory. Merton's (1938) strain theory, posits that societal pressures to achieve culturally approved goals, coupled with a lack of access to legitimate means, create strain that can lead to deviant behavior. Strain theory is the idea that people will engage in activities that are not accepted in the eyes of the people and law, when faced with hardships (Andreescu & Vito, 2021). In fact, the strain theory proposes that social factors, such as lack of income and quality education, drive people to commit further crimes.

In this study I will be interviewing probation officers in Eastern North Carolina who come into daily contact and communicate with offenders with a variety of economic barriers. In line with strain theory, the pitfalls of some of the barriers are identified. Based on the anticipated participation of (8-11 probation officers), the officers will share their perceptions on what they believe to be the common economic barriers of offenders. Then, I will examine how the probation officers came to these perceptions. From a strain theory perspective, the participants weighed why they believe the economic strains on offenders led them to commit further crimes and prolong their time spent on probation. With the knowledge of these perceived stressors probationers face, the North Carolina Community Corrections department will be afforded the opportunity to make the necessary changes to increase programs and to further provide financial assistance to those probationers that are experiencing economic hardships. Suppose more experienced probation officers are

encouraged to speak up and share their insights on the economic barriers that probationers face in Eastern North Carolina, there may be a reduction of probationers not completing probation in a timely manner.

Nature of the Study

A phenomenological study design would be fitting for this qualitative study. The phenomenological study design could entail the use of a combination of methods such as interviews, reading of documents, watching videos, and visiting places and events (Bartholomew et al, 2021). Through the utilization of interviews, it will allow the researcher to have a better understanding of the participants point of view within the research. A phenomenological study allows for the participants to give their perspectives on a variety of topics which in this case is the perspectives of the financial barriers of probationers and how it affects the timely completion of probation in Eastern North Carolina.

Through the use of structured interviews, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the economic barriers that are present amongst probationers through the perceptions of probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. The locations for which probation officers will be chosen to participate are three to four Probation Offices within Eastern North Carolina; those targeted locations include that of Wilson, Pasquotank, and Pitt County. After receiving the approval of the District Administrator, the participation of 12 or more officers would be sought or until saturation is met. This study will be guided through the lens of Strain Theory. The analysis utilized for the studying of the data is that of theming. Theming will allow for flexibility in interpreting the data. The

six-step process of thematic analysis utilized includes: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and writing up. The data collected through interviews will hopefully shed some light on reasons and or ways to better tackle these barriers that the probationers face.

Definitions

The following are definitions of keywords used throughout the study provided for purposes of clarity.

Criminal Record: “a known record of having been arrested in the past for committing a crime” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Employment Opportunities: “means consideration for hire, hire, transfer, promotion, training, and non-disciplinary retention, including in any reorganization or layoff” (Lawinsider, n.d.).

Financial Instability: “means the provider cannot meet its financial obligations” (Lawinsider, n.d.).

Mental Health: “mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act.” (CDC.gov, 2024).

Probation Officers: “supervise offender’s activities in the community and ensure their compliance with court orders.” (DAC.nc.gov, n.d.).

Probation Office/Department: “means a Probation Office attached to the Department of Corrections” (Lawinsider, n.d.).

Recidivism: “the relapse of criminal behavior that results in the re-arrest, reconviction, and/or reimprisonment of an individual” (World Population Review, 2024).

Support System: “a network of people who provide an individual with practical or emotional support” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Assumptions

In addressing the economic and social barriers probationers face, several assumptions are made. First, it is assumed that probationers with mental health issues will face significant challenges in their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. This assumption is based on research indicating the strong correlation between mental health struggles and higher recidivism rates (Bryson et al., 2019). Additionally, it is presumed that economic barriers, such as financial instability and limited employment opportunities, disproportionately affect probationers, making it more difficult for them to secure stable income and avoid reoffending (Van Beek et al., 2021). The research also implies that the effectiveness of probation officers and departments in providing support systems is crucial for reducing recidivism rates, which hinges on the proper training and resources being available to these officers (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study encompasses the various economic barriers faced by probationers within Eastern North Carolina, focusing primarily on financial instability, employment challenges, and mental health issues. This includes examining the roles of probation officers and departments in mitigating these barriers through support systems and resources.

The delimitations of this study include a focus on adult probationers. The study is geographically limited to Eastern North Carolina, recognizing that probation systems and

their challenges may differ significantly in other states. The data being discussed in this study are drawn from existing literature and research reports published within the last decade, ensuring relevance and accuracy while acknowledging that newer or unpublished data might present different insights.

My study will include fully certified Eastern North Carolina probation officers who have at least one year of experience post-certification. The unit of analysis for this study is specifically probation officers who have supervised offenders for at least one year. This study excludes anyone with less than one year of experience and those who are not fully certified prior to gaining their one year of probation supervision experience.

The exclusion of probation officers with less than one year of experience and those not fully certified before gaining their one year of supervision experience is based on the belief that officers with limited experience may not have had sufficient time to understand or navigate the complex barriers that probationers face. Since it often takes time to grasp the nuances of a probationer's case and home circumstances, only those with at least one year of experience are likely to have developed the depth of insight necessary to contribute meaningfully to the study.

Limitations

Issues that may arise during a research study include validity, reliability, and ethics. In a qualitative narrative study, much of the data collected depends on participants' responses, making the validity of this data crucial for the study's contribution to society. If the data are unreliable, the study's overall reliability is compromised, rendering the study invalid. At this point, ethical considerations become vital in determining how the

researcher presents the study. If the study is flawed, it must be withheld from presentation and peer review. Moreover, the researcher must not embellish the information to suit the study (Hayashi et al., 2019) or allow personal biases to influence the research. To minimize the possibility of flawed data due to participant responses, the number of participants selected should be sufficient to offset outliers within the accumulated data (Subedi, 2021).

A method to prevent these types of compromises when conducting a research study is to ensure that peers review the data and procedures used for collecting and documenting the artifacts to verify that the methods are correctly performed. Additionally, biases must be acknowledged to prevent questioning the results of the study.

Given the study's focus on probation officers in a specific geographic region, the transferability of the findings may be limited. The unique economic conditions and probation practices in Eastern North Carolina might not reflect those in other regions, which could impact the applicability of the results elsewhere. However, by providing detailed descriptions of the context and the participants, the study aims to offer enough contextual information for others to assess the relevance of the findings to their own settings.

To improve dependability, the study will use systematic data collection and analysis procedures, ensuring that the research process is well-documented and transparent. Peer reviews and careful documentation of the research steps will be crucial in maintaining the study's dependability. By acknowledging and addressing these

limitations, the study seeks to ensure that while its findings may be specific to Eastern North Carolina, they are derived from a robust and reliable research process that can serve as a foundation for future studies in similar contexts.

Significance

The potential implications for positive social change resulting from this study include the development of more effective support systems and intervention programs for probationers, particularly in Eastern North Carolina. By gaining a deeper understanding of the economic barriers faced by probationers through the perceptions of probation officers, policymakers and probation departments can tailor resources and training programs to better address these challenges. This could lead to improved employment opportunities, financial stability, and overall well-being for probationers, thereby reducing recidivism rates. These changes could foster a more inclusive and supportive community environment, enhancing social stability and reducing the long-term social and economic costs associated with high recidivism.

Summary

Chapter 1 of this study spoke on how the reintegration of individuals into society following involvement with the criminal justice system is a complex process marked by numerous challenges, with economic barriers being particularly significant. These barriers include limited employment opportunities, financial instability, and disparities in access to resources, all hindering probationers' ability to rebuild their lives. Addressing these obstacles is crucial for successful reentry into society and reducing recidivism rates. Research indicates that probationers face difficulties in securing employment due to

criminal records, lack of job skills, and discrimination (Link, 2018). Financial sanctions and debt burdens further exacerbate economic instability (Teague, 2016). Women in the probation system face additional economic challenges, necessitating targeted intervention programs (Wilfong et al., 2021). To mitigate these issues, probation departments must provide comprehensive support and resources, and train officers to effectively assist probationers in overcoming economic hurdles (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019).

In addition to economic challenges, mental health barriers also complicate the reintegration process for probationers. Age and mental health significantly impact treatment utilization and successful reintegration (Bryson et al., 2019). The inadequacies in addressing mental health within probation programs highlight the need for a holistic approach to rehabilitation (Epperson et al., 2017). By addressing both economic and mental health barriers through targeted interventions and supportive services, probation departments can promote successful reentry and reduce recidivism rates. Recognizing these barriers is underscored by the need for probation departments to play a pivotal role in providing necessary support and resources to probationers (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019). This study aims to understand the economic barriers faced by probationers in Eastern North Carolina through the perceptions of probation officers to inform more effective support strategies.

Chapter 2 explores the significant relationship between debt and crime, highlighting debt as a risk factor for criminal behavior and recidivism (Van Beek et al., 2021). It emphasizes the importance of understanding economic barriers at the individual level to better assist probationers in paying off probation-related fees and reducing

recidivism. The chapter aims to address the research gap in North Carolina, particularly in eastern North Carolina, by examining various factors impacting probationers' financial stability and ability to complete probation successfully.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

When exploring the idea of debt and crime, it is important to note that researchers have traditionally focused on the environmental characteristics of individuals from a macroeconomic view (Van Beek, et al., 2021). After a review of a series of articles, a strong relationship between debt and crime appears to exist, whereby debt is a risk factor for crime (Van Beek, et al, 2021). Due to the relationship of debt and crime, recidivism no matter the type of crime that has been committed, crime is a risk factor for debt. Studying debt related to crime will prove to be beneficial for probation officers when it comes to probationers at an individual level. This will allow probation officers the ability to best assist probationers when it comes to recommending good resources that will better help them pay off fees associated with probation. Probationers being afforded the opportunity to pay off fees related to probation, will better prevent recidivism.

The purpose of this study is to get a better understanding of the economic barriers that are present amongst probationers which could potentially prevent them from completing probation successfully. The findings may clarify ways in which other states have tackled the issues related to the economic barriers of probationers. The gap I am seeking to address is that of the lack of relevant research on the topic in North Carolina, specifically in eastern North Carolina. Although various researchers tackled the topic of economic barriers that probationers face, there is still a lack of relevant research on the topic. In order to address the issue best, I decided to touch on various factors that could

have an impact on the financial stability of probationers, ultimately affecting them being able to successfully complete probation in a timely manner.

Chapter Two of this study is dedicated to a comprehensive review of the literature related to the economic barriers faced by probationers and the impact these barriers have on their ability to successfully complete probation. The chapter began with an “introduction” that sets the stage for the discussion by emphasizing the significance of understanding the relationship between economic challenges and probation outcomes.

Following the introduction, the “Literature Search Strategy” section outlines the methods and databases used to identify relevant research, ensuring the review is thorough and grounded in the most current studies. This is followed by a discussion of the “Theoretical Foundation”, where Merton's Strain Theory is explored as the primary framework analyzing how societal pressures and lack of legitimate means can lead to deviant behavior among probationers.

The “Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts” delves into various topics central to the study, including the correlation between debt and crime, the financial struggles probationers face, and the role of probation officers in mitigating these barriers. This section is further divided into sub-sections that address specific issues such as probationer debt and support, the relationship between debt and crime, and the responsibilities of probation officers in supporting probationers through these challenges.

The chapter also covers the “Sanctions and Debt Burdens” probationers endure, analyzing how these financial pressures affect their chances of completing probation. Additionally, the review includes a discussion on “Offender Age and Mental Health”,

exploring how these factors intersect with economic challenges to complicate the probation process further.

The chapter concludes with a “Summary and Conclusions” section, synthesizing the key findings from the literature review and identifying areas where further research is needed. This chapter provides a solid foundation for understanding the complexities of the economic barriers probationers face and the implications for probation officers and the broader criminal justice system.

Literature Search Strategy

I used Walden University library databases and the internet search engines to conduct a literature search. Additional search databases included ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals, EBSCO e-books. Additional search engines included Google Scholar, Google, and Yahoo. The primary terms are finances, barriers, probation, debt, income, probationers, mental health, education, and jobs. Primary phrases that were used in the searches included economic barriers, debt and income, probationers’ mental health, probationers’ education, probationers’ barriers, probationers’ income, probationers housing, and probationers’ benefits. After reviewing all the articles, I then sorted the articles based on relevance to probationers’ financial barriers.

Theoretical Foundation

Due to the debt burden that most probationers face before and after being released from jail or being sentenced to probation or parole, most probationers are already destined to fail (Link, 2018). Debt burdens could be caused by the probationers’ education, mental health, substance abuse, job skills, communication skills, problem-

solving, and critical thinking skills. This study will examine the economic barriers that probationers face through the perceptions of the probation officers that are tasked with supervising them. The potential data that will be collected through interviews will hopefully shed some light on reasons and or ways to better tackle these barriers that the probationers face.

This study could benefit from the use and explanation of Strain Theory. Strain Theory is the idea that some people will engage in activities when faced with hardships that is not accepted in the eyes of the public and law, (Andreescu & Vito, 2021). The theoretical foundation for this study is rooted in Merton's Strain Theory, which originated from the work of sociologist Robert K. Merton in 1938. Merton's Strain Theory was developed to explain the ways in which societal structures exert pressure on individuals to achieve culturally approved goals, often without providing the legitimate means to achieve them. This discrepancy, or "strain," can lead individuals to engage in deviant behavior as they attempt to attain these goals through alternative, often unlawful, means.

The central propositions of Strain Theory suggest that when individuals cannot achieve socially accepted goals through legitimate avenues, they may resort to criminal behavior to fulfill these aspirations. The theory is based on several key assumptions, including the idea that societal pressure to succeed is universally experienced and that the lack of access to legitimate opportunities is a significant factor in determining whether an individual will engage in deviance. This theory assumes that the strain or pressure individuals feel is a direct result of the social structure and is particularly relevant in contexts where economic disparities are pronounced.

Strain Theory has been widely applied in criminological research to explore the relationship between societal pressures, economic challenges, and criminal behavior. Previous studies have used the Strain Theory to examine how economic hardships, such as unemployment, poverty, and debt, can lead to increased criminal activity. For instance, research has demonstrated that individuals facing significant economic barriers are more likely to engage in illegal activities to cope with financial strain. These applications of Strain Theory are similar to the current study, which seeks to understand how economic barriers experienced by probationers in Eastern North Carolina influence their ability to complete probation successfully.

The rationale for choosing Strain Theory as the foundation for this study lies in its relevance to the economic challenges probationers face. Given that many probationers struggle with financial instability, limited employment opportunities, and significant debt burdens, the Strain Theory provides a robust framework for exploring how these pressures might lead to behaviors that impede their progress on probation. The theory's focus on the interplay between societal expectations and individual circumstances aligns well with the study's aim to examine the economic barriers that probationers encounter from the perspective of probation officers.

The selected theory is directly related to the present study as it provides a lens through which the economic challenges probationers face can be understood in terms of societal pressure and the lack of legitimate means to achieve stability. The research questions in this study build upon the Strain Theory by investigating how probation officers perceive the impact of economic barriers on probationers' ability to comply with

probation requirements. By exploring these perceptions, the study seeks to challenge and expand upon existing theory, particularly in the context of Eastern North Carolina, where economic disparities are significant. This approach validates the application of the Strain Theory to the current study and offers the potential to contribute new insights to the broader field of criminology.

