

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Employment, Peers, and Life-Course Transitions*

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**Key Words:** peers, employment, criminogenic needs, social networks, recidivism, risk, protective factors

### Summary/Conclusions

Previous research has found correlations between marital status (i.e., positive significant relationships), employment and criminal behavior. These factors have been shown to result in desistance from antisocial behavior. This study's purpose was to evaluate data to determine if reductions in criminal behavior were due to employment or the peer network factors attributed to employment. Findings indicated that if coworkers were disapproving of crime, a reduction in criminal behavior was found to be significant.

### Limitations of Information

The study is limited by its design, which was a retroactive analysis from 1976 to 1984. While the data is still relevant, it is unclear how culture and sociological changes would impact the results of the study. Initially the National Youth Survey was not designed to evaluate employment peer groups. Therefore, while the study found pro-social peers at an individual's work contributed to positive behavior change, the study was not able to ascertain why individuals refrain from criminal behavior.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

### Examining Employment Based Peer Groups

The study analyzed data from the National Youth Survey (NYS), which was a longitudinal study of 1,725 people aged 11 to 17. The study was conducted in six stages with each stage representing a different age group. Stage 5 concluded when respondents were between the ages of 15 and 21 and stage 6 represented an age group of 18 to 24. Results analyzed for this study were primarily from stages five and six. The NYS measured a number of social factors including marriage, prior criminal behavior, college, age, race, gender, drug use, employment factors and neighborhood.

With controls for age, race, gender, marriage, college and neighborhood, the results concluded that the largest positive predictor of the cessation of criminal behavior and drug use was not job commitment or job stability but the presence of pro-social coworkers. Additionally the study concluded that the number of hours worked per week was not a determining factor on behavior change. Also noted, low paying entry level service jobs are often in settings with unstable work hours and a younger, less educated employment base. These environments often have a higher level of drug use and would contain higher incidence of antisocial behavior.

The study was unable to ascertain why individuals with pro-social coworkers leave their prior life of crime. Possible explanations include (1) the replacement of new peer groups in favor of old peer groups, (2) the reduced likelihood

that individuals with pro-social coworkers are in compromising situations where he or she may commit criminal behavior, and (3) pro-social peers created an environment to dissuade individuals from committing new crimes.

### Practical Applications

- ✓ With the client, examine peer networks at home, school and employment; this will give a more accurate assessment of all peer influences in a client's life.
- ✓ Consider completing a social network map with the client. A social network map will identify pro-social and antisocial peers as well as the frequency of contact with the client.
- ✓ Complete case plans integrating peer group considerations. This may serve as a roadmap, removing the client from environments with negative peer influences by replacing those networks in favor of positive influences.
- ✓ Consider vocational and job training programs instead of encouraging clients to become employed at organizations with increased negative peer influences.
- ✓ Encourage and affirm clients engagement in on-going pro-social support in the community.
- ✓ Use motivational interviewing to enhance client's intrinsic motivation to change peer associations.
- ✓ Have clients contemplate working day shifts or at locations where an older, more mature workforce is employed.