

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Breaking Up is Hard to Do: Romantic Dissolution, Offending, and Substance Use During the Transition to Adulthood*

Larson, M. and Sweeten, G. (2012). "Breaking Up is Hard to Do: Romantic Dissolution, Offending, and Substance Use During the Transition to Adulthood." *Criminology* 50(3): 605 - 636.

**Key Words:** Marital Status, Substance Use, Crime, Relationships, Adolescence

### Summary/Conclusions

The present study used data from the 1997 National Youth Survey to determine the impact of relationship dissolution on offending and substance use in late adolescent and young adults. The study attempts to unravel principles from three different criminological theories to examine the extent breakups influence deviant behavior such as substance use and criminal offending. Researchers discovered males and females process breakups differently. Males are more likely to participate in crime, use drugs, and use cocaine after multiple breakups. Females are not more likely to commit crime, but are more likely to use alcohol, binge drink, and use marijuana after multiple breakups.

### Limitations of Information

It is not clear how national survey data applies to Colorado youth and young adults. Researchers could not determine who ended the relationship, which may affect post breakup behavior. It is also not clear if some behaviors started just prior to relationship dissolution.

**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.

### Changes in Behavior After Breakups

In late adolescence and early adulthood, relationships have a profound impact on individuals' lives. The present study explores how individuals process breakups. Utilizing data from the 1997 National Youth Survey, researchers analyzed how individuals responded to changes in relationship status. The data was categorized by individuals who: stayed in a relationship, broke up but established another relationship, had multiple breakups, and individuals who went through a breakup but remained single. Those groups were then analyzed for crime prevalence, crime variety, alcohol use, alcohol binges, marijuana use, and cocaine use.

Generally breakups led individuals to commit more crime, drink more alcohol, and use more drugs than those who remained with their partner. Individuals who experienced one breakup were 2.5% more likely to commit crime. They were also 2.1% more likely to use drugs. Multiple breakups increased the chances of committing a crime by 4.6%, substance use by 3.9%, and increased the time using substances by approximately 1 day in the past 30 days. If the breakup was followed by a new relationship there was no increased effect of crime.

Finally, males and females process breakups in slightly different ways. Males are more likely to commit crime and use substances after a breakup. If males experience multiple breakups, the risk of the commission of crime rises to 9.7% and substance use to 7% more

than those who did not experience a breakup. Females were only at greater risk to use alcohol and marijuana after experiencing one or more breakups.

### Practical Applications

- ✓ Engage probationers, especially juvenile and young adults, in meaningful conversations about their relationships (e.g. the quality, progress, plans).
- ✓ Use collaborative case plans with the probationer to engage him or her in new social settings in education, leisure/recreation, or employment.
- ✓ After a breakup, actively seek, affirm, and reinforce positive behaviors a probationer is exhibiting.
- ✓ Try to involve probationers with relationship changes in new pro-social activities that may offset negative feelings regarding breakups.
- ✓ Collaborate with treatment providers to address negative emotions the juvenile or adult is feeling about ended relationships.
- ✓ Consider checking in with probationers just experiencing a breakup, as this can be a time he or she is at risk for offending behavior or substance abuse.
- ✓ If a probationer is experiencing relationship problems, it may be beneficial to create a prevention plan in advance of a breakup.
- ✓ Encourage the pursuit of healthy pro-social relationships.

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