

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Social Networks and Social Control of Probationers with Co-Occurring Mental and Substance Abuse Problems

Key Words: Social Networks, Mental Disorder, Criminal Justice, Outcomes, Co-occurring

Skeem, J., Louden, J., et al. (2009). "Social Networks and Social Control of Probationers with Co- Occurring Mental and Substance Abuse Problems." *Law & Human Behavior* 33: 15.

Summary/Conclusions

In the present study, researchers examined the influence of social control (i.e. influence from peers and professionals) on co-occurring individuals placed on probation (n=82). Probationers with co-occurring disorders had small social networks who provided great pressure to either conform to or ignore rules. Large social networks that are in favor of rule compliance predict greater treatment adherence. The quality of the relationship between treatment provider, and to a lesser extent probation officer, resulted in a higher level of treatment adherence, lower level of perceived coercion, and a lower risk of future probation violations.

Limitations of Information

The study sample size of 82 may not be completely representative of co-occurring probationers. The study was conducted in Orange County, CA and may not be geographically or demographically comparable to probation populations across the US. The follow up period examining revocations was only 8 months; longer term results are unknown. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the results may have been influenced by unaccounted factors.

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.

Co-occurring Disorder Probationers and Social Networks

The present exploratory study was to examine the influence of social control from peers and professionals on probationers with co-occurring disorders. Six hundred and one (601) probationers completed two validated mental health assessments and a validated substance abuse assessment. Of these probationers, 115 were determined to have co-occurring disorders. Only 82 of the 115 probationers agreed to proceed to the second stage of the study. In this stage, probationers were interviewed and completed a battery of assessments measuring their social networks, life satisfaction, working alliance with treatment providers and probation officers, perceived coercion, treatment adherence, and current probation progress. After an average of 8 months, the probationer's file was reviewed for probation violations.

Probationers with co-occurring mental and substance abuse problems (PCPs) were found to have smaller than average social networks. Researchers believed this to be from "triple stigma" (i.e. involved in the criminal justice system as well as substance abuse and mental health issues). PCPs had an average of 6 (5.9) people in their social network. On average just over half of those (55%) were positive or pro-social people. PCPs felt their probation officer tried to control them and placed the PCP under more pressure to adhere to treatment than any other person.

The study indicates that clinician rela-

tionships are associated with treatment adherence and reduced probation violations. Researchers state, "In particular, having a likable clinician who engages in participatory decision-making predicts rule-compliance". When there is a high quality relationship between clinicians and, to a lesser extent probation officers, the perceived coercion is reduced. Participatory decision-making allows clinicians to work with clients to engage pro-social supports that buffer against criminogenic factors without making the PCP feel controlled and resistant.

Practical Applications

- ✓ Since the relationship with clinicians is crucial to behavior change, ask probationers in treatment about their relationship with their provider.
- ✓ Collaborate with treatment providers to ensure that probationers are receiving treatment that is responsive to the probationer (See: 13 Questions Probation Should Ask Treatment is located in Judicialnet under Tips and Tools > Quality Treatment).
- ✓ Use motivational interviewing when dealing with ambivalence or resistance to change, particularly with co-occurring disorders probationers, as they felt more coercion from POs than from friends and family.
- ✓ Be aware of "triple stigmas" (e.g. cultural, physical, medical, and substance abuse issues) of those involved in the criminal justice system. Help probationers find and engage in local support groups.

State Court Administrator's Office
Colorado Division of Probation Services, Evaluation Unit
720.625.5760; www.courts.state.co.us
May 2013