

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Do relationships matter? Examining the quality of probation officers' interactions with parolees in preventing recidivism*

Polaschek, D. (2016). Do relationships matter? Examining the quality of probation officers' interactions with parolees in preventing recidivism. *Practice: The New Zealand Corrections Journal*, 4, 1.

### Relationships Matter

**Key Words:** working alliance, rapport, relationship, recidivism

#### Summary/Conclusions

The term “working alliance” describes the quality of the relationship between an officer and offender. This study sought to determine how the quality of the working alliance affected recidivism among a sample of 300 men on parole. Relationship quality was measured by both supervising officers and parolees. The quality of relationship was rated poorer by officers for parolees who were higher risk, had lower motivation, were less prepared for release, have not had prior treatment participation, and had fewer protective factors. When controlling for the latter variables, the parolee’s perspective of the relationship was a significant predictor of reimprisonment.

#### Limitations of Information

This study focused on parolees in New Zealand and may not apply to probationers in Colorado. This study did not provide observation and measurement of officer behaviors toward parolees, time spent with parolees, or how officers used their time with parolees. The study did not examine characteristics of officers. Additionally, this study used risk level and engagement rather than observing and rating parolee behavior.

**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.

Stemming from the counseling and psychology field is a cadre of research findings highlighting the importance of a quality relationship between practitioner and client. This relationship called the “working alliance” can be described as the ability of the officer to develop a positive and constructive relationship that is responsive, rather than reactionary, with all offenders regardless of individual offender characteristics, behaviors, or circumstances. Additional research findings show that offenders who are less prepared for release have a less productive working alliance with their supervising officer.

The study sample consisted of 300 recently paroled men sentenced to serve at least two years. Half of the men participated in a treatment program while in prison, whereas the control group did not have treatment programming. Supervising officers and offenders were interviewed two months after the men paroled. Interviewers rated the quality of the relationship from the viewpoints of the officer and offender. In addition to interview data, information about offender’s risks and needs were gathered.

Findings demonstrated that officers rated parolees released from confinement early and who completed treatment more generously than offenders who served their entire sentence and did not complete treatment. However, offenders who were less prepared for release and had higher dynamic risk did not view their officers negatively. Additionally, both officer and offender ratings suggested that offenders who were higher risk, in lower stages of change, poor

transition plans, and less engaged in treatment were treated less positively by their officer. This also appears in relationship ratings between offenders and officers for offenders who had violations, reconvictions, or returned to custody within the first two months of their release. Controlling for offender characteristics, relationship ratings were independently predictive of recidivism.

#### Practical Applications

- ✓ Be aware of biases that may be present in your work with probationers.
- ✓ Be mindful to engage all probationers equally.
- ✓ Ask for coaching. Specifically ask for feedback on strengths and areas for improvement in engaging higher risk and lower motivation probationers.
- ✓ Continue to develop skills and tools to respond in a non-reactive manner to probationers who are high in the Big Four criminogenic need areas.
- ✓ Consider engaging in Motivational Interviewing training.
- ✓ Attend training focused on strengthening Emotional Intelligence.
- ✓ Take into consideration the benefits of asking probationers for feedback about the quality of your working relationship. Be open to shifting your style to meet their individualized needs.
- ✓ Structure your day to allow time to prepare for each probationer appointment.