

7 days of Psychology

Forensic Psychology

What is Forensic Psychology?

Forensic psychology involves the application of psychological knowledge within the legal and criminal justice arenas. It encompasses issues such as the causes, prevention and treatment of offending behaviour, the courts and the correctional system, and the contributions of psychological evidence to legal proceedings.

Key service delivery areas include:

- Provision of expert psychological evidence (written reports and/or oral testimony) in various court (e.g. criminal, civil, family, and coroner's courts) and tribunal jurisdictions (e.g. parole boards, guardianship boards and the administrative appeals tribunals);
- Treatment and assessment of mentally ill offenders in forensic mental health services, as well as the rehabilitation and management of offenders within correctional settings;
- Consultation to different areas of the legal and justice system, such as child protection, victim's rights, crime prevention, police investigations, mediation, trials, fitness to plea/stand trial, insanity defense etc.
- Development and delivery to research and clinical services to forensic populations (e.g. anger management, substance use counselling, trauma intervention, and parenting skills)

Areas of Expertise:

Forensic psychologists are scientist practitioners who apply psychological knowledge, theory, and skills to the understanding and functioning of the legal and criminal justice systems, and to conducting research in relevant areas. They also have expertise in risk assessments and the psychological assessment of individuals involved in the criminal justice system.

Forensic psychologists are employed in a variety of areas:

- Courts and Tribunals
- Forensic Mental Health Services
- Adult Corrections and Youth Justice Systems
- Child Protection
- Alcohol and other Drug Services
- Police
- Academia, research and policy organisations
- Private practice

Forensic Psychology Myth Busters

Myth #1: Forensic psychologists work with dead bodies and DNA!

That only occurs on the television show CSI. Also, forensic psychology is NOT the same as forensic science which would involve laboratory investigations of crime scene evidence. In fact, being alive is a pre-requisite to getting an appointment to see a forensic psychologist for psychological intervention/assessment. You would also have had to commit a crime, be the victim of a crime, or, are involved with the legal and justice system, the courts, or a tribunal in some form or another.

Myth #2: We solve crimes and profile serial killers whilst travelling around in private jets!

If you think that, you have probably been watching one too many episodes of Criminal Minds.

Some forensic psychologists are solely employed as criminal profilers overseas, but such roles are pretty rare in Australia. However, there is an element of profiling in our forensic assessment, where we provide a formulation of an offender's psychological profile (e.g. mental health status and history, substance use, personality traits etc.) to help explain their criminal conduct, their risk of recidivism, and their treatment/rehabilitation needs.

Also, most forensic psychologists are employed by government organisations (e.g. Correctional Services) who have limited resources and budgetary constraints. Even in private practice, legal aid and Medicare funded (if seen for therapy) clients would be the norm rather than the exception. So, luxurious private jets are definitely NOT the reality for us!

Myth #3: Forensic psychologists work primarily with murderers.

Again, that is not true. There are simply not enough murderers to go around!

Flippancy aside, the reality is that forensic psychologists work with a variety of individuals involved in the criminal justice system. These include people who have committed (but are not limited to) driving related offences, assaults, child and adult sexual offences, trespass, drug-offences, and only very occasionally, homicides. Following a comprehensive psychological assessment on the causes of the criminal conduct, a forensic psychologist might also provide therapy using evidence based therapies such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy to address a person's cognitive distortions and other psychological dysfunction (e.g. substance use, poor

victim empathy, or antisocial attitudes) that are deemed to have contributed to the crime.

Skills and Competencies of Forensic Psychologists

So in summary, forensic psychologists are equipped to provide services in the following areas:

- Collecting and reporting evidence of psychological nature for use in legal and quasi-legal proceedings
- Psychological assessment and report writing
- Psychological formulation and diagnosis
- Psychological intervention (psychoeducation; individual, group and family psychotherapies; rehabilitation)
- Program evaluation
- Education and training
- Research

Working As a Forensic Psychologist in Australia

- Obtain a Bachelor degree majoring in psychology
- Complete an Honours degree in psychology
- Obtain a Masters or Doctorate in forensic psychology
- Complete Registrar Program in forensic psychology
- Join the Australian Psychological Society (APS) College of Forensic Psychologists
- Apply to become an endorsed forensic psychologist through the Psychology Board of Australia

For More Information About Forensic Psychology:

- Australian Psychological Society (APS)
www.psychology.org.au
www.psychology.org.au/public/forensic
www.believeinchange.com

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