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.

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.