Offenders are provided all the necessary tools to succeed while being on probation, such as free treatment related to drug abuse or mental illness, job interviews or referrals, and educational opportunities to help them combat the economic barriers that are present. Probationers are still faced with economic strains that make it harder for them to choose whether to utilize the services and opportunities provided to them. This study will be seeking the perceptions of probation officers and the reasons why they feel as though the barriers could potentially be self-inflicted or not. Some of the barriers could be due to the offender's economic hardships, which lead to the engagement for illegal activity, and due to the constant in and out of jail, which hindered opportunities of further improvement. The economic strain that probationers face could lead them to choose to engage in illegal acts and activities, resulting in jail or probation, hindering the probationer from getting off of probation sooner.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Debt can cause additional stress for offenders, leading to more crimes being committed. As more crimes are committed, the likelihood of more crimes, leads to more debt for the offenders (Van Beek, et al, 2021). The furtherance of debt could be due to monies owed because of the crime or the lack of money due to incarceration. This

situation could be further exacerbated when the offender is not able to obtain a job (Van Beek, et al, 2021). Studies have shown that debt among offenders provided important insight into the sources of income of offender, debt among offenders, and characteristics of offenders with a higher risk of debt (Van Beek, et al, 2021).

Regarding the sources of income that most offenders had prior to imprisonment, offenders did report having a job prior to going to prison (Van Beek, et al, 2021). After the offender's release from prison, it was reported that offenders had more difficulty finding employment. There was a small percentage of offenders reporting not having any type of legal employment prior to arrest and imprisonment. Debt amongst offenders has also proven to be more complex than that of individuals not being released from prison or on probation (Van Beek, et al, 2021). Offenders' not having a job to go to prior to release from prison will likely lead to an unsuccessful reintegration into the community. When referring to the characteristics of offenders with a risk of debt, it was found that in the Netherlands, debt is the common risk factor for almost all of the individuals currently on probation (Van Beek, et al, 2021). For male prisoners in the Netherlands, debt was shown to be the most common criminogenic factor and for males, having debt could lead to further crimes being committed (Van Beek, et al., 2021).

Jacobs & Gottlieb, (2020) focused on individuals who are on probation that are experiencing economic disadvantage due to their criminal history. In 2016, interviews were conducted with 22 adult probationers in Rhode Island to assess and rank their basic needs. Notably, a pilot study of recently released prisoners revealed that 91% experienced food insecurity, with 37% reporting they had gone without eating due to a lack of funds

(Dong et al., 2018). The interviews were designed to explore two content areas: the priorities during probation and the current health concerns of the probationers. As a result, it was observed that probationers struggled with finding employment, which affected their ability to support their wellbeing.

Given that Rhode Island has the second-highest recorded number of individuals under probation supervision, Dong et al., (2018) selected it as an ideal location to conduct their research for more meaningful results. To maintain anonymity, the interviews were conducted privately at the probation office without probation officers present. This research applied Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory and relevant literature to guide the priorities that participants were asked to rank. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, human needs can be structured into a hierarchy, ranging from basic necessities like food and water to more abstract concepts such as self-fulfillment (Hopper, 2020). On average, the probationers selected four cards to rank their priorities. The researchers then calculated and recorded the mean scores, identifying the top four priorities in order of importance as substance abuse recovery, employment, housing, and food intake (Dong et al., 2018). Notably, other priorities that did not rank as highly included finding transportation, avoiding re-incarceration, applying for disability, and addressing mental, spiritual, and financial well-being. Interestingly, none of the participants chose seeking substances as a top priority (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020).

Substance abuse recovery was identified as the top priority by the offenders, despite none of the participants considering the act of seeking substances as a priority. Some offenders mentioned recovery from substances such as the substances identified

included alcohol, cocaine, heroin, and oxycodone. Interestingly, marijuana was not mentioned as a substance from which the participants were recovering, despite five participants acknowledging current use. Some participants emphasized that recovery was a priority because, without sobriety, addressing other aspects of life would be nearly impossible. The prevailing theme among participants in recovery was the recognition that substance use was not an effective way of coping with life; instead, it worsened their situations (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020).

Employment was the second priority highlighted by the participants. It was observed that fewer resources were available to help offenders find employment compared to resources for food or housing (Dong et al., 2018). The scarcity of job placement resources becomes even more evident when participants with criminal records face significant challenges while seeking employment. Probationers identified their current probation status and history of incarceration as key barriers to employment (Dong et al., 2018). The probationers' criminal records led to significant stigma from employers. This lack of employment contributed to financial insecurities that deeply affected their loved ones at home. Furthermore, when job opportunities did arise, they were typically low-wage and seasonal, offering little long-term stability. As a result, some participants admitted to turning back to alternative income sources, such as dealing drugs or working under the table, to support their families (Dong et al., 2018).

Housing was also identified as a top priority by the participants. The primary issue they highlighted was the lack of affordability, given their income levels. As a result, many offenders are forced to return to crime-ridden areas. Participants reported that

landlords often denied their housing applications once their probation status was revealed. The shortage of housing options led many to rely on living with parents, family, or friends (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020). Housing remains a top priority for participants due to the ongoing concern that homelessness and living in unsafe conditions are still a reality for some of them.

Food intake was identified as a priority by 16 participants, primarily because all of them receive food stamps. They highlighted this concern due to the continuous rise in food costs, the insufficiency of food stamps to cover all their food needs, and the need to improvise meals when food is scarce (Dong et al., 2018). Additionally, 10 of the 16 participants noted that their perception of being overweight is self-inflicted, which contributes to an increased risk of diabetes. These challenges related to food insecurity and health further underscore the broader economic struggles probationers face, highlighting the critical need for support systems that address their financial vulnerabilities. As we delve into probationer debt and support, it becomes clear how these economic pressures contribute to the overall difficulty probationers face in completing their probation.

Probationer Debt and Support

Beek et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study to explore the barriers probation officers and clients encounter during supervision concerning debt and the support clients need. The study also highlighted the financial challenges encountered by both probation officers and probationers. The semi-structured interviews focused on five key areas: the length of time and type of financial burden, history of debt occurrence, the alignment

between debt and crime, barriers faced with the supervision of probationers with debt problems, and the assistance of probationers with debt problems (Beek et al., 2022).

Through voluntary participation of the probation officers 33 interviews were conducted.

The results for prevalence and type of debt found the majority probation officers mentioned that most of the individuals supervised on probation are in debt and could be considered a major criminogenic factor. The debt the probationers face could be due to a couple of factors, one of which is that probationers are in serious debt, and the others who are young probationers and who have financial problems due to greed, immediate satisfaction of needs, and who is willing to do anything at all costs to make quick money (Beek et al., 2022). Some probationers mentioned the fact that without the use of supplemental income such as disability and social security, it makes it harder to survive day to day with the cost of living. Probationers also pointed out that true reintegration becomes more challenging without some form of financial stability. Probationers noted probationary fines as being a hinderance to successfully completing probation and not reoffending (Beek et al., 2022). In addition to probationary fines, probationers mentioned additional expenses such as monies owed to the courts, home costs, and other debts as major barriers. Probationers mentioned that these financial stressors are what ultimately cause mental and physical anguish.

Regarding the debt background of most of the probationers, some mentioned a history of growing up in poverty. Growing up in poverty meant that most of the offenders did not learn how to properly manage money or the necessary skills to organize and prepare for day-to-day life situations. In fact, it was mentioned that part of the debt

burden probationers face is due to the probationers' tendencies to make impulsive decisions and choices, focusing on luxury and status (Beek et al., 2022).

The mental and behavioral challenges experienced by probationers pose significant barriers to addressing their debt issues. Among these challenges are personality disorders, ADHD, and substance abuse, all of which were highlighted by probationers as contributing factors to their financial struggles. Additionally, family issues such as divorce, housing expenses, and loss of income due to dependence on family or close relatives compound their financial difficulties (Beek et al., 2022).

Notably, the costs associated with legal representation for divorce proceedings and other expenses related to separation further strain their finances. Moreover, the financial repercussions of criminal behavior, including activities such as marijuana cultivation, banking fraud, or car registration fraud, exacerbate their financial burdens (Beek et al., 2022). Probation officers have observed that some clients' financial situations have not improved despite incarceration for criminal activity. This observation underscores the persistent nature of financial challenges faced by probationers. Furthermore, probationers often lack responsible role models in their upbringing, which may contribute to their financial struggles (Beek et al., 2022). The absence of positive influences during their formative years can hinder their ability to make sound financial decisions and manage their debts effectively.

These persistent financial challenges, and the absence of positive role models, create a cycle of economic instability that is difficult for many probationers to break. This ongoing struggle not only hampers their ability to manage existing debts but also

increases the likelihood of engaging in further criminal activities to cope with their financial burdens. As we explore the debt and crime relationship, it becomes evident how these financial pressures can lead to a vicious cycle of recidivism.

Debt and Crime Relationship

Probation officers identified a strong relationship between debt and crime (Beek et al., 2022). The relationship exists primarily because of the high levels of stress caused by the probationer's debt burden (Beek et al., 2022). To relieve the stress accompanied by the debt the probationers are facing, the need for instant gratification kicks in, to resolve the problems that were self-inflicted. The probationer's spending is out of alignment with what the probationer could afford. The probationer's financial difficulties lead to resorting to crime to sustain a lifestyle that they cannot afford through lawful means given their current situation. The financial problems probationers tend to face always seems to increase the recidivism risk (Beek et al., 2022). Due to the amount of time it takes to set up and apply for assistance for probationers once released from jail, the risk for reoffending is high. Probationers are more likely to reoffend due to the lengthy amount of time for the arrangements to go into effect such as housing and other benefits for the probationer.

The financial barriers impeding the supervision of probation clients significantly contribute to probation officers' perception that it hampers the adequate supervision of offenders. In fact, a probation officer mentioned that if someone has much stress due to money problems, he does not want to talk about other things because he has a problem now, and that is a lack of money (Beek et al., 2022). The probation agency's

communication of supervision expectations to probationers is often unclear, resulting in misaligned expectations between the agency and the probationers. Secondly, the lack of realistic conditions probationers face hinders the offender from completing probation on time. Other notable barriers that probationers with financial issues face to successfully completing probation in a timely manner is that of individuals of antisocial behavior and the willingness to push forward in the process (Beek et al., 2022). The probationers behaviors are important to note because the process for housing arrangement and benefits is key to income stabilization, and the beginning to get over the idea of being an offender on probation.

Given these financial and behavioral challenges, the role of probation officers becomes increasingly complex and demanding. The responsibilities of probation officers extend beyond mere supervision, as they must also navigate these economic and psychological barriers to effectively support probationers in overcoming the obstacles that impede their progress. Understanding the critical role of probation officers in this context is essential for addressing the broader challenges within the probation system.

Probation Officer Responsibilities

Probation officers noted the difficulty of overseeing probationers with financial barriers (Beek et al., 2022). Probation officers lack the knowledge to support clients with financial problems further. Clients with the lack of resources that is already being dealt with, always seem to have issues with paying off debts already, not including legal debts that will be added (Beek et al., 2022). With the added financial burdens, the clients report having a sense of injustice. The added financial obligations are now being seen as added

punishment for their involvement in criminal acts. Some clients believe that serving time is punishment enough, and adding financial obligations to an already challenging situation is now being seen as a second punishment. The idea of having another financial obligation that will not be able to be paid in a timely manner will hinder potential progress that would otherwise have been made without the extra monies being owed on the probationer caseload.

Probation officers are always attempting to assist individuals on probation with debt problems. One of the first things probation officers do with new probationers is go over the conditions that are applied to their existing probation case. The probation officer will also go over the client's current behavior by discussing norms and values (Beek et al., 2022). Some officers will go above and beyond and will help the clients with daily life tasks that benefit them in their daily life. The tasks include that of organizing letters, calling creditors, and making payment arrangements (Beek et al., 2022). Most officers will also come up with a financial plan with the probationer, which allows the client to have some goals that could be realistically obtained. The offender needs to have to have a financial plan because the offender working to be fiscally responsible at times will take longer than the probation case itself (Beek et al., 2022). Because a probationer is fiscally responsible, it is advised that the client continues to follow the financial plan long after probation.

It has been reported that most clients are not optimistic about the idea of debt counseling. Probationers feel as though the probation officers or counselors assigned are not clear on the process and a realistic timeline by which there is no flexibility.

Ultimately, the clients feel as though they have little input on the process themselves (Beek et al., 2022). The lack of involvement instilled a form of distrust, by which the probationers reluctantly give out information to helping entities with the fear of information given will be shared with the police or assigned probation officer.

With these financial barriers in mind, probationers made mention of feeling hopeless for the future and acknowledging that a main goal is to obtain a steady job. In fact, a good number of probationers seem to worry more about finances than other life priorities, such as housing or work, and mention of limited support options (Beek et al., 2022). Probation officers and clients agreed on the idea of a small financial startup, that will go towards the benefit of the probationer, which will help give them the kick start that would be needed to begin the phase of rebuilding the probationer livelihood. Both parties also argue the idea of their need to implement a personalized approach that considers the unique circumstances of each probationer enables a more flexible strategy, fostering better alignment with individuals facing financial barriers (Beek et al., 2022).

These insights highlight the critical need for a more individualized approach to probation that addresses the specific financial challenges faced by each probationer. Such tailored strategies are necessary for the burden of sanctions and accumulated debt to be manageable, further complicating the probationer's ability to meet the conditions of their supervision. As we discuss sanctions and debt burdens, it becomes clear how these financial pressures can exacerbate the difficulties probationers face, often trapping them in a cycle of ongoing economic hardship and legal consequences.

Sanctions and Debt Burdens

Link's (2018) study utilized descriptive analysis, logistic regression, and negative binomial models to explore the issue of financial sanctions and the related debt burdens faced by individuals in the prison system. The study also suggests that prisoners face barriers prior to their release, which contributes to a challenging transition back into the community. The identified barriers include employment, income, and race.

Due to the constant talks in mainstream media and other outlets, results tend to show individuals released from prison have debts due to financial sanctions (Link, 2018). In states such as Texas, Illinois, and Ohio, nearly half of the individuals that were a part of the study reported having financial burdens due to financial sanctions; with financial sanctions being owed to various criminal justice agencies, the released individuals owe on average an amount of \$872 US and a median of \$260 US (Link, 2018). For the average individual not on probation these reported figures may not seem to be a lot, but for individuals just released from prison, it could be very daunting and further promote recidivism.

There are at least three reasons debts could hurt the reentry process of offenders and could lead them to reoffending. The first includes that of the criminal background, lack of work history, and disorganized neighborhoods awaiting offenders when returning to civilization (Link, 2018). This tends to make finding legitimate jobs that pay well for offenders even more difficult, making it even more difficult to pay back debts that are owed to the state or probation case. When probationers lack the financial resources to pay financial obligations, it further threatens a clean transition. It increases the possibility of

probation violations being sought by probation officers due to insufficient payments (Link, 2018).

Second, the idea of added debt for offenders also brings along a multitude of other negative consequences. The consequences of added debt include driver's license suspension, bad credit reports, and lack of housing opportunities (Link, 2018). Even with the projected consequences hovering over the offender's head, Link reported that these adverse consequences came about whether the offender had debt burdens or not. No matter how much the offender owed, the same consequences can come to fruition even when an offender must owe an extremely large amount of money (Link, 2018).

