

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Delaying gratification depends on social trust*

Michaelson, L., Vega, A., et al. (2013). "Delaying gratification depends on social trust." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4.

**Key Words:** Incentives, impulse control, substance abuse, social trust

### Summary/Conclusions

In two experiments, researchers surveyed adults' willingness to accept a lesser monetary reward right away or receive a reward of a larger monetary value later. Through vignettes and computer-generated faces, researchers manipulated the trustworthiness of individuals providing rewards. Both experiments confirmed there was a correlation between the perceived trustworthiness of an individual and if a participant would wait for a larger reward. The more untrustworthy the provider of the reward seemed, the more unwilling individuals were to wait for a larger delayed reward.

### Limitations of Information

The study's population consisted of individuals from a pay per task website. It is not clear if the population of the study is similar to Colorado probation. The experiments did not control for differences in individual's impulsivity. Individual's decisions were hypothetical and may not reflect a person's true choice. There were no elements of authority contained within the experiments. It is unclear if trust would be more or less important in situations where individuals interact with authority figures.

**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.

### Trust effects delayed gratification

Researchers were interested in how much trust weighed on individuals' decisions to delay gratification for a greater future reward. In two studies, researchers accepted volunteers from a "pay per task" website. Using an online survey format, the study asked individuals to read vignettes with assigned computer-generated faces. The vignettes and faces were designed to be untrustworthy, neutral, or trustworthy. After reading the vignettes, participants answered a series of questions regarding their preference to accept a lesser monetary amount right away or a greater monetary amount in the future (between 10 – 75 days).

In the first experiment, 78 participants read and were surveyed on all three vignettes. In the second experiment, 172 participants received only one of the three vignettes and a larger database of computer-generated faces that have previously shown to influence trustworthiness were utilized.

In both experiments, trustworthiness was a predictor of the likelihood an individual would delay gratification. If the participant perceived the person and face as untrustworthy, it was more unlikely that the participant would delay gratification for a larger reward. Participants were more inclined to accept delayed rewards from neutral individuals, which led researchers to believe there is a minimum threshold for social trust with delayed gratification. Results from the study suggest that a lack of trust has a

greater effect on an individual's decision to seek immediate gratification than either someone viewed as neutral or trustworthy.

### Practical Applications

- ✓ When utilizing incentives, be fair, swift, and consistent. A lack of consistency may negatively impact trust.
- ✓ Discuss what incentives are meaningful to probationers. This may help probationers learn to delay gratification.
- ✓ Establish a positive working relationship with probationers. Mutual respect and a level of trust are products of such an alliance.
- ✓ Elicit feedback from probationers regarding their perception of trust in you.
- ✓ Collaborate with treatment providers to help the probationer through past events that are hindering trust.
- ✓ Capitalize on opportunities to model honesty and build trust with probationers.
- ✓ Engage in conversations about a probationer's choice for "some now" over "more later".
- ✓ Ask about strategies (e.g. task engagement, distraction, decisional balance matrix, reminders of larger rewards) utilized by probationers to delay gratification.
- ✓ Be aware of facial and body gestures when working with probationers. Conflicting verbal and non-verbal messages may lead to a lack of trust.