

Introduction to Forensic Psychology

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Key concepts, roles, and foundational knowledge for students and practitioners

1. Definition & Scope

Aspect	Description
Forensic Psychology	The application of psychological principles, methods, and research to legal and criminal justice matters.
Core Domains	• Criminal behavior & profiling • Assessment of competency, sanity, and risk • Victim and witness support • Consultation with law enforcement, courts, and correctional agencies
Distinction from Related Fields	• Legal Psychology – focuses on how people think, feel, and behave in legal contexts (e.g., juror decision-making). • Psychiatry – medical specialty; forensic psychiatrists can prescribe medication. • Criminology – sociological study of crime and its control.

2. Historical Milestones

Year	Event	Significance
1885	M’Naghten Rules (UK)	First formal legal test for insanity, still influential.
1905	James McKeen Cattell publishes “Psychology and the Law”	Early bridge between psychology and legal practice.
1941	Walter V. Shipley conducts the first forensic psychological assessment (competency).	
1960s–70s	Growth of psychology law programs in U.S. universities.	
1973	American Psychology Law Society (now APA Division 41) founded.	

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Year	Event	Significance
1990s	Introduction of <i>risk assessment tools</i> (e.g., HCR-20, LS/CMI).	
2000s	Expansion of <i>neuropsychology</i> evidence (brain imaging, neurocriminology).	

3. Primary Roles & Settings

Role	Typical Tasks	Common Settings
Consultant	Advise police, attorneys, judges on psychological aspects of cases.	Police departments, law firms, courts.
Evaluator	Conduct forensic assessments (competency, insanity, risk, custody).	Courts, correctional facilities, forensic hospitals.
Expert Witness	Provide testimony on psychological findings, explain methods to jurors.	Trial courtroom, arbitration panels.
Researcher	Design studies on juror bias, eyewitness reliability, interrogation techniques.	Universities, government research labs.
Therapist/Interventionist	Provide treatment to offenders, victims, or witnesses; develop rehabilitation programs.	Prisons, victim services agencies, community mental health centers.

4. Core Assessment Areas

Assessment	Purpose	Standard Instruments
Competency to Stand Trial (CST)	Determine if defendant can understand proceedings & assist counsel.	<i>Competency Assessment Instrument (CAI)</i> , <i>MacArthur Competence Assessment Tool – Criminal (MacCAT-C)</i>
Insanity / Mental State at Time of Offense	Evaluate legal insanity or diminished capacity.	<i>R-CRAS</i> , <i>M'Naghten criteria</i> (jurisdiction specific)

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Assessment	Purpose	Standard Instruments
Risk of Violence / Recidivism	Predict future dangerousness for sentencing, parole, treatment planning.	<i>HCR?20, LS/CMI, Static-99</i> (sexual offenders)
Child Custody & Parenting Capacity	Assess best interests of the child and parental fitness.	<i>Parenting Stress Index, *Child</i>