

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT JUVENILE PROBATION 1. I am a student and I am interested in becoming a juvenile probation officer. Which classes should I take to pursue this career?

Suggestions for types of classes to take:

- Sociology
- Juvenile Delinquency
- Psychology
- Cultural Sensitivity/Diversity
- Social Work
- Child Development
- Criminal Justice
- Volunteer in agencies dealing with youth and their families.
- If possible, do internships within these agencies.
- Work, even part-time, in youth agencies.

2. What happens to a child who breaks the law and enters the Texas juvenile justice system?

A child who breaks the law in Texas may enter a complex world of procedures, places and people called the juvenile justice system. In Texas the ages of juvenile justice jurisdiction are 10 through 16. The handling of juveniles is strictly regulated by state law, but juvenile probation is locally administered at the county level.

This year, more than 130,000 Texas children picked up by law enforcement officers will enter the juvenile justice system. Liberty County has a juvenile population of approximately 6,500 and Juvenile Probation will receive approximately 300 juvenile referrals from Liberty County Police agencies for the year.

For minor violations the police may simply warn the child and parents. However, when further action is needed to protect the public or the child, or to prevent future offenses, the case is forwarded to the Liberty County Juvenile Probation Department.

All juveniles with alleged delinquent offenses, which are crimes punishable by a jail sentence if committed by an adult, are fingerprinted and entered into a statewide central criminal justice information system. Their criminal history record may then be accessed by law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies throughout Texas.

Intake

Children are referred to Juvenile Probation by law enforcement 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If charges are to be filed the Juvenile Probation Officer must make the decision about where the child will stay pending judicial proceedings. Many are safely released to parents or guardians but others must be held in secure detention.

Who are these children?

Children who break the law come from all social, racial and economic groups. Nearly half are

between 14 and 15 years of age, and about three-fourths are male. Many are charged with minor offenses or "status offenses" such as truancy or running away from home. However, one-third or more are serious offenders who may have committed crimes such as burglary, assault or murder. Substance abuse, family violence and school problems are common.

Detention

Detention centers are designed to protect the community and the child, and to assure the child's appearance in court. Detention must not be used for punitive purposes and the law does not allow a status offender to be placed in detention. A child must be taken before a judge within 48 hours of being placed in detention. If a child is detained at the initial hearing they must be represented by an attorney and have another hearing within 10 working days.

Intake

When charges are filed against a child, a probation officer initiates an investigation into the background of the child and the child's family. The case is discussed with the County Attorney and a decision is made to proceed with a formal court hearing or to place the child on Deferred Prosecution.

Deferred Prosecution

A child can be placed on Deferred Prosecution for six months. They are required to follow the same probation rules as a child placed on formal probation but they avoid the adjudication process.

Court Procedures

In the Adjudication Hearing, the child, family and the child's attorney appear before a judge or jury that will decide if the child committed a violation of the law. If the child is adjudicated for the offense, the Judge will order a Disposition Hearing to determine the best method to protect the public and to redirect the child toward a law-abiding future. Dispositions are based on "progressive sanctions" guidelines, mandated by the state and developed to provide appropriate consequences and outcomes for juvenile offenders. The guidelines provide a continuum of progressive steps designed to balance public protection, offender accountability and rehabilitation.

What can the Judge decide?

The Juvenile Judge has many options from dismissal to long-term confinement in a correctional facility. For certain felony offenses, a youth 14 or older can be certified to stand trial in the adult criminal court system. For other serious offenders, the Determinate Sentencing Law allows a juvenile to be confined up to 40 years, first in a Texas Youth Commission facility, followed by an optional court transfer to the prison system. For other less serious offenders who require confinement, the judge may order an Indeterminate Sentence to the Texas Youth Commission where the child may be held until his/her 21st birthday or placement in a private or a state residential treatment facility. In most cases the child is placed on probation to remain in their own home or placed with a relative. The court-ordered rules of probation demand school attendance, good conduct, drug testing, curfews and participation in specified programs, including community service and financial restitution. Probation Officers enforce these rules while they help the child and family achieve positive change. Parents are expected to participate

in their child's probation program. As the source of social, emotional and financial support, the family is essential to a successful probation. The child who succeeds on probation, either at home or in an institution, gets a fresh start. The Texas juvenile justice system treats children with confidentiality and concern. Juvenile case records are not made public. The Liberty County Attorney, Juvenile Judge and Juvenile Probation Department work hard to see that children leaving their care and custody are better equipped to build productive, law-abiding futures. Because all children have the potential for good, they deserve our best efforts in their behalf.