Lastly, Link mentioned most debt incurred by offenders are subjected to late penalties and fees that are imposed by the courts and other agencies. Due to the reality of most offenders not being able to afford the additional penalties and fees, it is just a matter of time before small debts become increasingly overwhelming. There is a strong correlation between both supervision and debt owed because probation/parole agencies normally access monthly supervision costs, and when it is not paid by the offender, the monies owed continues to add up (Link, 2018).

These accumulating financial burdens place probationers in an increasingly precarious situation, where the inability to pay leads to further debt and exacerbates the challenges they face in complying with probation requirements. This escalating cycle of debt can have profound effects on other aspects of a probationer's life, including their mental health and overall well-being. As we explore the intersection of offenders' age and

mental health, it becomes evident how these factors further complicate the probation process, particularly for those already struggling under significant financial strain.

Offender Age and Mental Health

Bryson et al. (2019) seek to examine the mental health needs and treatment utilization patterns of older adults on parole and probation. The barriers identified in the probationers' responses include age and mental health. The article effectively links age and mental health, offering valuable insights into why financial burdens are more prevalent among probationers. It is important to point out that mental health-related issues are more known amongst older individuals placed on probation or parole due to criminal involvement than older individuals who have not had any criminal involvement (Bryson et al., 2019).

The study conducted has shown that some form of mental illness either serious or moderate is prevalent amongst individuals on probation or parole. Mental illness tends to be more prevalent among older individuals, as evidenced by a higher proportion of older parolees or probationers receiving some form of mental health treatment within the first 12 months, compared to those not under supervision (Beek et al., 2022). The most interesting idea is that the age, gender, ethnicity, education levels, income, type of client, location, etc., did not deter the findings of the authors results. Older adults that tend to suffer from mental illness not in proportion to younger adults have high case of substance use disorders and socioeconomic disadvantages (Bryson et al., 2019). Ultimately, the kind of issues projected in this study call for coordinated attempts to find best ways to tackle a complex mental health issue, with the help of social service agencies.

Something that is talked about very little when discussing mental health of offenders, is that of the stigma for getting treatment. When treatment is provided to the offenders within the prison system, the inmates are more willing to participate in the program to receive treatment. Studies show that the “identification and treatment of mental health issues of older inmates while in the system, can ease the negative stigma, and could further help ease the mind of the inmate once released from the system” (Bryson et al., 2019). The inmate further engage in outpatient services and treat. Ultimately, early detection would help with a full integration of inmates back into society.

Continued support and coordination of services should not just begin and end within the prisons system it should continue once the inmate is released into probation/parole supervision. Probation and parole services also structure services and support for clients with known mental illnesses (Bryson et al., 2019). Doing this would once again ease the tension with the stigma of addressing the mental health of the probationers. With the stigma behind mental health treatment being addressed, probation officers could then better help probationers focus on more practical barriers such as the cost, coverage, distance from services, and not knowing where to go (Bryson et al., 2019). Best practices with helping individuals with mental health issues include that of furthering of research, structured needs assessment, introduction to resources within the community, educating community partners on the mental health population, and interventions that are grounded on evidence that has been proven to work (Bryson et al., 2019).

Addressing the mental health needs of probationers is crucial for ensuring their successful reintegration into society. However, whether public or private, the type of probation system can significantly influence the availability and quality of these necessary services. As we turn to the discussion of public versus private probation, it is essential to consider how the structure of the probation system itself can either support or hinder efforts to provide comprehensive care and reduce recidivism among probationers.

Public vs. Private Probation

When it comes to understanding the barriers of probationers, it is important to understand the institutions that could contribute to the financial burdens. Rogers (2018) provided an educational digest that discusses how private probation services drastically differ from public probation by the state. This article touches on how private probation agencies influence the financial barriers that probationers face daily. By touching on private probation and how it operates and deals with individuals ordered to serve time outside of public institutions, people can genuinely understand how private probation can further affect the financial stability of individuals on probation (Rogers, 2018).

Private probation, in the eyes of the public system, is not inherently bad. It could be seen this way because it further lines up with the interests of the court system and the public, eases the workload of probation officers and staff, further freeing them up with heavy caseloads (Rogers, 2018). The interests of the public are important because of the idea of taxpayers' dollars funding the supervision of offenders once released from prison or jail, or in most cases being ordered to probation run by the state the offender resides in meets resistance from those taxpayers. The private probation agencies have a vested

financial interest, because as long as the probationers remain on probation, the agencies will continue to receive tax dollars.

More importantly, to curb the overcrowding issue of jails and prisons in the U.S., America is now turning to probation more than ever. So in lieu of jail time, probation is being utilized more often for criminal sentencing (Rogers, 2018). There was research conducted in 2014 by an activist group named “Human Rights Watch”, where it was found that U.S. courts tends to sentence several hundred thousand to probation with for-profit companies for months and years (Rogers, 2018). The report that the activist group’s report focused on four states that included Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee. The report noted that the individuals facing financial hardships were required to pay for the following: court fines, supervision fees each month, and random drug and alcohol test (Rogers, 2018). The drug and alcohol test payments are important to note because people are ordered to pay for screening even though the probationer case did not involve drugs or alcohol. The offenders could also be ordered to pay for rehabilitation courses as well as fees for electronic monitoring (Rogers, 2018).

Paying for rehabilitation could very much be burdensome for the offenders because the offenders are also burdened with the penalties for not making the payments as ordered. The penalties for not paying could lead to jail time or the revocation of the client’s driver’s license (Rogers, 2018). Many of the people that were reported in this study were already considered to be financially below the poverty line within the state for which the client resides. This means that the clients potentially utilized court appointed attorneys due to the offender not being able to afford one.

A 2018 report conducted by Rogers exposed the firm control that the private agencies seemingly have over probationers. With the additional fees imposed on offenders, the private agencies have other tools for penalties, such as the issuance of probation violations, court-ordered summons, and arrest warrants (Rogers, 2018). The report mentioned the idea of fear tactics being utilized by probation officers with private agencies. It was reported by offenders that probationers made threatening or coercing statements when they did not have enough money to pay for their supervision and other conditions (Rogers, 2018).

With the fear of not being able to pay and the daunting consequences, some offenders just stop reporting all together, making their situation worse. There is seemingly an endless cycle of probationers who cannot afford the services of private agencies. With the cycle comes additional criminal charges, extension of probation terms, and expanding debt owed to the courts, jail, and now probation. Individuals that have money easily escape the cycle (Rogers, 2018).

Due to the negative publicity of privatized probation agencies and the filing of this report, a class action suit was filed in October 2015 in Tennessee against a private probation agency. The lawsuit alleged violations of racketeering laws by jailing impoverished individuals who fail to pay court fines for traffic violation and misdemeanor offenses and refusing to waive fees for the indigent (Rogers, 2018). The suit further alleged instances of probationers being unable to complete other treatment and services (community service, etc.) unless the probationers first paid the associated fees. The primary purpose of probation should be to rehabilitate any individuals that are

ordered to serve time, and to further help probationers break free from barriers that potentially were the cause for the criminal behavior.

With private probation agencies being for-profit agencies, it could be seen as an incentive to ensure that individuals stay on probation for as long as possible. In September of 2017, the class action suit in Tennessee was settled with PCC and Rutherford County agreeing to pay \$14.3 million (Rogers, 2018). The lawsuit claimed that when probationers were not able to pay, the individuals probation cases were revoked, and offenders were sentenced to jail in Rutherford County. After the lawsuit, Rutherford County cut all ties with the private probation agency (PCC) and handled all probation cases through the county moving forward.

Teague (2016) highlighted that the current probation system operates on an offender-funded model. This is significant, as the offender-funded system discussed in the article helps explain the economic barriers faced by offenders on probation in eastern North Carolina. The author mentions the similarities and differences of probation in the United States and the United Kingdom (UK). For instance, the issues of large probationer caseloads, limited resources for offenders and probation officers, offender management difficulties, and issues of high recidivism are all issues that plague both the US and the UK (Teague, 2016). It is important to highlight large probation caseloads because they reflect the ongoing evolution of probation officers' true responsibilities across the two countries.

Experts explain that probation is gradually transitioning from a model focused primarily on imposing conditions and monitoring to one that prioritizes risk assessment

and direct intervention, utilizing the offender's behavior as a tool to address problematic behaviors and prevent probationers from failing to complete their probation terms (Teague, 2016). That is why in the state of North Carolina, a risk and needs assessment is completed on every offender when placed on probation, to determine the level of supervision that will be applied to the probationer supervision case. Due to the complexities of probation cases, the qualifications to become a probation officer vary by state. In most cases a degree in criminal justice, social work, or an associated degree could be required (Teague, 2016).

This shift towards a more individualized and intervention-focused approach in probation highlights the evolving nature of the field, and the increasing recognition of the need for tailored strategies to support probationers effectively. Understanding the historical context and development of the American probation system provides essential insights into how these changes have come about and their impact on current probation practices. As we explore the evolution of the American probation system, it becomes clear how past reforms have shaped the contemporary landscape of probation, influencing both public and private models.

Evolution of American Probation System

Even with the standards and requirements of having a degree, most probation officers in the United States will be required to carry a firearm on duty. The practice of carrying a firearm is the one aspect that the UK seems to differ, especially when talking about the idea of intervention, and how the idea of carrying a weapon is supposed to help with the treatment of offenders. In fact, some states in the United States consider

probation officers as peace officers (Teague, 2016) and therefore must participate in in-service training dedicated and getting proficient in self-defense and handgun training to maintain probation licensure. Some experts say that this hardline of supervision in the USA could stem from the sheer number of individuals placed on probation or parole throughout the years. At the end of 2014, 7 in 10 people on correctional supervision were supervised in the community (Teague, 2016). The correctional supervision ratio being around 4,721,000 people (about twice the population of Kansas) who are either on probation (3,864,100) or parole/post release (856,900) in the USA (Teague, 2016). The reported offence that most of the probationers are placed on supervision for is that of drug offences.

With the high number of individuals being placed on probation, most states in America moved to a more privatized system, which is a more offender-funded probation. In 1929, Michigan became one of the first states to collect probation supervision fees from offenders. By the 1990s, an additional 29 states had followed suit, implementing similar charges for individuals under supervision (Teague, 2016). When thinking about the true purpose of charging offenders with supervision fees Teague considered the following: whether the charging of fees is following along with the original purpose of probation, and whether the charging of fees prevents offenders from successfully completing probation in a timely manner. Based on upon the most classic arguments, the charging of supervision fees will lead offenders to find other means of obtaining funds which could ultimately hinder the offender from completing probation successfully (Teague, 2016).

To fight against the privatized system, some agencies have begun to take a stand and have started to petition some states to investigate the offender-funded system. In 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), located in Atlanta, conducted a study of the privatized system that the state of Alabama uses for probationers, and has concluded that it is not fair and does not help to rehabilitate offenders better. The SPLC mentioned that the privatized probation is based on the idea of probation being funded by the service users which are the probationers for the supervision of the probationers. This is seemingly a way for the system to continue to take money from the already poor community. Knowing this, SPLC led the charge for the abolishment of what is considered “the modern-day debtors” (Teague, 2016).

The state of California has showcased a system that utilizes both the private and public system of probation that focuses on the rehabilitation of the offender. The California legislature allows for counties to have sole authority over the planning, designing, and allocating community supervision and support services (Teague, 2016). Autonomy allows for the counties within the state to determine not only which system to utilize, but also how it will be implemented based upon the barriers that exist in the county. The city of San Francisco Adult Probation Department (SFAPD) created a service center call the Community Assessment and Service Center. The SFAPD showcased a lot of good practices by implementing an intervention model that was heavily focused on collaborative case management (Teague, 2016). The collaborative approach allows for the probationers to learn from previous mishaps and prevents the probationers from circling back into the system. The San Francisco Adult Probation

Department has proven that private and public institutions of probation can co-exist with one another and be conducted in a moral way.

Wilfong et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study aimed at understanding why low income within the probation system in America disproportionately affects women compared to men. It is important to note that the number of women on probation has risen over the decades to nearly 1 million. This is crucial because the nearly 1 million women (about the population of Delaware) account for about 80% of the women within the criminal justice system (Wilfong et al., 2021). Probation was initially designed as a cost-effective alternative for offenders, offering judges the option to sentence individuals to probation. Probation, instead, became a system that became an additional barrier for men, and now women.

The first reason is a multifaceted one that includes the offenders not being able to meet the requirements of community supervision simply because of the difficulties of being able to keep up with the many sanctions. The sanctions include monthly supervision fees, random or monthly drug and alcohol tests, scheduled office appointments with the probation officer, participation in and payment for court-ordered treatment services, and other requirements mandated by the court or probation officer (Wilfong et al., 2021). These sanctions could be overwhelming for offenders, especially if barriers that were unforeseen by the judge or probation officer prior to sentencing. Most offenders will eventually violate the conditions of probation, that could lead to revocation making the suspended jail or prison sentence active (Wilfong et al., 2021).

The second reason is that with the federal criminal codes, the states started to change the way cases are being settled. With the ever-changing criminal codes, it could have been that in the past, certain crimes could have been settled by way of fines and fees but are now being settled by being placed on probation (Wilfong et al., 2021). As a result, people are starting to see more and more offenders participating in the criminal justice system based on low level crimes that would have otherwise been settled financially. Even though there is research that exists that links income with probation outcomes, the author mentioned there is limited research on how to improve financial issues of female offenders, and how creating programs could assist with that. If the probationers fail to comply with the conditions of probation set by the court, the probationer will then be arrested and sent to jail, because of a crime that would have never previously received jail time if it wasn't for the changing of the criminal code.

Like the male population of offenders, the financial problems that has always seemed to plague the female population is normally linked to that of limited resources within the community for which they reside (Wilfong et al., 2021). Studies revealed that women are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system when the community in which women reside are lacking the educational and economic resources, that are provided in other areas (Wilfong et al., 2021). Women have proven to be resilient in not allowing financial barriers to be the reason to violate the conditions and terms of probation, leading to incarceration. There are not many studies being conducted on whether financial support programs will prove to be beneficial for the women probationer populations. Most criminal justice systems tend to focus more on Community supervision

typically prioritizes the risk, needs, and responsivity of individuals, emphasizing personal factors over structural influences like financial circumstances that affect the lives of probationers. (Wilfong et al., 2021).

This focus on individual risk and needs often overlooks the broader structural challenges, such as financial barriers, that disproportionately impact specific groups, particularly women. To address these gaps, it is essential to examine how welfare and assistance programs designed to support probationers can help them overcome the economic hardships that may hinder their progress. As we delve into the discussion on probationer welfare and assistance programs, we will explore how these initiatives can play a crucial role in mitigating the financial challenges that probationers face, ultimately contributing to more successful outcomes.

Probationer Welfare/Assistance Programs

Studies have shown that programs such as life skills, resume building, interview preparation, and housing assistance have proven to be very effective when attempting to break down the financial barriers of probationers (Wilfong, et al. 2021). Wilfong stated that it will be beneficial to see how already existing government programs, such as Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), are currently helping the lower income population. Most of the probationers are below or at the poverty line. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) is based on factors such as a person's age, disability, and how long an individual has worked (USA.gov, 2023). SSDI is funded through individual payroll taxes as it is collected throughout the year. Recipients of SSDI

work to contribute under either the Federal Insurance Contributions Act for employees or the Self Employment Contributions Act for the Self-employed (Bystry, 2021).

