

# ANATOMY OF THE PSR

## The Structure of the PSR

The PSR follows a standardized structure that probation officers use across cases. Each section serves a specific purpose.

When you understand how the PSR is organized, you can better anticipate how administrators will interpret and use your words, documentation, and preparation. This awareness reduces surprises and helps you focus your preparation where it matters most.

## Offense Conduct

This section typically reflects the government's version of events. It may include facts from charging documents, investigative reports, and statements attributed to you or others.

If there are disputes or nuances in how events are described, this is where they often appear. Because this section is heavily relied upon by downstream decision-makers, inaccuracies or broad characterizations can have lasting effects if they are not addressed early. It is the reason I recommend you work through the sentencing narrative course that we offer. Your narrative gives an opportunity to influence the PSR.

If you want to learn more, watch the interviews I did with federal judges, which you can access below.

- » Judge Bennett Interview: [https://youtu.be/1uG\\_z5X45nE](https://youtu.be/1uG_z5X45nE)
- » Judge Bough Interview: [https://youtu.be/ZjNwD\\_G5EU8](https://youtu.be/ZjNwD_G5EU8)

## Victim Impact

When a crime involves an identifiable victim, the PSR may include a description of harm caused, sometimes based on victim statements. This section can influence how severity and responsibility are perceived.

While you may not control what a victim says, understanding that this section exists helps you prepare your own narrative and mitigation materials thoughtfully and respectfully.

## **Defendant's Participation**

In cases involving multiple defendants, the PSR may describe each person's role. This is a high-risk area. Language suggesting leadership, organization, or association with more serious conduct can influence classification and treatment later.

I've seen people suffer unnecessary consequences because the PSR failed to distinguish between levels of involvement. This is one section where accuracy and careful review are critical.

## **Acceptance of Responsibility and Obstruction**

These sections reflect how the probation officer interprets your conduct after conviction. Statements about cooperation, remorse, or perceived interference with the investigation can influence sentencing recommendations and later classification.

This is where preparation, tone, and consistency matter most. The same facts can be framed very differently depending on how they are presented and verified.

## **Criminal History and Offender Characteristics**

These sections document prior convictions, family background, community ties, and personal circumstances. They are used to assess risk and stability.

Probation officers may incorporate portions of your personal narrative in a section reserved for the defendant's version of events. Clear, accurate documentation can help ensure this section reflects reality rather than assumption.



## Substance Abuse and Health

The sections of the PSR that address substance abuse, physical health, and mental health are among the most consequential in the entire report. How these areas are documented can influence treatment access, housing assignments, program eligibility, and release opportunities long after sentencing.

Many people misunderstand this section and either minimize or conceal information because they fear it will reflect poorly on them. In reality, that decision often works against their long-term interests. When substance-use history or health conditions are not accurately documented, administrators may later conclude that no treatment or accommodation is needed.

This section is especially important for people who may qualify for the Bureau of Prisons' Residential Drug Abuse Program, commonly known as RDAP.

If you want more details, use AI to learn more about the BOP's policy statement P5331.02. It sets out how RDAP early release is administered — who qualifies, how eligibility is determined, and how sentence reductions are calculated and approved under federal law. It supplements the statutory authority in 18 U.S.C. § 3621(e) and regulatory criteria at 28 C.F.R. § 550.50-.57.

Basically, RDAP is one of the few federal prison programs that authorize administrators to reduce a person's sentence by as much as 12 months for successful completion. But eligibility for RDAP depends heavily on what is documented in the PSR. If the report does not reflect a qualifying history of substance abuse, a person may be disqualified before they ever have a chance to apply.

Administrators who oversee RDAP rely on the PSR to determine whether a person has a documented substance use disorder and whether that history occurred within a timeframe that meets program criteria. If the PSR states that no substance abuse exists, later explanations are rarely accepted.

This is where preparation matters. The PSR is often the only opportunity to document substance-use history in a way that the Bureau of Prisons will recognize. It is self-reported. Unfortunately, many people choose to minimize their history with substance abuse or alcoholism because they mistakenly believe that it will make them look bad at sentencing. After



they get to prison, they regret not being open about their substance abuse or alcoholism with the probation officer. Once the report is finalized and transmitted, correcting or supplementing this section becomes extremely difficult.

Health and mental-health documentation works the same way. If medical conditions, treatment histories, or limitations are not recorded accurately in the PSR, administrators may deny accommodations later. That can affect housing placement, work assignments, and access to appropriate care.

I've seen people struggle unnecessarily because they tried to appear "problem-free" during the PSR interview. Others lost eligibility for programs that could have shortened their sentence because they did not understand how this section would be used.

The goal is not to exaggerate or dramatize anything. The goal is accuracy. If substance abuse, medical conditions, or mental-health treatment are part of your history, those facts should be documented carefully and truthfully, ideally with supporting records when available.

The PSR is not a place to posture. It is a place to build a record that reflects reality—because that record will govern decisions made long after sentencing.

Understanding how the substance abuse and health sections work allows you to prepare responsibly and avoid limiting options that you may later wish you had protected.

## **Education, Employment, and Financial Condition**

This information helps administrators assess work capability, education needs, and financial obligations. Missing or inaccurate information here can create unnecessary complications once custody begins.

Documentation matters. Verifying degrees, licenses, and employment history early can prevent bureaucratic problems later. Make sure that you've helped the probation officer verify a high school diploma or GED. If the PSR does not verify this credential, administrators in the BOP will mandate that you attend GED classes in order to qualify for good-time credits.



## Why Placement Matters More Than You Think

The PSR is not just a sentencing document. It is a classification tool. Each section feeds decisions about where you are housed, what programs you can access, and how your time is managed.

Understanding the anatomy of the PSR helps you see why preparation cannot be generic. Each section carries different risks and opportunities.

## Looking Ahead

In the next lesson, I'll explain which PSR sections require extra care and why certain words or labels—such as leadership roles, drug quantities, or violence—can dramatically change how the system treats you.

Once you know where problems tend to arise, you can prepare to avoid them.



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