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First published October 2013

Contact info:
National.Research@noms.gsi.gov.uk

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Intermediate outcomes of peer relationship interventions: a rapid evidence assessment

Oonagh Skrine, Paul Turnbull, Anne Kazimirski, David Pritchard
Institute for Criminal Policy Research and New Philanthropy Capital

Edited by Jess Haskins, NOMS

This report summarises the findings from a rapid evidence assessment (REA) examining how interventions targeting offenders' peer relationships can have an impact on reoffending through achievement of intermediate outcomes¹. The REA was the first stage in a wider project to develop a framework for outcome measurement which can be adopted by organisations that deliver peer relationship interventions to offenders.

Key points

- The importance of peer relationships in juvenile offending is well established, but peer relationships have been less frequently discussed in the context of adult offending.
- Ten studies evaluating interventions addressing adult peer relationships were found: three were evaluations of curfew orders, one of residential change, two focused on the effects of incarceration, and four on resettlement projects. The quality of the evidence was generally weak.
- Many interventions which aimed to change peer relationships were not solely focused on this outcome, which made assessing the impact on reoffending difficult.
- Intermediate outcomes identified in the review included changing social capital, influencing attachment, improving peer relationships and reconsidering life choices. Outcomes related to changing social capital appeared to be the most common across studies.
- It is recommended that consultation is carried out with providers of services that intend to change peer relationships to better understand the outcomes they aim to achieve, and how best to measure these.

¹ The full report is available on request from national.research@noms.gsi.gov.uk

Context

Studies evaluating desistance have stressed the importance of both human and social capital.² Human capital focuses on an individual's abilities and attitudes and social capital stresses the value of relationships with others, including bonds and associations with peers.³ Andrews and Bonta (2010) recognised the role of peers to be a major risk and need factor for offenders. A meta-analysis of effective correctional practices with female offenders found that targeting interpersonal criminogenic needs, such as antisocial associates and family, showed the strongest positive association with decreased reoffending (Dowden and Andrews, 1999).

Some previous research has shown a correlation between age and the extent and strength of peer influence on criminal behaviour. However this link may be exacerbated by the lack of research on peer relationships into adulthood. In fact, some (limited) research shows that antisocial peer behaviour appears to be a significant factor on an offenders' antisocial behaviour, regardless of age (Monahan *et al.*, 2009; Warr, 1993). Dynamic factors⁴ such as positive relationships (including with partners), change in environment, and self-control can determine the extent of influence of negative relationships. Therefore it may be that peer relationships, whether positive or negative, have the potential to impact on 'staying out of trouble' and as such are a concern for offenders (Forste *et al.*, 2011).

The quality and extent of peer relationships can impact on antisocial behaviour and offending in a number of ways. First, association with peers who hold attitudes and engage in behaviours which are pro-social can, in combination with the support of partners, encourage desistance from crime (Giordano, 2003; van Domburgh *et al.*, 2009). Second, studies have shown that early peer rejection through, for example, bullying, is associated with later criminal behaviour (see Agnew and Brezina, 1997; Hymel *et al.*, 1990). Third, antisocial peer relationships can strengthen, support

and help to maintain offending attitudes and behaviour. In short, the presence or absence of peer pressure may act as a catalyst either to reduce offending, or to persevere with it (Boyce *et al.*, 2009).

This rapid evidence assessment (REA) aimed to identify potential intermediate outcomes achieved by interventions which attempt to change adult offenders' peer relationships, and sought evidence of their impact on reoffending. Intermediate outcomes in this context are those that may be linked to reductions in reoffending or desistance from crime, such as changes in attitudes. Demonstrating effectiveness (in other ways than reconviction analysis), such as through robust evidence of achievement of outcomes related to reduced reoffending, can help providers ensure they are focusing resources in the right areas. Additionally, it can give commissioners confidence that services as part of a package of interventions are contributing to reducing reoffending.

Approach

The REA is a quick, structured and transparent method to review what is already known about a narrowly defined policy or research issue (Davies, 2003). It is based on the principles of a systematic review, but with greater exclusion criteria, usually due to time constraints.

Key search terms for peer relations (with adult offenders) were used to search a range of bibliometric databases, criminal justice journals, government websites and websites of relevant charities for qualitative and quantitative outcome focused studies published since 1992 in the English language. Although qualitative studies cannot be used to demonstrate impact, they were included as it was expected that evidence would be limited, and they could provide further information about the types of intermediate outcomes that could be examined empirically.

Data were extracted in a consistent, structured manner. Information was recorded on aims, content, dosage, implementation details, participants, and the theory of change on which the intervention was based. Methodological details on sampling, controls and points in time outcomes were measured, and statistical validity data (where appropriate) were also collected. Additional details on how intermediate

² See 'Transforming Rehabilitation. A summary of evidence on reducing reoffending', Ministry of Justice, 2013.

³ In this paper, 'peer' is used to describe someone of equal standing to another. Following Ryan *et al.* (2009), a 'peer group' is defined as a small, relatively intimate group with whom an individual regularly interacts.

⁴ Dynamic factors are those which change over time.

outcomes were operationalised and measured were extracted from source material.