Dependents that are qualified may also receive benefits even if work was never obtained. This could be based upon the disabled person by which they may have helped the individual qualify.

Another government program is that of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which used to go by the name the Food Stamp Program. SNAP is a program that seeks to provide A flexible pricing structure is established to accommodate individuals likely experiencing food insecurities, low wage working families, low-income seniors, people with disabilities, and others with limited incomes (moveforhunger.org, n.d). It is important to note that more than 50% of people that are participating in SNAP are individuals with children, and 40% of the individuals who are currently working. People receive more SNAP benefits when the family level of income is further below the poverty line, and as families get closer to the poverty line less SNAP benefits are received (moveforhunger.org, n.d.). The intended purpose of SNAP is to help individuals in need of further assistance for such things as rent, utilities, transportation, and medical bills.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a program that currently provides around \$16.5 billion (about \$51 per person in the US) to all U.S. States and its territories. The TANF program encourages states to create programs that are designated to help-low-income families with children fix financial insecurities (ACF.hhs.gov, 2022). TANF federal funds do not go directly to the public, but instead

the funds are given to the states and the states give them out in the form of monthly cash payments to those families that meet the grant requirements. There are four purposes of the grant that are: Supporting families in need of additional funds to care for children in their original guardian's or relatives' homes aims to reduce dependence on grant funding. This is achieved by promoting programs focusing on job preparation, employment, marriage, preventing and reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent households (ACF.hhs.gov, 2022).

Through the help of government assistance programs such as SSDI, the study conducted by Wilfong and other researchers has shown that the incarceration rates were positively impacted. In fact, it has shown that receiving financial assistance could be the key to further decrease some of the burden off women currently on probation (Wilfong et al., 2021). The study also pointed out that SSDI has proven to be consistent when it comes to releasing money to offenders with financial barriers and disabilities. SDI releases funds to qualified individuals monthly unlike that of TANF recipients. Employment services had little to no effect on the criminal justice outcomes of the probationers and could be explained by the types of jobs that are available to individuals involved in the criminal justice system (Wilfong et al., 2021). The jobs that are normally available are jobs that require a level of education that the individuals involved in the system currently do not have. Along with the offender's criminal record, most offenders end up having minimum wage jobs having to live paycheck to paycheck (Wilfong et al., 2021).

While financial assistance programs like SSDI have shown promise in alleviating some of the economic burdens faced by probationers, other challenges, such as mental health issues, remain significant barriers to successful reintegration. Addressing these mental health barriers is crucial, as they can exacerbate the difficulties probationers face, further complicating their ability to meet the conditions of their probation. As we turn to the discussion on offender mental health barriers, it becomes clear how mental health challenges intersect with economic and social factors to create a complex web of obstacles for probationers.

Offender Mental Health Barrier

Serious mental illness (SMI) is known to be a contributing factor to probationers' financial barriers. Epperson et al., (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the relationship between probation staff and a sample of ninety-eight probationers with serious mental illnesses (SMI) across three programs. The study explores probationers' perspectives on why they believe their mental health needs are not being adequately addressed. Data suggests that there are around 500,000 probationers that suffer from some form of SMI, including that of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression (Epperson et al., 2017). Along with the dealing of mental health illnesses, probationers must also refrain from committing any more criminal acts, not use any illegal drugs or substances, pay any monies owed on case, participate in any court ordered treatment, and maintain a place of residency. It is said that probationers with SMI tend to have the most complex cases due to SMI already having a complex set of factors being attached to it (Epperson et al., 2017). With the already mound of related risks and barriers hovering

over the offenders' heads, SMI being added puts the offenders in a viscous cycle of reoffending and probation failure.

The roles and relationships that probation officers have with the probationers is said to be crucial to the offender's success. Probation officers must be prepared to put forth the best effort possible when it comes to the offenders with SMI. The officers must put forth strategies that focus on relationship-building skills such as self-disclosure, active listening, and learning more about the assigned offender behavioral patterns (Epperson et al., 2017). One of probation officers' primary tasks is offering services and providing direct support for the offenders' needs and helping to curb behaviors that lead to reoffending. The nature of this task could be seen as therapeutic in nature and the interactions paint the probationer as being kind, neutral in any given situation, and nonjudgmental given the probationer's case (Epperson et al., 2017).

Through the utilization of the Dual Role Relationship Inventory-Revised (DRI-R), researchers were able to determine the importance of the probation officer and probationer relationship as it relates to the recidivism rate of probationers with SMI. The DRI-R was a system that was created, tested and validated, and results were drawn off a focus group's interviews consisting of probation officers and probationers. The DRI-R is a 30-item instrument that is used to further investigate the quality of the relationship between both officer and probationer, based on the conceptual and empirical understanding of therapeutic alliance formed between clinical practitioner and clients (Epperson et al., 2017). Research has shown that the more authoritative, demanding, inflexible, and belittling probation officers are, the more it will negatively affect the

treatment and criminal behaviors of the probationer that is currently dealing with SMI. It has been demonstrated by a group of parolees that the higher the DRI-R scores, the lower the rates of drug usage and parole violation, and the lower the DRI-R scores the easier it is to predict the outcome of recidivism by the offender (Epperson et al., 2017).

Most states also have specialized probation programs for probationers dealing with SMI. Specialized probation interventions are supposed to meet the needs of individuals dealing with SMI. Two examples of specialized programs are that of specialized mental health probation and mental health court (Epperson et al., 2017). In order for probation officers to deal with SMI caseloads that are assigned by the court, probation officers go through a series of professional development and training geared towards probationers diagnosed with SMI. Depending on the severity of the diagnosis of the offender SMI, probation officers are prepared to take on such caseloads whether the officer has a standard caseload or specialized caseload (Epperson et al., 2017). Probation officers with specialized caseloads consisting of SMI probationers must be prepared to integrate standard probation rules and conditions with that of community resources to better meet the needs and address issues related to probationer non-compliance.

Qualitative findings based on the DRI-R reports found the following traits: caring, fairness, support, toughness/authoritarianism, and trust/distrust, and to be crucial to the ultimate success of completing probation for individuals suffering from SMI. Caring was the first trait reported by the DRI-R because it was reported by more than half of the participants that the officer showcased this trait more than any of the other traits. While probationers perceived that probation officers cared about their cases, data revealed that

high levels of caring were associated with low levels of trust between both parties. Probationers attributed this lack of trust to actions taken by probation officers that they perceived as unjust, unfair, and authoritarian. (Epperson et al., 2017).

Fairness was the second trait, even though it could seemingly be paired with caring, since the probationers reported that when the officers seemed to be caring, probationers also viewed the officer to be fair when it came to decisions being made. It was reported by probationers that fairness to them was the probation officer treating them humanely and respectfully (Epperson et al., 2017). Support is the third trait that was reported by the DRI-R. Support is based on the grounds of the perceived actions and intentions of the probation officers. The probationer's perception of being supported is dependent upon feelings of being cared for by the probation officers. Unlike all the other traits, when the offenders feel supported and have the proper supportive services, it will strengthen a sense of care between both the probationer and probation officer (Epperson et al., 2017).

Toughness and authoritarianism are traits that coincide with one another. When probation officers display these two traits, they are seen as being demanding and inflexible, with an emphasis on compliance and control (Epperson et al., 2017). At times, probationers reported that probation officers can come across as bossy and rude, which could seem as though probation officers can care little about them as people. Trust and distrust seemed to be especially important depending upon which court the offenders were sentenced to probation from. The DRI-R revealed that probationers that came from the specialized mental health probation unit mentioned trust was not something that likely

existed with the mental health court probationers (Epperson et al., 2017). The probationers that were on standard probation reported a split as it related to trusting probation officers.

The complex dynamics of trust and authority between probation officers and probationers, particularly in cases involving mental health, highlight the challenges in establishing adequate supervision and support. These challenges are further compounded when probationers also struggle with substance use issues, which can significantly impact their ability to comply with probation requirements. As we transition to the discussion on probationer drug use, it is essential to explore how substance use disorders intersect with mental health and economic barriers, creating additional hurdles for probationers striving to meet the conditions of their supervision.

Probationer Drug Use

Reichert and Gleicher (2019) discuss how probation departments can take essential steps to help offenders overcome barriers related to drug use, specifically focusing on the crisis of opioid use disorders (OUDs). The article highlights that a lack of training hinders probation officers from effectively assisting offenders in making improvements. It is important to mention that probation officers' jobs also consist of managing individuals with OUDs, and to ensure that not only probationers receive treatment but ensure that the offender also gains access to recovery services (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019). It is important to discuss individuals suffering from substance use disorders (SUDs) because by the end of 2016, nearly 3.7 million people (about twice the population of New Mexico) were on probation and suffered from some drug addiction.

The barriers associated with the medications for individuals on probation include that of the negative views of the medications being utilized, the additional costs added to the probation case because of it, stigma, and diversion risks (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019). It is the responsibility of the probation officers to ensure that the offenders' barriers do not prevent the offenders from successfully completing probation in a timely manner. One way to help officers ensure that these barriers are addressed is by ensuring that officers receive more professional development training related to that of OUDs and medication-assisted treatment (MAT).

The financial barriers related to the cost of medications that the offenders are responsible for paying could be detrimental to the successful completion of probation. In fact, half of the probation departments that participated in the study reported costs associated with medication as a major barrier (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019). Some presented solutions posed by the probation departments to curbe the issue included that of working with the probationer's health care providers to better determine a reasonable price, or discussing payment plan options that will better accommodate the offender's current financial situation. There are some policy limitations related to the cost of the medications the offenders are required to take. As it is related to medications such as methadone, buprenorphine, and injectable naloxone, it can range from the most expensive to least expensive due to whether the insurance company that is covering the medication is a public or private insurer. To better help address the financial barriers associated with the cost of medication, healthcare providers have proposed to help do the following: eliminate prior authorizations for medications, provide transportation to and from

appointment visits, helping with childcare, and shorten length of appointment visits (Reichert & Gleicher, 2019).

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 begins with an introduction exploring the significant relationship between debt and crime, emphasizing how debt acts as a major risk factor for criminal behavior and recidivism. The literature search strategy outlines the various databases and search engines utilized to gather relevant literature, including specific terms and phrases essential in identifying sources related to probationers' financial barriers.

The theoretical foundation highlights Strain Theory, which explains how societal pressures and the lack of access to legitimate means can lead to deviant behavior among probationers. The literature review delves into key variables and concepts such as probationer debt and support, discussing the prevalence and types of debt among probationers and the necessary support they require. It examines the strong correlation between debt and criminal behavior, underscoring the challenges probation officers face in managing probationers with financial issues. The section on sanctions and debt burdens analyzes the impact of financial sanctions and associated debts on probationers, while the discussion on offender age and mental health investigates the mental health needs and treatment utilization patterns among older adults on probation.

The review also compares the influence of private versus public probation services on the financial barriers faced by probationers, providing a historical overview of the American probation system and highlighting the shift towards privatization and its implications. Additionally, it reviews various welfare and assistance programs available

to probationers and their impact on financial stability. The section on offender mental health barriers discusses the prevalence of serious mental illness among probationers and the associated challenges, while the segment on probationer drug use addresses how probation departments can support offenders with substance use disorders.

In summarizing the existing literature, it is evident that significant research has been conducted on the economic and social barriers probationers face, particularly regarding the challenges related to debt, employment, and financial instability. Studies have highlighted the direct correlation between these economic hardships and increased recidivism rates, as well as the role of probation officers in supporting probationers through these challenges. Additionally, research has explored the impact of mental health issues and substance use disorders on probationers' ability to comply with supervision requirements. However, despite these insights, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the specific perspectives of probation officers on how these economic barriers affect probationers' success, particularly in Eastern North Carolina. The intersection of financial challenges, mental health issues, and the varying structures of probation systems (public vs. private) also remains underexplored, particularly in terms of how these factors collectively influence probation outcomes.

The present study aims to address this gap by focusing on the perceptions of probation officers in Eastern North Carolina regarding the economic barriers that probationers face. By capturing the insights of those directly supervising probationers, this study will provide a unique and valuable perspective that has been largely overlooked in existing research. This focus on a specific geographic region, coupled with

the detailed examination of probation officers' experiences and observations, will not only fill a gap in the literature but also extend the knowledge within the discipline. The findings from this study are expected to contribute to more informed and targeted interventions, potentially leading to more effective support strategies that can help reduce recidivism and improve probation outcomes, particularly in regions facing similar economic challenges.

In conclusion, Chapter 2 summarizes the complex relationship between economic barriers and successful probation completion, emphasizing the need for individualized approaches to address these barriers effectively.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology employed in the study, emphasizing the appropriateness of a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of probation officers regarding the economic barriers faced by probationers in Eastern North Carolina. It describes the chosen research design and rationale, explaining why a qualitative methodology aligns with the study's objectives.

The role of the researcher is discussed to ensure transparency in the research process and to acknowledge potential biases. The methodology section details the criteria for selecting participants, including the targeted locations and the number of probation officers to be interviewed. It describes the tools and techniques used for data collection, such as structured interviews, and outlines the steps taken for participant recruitment, participation, and data collection. The data analysis plan explains the methods for analyzing the collected data, including thematic analysis.

Trustworthiness concerns are addressed by outlining steps taken to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings.

Ethical procedures are outlined to protect the participants' rights and confidentiality.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

A qualitative methodology is deemed most appropriate for the chosen research endeavor. Qualitative research is characterized by exploring and examining a specified phenomenon (Tenny et al., 2021). It delves into the lived experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of individuals involved in the study, refining and delineating hypotheses. Additionally, qualitative inquiry is particularly adept at addressing questions related to the processes and rationales behind phenomena, rather than merely quantifying them (Tenny et al., 2021). Considering the study requires an understanding of the perspectives held by probation officers, a qualitative approach aligns well with the objectives of the research.

This qualitative inquiry aims to explore the economic obstacles experienced by probationers, as perceived by probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. This study seeks to address a notable gap in research within the context of North Carolina Probation, specifically focusing on the potential barriers probationers encounter in the eastern region of the state. The training curriculum for Probation/Parole Officers encompasses twelve key areas, including administrative procedures, firearms proficiency, defensive tactics, courtroom protocols, case management, arrest protocols, emergency medical response, staff well-being, professional ethics, conduct standards, contemporary correctional theory, and administrative protocols (NCDPS.gov, 2021). The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policy and practice within the state, thereby facilitating the development of targeted interventions, training initiatives, or reviews of

probation conditions aimed at alleviating economic barriers faced by probationers. Such efforts have the potential to enhance the likelihood of probationers successfully completing their probationary terms in a timely manner.

This chapter outlines the methodology used to explore the perceptions of probation officers in Eastern North Carolina regarding the economic barriers that probationers face. It begins with an “Introduction” that provides an overview of the research design and establishes its relevance to the study's objectives. This section sets the foundation for understanding how the chosen methodology aligns with the study's intent to address the gap in knowledge identified in the literature.

