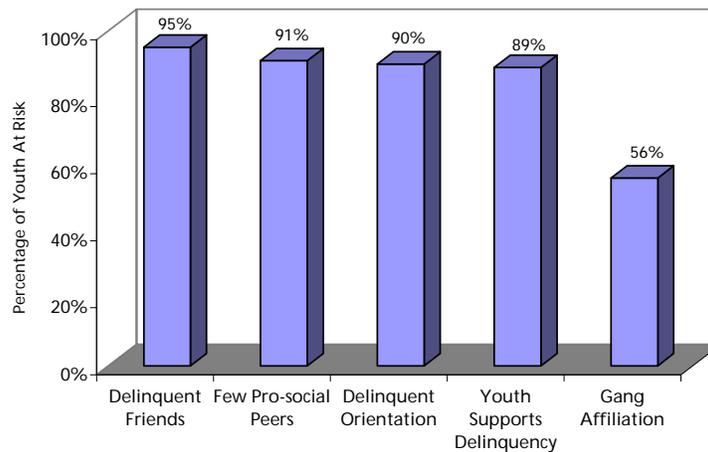


Negative Peer Relationships Increase the Likelihood of Youth Engaging in Violent Criminal Behavior

A recent study¹ sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) on the relationship of co-offending (committing a criminal act with another juvenile) and patterns of juvenile crime suggests that youth learn attitudes and beliefs about crime through their association with their delinquent companions. Specifically, the study found that youth who co-offend are more likely to commit a violent crime than those who are solo offenders.

This finding provides valuable information about possible program interventions for juveniles in San Diego County with significant contact with the juvenile justice system. Since the late 1990s, juveniles in the probation system have been assessed using the San Diego Risk and Resiliency Check-up (SDRRC) (a strength-based assessment instrument utilized to create case plans for delinquent youth) for behaviors that place them at risk in six domains: family, peer, education, substance abuse, individual, and delinquency. Analyses of risk factors related to a youth's relationship with peers (regardless of the domain) show that a large percentage of San Diego youth committed through the Breaking Cycles program have negative peer influences in their lives at the time of program intake. As Figure 1 illustrates, around nine out of ten were assessed as interacting with delinquent peers and living a lifestyle that supported delinquent behavior.

Figure 1
THE MAJORITY OF YOUTH IN BREAKING CYCLES LACK POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS



Total = 4,310

SOURCES: SANDAG; San Diego County Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act 2005 Evaluation Report

These findings from NIJ and the data from the SDRRC have important implications when designing prevention and intervention programs for at-risk youth. Specifically, this information supports program models that promote pro-social relationships and decrease the probability of youth being negatively influenced by delinquent peers.

¹ McCord, J. & Conway, K. (2005). **Co-Offending and Patterns of Juvenile Crime**. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.