Psychologists working in correctional facilities have had differing roles that have adapted through the many changes of the prison system. In general, their responsibilities are a combination of clinical and community psychology (Milan & Long, 1980). With the continuously increasing inmate population, psychologists are deemed the tasks of assessment, treatment, training, and consultation in an environment that incessantly needs conflict resolution (Boothby & Clements, 2000). In addition to the rising number of incarcerated individuals, these prisoners also have an increased need for mental health services than ever before matched with the complexity of the more severe sentencing policies that have evolved (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999a). With the last study of correctional psychologists conducted in 1981, the current authors felt that based on the numerous changes to the correctional system and only three previously published articles on this subject, an updated and larger sample would provide valuable information to the current roles of correctional psychologists (Otero, McNally, & Powitzky, 1981; Bartol, Griffin, & Clark, 1993; Gallagher, Somwaru, & Ben-Porath, 1999).

The survey that Boothby and Clements distributed had 830 respondents from 48 different state prison systems and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons with a majority of the individuals holding a doctorate degree and with a smaller percentage of those with a master’s degree. This four page survey was developed for this study and addressed multiple aspects of the experience of being a correctional psychologist. The topics of the survey included demographics, job duties and responsibilities, provision of mental health services, assessment practices, and training recommendations (Boothby & Clements, 2000).
Due to the large majority of male offenders in the prisons, the surveys indicated that most correctional psychologists work only with male offenders at different levels of custody, most often a combination of different security levels. The psychologists don’t appear to treat any one specific type of inmate, but a range of different problem areas. When looking at their job responsibilities the three main areas of work were: 30 percent of their time went to administrative work, 26 percent was direct treatment, and 18 percent was conducting assessments. Reported interests would be to lower their administrative work and increase the amount of time they spend providing therapy and conducting research. In examining the treatment further, 60 percent was individual therapy, 18 percent psycho-educational groups, and 15 percent process group with a cognitive model used almost all of the time. The mental health issues most often addressed in the prison population were reported as depression, anger problems, psychotic symptoms, anxiety, and adjustment issues (Boothby & Clements, 2000).

The psychological assessment of inmates normally consists of personality characteristics, with a small amount of time spent on intellectual assessment, risk, symptoms, neuropsychological issues, and behavior analysis. Although a variety of assessment tools were reported during this survey, many psychologists rely on just a few instruments. First, in regards to personality assessments, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) was used by 87 percent of clinicians from this sample. The authors found probable that these psychologists did not administer the tool themselves, but used psychological data gathered during the intake process. Other personality assessment tools that were reportedly used in the correctional setting were the Millon Clinical Multiaxis Inventory (MCMI), Rorschach, projective drawings, and the Personality Assessment Inventory. For intellectual assessments, the correctional psychologists used the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) 69 percent of the time. Tools used for
neuropsychological assessment were the Bender-Gestalt about 25 percent of the time while others used the Wechsler Memory Scale (8%), Trails A and B (6%), the Halstad Reitan (5%) and the Luria Nebraska (4%). Only 13 percent of the correctional psychologists claimed to be involved in risk assessment, the instruments used were used the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised by 11 percent, the Multiphasic Sex Inventory was used by six percent, and the Level of Supervision Inventory by less than one percent (Boothby & Clements, 2000).

About one third of respondents reported that they had previous forensic or correctional experience before entering this field of work with the recommendation to those interested individuals that they should intern at a prison facility so they are familiar with the job responsibilities but also working with inmates. In addition, individuals should be familiar with psychological testing, diagnosing, treatment of personality disorders, specific issues related to forensic psychology, and criminal justice/law coursework (Boothby & Clements, 2000).

In comparing these results with the previous studies, the higher sample rate shows an increase in psychologists employed in the correctional system, but this number is still too low for the amount of inmates in the United States that need mental health services (Boothby & Clements, 2000). Although the number of psychologists in this field is rising, the ratio of psychologist-to-inmate is half of what it was during the 1981 study which corresponds with the respondents wants to increase their direct treatment time allocation (Otero, McNally, & Powitzky, 1981). In addition, it seems that more time is being spent today on administrative tasks than in the past (Boothby & Clements, 2000). While correctional psychologists still seem to try and dedicate time to individual therapy, it seems their time may be best spent treating a larger number of inmates at one time during group therapy (Boothby & Clements, 2000). Two other areas that need to be addressed further are female inmates and the aging of the prison population.
While assessment tools are frequently used in the correctional setting, norms for incarcerated individuals are not always available and the results from these instruments cannot always be generalized to this population, for example the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory used in 87 percent of the assessments by the respondents (Boothby & Clements, 2000). Challenges to the correctional system are attracting, recruiting, and retaining qualified professionals but the growth in the field of psychology and law suggests expansion will continue in the future. The authors in this study further recommend that familiarity with new instruments that are forensically relevant, cognitive-behavioral treatment knowledge, applying skills to the institutional setting, and a commitment to outcomes assessment (Boothby & Clements, 2000).