The “Research Design and Rationale” section explains the decision to use a qualitative, phenomenological approach, focusing on its suitability for capturing probation officers’ lived experiences and professional insights. This design allows for a deeper exploration of individual experiences, which is essential for understanding the complex economic challenges faced by probationers. The rationale for selecting this approach is discussed in the context of the study’s goals, demonstrating how it effectively addresses the research questions and aligns with the identified gaps in previous studies.

The “Role of the Researcher” section discusses your involvement in the study, outlining your responsibilities in data collection and analysis. It also highlights potential biases that may arise due to your role and the strategies that will be employed to mitigate these biases. By addressing these concerns, this section ensures that the research process maintains its integrity and credibility, contributing to the reliability of the study's findings.

The methodology section outlines the procedures for participant selection, including the criteria for choosing probation officers with at least one year of experience. This section also covers the “Instrumentation” used in the study, such as interview guides. It details the “Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection”, ensuring that the methods are transparent and replicable.

The “Data Analysis Plan” section provides an overview of the thematic analysis approach, explaining how the data will be coded, categorized, and interpreted to identify key themes related to the economic barriers probationers face. The “Issues of Trustworthiness” section addresses the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, ensuring the research findings are robust and reliable.

The chapter concludes with a “Summary” section that recaps the key points of the methodology and emphasizes its role in guiding the study. This summary reinforces the relevance of the chosen research design and methods, highlighting their alignment with the study’s objectives. By setting the stage for the presentation of findings in the next chapter, this section establishes a clear connection between the research process and how the data will be analyzed to address the research questions effectively.

Research Design and Rationale

The current study will explore the reasons why economic barriers of probationers’ could prevent them from finishing probation in a timely manner. The aim is to understand the reasons behind probationers' economic barriers through the perceptions of probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. Ultimately, this knowledge could further help the NC Community Corrections Division better understand and provide assistance to

probationers whose economic barriers are seemingly preventing them from completing probation promptly. This study's research questions ask:

RQ1: What economic barriers prevent probationers in Eastern North Carolina from successfully completing probation promptly?

RQ2: How would a probation officer's first impressions of a probationers' economic barriers affect the successful completion of probation promptly?

Qualitative tradition is particularly well-suited to exploring the complex and nuanced perceptions of probation officers regarding the economic barriers faced by probationers in Eastern North Carolina. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and insights, which is essential for capturing the subtleties and context-specific factors that may influence probation outcomes.

The rationale for choosing a qualitative tradition is grounded like the research questions, which seek to understand the subjective experiences and perspectives of probation officers. While valuable for measuring and analyzing numerical data, quantitative approaches would not adequately capture the depth and richness of the insights needed to explore the multifaceted challenges probationers face. By using qualitative research, the study can delve into the complexities of the probation officers' experiences, allowing for a more holistic understanding of how economic barriers impact probationers and the role of the probation system in addressing these challenges. This approach aligns with the study's goal of filling a gap in the literature by providing

detailed, context-specific knowledge that can inform more effective interventions and policies.

Role of the Researcher

In the context of this study, my role is defined as that of a “participant” in the data collection process, specifically through conducting interviews with the probation officers. This role involves engaging directly with the participants to gather their insights and experiences related to the economic barriers probationers face.

As the researcher, active involvement will include facilitating the interviews, asking questions, and encouraging the probation officers to share their perspectives in a detailed and reflective manner. However, my involvement is limited to the data collection process through these structured interviews, without observing the participants' day-to-day work or activities. This approach allows me to focus solely on gathering the qualitative data needed for the study, ensuring that the participants' experiences and insights are captured accurately and comprehensively without the influence of direct observation.

For this research study, semi-structured interviews will be employed as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews offer an effective approach because they enable the researcher to gather open-ended data, facilitating an exploration of the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of probation officers concerning a specific topic, with a particular emphasis on eliciting deep, personal, and sensitive information (Dejonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). Although I am not currently employed as a probation officer, it is important to acknowledge that I have past experience as one and have also

worked as a professor of criminal justice. Recognizing the potential for bias stemming from these former roles, I aim to mitigate their influence on the research process. To minimize the impact of any biases, I will use a predetermined set of questions that I pose to each participant. Additionally, I only pose follow-up questions when they are pertinent to the ongoing conversation. I intend to maintain a nonbiased stance and refrain from influencing participants' responses.

Methodology

The plan is to interview at least 8 to 10 probation officers, with interviews continuing until saturation is achieved. Saturation occurs when new data repeats previous observations without providing any new information (Lakens, 2022). During the telephone interviews, participants will be asked questions as outlined in the Appendix.

Participant Selection Logic

The target population for this study comprises probation officers operating within the Eastern District of North Carolina. These officers are responsible for enforcing probation judgments and aiding probationers in overcoming barriers to successfully completing their probation terms. As part of their duties, probation officers identify relevant services to assist probationers in overcoming these barriers. Given their role and expertise, probation officers represent an ideal population from which to gather data, ensuring a meaningful and impactful analysis.

Given the study's focus on probation officers' perceptions of economic barriers among probationers in Eastern North Carolina, all interview participants will be certified probation officers stationed within the eastern district of North Carolina. Eligible

participants must have held certification as probation officers in North Carolina for a minimum of one year. This duration ensures that participants have sufficient experience supervising probationer caseloads, thereby providing valuable insights into probationers' economic challenges. To ascertain the eligibility of prospective participants, all individuals will receive a preliminary questionnaire via email. This questionnaire will include the following inquiries:

1. Are you a certified probation officer in the state of North Carolina?
2. Are you a certified probation officer working within the Eastern part of the state?
3. Have you been a certified probation officer for at least 1 year?

Recruitment efforts will involve the distribution of flyers at probation office locations in the eastern counties of North Carolina and posting a public recruitment announcement on Facebook. These strategies aim to reach and engage potential participants effectively.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews will be utilized for the research study. Semi-structured interviews are an effective method because it allows the researcher to explore the probation officers' professional thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on a particular topic, and, more importantly, to delve into deep, personal and sensitive information (Dejonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). Semi-structured interviews have emerged as a powerful tool for gathering rich and nuanced data. Unlike structured interviews, which follow a rigid set of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews offer a balance between flexibility and structure, allowing researchers to delve deeply into participants' experiences and perspectives while maintaining a degree of consistency.

Since the goal is to gather the perspectives of probation officers within the eastern region of North Carolina, the answers may vary based on their experience within their respective counties. Validity would be established by including interview participants from a large region and not just one county within the eastern region. All participants are probation officers in North Carolina, and the culture surrounding the economic barriers of probationers within the eastern region could affect the results. The interviewees would be asked a set of pre-determined questions along with any relevant follow-up question to clarify their statements. The interviews would be audio-recorded. The audio recordings would be used to transcribe each individual interview, and the transcriptions would then be organized into codes, categories, and themes.

Semi-structured interviews will afford the researcher the flexibility to adapt the questioning based on the flow of conversation and the unique responses of the participants (Madhuri et al., 2022). This adaptability will enable me to explore unexpected themes or insights that may arise during the interview questioning, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Allowing for natural conversation and active listening creates a supportive environment in which participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences (Horsfall et al., 2021).

One of the key advantages of semi-structured interviews is the ability to foster rapport and trust between researchers and participants. Allowing for natural conversation and active listening helps create a supportive environment in which participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences (Madhuri et al., 2022). This rapport is

essential for eliciting honest and authentic responses, minimizing social bias, and ensuring the validity of the data collected (Horsfall et al., 2021).

The qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews offer rich insights into participants' perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors. Unlike quantitative data, which are often limited in scope, qualitative data provide depth and context, allowing researchers to uncover underlying patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Techniques such as thematic analysis help identify recurring motifs within the data and develop interpretations that shed light on the proposed research questions (Murphy, 2022). This depth of analysis is crucial for generating meaningful findings and contributing to theory development in the social sciences (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The recruitment, participation, and data collection procedures will remain consistent for each research question (RQs). The aim is to gather data from a minimum of eight to ten probation officers in the eastern region of North Carolina, all of whom are fully certified with at least one year of experience post-certification. Data collection will involve conducting telephone interviews with the probation officers, each expected to last approximately 15-20 minutes. Interviews will be scheduled based on the availability of the interviewees.

Recruitment efforts will employ various methods including distributing flyers, posting recruitment notices on Facebook and LinkedIn, and sending emails to eastern region probation offices. The interviews will be conducted personally, with both the

initial questions and any follow-up inquiries being asked. All interviews will be recorded for accuracy.

Subsequently, the recorded interviews will be transcribed, and the transcriptions will be organized into codes, categories, and themes for analysis. Following the interviews, a debriefing procedure will be implemented, wherein participants will be thanked for their participation, provided with my contact information for any further inquiries, and reminded of the study's purpose.

Data Analysis Plan

During the interviews, participants will respond to predetermined questions, and their responses will be recorded. These recordings will then be transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, the transcriptions will be analyzed by identifying common elements, which will be organized into codes, categories, and themes. This process will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the data collected and allow for meaningful interpretation of the participants' insights and experiences.

The interview questions align closely with the research questions (RQs) by probing into the experiences, perspectives, and practices of probation officers regarding economic barriers faced by probationers. Questions such as "How much experience do you have as a probation/parole officer?" and "Why do you want to work as a probation officer?" provide context about the interviewee's background and motivations, which could offer insights into their approach towards addressing probationers' economic challenges.

Questions 3 and 4 directly address RQ1 by inquiring about common financial barriers faced by probationers and how these barriers impact their daily lives. By eliciting specific examples from probation officers, the responses can shed light on the economic obstacles prevalent in Eastern North Carolina and their real-world implications for probationers.

Similarly, questions 5, 8, and 9 delve into the consequences of economic barriers on probationers' ability to complete probation successfully, which aligns with the focus of RQ1. Understanding how probation officers perceive and address these challenges, and their strategies for facilitating positive changes provide valuable insights into the dynamics between economic barriers and probation outcomes.

Furthermore, questions 6 and 7 directly relate to RQ2 by exploring how probation officers formulate supervision plans and identify resources for probationers, particularly in economic constraints. These inquiries delve into the practical aspects of probation officers' roles and how their initial impressions of probationers' economic situations may influence their approach to supervision and support.

Finally, question 10 allows probation officers to share any additional insights or perspectives that may not have been captured by the preceding questions, providing an opportunity for them to offer nuanced reflections that could further inform the research questions.

Overall, the interview questions effectively correlate with the research questions by probing into probation officers' experiences, perceptions, and practices regarding economic barriers and their impact on probation outcomes in Eastern North Carolina.

Through these inquiries, the study aims to understand the complex dynamics surrounding economic challenges in the probation system and their implications for successful probation completion.

Analyzing the data collected through interviews will involve thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The process begins with “familiarization” with the data, which involves transcribing the interviews and reading the transcripts multiple times to become deeply acquainted with the content.

The next step involves “coding”, where specific text segments are labeled with codes that capture the essence of the data. These codes represent key ideas, concepts, or patterns that emerge from the interviews. The coding process will be systematic, assigning codes to relevant portions of the data across all transcripts. This allows identifying recurring patterns or themes that are significant to the research questions.

Following coding, the next step is “generating themes” by grouping related codes to form broader themes that reflect the underlying patterns in the data (Caulfield, 2019). These themes will then be reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represent the data and are relevant to the research questions. Each theme will be “defined and named” to convey its essence, making the analysis more accessible to readers.

I plan to use qualitative data analysis software such as “NVivo”. This software is helpful for organizing and managing large data sets, facilitating the coding process, and helping to identify and analyze themes systematically. NVivo allows for efficient sorting and retrieval of coded data, essential for thorough thematic analysis.

Regarding the “treatment of discrepant cases”, these are instances where the data does not fit neatly into the established themes or contradicts the emerging patterns. Discrepant cases will be carefully examined and reported in the analysis to ensure that the study reflects the full range of experiences and perspectives the probation officers share. Rather than being dismissed, these cases will be explored to understand their significance and how they might offer alternative insights or challenge the prevailing themes. This approach ensures that the analysis remains robust and comprehensive, acknowledging the complexity of the data.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To maintain credibility in this study, I will directly contact probation offices to recruit participants who are certified probation officers with at least one year of post-certification experience. This recruitment method serves as a form of member checking, ensuring that participants meet the specified criteria. Reflexivity will be employed to address potential biases, considering my previous experience as a probation officer.

To minimize researcher bias during analysis, analysis software will be utilized to generate codes, categories, and themes from the interview transcriptions. This approach aims to minimize personal bias’s impact and maintain the research findings’ integrity and objectivity.

Transferability

I acknowledge potential issues of transferability in this study due to the limited number of participants, who are all probation officers from the eastern region of North

Carolina. To mitigate these concerns, officers from various regional probation office locations will be included. The issues addressed in this study are prevalent nationwide, and the potential findings are expected to benefit adult corrections agencies broadly. However, the results are expected to be most relevant to probation agencies in North Carolina.

To enhance transferability, interview questions will be designed to apply to probation officers across various regions, extending beyond North Carolina. This broader approach increases the relevance of the findings to a wider audience. As a result, the insights gained from the study can be applied across the field of probation in diverse settings.

Dependability

To ensure the dependability of this study, an audit trail will be implemented. This involves recording the interviews in full and subsequently transcribing them. The transcriptions will serve as the basis for creating codes, categories, and themes, which will inform the conclusions drawn from the data. By comparing the original transcriptions with the codes, categories, themes, and findings, readers will be able to ascertain the dependability of the research process and findings. This methodological approach enhances transparency and enables the validation of the study's results.

Confirmability

To ensure the confirmability of this research study, reflexivity will be employed throughout the process. Acknowledging the researcher's background as a probation officer, the potential for bias influencing the study's outcomes is recognized. To mitigate

this, the literature review will guide the research process, and a predetermined set of interview questions will be utilized. Follow-up questions that naturally arise during interviews and are essential for clarification purposes will be included to uphold confirmability. This approach is intended to minimize the impact of personal bias and maintain the integrity and objectivity of the research findings.

Ethical Procedures

Certified probation officers in the eastern region of North Carolina with full certification and at least one year of post-certification experience will be recruited. Recruitment methods will include distributing flyers, posting on social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, and emailing probation offices in the region.

Prospective participants will receive a consent form detailing the study's purpose, a disclaimer informing the participant that the entirety of the dialog will be recorded and transcribed, and confidentiality measures that will ensure no names or personal identifiers are used in the final study. The form will also clarify that participation is voluntary, with no compensation offered, and participants may opt-out or discontinue the interview at any time without consequence. All research materials will be securely stored for a minimum of 5 years, with participant anonymity strictly maintained.

Acknowledging my past experience as a probation officer in the region, I'm aware of potential biases regarding economic barriers faced by probationers. To address this, a predetermined set of interview questions approved by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) will be adhered to. Follow-up questions will only be asked when

necessary for clarification purposes, ensuring objectivity and ethical integrity throughout the study.

Summary

Chapter 3 of the study details the research methodology, emphasizing the suitability of a phenomenological qualitative approach to understand the economic barriers faced by probationers through the perceptions of probation officers in Eastern North Carolina.

The gap that necessitated the use of a phenomenological qualitative approach lies in the lack of research specifically focusing on the economic barriers faced by probationers in Eastern North Carolina from the perspectives of probation officers. Previous studies have often generalized the economic challenges of probationers without delving into the nuanced and context-specific experiences of probation officers who interact with these individuals daily. The phenomenological approach allows for a detailed exploration of these lived experiences, providing richer and more contextually relevant insights that quantitative methods might overlook.