Studies were reviewed where possible using an adapted scientific methods scale (SMS) and agreed assessment criteria for qualitative studies (Sherman *et al.*, 1997; Harper and Chitty, 2005; Spencer *et al.*, 2003).⁵

Results

Ten studies that met the inclusion criteria were identified, focusing on 10 different interventions. They included three studies of curfew orders (UK studies), one of residential change (US study), two of types of incarceration (US study), and four of resettlement services (UK, US and Australian studies). Changing peer relationships was seldom the primary aim of these interventions, but rather one of several outcomes, such as improvements in family relationships. This made assessing the impact on reoffending difficult.

General findings were:

- Most studies were based on secondary data (albeit from large samples over multiple years), and specific interventions were rare.
- Most of the literature discussed peers in the context of adolescents.
- Although samples in the literature were sometimes large, they were often idiosyncratic of a particular community and therefore not generalisable.
- Only four of the 10 studies found were scalable on the adapted SMS scale, two of which scored 3 (and used non-intervention comparison groups to compare intervention effects) and two of which scored 2 (and measured pre and post intervention effects).
- Six studies were qualitative and/or based on small samples.

- Most studies examined attitudes and attitudinal change. Attempts to objectively measure the behavioural impact of peers were not common.
- Only a minority of studies sought corroboration from others about changes in attitudes or behaviours.

Intermediate outcomes

A range of intermediate outcomes were identified, these being:

- Reduction of antisocial capital (five studies)
- Development of pro-social capital (four studies)
- Supportive attachment to significant others who can be relied on for support (two studies)
- Improved relationship with peers (one study)
- Reconsideration of commitments and priorities; commitment to conventionality (two studies)
- Facilitation of changes in attachment relationships during incarceration (one study)

The three studies on curfew were non-scalable, meaning that the evidence on impact of the interventions on outcomes was weak. One of the aims of curfew orders is to reduce time spent with antisocial peers, therefore they can be linked to potential changes in social capital. The studies found that curfew orders could disrupt some antisocial peer relationships, but conversely, could also negatively affect pro-social peer relationships (Deuchar, 2012; Hucklesby, 2008; Walter, 2002).

The study on residential change (SMS rating three, Ludwig and Kling, 2007) tested the hypothesis that behaviour is susceptible to social and peer pressure. The intervention involved people from high crime, deprived areas where they were either:

- given tokens to move to a more affluent area
- given tokens to move to any other location of their choice
- given no change of location

Findings suggested that patterns of crime persisted regardless of neighbourhood if individuals continued to live within a community with the same cultural and ethnic groups. The findings from this study were unclear on which intermediate outcomes this type of intervention would affect, although the intention was to reduce antisocial capital.

⁵ Level 1: Correlation between a crime prevention program and a measure of crime or crime risk factors at a single point in time. Level 2: Temporal sequence between the program and the crime or risk outcome clearly observed, or the presence of a comparison group without demonstrated comparability to the treatment group. Level 3: A comparison between two or more comparable units of analysis, one with and one without the program. Level 4: Comparison between multiple units with and without the program, controlling for other factors or using comparison units that evidence only minor differences. Level 5: Random assignment and analysis of comparable units to program and comparison groups.

The two studies on types of incarceration were both investigating the impact of boot camps (Benda *et al.*, 2003; Rocque *et al.*, 2011). Both studies were level two, and found a correlation between negative peer relationships and antisocial beliefs, and higher risk of reoffending. The boot camps aimed to achieve outcomes around changing attitudes to choices in life. The study by Rocque *et al.* compared boot camp with imprisonment, testing for 'facilitative attachment' (the degree of change in personal relationships during imprisonment). Differences in facilitative attachment between those in prison and in community boot camps were initially found, although these differences disappeared once criminality of peers and family was accounted for. No evidence was found in either study for the intervention being successful at reducing reoffending.

Of the four resettlement studies, only one was scalable on the SMS (at level three, SVORI programme, Lindquist *et al.*, 2009). A variety of interventions aiming to influence peer relations have been used in resettlement services, including cognitive behavioural therapy, mentoring and general support (Burgess *et al.*, 2011; Brown and Ross, 2010; Hutton and Nugent, 2011; Lindquist *et al.*, 2009). Evidence was stronger for success in increasing positive relationships with peers than in reducing negative relationships. Resettlement programmes appeared to aim to build confidence and to increase or mobilise social capital.

Implications

The notion that negative peer relationships can be associated with delinquency and offending was supported. However changing peer relationships among adult offenders has not been an area of considered or systematic intervention, and few studies have focused on assessing the impact of these interventions. No evidence was found for a causal link between improving peer relationships and reducing reoffending, although this may be due to a lack of robust studies in the area, and the difficulty in assessing this impact when changing peer relationships is only one aspect of an intervention.

A reduction in negative peer relationships is a potential outcome of a wide range of interventions, including gang-related activity and interventions focused on offenders under the age of 18, as well as

generic types of resettlement support. Interventions dealing with peer relations tend to deal with promoting positive peer relationships alongside reducing negative ones. Developing measures to assess changes in peer relationships would therefore have a wide applicability.

The development of tools aimed at measuring the effectiveness of peer relationship interventions could help commissioners as well as service providers understand which interventions work best. It may also boost explicit activity in this area. Collation of robust data on intermediate outcomes could later be used to test the link with reoffending outcomes.

When considering measures of effectiveness for interventions focused on changing peer relationships, achieving outcomes related to those identified above should be considered. In particular, it seems that outcomes related to changing social capital, such as developing relationships with more pro-social peers, are most prominent, and so interventions may wish to consider how best to target their services to achieve this. Further consultation with providers of services, to better understand how these outcomes could be measured, is recommended.

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