



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

Protecting Probation Officers: An International Perspective on Assault, Fear, and Safety

Key Takeaways

- Among South Korean probation officers, physical assault was relatively rare, but verbal threats and fear of being attacked were far more common.
- Strong organizational support - meaning effective safety measures and good communication between officers and their supervisors - was the most consistent factor associated with lower levels of assault and fear.
- What officers feared did not always match the risks they actually faced, so fear and actual risk need to be addressed as separate problems.

Why This Matters

Probation officers supervise people in the community rather than in prison, which requires daily contact through office and home visits and field checks. Their work combines two duties, enforcing court-ordered rules and offering support. Enforcement moments can turn tense, exposing officers to risk of threats or violence. Yet most research on officer safety has focused on prisons and jails, leaving community supervision officers understudied.

Previous research on community corrections staff highlights the extent of the problem. Early US surveys found that, in some cases, roughly 40 percent to 55 percent of community corrections staff faced work-related threats or violence during their careers. A study of juvenile probation officers found that most had been verbally threatened, and more than a quarter had been physically assaulted. More recent US studies similarly found that many officers had been threatened, and a smaller share had been injured.

Most of this work, however, is dated and mainly descriptive, focuses on the United States, and rarely identifies the factors that raise or lower risk. This study helps fill that gap by examining the factors linked to assault and fear among probation officers in South Korea.

How the Study Worked

The researchers analyzed survey data collected in May 2025 by a national criminal justice research institute from 536 South Korean probation officers. They looked at three outcomes: whether an officer had ever been verbally abused or threatened by a client, whether an officer had ever been physically assaulted, and how often an officer felt physically threatened by the people they supervised. They also measured officers' daily routines (e.g., how burdened they felt supervising clients with alcohol problems or juveniles, their caseload and workload), personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, years on the job, education, rank), and organizational supports (e.g., safety and health measures, the quality of communication with supervisors, worry about being disciplined for mistakes).

To make sense of these factors, the researchers used routine activity theory - the idea that harm becomes more likely when three factors come together: someone who is motivated to cause harm, a suitable target, and the absence of protection (called “guardianship”). Using this lens, they compared officers who had and had not been assaulted and those who reported more or less fear to identify which routines, traits, and supports were linked to each outcome while accounting for the others.

What Was Learned

- **Threats and fear were common; physical assault was not.** Nearly 30 percent of officers had been verbally abused or threatened by a client, while only about 5 percent had ever been physically assaulted. At least a quarter of officers felt that they were at risk of being physically attacked at work.
- **Organizational support was the strongest protection.** Officers who reported adequate safety and health measures and effective communication between senior and junior staff faced lower risk of both physical and verbal assault and reported less fear. This pattern was the steadiest across all three outcomes.
- **Fear of being disciplined was associated with worse outcomes.** Officers who worried about being punished for on-the-job mistakes reported more verbal assault and greater fear of being attacked.
- **Fear did not always track actual risk.** Supervising juveniles or clients with alcohol problems was linked to greater fear but not greater assault risk. Older officers and women reported greater fear, without being assaulted more often, while higher-ranking officers faced greater assault risk.

What This Means in Practice

The clearest lesson is that officer safety depends heavily on the organization, not just on individual caution. When agencies put effective safety and health measures in place and keep communication open between officers and supervisors, officers in this study faced less violence and less fear. The authors point to leadership and communication at every level, especially among supervisors and upper management, as central to keeping officers safe. They recommend mandatory recurring training to strengthen supervisors’ leadership and communication skills so they can support officers in making confident field decisions. They also argue for accountability when officers mishandle situations, recognition when they manage difficult incidents well, and a supportive culture rather than an “us-versus-them” culture.

The authors also emphasize the gap between what officers fear and what actually endangers them. They recommend sharing assault data, discussing the real circumstances of past incidents, and using scenario-based exercises to help officers identify genuinely high-risk situations. They add that these findings come from South Korea, whose system has features—such as volunteer probation officers who provide continuity and family support, especially in juvenile cases—that may lower actual risk even when fear stays high, so the patterns may look different elsewhere.

Source article

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