The chapter begins with an introduction explaining the rationale behind choosing a qualitative methodology, highlighting its effectiveness in exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of the study participants. This approach is deemed appropriate as it allows for a deeper understanding of the processes and rationales behind the phenomena being studied rather than merely quantifying them.

The section on research design and rationale elaborates on why a qualitative approach was selected, particularly focusing on the phenomenological method, which

aims to explore and describe the lived experiences of probation officers in dealing with probationers' economic barriers.

The role of the researcher is discussed to ensure transparency and address potential biases that could influence the study. This section emphasizes the importance of maintaining objectivity and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

The methodology section outlines the participant selection logic, detailing the criteria for selecting probation officers from targeted locations in Eastern North Carolina. It describes the instrumentation used, such as structured interviews, and the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. The data analysis plan is explained, focusing on thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns in the collected data.

Issues of trustworthiness are addressed by discussing measures taken to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Ethical procedures are outlined to protect participants' rights and confidentiality, ensuring the research adheres to ethical standards.

Chapter 4 will present the results of the study. It will begin with an introduction, followed by a description of the pilot study, if applicable, and the setting in which the research was conducted. Demographic information of the participants will be provided to contextualize the findings. The chapter will then detail the data collection process and the methods used for data analysis. The main section will present the results of the study, highlighting key themes and patterns identified through thematic analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to better understand probation officers' perceptions of the economic barriers that probationers face in Eastern North Carolina, particularly how these barriers prevent them from successfully completing probation. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What economic barriers prevent probationers in Eastern North Carolina from successfully completing probation in a timely manner?
- **RQ2:** How would a probation officer's first impressions of a probationer's economic barriers affect the successful completion of probation in a timely manner?

To answer these research questions, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. The interview questions were designed to align with the research questions and explore the perceptions and insights of probation officers regarding the economic challenges probationers face.

This chapter presents the study's results, including a discussion of the study's setting, participant demographics, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods. Additionally, it includes an examination of the evidence of trustworthiness in the research process. The findings from the interviews will be analyzed in relation to the research questions, revealing key themes and patterns regarding the economic barriers that probationers in Eastern North Carolina encounter and the role probation officers play in addressing these challenges.

Setting

This study focuses on probation officers employed in Eastern North Carolina. The research was conducted remotely via Zoom to accommodate participants' schedules and maintain confidentiality. Participants were instructed to conduct the interviews in a quiet, private space, such as their home office, vehicle, or a secluded work environment. This setup was selected to ensure that the interviews would not disrupt the officers' daily work duties while protecting their responses' confidentiality. The timing of the interviews varied to align with both the officers' and my availability, and they were scheduled throughout the week, including weekends, over a two-week period. Interviews were conducted between 10:00 AM and 8:00 PM. Although each interview was scheduled for one hour, all interviews lasted no longer than 37 minutes.

Demographics

For this qualitative phenomenological study, the recorded demographics focused on whether the participant was a probation officer and the number of years of service, provided they had at least one year of work post-certification. An important aspect that emerged during the interviews, however, was the varying positions held by the officers, which contributed to the diversity of expertise and experience within the group. While all participants were certified probation officers, their roles within probation varied significantly. One participant served as a field training specialist, four held the chief probation officer role, one worked as a judicial district manager (JDM), and the remaining six were probation officers with no administrative responsibilities aside from potentially having a specialized caseload. Gender, race, and office location were excluded

from the demographic data to maintain confidentiality for each participant. However, it is important to note that although location is not mentioned in the study, it was verified in the eligibility questionnaire whether the officers worked within the Eastern North Carolina region in order to qualify for participation in the study. These variations in roles provided unique perspectives on the financial barriers faced by probationers, as officers with different levels of experience and responsibility brought different insights into the impact of these barriers on probation compliance. Table 1 displays the participant demographics.

Table 1

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

PARTICIPANT	Occupation	Role	Years of Experience
P1	Probation Officer	Chief Probation Officer	8
P2	Probation Officer	Chief Probation Officer	15
P3	Probation Officer	Probation Officer	1
P4	Probation Officer	Probation Officer	4
P5	Probation Officer	Probation Officer	8
P6	Probation Officer	Probation Officer	6
P7	Probation Officer	Field Training Specialist	7
P8	Probation Officer	Probation Officer	1
P9	Probation Officer	Probation Officer	7
P10	Probation Officer	Chief Probation Officer	29
P11	Probation Officer	Judicial District Manager	15

P12	Probation Officer	Chief Probation Officer	15
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Data Collection

This study's primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews with probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. A total of 12 probation officers participated in the study. IRB approval was obtained through Walden University (Approval #10-30-24-1040467). Before recruitment could begin, I was required to obtain additional approval from the North Carolina Department of Adult Corrections (NCDAC). After submitting my research proposal to the NCDAC Research Committee and receiving approval, I forwarded the approval letter to Walden's IRB. Upon confirmation that no additional actions were needed, I began participant recruitment.

Recruitment was conducted through social media platforms, including Facebook and LinkedIn, where I posted a recruitment flyer. Officers interested in participating contacted me through either social media direct messages or email. Snowball sampling also occurred—some participants referred their colleagues to the study by sharing my contact information. These additional officers then contacted me independently to express their interest in participating.

Each interested participant was asked to provide their email address, to which I sent an eligibility screening survey. The survey included three probing questions to confirm whether they met the study criteria, as outlined in Chapter 3. If they qualified, I sent a congratulatory email with a copy of the study's informed consent form and the

NCDAC approval letter. Participants were instructed to respond with “I Consent” before an interview could be scheduled.

All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. The interviews were scheduled at times convenient for each participant and took place over a two-month period. Interviews occurred once per participant and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes each. Zoom’s built-in recording and transcription features were used to document the interviews. Additionally, I maintained a backup audio file for each session and took brief observational notes during each interview.

As outlined in Chapter 3, the initial plan was to rely on voluntary responses to the social media recruitment flyer. However, due to initial hesitancy from some officers, I attempted to reach out to a regional probation administrator to gain local approval or a formal letter of support. Unfortunately, responses from local administrators were either delayed or nonexistent, and some were unfamiliar with the proper procedures. I contacted the Secretary’s Office of NCDAC to address this barrier directly. The Secretary's Office referred me to the NCDAC Research Department, where I obtained official state-level approval. This letter of approval was then used to reassure hesitant participants and shared with any administrators upon request—an unplanned but necessary adaptation to the original data collection approach.

One unusual circumstance encountered during data collection was the challenge of gaining trust and approval at the local administrative level. The lack of clarity around the internal process for research approval among regional administrators caused delays. The use of snowball sampling also emerged organically, as initial participants referred to

others, which helped accelerate recruitment after a slow start. Member checking was conducted by emailing each participant a copy of their Zoom-generated transcript and asking them to review it within 48 hours. Some participants confirmed the accuracy of their transcripts, while others did not respond within the timeframe. For those who did not reply, it was assumed that the transcripts accurately reflected their responses.

Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews and collecting the auto-generated transcripts from Zoom, I manually edited each transcript to ensure accuracy and alignment with what participants stated during their interviews. Following this, I conducted member checking by emailing each participant a copy of their revised transcript and requesting confirmation of its accuracy. Once I received participant approval, I uploaded the finalized transcripts into NVivo 15 for qualitative analysis.

I used thematic analysis as my primary analytical strategy, following an inductive approach to move from individual coded units to broader categories and themes. I began by reading each transcript line by line, carefully highlighting recurring words, phrases, and ideas. This process led to the development of the initial code based on the language used by participants and the issues they emphasized. Because I manually edited transcripts and conducted member checking, I reviewed each transcript twice—first for accuracy and second for analysis. This allowed me to identify frequent terminology but also co-occurring words and meaningful patterns across interviews (Ozden, 2024).

From this iterative process, I generated 26 codes, which were grouped into eight categories and refined into seven overarching themes. These themes were aligned with

the study's two research questions. Three major themes emerged for Research Question 1, which explored economic barriers to probation completion. The first, Economic Barriers to Stability, captured the challenges related to employment, wages, and financial obligations. P1 explained, "They want to do right, but they can't keep a job long enough to pay the fees, let alone their rent or food" (P1). P4 added, "They can't find employment that is willing to accept their background... they get hired by temp agencies, then get fired after background checks" (P4). These financial pressures were consistently described as influencing probationers' ability to comply with supervision requirements.

The second theme, Access to Essential Services, reflected housing, healthcare, transportation, and education barriers. According to P2, "There are probationers who don't have running water, but they're expected to pay \$3,000 to \$4,000 in fees" (P2). P6 reinforced this reality, stating, "We have people missing appointments because they don't have a ride or can't afford the gas. That's not willful neglect—it's poverty" (P6). These quotes underscore the reality that many probationers face competing demands between basic survival needs and meeting probation conditions.

The third theme for RQ1, Systemic and Legal Challenges, revealed the persistent effects of having a criminal record. P2 stated, "That record follows them everywhere. Even when they try to get help, they're denied because of it (P2). This highlights how structural barriers related to criminal history limit access to employment and services, further complicating the probationer's journey.

Four themes were developed for Research Question 2, which examined how probation officers' first impressions shape probation outcomes. The first theme, Building

the Foundation for Success, emphasized the importance of early engagement. P1 noted, “The first meeting sets the tone. If I show them, I care and I’m listening, they’re more likely to open up and stay on track” (P1). Officers consistently discussed the value of building rapport in establishing a productive supervisory relationship.

The second theme, Motivation and Support for Positive Change, addressed how officers used encouragement and mentoring to influence behavior. P7 stated, “Once I started speaking life into people, they seem to grab the reins and run with it” (P7). This highlights the importance of emotional support in guiding probationers toward success. The third theme, Leveraging Community Resources and Partnerships, focused on how officers connected clients with local services. P6 said, “We have different places that offer substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, and job assistance... as probation officers, it’s our job to stay informed” (P6). This proactive networking was critical to meeting the needs of those under supervision.

The final theme, Structured Risk and Needs Assessment illustrated the use of formal tools in shaping supervision plans. P1 explained, “We use the RNA to calculate how likely they are to commit a crime within the next year... and we build the case plan from that” (P1). Officers described how these assessments helped identify needs early and build individualized strategies to improve outcomes.

During the analysis, I also accounted for discrepant cases where participant experiences or views did not align with the dominant themes. For example, while most officers emphasized the role of structural and financial challenges, P4 offered a contrasting view, stating, “Some just don’t want to follow the rules... they’re more

comfortable going back to whatever they did to get themselves on probation” (P4). Rather than exclude this perspective, I created a subtheme under “Motivation and Support for Positive Change” to reflect the complex interplay between personal responsibility and structural barriers. Including discrepant cases ensured a more comprehensive and balanced interpretation of the data.

NVivo 15 was essential in managing the large volume of qualitative data. It allowed me to organize, code, and track relationships across transcripts systematically. During analysis, I combined overlapping codes and eliminated redundant ones to sharpen the emerging themes. Before finalizing the analysis, I revisited each transcript and reviewed the final set of codes, categories, and themes to confirm that no significant data had been overlooked or unintentionally excluded. There were no discrepant cases to analyze.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To establish credibility, several strategies proposed in Chapter 3 were fully implemented, including prolonged engagement, member checking, and triangulation through transcript validation (Ahmed, 2024). Each Zoom interview was transcribed using the platform’s auto-transcription tool, and I then manually reviewed and corrected the transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected the participants’ words. Once edited, I sent each transcript to the corresponding participant for member checking, allowing them to verify the content and offer corrections or clarification. This process enhanced the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data. Additionally, I reviewed each transcript twice, first for accuracy and second during the coding phase, to deepen my engagement

with the data and ensure a thorough understanding of participants' perceptions. This prolonged interaction with the dataset allowed for the emergence of nuanced themes and reduced the likelihood of researcher misinterpretation.

For transferability, I provided rich, thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures. The study focused on probation officers from counties in Eastern North Carolina which are representative of rural and economically diverse areas within the state. Detailed descriptions of each participant's role and experiences, along with quotes directly from the transcripts, allow readers to determine whether the findings are applicable to similar populations or settings. Although the study focused on a specific geographic area, the commonalities in economic challenges faced by probationers such as employment difficulties, transportation issues, and probation-related fees, enhance the potential for transferability to other under-resourced regions.

To ensure dependability, I followed the systematic data collection and analysis plan detailed in Chapter 3. All interviews were conducted via Zoom using a standardized interview protocol. I documented all steps of the process from recruitment and consent to data collection, transcription, member checking, and thematic analysis, creating an audit trail of decisions made throughout the study (Ahmed, 2024). NVivo 15 was used to manage and code the data, and the coding structure was continuously updated as themes were refined. Additionally, I revisited my coding and themes at the end of the analysis to verify consistency across transcripts. These steps demonstrate a commitment to reliability and confirm that the findings could be replicated using the same methodology.

Regarding confirmability, I took deliberate steps to minimize researcher bias and ensure that findings were firmly grounded in the participants' data rather than personal assumptions. One key strategy was the implementation of member checking, which involved sending the final, edited transcripts to each participant for review and confirmation of accuracy (Ahmed, 2024). This process ensured that participants' perspectives were authentically represented. Throughout the study, I also maintained reflexivity by consistently documenting analytical decisions and actively reflecting on how my role as the researcher might influence interpretation.

To further support transparency, I preserved an audit trail detailing coding decisions, the evolution of themes, and any modifications made during the analysis process. Additionally, I incorporated discrepant cases into the final analysis. For example, one participant (P4) expressed the belief that some probationers fail not because of systemic or economic barriers, but due to a lack of personal accountability. Including this divergent viewpoint helped capture the complexity and variability of perspectives within the data. Acknowledging such outliers strengthened the study's trustworthiness by demonstrating that conclusions were drawn inclusively and not selectively constructed to favor a single narrative.

Results

This qualitative study aimed to explore the economic barriers that probationers in Eastern North Carolina face in completing probation in a timely manner, as well as to examine how probation officers' first impressions of these barriers influence probation outcomes. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with twelve probation

officers and analyzed through thematic coding using NVivo 15. Twenty-six codes were organized into eight categories and used to develop seven themes across the two research questions. These findings reflect the real-world experiences and perceptions of probation officers, who offered insight into the structural, financial, and personal challenges their clients face on a daily basis.

In response to Research Question 1, which asked, “What economic barriers prevent probationers in Eastern North Carolina from successfully completing probation in a timely manner?”, three central themes emerged: Economic Barriers to Stability, Access to Essential Services, and Systemic and Legal Challenges. These themes were grounded in categories such as Employment and Income Barriers, Basic Living Needs and Financial Strain, Educational and Resource Barriers, and Criminal Record and Legal Barriers. Officers consistently described how chronic unemployment, low wages, and costly probation-related fees, such as electronic monitoring, lead to extended probation terms and frequent noncompliance. Participants like P1 and P4 shared how probationers are often hired and then released due to background checks, while P2, P5, and P10 noted that even those who find work struggle to manage basic living costs and restitution. Additionally, participants described how lack of transportation, housing, access to treatment, and educational opportunities further limit probationers' ability to comply. P6 and P2 spoke of individuals who miss appointments due to poverty or live without basic utilities while under court supervision. Structural barriers, such as the lingering effects of a criminal record, were emphasized by officers like P2, P6, and P8, who detailed how probationers are denied jobs and housing, even when they are compliant. While most

officers attributed probation failure to these economic and systemic challenges, P4 offered a contrasting view, suggesting that some individuals choose not to follow the rules. This counter-narrative was included as a discrepant case and provides important context for understanding the full range of probation officer perspectives. Overall, the responses reflect how economic insecurity and limited access to services are inextricably linked to probation failure, revealing that success is not solely determined by individual behavior but by broader structural realities.

