

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Self-Control and Substance Use Among College Students

Ford, J. and Blumenstein, L. (2013). "Self-Control and Substance Use Among College Students." *Journal of Drug Issues* 43: 56 - 68.

Key Words: self-control, peers, substance use, college, opportunity

Summary/Conclusions

Recently a number of studies have identified the importance of self-control. Problems with self-control have been linked to increased criminal activity and substance abuse. The current study explored links between self-control and substance abuse in a university setting. Researchers surveyed university students about their substance use (e.g. binge drinking, marijuana use, prescription drug use, other illicit drugs), self-control, demographic variables, religiosity, Greek membership, peers, and access to drugs. The study discovered self-control was related to all different forms of substance abuse. Both peers and opportunity moderated self-control for binge drinking and marijuana use.

Limitations of Information

The study population contained only college students. College students may not be representative of probationers in Colorado. Peer use was determined by participants' perception of peer substance use. Lastly, the survey did not examine the reason for illicit prescription drug use. The user of OxyContin may look quite different than users of Adderall.

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.

Factors Influencing Substance Use in College

In the current study, researchers utilized survey data from 1,092 undergraduate college students to determine how self-control and substance use are related. The surveys collected data on self-control, substance use, drug choice, opportunity to use substances, perception of peers drug use, demographic information, grade point average, religiosity, and Greek affiliation. Researchers analyzed the data to determine which factors (e.g. self-control, religiosity, grade point average) were related to substance use. Researchers also analyzed the data to determine if self-control was moderated by peer use or opportunity.

Researchers determined that a number of factors impacted substance use. Peers and opportunity were two factors that influenced all forms of substance use. Low self-control was related to binge drinking, marijuana use, and prescription drug use. When low self-control scores rose by one unit, the risk increased for binge drinking (2%), marijuana use (2%), and prescription drug use (4%). Researchers also found correlation between low self-control and use of illicit drugs. Age (older) and Greek affiliation increased the likelihood of binge drinking. Lower scores in religiosity and grade point average also increased the likelihood of substance use.

To analyze how self-control was moderated by peers and opportunity, researchers examined the level of access to substances, peer use, binge drinking,

marijuana use, prescription drug use, and self-control scores. Low self-control was found to be a factor in use with individuals who reported greater opportunity to binge drink or use marijuana or had peers that binge drink or use marijuana.

Practical Applications

- ✓ Review assessment information to determine if substance abuse might be related to peers or impulsivity.
- ✓ Use Carey Guides to address issues with impulsivity and peers.
- ✓ Discuss factors like peers, self-control, and opportunity with probationers that are struggling with substance use.
- ✓ If a probationer is in or about to begin college, consider collaborating with the probationer to case plan strategies to identify and spend time with pro-social peers.
- ✓ Explore the opportunity or access to substances a probationer may have in various settings.
- ✓ Collaborate with probationers to develop skills to increase self-control.
- ✓ Identify behaviors that increase self-control and provide the probationer incentives for such behaviors.
- ✓ Try having the probationer practice difficult situations where he or she may struggle with self-control.
- ✓ If a probationer is in college, have conversations about possible campus life factors that may be difficult him or her (e.g. Greek affiliation).