

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Delinquent Peer Influence On Offending Versatility: Can Peers Promote Specialized Delinquency*

Thomas, K. (2015). "Delinquent Peer Influence On Offending Versatility: Can Peers Promote Specialized Delinquency?". *Criminology* 53(2): 280-308.

**Key Words:** Peer influence, specialization, delinquency

### Summary/Conclusions

The current study examined the relationship between peers and specialized offending. Utilizing data from the Gang Resistance Education and Training evaluation and the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, researchers used statistical modeling to determine if there was a relationship between a juvenile's offense and their peers' offenses. The study discovered that peers significantly shape a juveniles offense specialization in crimes of violence, theft, and substance abuse.

### Limitations of Information

The study utilized self-report survey data, which is limited to the respondent's perceptions. Researchers decided to only analyze the type of offending and not the frequency at which juveniles and peers offended. The study was conducted on juveniles and may not be applicable to adults. The study did not distinguish if there is co-offending, committing crimes with others, or committing crimes comorbidity, which is committing multiple crimes in the same occurrence.

**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.

### The Power of Peer Influence

Various research has demonstrated that negative peer influences contribute to an increased risk to commit crime. What has been unclear is whether peers influence adolescents to commit crime generally or whether peer influence creates certain types of offending. The current study examines the influence peers have on specialization of juvenile delinquency.

Researchers utilized existing data from the Gang Resistance Education Training (GREAT) evaluation (n=1,390) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (ADDHealth) (n=1,848) for data on juvenile delinquency and peers. The type of delinquency for both individuals and their best friends were analyzed and coded. Data relating to impulsivity, unstructured socializing, bonds to prosocial institutions, demographics, and prior offending behavior were all controlled for in the study. Next the data was run through a series of models to test the relationship between individuals offense types and peer offense types.

The study discovered that when friends displayed a greater propensity certain types of crime there was a 30% to 45% increased likelihood a juvenile committed a similar offense. Interestingly, in both the GREAT and ADDHealth data, age and school commitment (e.g. determined by the adolescents' self-reported grade or whether or not the individual felt grades were important) were significant predictors of all types of delinquency.

Unstructured socializing only appeared to be a significant predictor of delinquency in for overall offending in the ADDHealth data.

### Practical Applications

- √ Consider asking open-ended questions like "Tell me about your friends", "What do you friends like to do", "How do your friends staying out of trouble?"
- √ Seek opportunities to discuss friends and acquaintances (e.g. when a probationer is discussing activities ask who is joining them in the activities).
- √ When referring individuals to treatment, keep various risk levels separate to limit negative influences with lower risk populations.
- √ Use cognitive behavior homework assignments to explore why a probationer committed an offense. In the study crimes of violence, theft and substance issues showed a direct link to anti-social peers/companions as a driver for criminal behavior.
- √ Utilize homework such as Carey Guides, specifically the Interpersonal Skills and Anti-social Peers workbooks, to explore attitudes and beliefs about themselves and their friends.
- √ Use case plans to help probationers find new opportunities to create pro-social networks.

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**July 2016**