For Research Question 2, which asked, “How would a probation officer’s first impressions of a probationer’s economic barriers affect the successful completion of probation in a timely manner?”, four key themes emerged: Building the Foundation for Success, Motivation and Support for Positive Change, Leveraging Community Resources and Partnerships, and Structured Risk and Needs Assessment. These themes were derived from the categories Initial Engagement and Assessment, Supportive Interventions and Motivation, Resource Identification and Community Partnerships, and Risk and Needs Assessment, and included twelve distinct codes such as Building Rapport, Self Report, Motivational Support, TASC, and RNA. Officers emphasized the importance of early engagement strategies, explaining that the first meeting with a probationer often sets the tone for the entire supervision experience. P1 and P3 highlighted how empathy and careful listening build trust, while P5, P7, and P10 described using formal assessments like the ISI and OTI to identify immediate financial needs. Motivation was also shown to play a key role. P7 and P2 reported that recognizing a probationer's efforts, no matter how small, encouraged continued compliance. P4 and P11 emphasized that consistency

and belief in the client's potential were essential to sustaining progress. Officers also noted the importance of community-based resources. P6 and P12 discussed the value of partnerships with agencies that provide housing, treatment, and job support, while P8 and P9 explained that many probationers are unaware of available help unless officers guide them toward it. Finally, structured tools like the RNA and PRIDE assessments were seen as critical in forming case plans and reducing officer bias. These tools helped identify high-risk needs early and shaped supervision strategies accordingly. The collective data from all twelve participants illustrated that officers who build rapport, apply structured tools, and connect clients to external support systems are more successful in helping probationers navigate economic hardship and ultimately complete supervision.

The following sections of this chapter present a detailed analysis of each research question. Direct participant quotes support the themes, organized according to the categories and codes established through the analytical framework. Tables are included as appropriate to illustrate the coding structure and relationship between themes. This results offer a thorough and transparent account of how probation officers perceive, assess, and respond to the economic realities of their clients, setting the foundation for deeper interpretation in Chapter 5.

Research Question 1:

What economic barriers prevent probationers in Eastern North Carolina from successfully completing probation in a timely manner?

Data analysis revealed three core themes in response to Research Question 1: Economic Barriers to Stability, Access to Essential Services, and Systemic and Legal

Challenges. These themes were identified through a systematic coding and categorization process in NVivo 15 and reflect shared experiences across the twelve interviewed probation officers. Each theme was supported by multiple categories and codes that captured the lived realities of probationers navigating supervision while managing financial hardship, limited access to services, and systemic obstacles. Table 2 provides a concise overview of the three key themes, their corresponding categories, and the specific codes derived from participant responses to Research Question 1.

Table 2

RESEARCH QUESTION 1 SUMMARY

	Themes	Categories	Codes
1	Economic Barriers to Stability	Employment and Income Barriers, Basic Living Needs and Financial Strain	Employment Issues, Low Wages, Electronic Monitoring Costs, Extended Probation Due to Non-Payment, Reverting to Crime Due to Financial Issues
2	Access to Essential Services	Basic Living Needs and Financial Strain, Educational and Resource Barriers	Housing Affordability Issues, Medical Bills, No Transportation, Probation and Court Fees, Restitution, Lack of Education, Substance Abuse Treatment Costs
3	Systemic and Legal Challenges	Criminal Record and Legal Barriers	Criminal Record

Theme 1: Economic Barriers to Stability

This was shaped by the Employment and Income Barriers category, which included employment issues, low wages, electronic monitoring costs, extended probation due to non-payment, and reverting to crime due to financial issues. Officers explained that many probationers struggle to maintain steady employment due to their criminal

records or limited local opportunities. This instability leads to difficulties covering probation-related costs and often results in extended probation terms. For example, P1 stated, “They want to do right, but they can’t keep a job long enough to pay the fees, let alone their rent or food.” Similarly, P4 described how temporary job placements often end after background checks are completed: “They can’t find employment that is willing to accept their background... they get hired by temp agencies, then get fired after background checks.” P2 and P9 noted that even when employment is secured, wages are often too low to support basic needs or supervision costs. P5 emphasized the compounding effect of financial strain, stating, “If they can’t pay restitution or fees, their probation gets extended. It’s like they’re punished for being poor.” Other participants, such as P8 and P10, pointed to the burden of paying for electronic monitoring while also managing essential expenses like rent or groceries. P6 and P11 further observed that probationers often become discouraged when they feel unable to “get ahead,” describing an emotional toll that contributes to technical violations and reduced motivation. These examples highlight how chronic economic instability leads to noncompliance and delays in successful probation completion.

Theme 2: Access to Essential Services

Informed by the categories Basic Living Needs and Financial Strain and Educational and Resource Barriers. The relevant codes included housing affordability issues, medical bills, no transportation, probation and court fees, restitution, lack of education, and substance abuse treatment costs. Participants described how gaps in basic needs and support services make it difficult for probationers to meet supervision

expectations. P6 stated, “We have people missing appointments because they don’t have a ride or can’t afford the gas. That’s not willful neglect, it’s poverty.” P2 described more extreme cases where individuals lacked utilities but still faced steep financial penalties: “There are probationers who don’t have running water, but they’re expected to pay \$3,000 to \$4,000 in fees.” P3 explained that probationers with chronic health conditions often fall behind due to medical expenses, while P7 noted that even those willing to seek substance abuse treatment may be unable to afford or access it without a court order. P12 added that treatment availability varies across counties, with long waitlists and transportation challenges being common issues. The emotional burden of these circumstances was also discussed by P9, who stated, “Some of them are trying, but they’re so overwhelmed with life that probation becomes just another pressure.” Additionally, P11 identified lack of education as a long-term barrier, explaining, “Without a GED or diploma, a lot of doors stay closed, especially in rural areas where job options are already limited.” Collectively, these perspectives show how structural inequities related to access—not just behavior—contribute to noncompliance and extended supervision.

Theme 3: Systemic and Legal Challenges

Emerged from the Criminal Record and Legal Barriers category, which included the sole but frequently referenced criminal record. Officers emphasized how probationers continue to face systemic disadvantages long after their offense, particularly in housing, employment, and access to supportive services. P2 stated, “That record follows them everywhere. Even when they try to get help, they’re denied because of it.” P6 shared

similar frustrations, explaining, “Probationers who are doing everything right still get turned away because of their record. It’s frustrating for them and us.” P8 spoke to the hopelessness this creates: “They tell me, ‘What’s the point of staying out of trouble if no one’s going to give me a chance anyway?’” According to P10, housing discrimination is a common issue, as “even housing applications get denied when they see a criminal background. And if they do get housing, it’s usually in poor conditions.” P3 and P12 discussed how these structural limitations are particularly hard on probationers with families, while P7 observed, “We’re telling them to be productive, but the system blocks them at every step.” These accounts reveal that the stigma of a criminal record creates additional, long-term hurdles that make successful reintegration and probation completion more difficult, even for those who are otherwise compliant.

A discrepant case was presented by P4, who expressed skepticism about whether economic barriers are the primary cause of probation failure. P4 stated, “Some just don’t want to follow the rules... they’re more comfortable going back to whatever they did to get themselves on probation.” While this perspective differed from the broader consensus, it was not excluded from analysis. Instead, it was integrated into the findings as a counter-narrative that adds complexity to the discussion, reinforcing that both structural and personal factors may influence probation outcomes.

In sum, the responses from all twelve participants illustrate that probationers in Eastern North Carolina face multiple overlapping economic challenges that significantly affect their ability to comply with the conditions of their supervision. The use of clearly defined codes and categories, ranging from income instability and limited transportation

to systemic stigma and lack of educational access, allowed for the development of three robust themes. These findings reinforce the idea that probation completion is shaped not only by individual behavior but by a broader network of economic, social, and legal barriers that must be acknowledged and addressed to support long-term success.

Research Question 2:

How would a probation officer's first impressions of a probationer's economic barriers affect the successful completion of probation in a timely manner?

The analysis of participant responses to Research Question 2 produced four key themes: Building the Foundation for Success, Motivation, and Support for Positive Change, Leveraging Community Resources and Partnerships, and Structured Risk and Needs Assessment. These themes were derived from twelve codes that fell within four categories: Probation Officer's Initial Engagement and Assessment, Supportive Interventions and Motivation, Resource Identification and Community Partnerships, and Risk and Needs Assessment. The themes reflect how probation officers' early interactions with probationers, including their assessment of financial conditions and personal motivation, shape the tone, trajectory, and outcomes of probation supervision. Participants emphasized the importance of empathy, structure, and access to tools and resources in building effective support systems for probationers facing economic barriers. Table 3 provides a concise overview of the four key themes, the corresponding categories they fall under, and the specific codes derived from participant responses to Research Question 2.

Table 3

RESEARCH QUESTION 2 SUMMARY

	Themes	Categories	Codes
1	Building the Foundation for Success	Probation Officer's Initial Engagement and Assessment	Building Rapport & Communication, Carry Guides, Initial Office Management Contact (IOMC), Initial Supervision Interview (ISI), Offender Traits Inventory (OTI), Self Report
2	Motivation and Support for Positive Change	Supportive Interventions and Motivation	Motivational Support for Change, Criminogenic Needs
3	Leveraging Community Resources and Partnerships	Resource Identification and Community Partnerships	Community Partnership, PRIDE, TASC
4	Structured Risk and Needs Assessment	Risk and Needs Assessment	Risk Needs Assessment (RNA), PRIDE

Theme 1: Building the Foundation for Success

Emerged from the category Probation Officer's Initial Engagement and Assessment, which included codes such as Building Rapport & Communication, Carry Guides, Initial Office Management Contact (IOMC), Initial Supervision Interview (ISI), Offender Traits Inventory (OTI), and Self Report. Participants emphasized that the initial meeting between officer and probationer is crucial in establishing mutual trust, understanding economic hardships, and creating a foundation for success. P1 explained, "The first meeting sets the tone. If I show them, I care and I'm listening, they're more likely to open up and stay on track." Similarly, P3 stated, "If they feel like you're judging them from day one, they won't come to you when something goes wrong." Officers frequently described using tools such as the ISI and OTI to identify barriers like unstable housing, lack of transportation, or minimal income, which could hinder compliance. P5

noted, “I always ask about transportation, income, and housing in the first meeting. If they don’t have those, we need to talk about them immediately, not after they miss an appointment.” P7 and P9 emphasized the importance of open communication early on, especially when working with probationers who may be embarrassed or defensive about their financial situation. P10 shared, “Sometimes just letting them vent that first day helps you understand what they’re going through.” These accounts reflect a shared belief that when officers take the time to build rapport and assess economic needs upfront, probationers are more likely to stay engaged and compliant throughout supervision.

Theme 2: Motivation and Support for Positive Change

Derived from the category Supportive Interventions and Motivation, which included Motivational Support for Change and Criminogenic Needs. Participants emphasized how offering consistent encouragement and helping probationers set realistic goals can positively influence compliance, especially for those burdened by financial stress. P7 explained, “Once I started speaking life into people, they seem to grab the reins and run with it.” P2 spoke to the value of recognition, stating, “When I acknowledge their struggle and still celebrate their progress, even small wins, they try harder.” Some officers pointed to structured support as essential, with P4 stating, “They’re used to people giving up on them, but if they see that I haven’t, that motivates them to keep showing up.” P11 echoed this sentiment, describing how some probationers simply wait for someone to believe in their potential: “Some of them are just waiting for someone to believe in them.” These reflections reinforce the notion that officer encouragement and

strategic motivational interventions can help probationers remain compliant and resilient despite their economic limitations.

Theme 3: Leveraging Community Resources and Partnerships

Grounded in the category Resource Identification and Community Partnerships, supported by the codes Community Partnership, PRIDE, and TASC. Officers reported that their ability to link probationers with external support services often determined whether individuals could overcome economic challenges. P6 explained, “We have different places that offer substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, and job assistance... as probation officers, it’s our job to stay informed.” P12 described the importance of creativity and networking, especially in rural communities: “Without partnerships, we can’t offer much. I call in favors, use my contacts, whatever I can.” Officers shared that many probationers were unaware of the services available to them, which makes the officer’s role as a connector essential. P8 stated, “Half the battle is letting them know there are places that can help, especially with transportation or housing.” P9 emphasized the utility of programs like PRIDE and TASC in addressing unmet needs: “They’re a lifeline for people who need services we can’t directly give.” These accounts affirm that probation officers who actively engage with community partners can significantly improve the likelihood of probationer success by addressing the economic and social barriers that fall outside the justice system’s direct reach.

Theme 4: Structured Risk and Needs Assessment

This theme originated from the Risk and Needs Assessment category, with codes including Risk Needs Assessment (RNA) and PRIDE. Participants described how formal

tools guided supervision planning and helped prevent bias when evaluating a probationer's potential for success. P1 noted, "We use the RNA to calculate how likely they are to commit a crime within the next year... and we build the case plan from that." P5 shared that the alignment between self-reported needs and assessment outcomes often validated what officers already suspected: "Sometimes what they tell us and what shows up on the assessment match, and that gives us a clearer picture of what they need." P10 stressed that these assessments help mitigate personal bias, stating, "It keeps us from going by 'gut feeling' alone. We need the data too." P3 highlighted that structured assessments also help prioritize interventions, explaining, "If someone scores high on housing instability and employment needs, I know that's where we have to start." Together, these insights show how structured assessments support data-driven decision-making and ensure consistent attention to economic barriers in supervision planning.

Overall, the findings for Research Question 2 demonstrate that probation officers' early impressions of a probationer's economic situation directly shape the supervision strategy, tone, and level of support provided. Officers who employed structured assessments, engaged in empathetic conversations, and built partnerships with community organizations were better able to develop individualized plans that helped probationers navigate financial instability. These findings underscore the importance of officer training in motivational interviewing, risk assessment, and community resource awareness, especially when working with economically disadvantaged populations. While most officers acknowledged the significant influence of financial barriers, the presence of divergent views, such as that of P4 who emphasized individual

accountability, served as a reminder of the complexity involved in interpreting probationer behavior. Taken together, the data suggests that officers who integrate empathy, structure, and resource coordination into their early supervisory efforts are better positioned to support probationers in overcoming economic hardship and achieving successful completion.

Summary

The results of this study provide a clear and compelling understanding of the economic barriers that probationers in Eastern North Carolina face and how probation officers' initial impressions of these barriers influence probation outcomes. In response to Research Question 1, participants identified a variety of interrelated challenges that prevent probationers from successfully completing probation in a timely manner. The themes, Economic Barriers to Stability, Access to Essential Services, and Systemic and Legal Challenges, highlighted how low wages, unemployment, housing insecurity, transportation gaps, healthcare costs, and the stigma of a criminal record collectively contribute to extended probation terms or violations. Most probation officers emphasized that these systemic challenges often outweigh a probationer's willingness to comply. However, a divergent perspective was acknowledged, emphasizing the importance of personal accountability for some individuals.

For Research Question 2, four major themes emerged that illuminated how officers assess and respond to economic hardship during the early stages of supervision: Building the Foundation for Success, Motivation and Support for Positive Change, Leveraging Community Resources and Partnerships, and Structured Risk and Needs

Assessment. Officers who built rapport early, engaged in empathetic conversations, and used structured assessment tools were better able to understand probationers' needs and guide them toward success. The findings suggest that the quality of early officer-probationer interactions, paired with resource navigation, plays a significant role in probation completion, particularly for economically disadvantaged clients.

The findings from both research questions reveal that economic conditions and systemic barriers are inextricably linked to probation outcomes. Probation officers' awareness, perception, and response to these conditions significantly shape the course of supervision. The data also highlights a need for policies incorporating economic support strategies into probation supervision to improve outcomes for high-risk populations.

Chapter 5 will further interpret and contextualize these findings about existing literature and the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2. The next chapter will also explore the implications for practice and policy, make recommendations for future research, and address the study's limitations. By reflecting on how these findings align with, extend, or challenge existing knowledge in the discipline, Chapter 5 will provide a thoughtful synthesis of the study's contributions to the field of community corrections.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This qualitative phenomenological research study aimed to understand better probation officers' perceptions of the economic barriers that prevent probationers in Eastern North Carolina from successfully completing probation. This study sought to address the limited literature exploring these barriers through the eyes of probation officers, despite their central role in supervising and supporting probationers. I recruited twelve probation officers from Eastern North Carolina using criterion-based sampling to address this gap. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and perceptions.

While multiple themes emerged to answer the two central research questions, the key findings indicated that (a) probation officers consistently viewed financial instability, such as court fines, fees, and unemployment, as significant barriers to probation success and (b) first impressions of a probationer's economic condition often shaped how officers approached supervision, including identifying at-risk individuals early in the process. Officers also emphasized how a lack of job skills, mental health support, and access to affordable housing compounded these challenges, often prolonging or derailing probation outcomes.

Chapter 1 introduced the study by outlining the research problem, background, purpose, and significance while highlighting Merton's Strain Theory as the theoretical framework. Chapter 2 presented the literature review, which examined debt, recidivism, probation officer responsibilities, mental health, and the structural disparities in public

versus private probation. Chapter 3 detailed the research methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 provided the setting, participant demographics, data collection process, and thematic analysis of the findings. This final chapter builds upon the findings and literature to interpret results, discuss limitations, make recommendations, and present implications for future research and practice.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study confirm and extend prior research within the field of criminal justice, particularly as it relates to the economic barriers probationers face and the perceptions of probation officers. For Research Question 1, which explored the economic barriers that prevent probationers in Eastern North Carolina from completing probation, four central themes were identified: financial sanctions and supervision fees, unemployment and lack of job skills, housing instability, and overwhelming debt coupled with limited financial literacy.

These themes confirm the findings of Link (2018), who argued that financial sanctions imposed by the criminal justice system create structural disadvantages for probationers, often leading to technical violations. Probation officers in this study consistently reported that probationers struggled to pay court fees, supervision costs, and fines, which supports the claim that economic burdens are not just a consequence but a contributing factor to probation failure. Similarly, Beek et al. (2022) emphasized that most probationers experience significant debt, which becomes a criminogenic risk factor, a finding mirrored in the perceptions of the officers interviewed in this study.

Participants also frequently mentioned unemployment limited job skills, particularly in rural areas with scarce employment opportunities. These findings support Van Beek et al. (2021), who found a direct relationship between debt and crime, where economic hardship increases the likelihood of recidivism. Probation officers described how probationers with limited education and job training often reoffended out of economic necessity. The lack of employment access, especially for individuals with criminal records, echoed the barriers identified by Dong et al. (2018), who observed that food, housing, and employment were among the top unmet needs of probationers.

Housing instability was another key barrier, as many probationers were forced to live in environments that were either unsafe or not conducive to compliance with probation terms. This finding is consistent with Jacobs and Gottlieb (2020), who reported that a lack of affordable and stable housing negatively affects probationers' ability to maintain employment and attend required meetings. Finally, the theme of limited financial literacy reinforces the conclusion by Beek et al. (2022) that many probationers come from generational poverty and lack essential financial planning skills. Officers in this study noted that some probationers prioritized luxury spending or made impulsive financial decisions that worsened their situations, affirming previous research findings.

For Research Question 2, which examined how probation officers' first impressions of a probationer's economic barriers influence their ability to complete probation, the themes of early assessment and discretionary support emerged. Officers described how initial evaluations often shaped the level of flexibility or support offered to a probationer. This supports Reichert and Gleicher's (2019) findings that probation

officers are more effective when trained to identify and respond to probationers' individual needs. Officers who quickly identified economic distress were more likely to adjust supervision expectations or connect probationers with community resources, thus increasing their chances of success.

These findings also extend the literature by introducing the idea that discretion during the early stages of supervision can function as a form of informal intervention. This proactive approach, guided by officer judgment, goes beyond the rigid application of rules and may serve as an early mechanism for identifying high-risk individuals who would otherwise fall through the cracks.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings strongly support Merton's Strain Theory, which posits that when individuals cannot achieve socially accepted goals through legitimate means, they may resort to deviant behavior (Merton, 1938; Andreescu & Vito, 2021). The probation officers' accounts illustrate that probationers frequently experience strain due to financial instability, unemployment, and unmet basic needs. These pressures often lead to decisions that violate probation terms, either through the inability to pay required fees or engagement in survival-based offenses. In this context, the strain experienced by probationers is not solely personal but structurally embedded, reinforcing the relevance of the theory to contemporary probation challenges.

This study's findings do not disconfirm existing literature but affirm and deepen the understanding of economic barriers through the voices of probation officers, an often-overlooked perspective. Moreover, the study extends the literature by emphasizing how

probation officers' early perceptions and discretionary decisions can mitigate or compound the economic challenges probationers face.

Importantly, all interpretations remain grounded in the data collected and the scope of this study. The insights presented are specific to the region of Eastern North Carolina and reflect the participating officers' lived experiences and professional perspectives. While the findings cannot be generalized nationally, they offer critical implications for practice and policy in economically distressed regions, reinforcing the need for probation systems that are both equitable and responsive to the real-world barriers faced by those under supervision.

Limitations of the Study

In Chapter 1, I anticipated potential challenges related to validity, data reliability, and ethical concerns, especially regarding participant recruitment and data interpretation. These concerns materialized in several specific ways during the execution of the study.

One limitation involved the degree of recruitment support available from probation officers across Eastern North Carolina. While I received official approval from the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction (NCDAC), the agency was not responsible for assisting with recruitment. As a result, recruitment relied entirely on my personal and professional networks via social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook. This method introduced a limitation in reach and diversity, as participation depended on how widely my posts were shared and the willingness of potential respondents within those networks to engage with the study. This recruitment strategy,

while ethical and practical for assessing participants, may have influenced the sample's representativeness and limited the range of perspectives captured.

A second limitation, which was not fully anticipated in Chapter 1, was the narrow geographic scope of the study. Although Eastern North Carolina was intentionally selected to address a regional gap in the literature, this area's specific economic and structural conditions may differ significantly from other parts of the state or country. While this regional focus allowed for in-depth exploration and contextual specificity, it also limits the transferability of findings to other jurisdictions with differing probation structures, funding models, or community resources.

Another noteworthy limitation involved using Zooms' transcription feature for capturing interview data. While the automated transcription tool was intended to enhance accuracy and efficiency, it occasionally failed to distinguish between natural pauses in speech and the initiation of new thoughts. This created minor challenges in accurately interpreting participant responses from the transcripts alone and required me to revisit audio recordings frequently to ensure the correct context and meaning were preserved. In addition, although some participants had their cameras enabled, allowing me to observe facial expressions and body language, others chose to keep their video off. This inconsistency made it more difficult to uniformly assess nonverbal cues, which can provide valuable insight into meaning and emotional tone during qualitative interviews.

These limitations, such as recruitment challenges, geographic scope, and technological transcription and observation constraints, reinforce and extend the concerns anticipated in Chapter 1 regarding credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Despite

these challenges, measures such as triangulating transcripts with audio recordings and maintaining reflexive documentation helped uphold the study's trustworthiness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, strengths, and limitations of this study, as well as the existing literature on economic barriers probationers face, several recommendations are proposed for future research. These suggestions are offered to build upon the insights gained in this study while remaining within the boundaries of the current research scope.

First, future studies should consider expanding the geographic scope beyond Eastern North Carolina. While this study focused on a region with known economic challenges, other parts of North Carolina and different states may reveal unique perspectives based on varied probation practices, community resources, and economic conditions. Comparative regional studies could help determine whether the economic barriers identified in this study are widespread or context-specific, and such findings could contribute to developing more universal strategies to support probationers.

Second, given the limitations of participant recruitment through social media, future research could explore alternative recruitment methods. Collaborating directly with probation departments, community corrections agencies, or criminal justice associations may lead to broader participation and diverse perspectives. Expanding the sample size and demographic diversity, including gender, race, years of experience, and rural vs. urban jurisdictions, could enrich future findings and offer a more comprehensive view of how probation officers perceive economic barriers across different populations.

Thirdly, this study surfaced the issue of limited financial literacy and support systems available to probationers, which aligns with findings from Beek et al. (2022) and Link (2018). Future studies might evaluate the effectiveness of financial counseling or resource referral programs provided through probation departments. Interviewing probation officers and probationers could provide a more balanced, two-sided perspective on the effectiveness of such interventions.

Finally, it is recommended that future research explore the impact of mental health and substance use in conjunction with economic barriers, as this study reaffirmed that these intersecting challenges complicate probationers' ability to comply with supervision conditions. Building on Bryson et al. (2019) and Epperson et al. (2017), future studies might explore how probation departments can better integrate wraparound services that address economic and behavioral health needs.

These recommendations remain grounded in the scope of the current qualitative, phenomenological study and align with the issues raised during data collection and in the literature. They offer realistic next steps for researchers and practitioners committed to improving probation outcomes through better understanding and targeted intervention strategies.

Implications

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to positive social change across multiple levels, including individual, family, organizational, and societal, while remaining within the boundaries of this research. By examining the perceptions of probation officers regarding economic barriers faced by probationers in Eastern North

Carolina, the study highlights specific areas where systemic and practical improvements could lead to better outcomes for justice-involved individuals and their communities.

At the individual level, the insights from probation officers emphasize the critical need for probationers to receive early, targeted support related to employment, housing, and financial literacy. By increasing awareness of these needs among probation professionals, departments may be better positioned to implement personalized case management strategies. Such changes could help reduce the likelihood of technical violations or recidivism caused by unmet economic needs, thereby supporting more successful reintegration.

At the family level, improving probation outcomes through economic support directly impacts on dependents and household stability. Several officers in the study observed that probationers who are parents or caregivers often struggle to meet both probation conditions and family obligations. Addressing economic hardship could reduce the intergenerational effects of criminal justice involvement and promote more stable family environments.

On the organizational level, this study highlights a need for probation departments and training academies to consider integrating economic awareness into officer training and supervision strategies. Departments can foster a more rehabilitative approach that aligns with best practices in community corrections by equipping officers with tools to recognize and respond to economic barriers early in the probation process. The study also revealed how discretionary decisions by officers can either support or hinder probationer

success, suggesting a need for clear guidelines and resources that support equity and flexibility in supervision.

At the societal and policy level, while broader generalizations are outside the scope of this regional study, the findings may inform local-level policy discussions. For example, probation departments in economically disadvantaged regions like Eastern North Carolina might consider revising supervision conditions or fee structures for low-income individuals. Policies that reduce the financial burden of probation—such as waving specific supervision fees or expanding access to employment programs—could create more equitable pathways for successful completion of probation and reduced recidivism.

From a methodological perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research focused on the experiences and perceptions of frontline criminal justice professionals. Using a phenomenological approach, the study provides a deep, context-rich understanding of how probation officers interpret and respond to economic hardship among probationers.

Theoretically, the findings reinforce the continued relevance of Merton's Strain Theory in explaining how economic pressures contribute to criminal behavior and noncompliance with legal supervision. The probation officers' accounts provide real-world evidence of how structural strain manifests probationers' lives and how these strains might be mitigated through supportive supervision.

Finally, this study presents practical recommendations for probation officers and community corrections agencies. These include implementing early assessments of

financial hardship, increasing officer training around economic support resources, and advocating for more integrated service delivery models that address economic and behavioral health needs. If applied within the scope of the department's existing policies, these actions could meaningfully improve outcomes for probationers and help shift community supervision toward a more restorative and supportive model.

Conclusion

This study illuminated the often-overlooked economic barriers that probationers face through the eyes of those tasked with guiding them—probation officers in Eastern North Carolina. The findings revealed that financial instability, unemployment, debt, and lack of access to essential resources significantly hinder probationers' ability to comply with supervision conditions and complete probation. More importantly, the study demonstrated that probation officers are not just enforcers of rules but also frontline observers who recognize the systemic barriers undermining rehabilitation.

Guided by Merton's Strain Theory, this research affirmed that when legitimate opportunities are limited, individuals under economic strain are more likely to struggle with reentry and potentially re-offend. The study calls for a shift in practice—toward early identification of financial hardship, supportive supervision strategies, and policies that reduce the economic burden of probation.

The core message of this study is clear: if the goal of probation is rehabilitation, then addressing economic barriers is not optional; it is essential. By amplifying the voices of probation officers, this research provides both practical insight and a call to action for more equitable, supportive, and effective community corrections systems.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Hello, and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Dwayne Ponton, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University conducting a study about probation officers' perceptions of economic barriers faced by probationers in Eastern North Carolina. This interview aims to gather your insights and experiences regarding these barriers.

Before we begin, I want to ensure that you understand your rights as a participant. Your responses will be kept confidential, and any identifying information will be removed to protect your privacy. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time, even during the interview process, without any consequences. This study involves a confidential recorded interview via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, which will take approximately one hour. You may be contacted again later to confirm my interpretations of your responses, a process known as member-checking, which will take about 20–30 minutes.

Are you ready to proceed?

Now, let's move on to the main questions related to your experiences and insights as a probation officer:

1. How much experience do you have as a probation/parole officer?
2. Why do you want to work as a probation officer?
3. What are the common financial barriers you see probationers face daily?
4. In what ways do the barriers you mentioned affect the daily lives of the individuals you monitor?

5. In what ways do the barriers affect the probationers completing probation?
6. How do you prepare a supervision plan for someone on probation?
7. How do you identify resources and treatment services for people on probation?
8. Have you ever helped someone on probation make a positive change? If so, how did you do this?
9. What methods do you use to evaluate the progress of someone who has the financial barriers you have mentioned?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to add before we end?

As we wrap up, is there anything else that you would like to add before we end? Your insights are incredibly valuable to this research. Thank you once again for your time and participation. Your experiences will greatly contribute to our understanding of the challenges faced by probation workers and the role of probation officers in addressing these issues.