

You are who you hang out with.

You may have heard this in your younger years from a parent or teacher. And it's true. If you've got friends who study and do well in school, you'll try to do the same. If you've got friends who skip school to smoke pot, the odds are you'll be lighting up a joint as well.

When working with prisoners and ex-prisoners, this old saying takes on even greater significance. It can literally mean the difference between a prisoner reforming his life for good or reverting back to a life of crime and incarceration. With consequences this heavy, it is imperative for volunteers to educate themselves about criminal networks.

Criminal Peer Pressure

Over nine years, a study was conducted at various locations by Jeremy F. Mills and Daryl G. Kroner of the Correctional Service of Canada. Respondents were asked to recall the four adults in the community with whom they spent the most time and the amount of time spent with each person.

According to the study, prisoners who reported they had no criminal peers had a recidivism rate of 23 percent. Those who reported having one, two, three, or four criminal peers had recidivism rates of 44-50 percent. Furthermore, recidivism rates increased if longer amounts of time were spent with these criminal peers.

Research shows that in order for ex-prisoners to have the best chance for succeeding on the outside, they must deconstruct – or break down – their criminal networks. And they must find and develop new, healthy relationships. This is harder than it sounds, but accepting this challenge drastically increases the odds of staying out of prison.

Taking the Next Steps

Here are some practical tips mentors can share with prisoners and ex-prisoners to help break their cycle of criminal associates.

- 1. Commit to having a close, non-criminal friend or mentor.** It is vital for ex-prisoners to develop an open and honest relationship with a trustworthy person. This can help ex-prisoners get through the tough obstacles they will face on the outside. Mentors need to be very proactive in this area. Tell your mentee you need to know who he or she's hanging out with, so you can hold them accountable in forming non-criminal relationships.
- 2. Learn how to make good impressions.** This may sound like a basic skill, but it's difficult for ex-prisoners to make small talk and hold conversations. Start small. Sit with your mentee and discuss topics of the day like news, sports, and the weather. Help them learn to listen and ask questions in return. Having basic conversational skills will help open the door to meeting new people.
- 3. Identify where to meet positive people.** Some mentees think the local bar is the only place to meet someone. Mentors need to help ex-prisoners learn where to meet people that could potentially be solid, non-criminal friends. Encourage them to join a church, get involved in community

service projects, and get to know co-workers. As they branch out, they'll begin to realize the old places they used to hang out were filled with negative influences.

- 4. Proceed with caution.** There are some instances where avoiding criminal associates is difficult, especially in prison. The key is to be prepared. Encourage prisoners and ex-prisoners to bring a positive friend or mentor along with them, and make sure this friend knows that they want to maintain healthy, non-criminal relationships.

By being aware of the negative power of criminal associations, you can prepare yourself to help prisoners and ex-prisoners you mentor. Guide them into making the tough choices now – like choosing to deconstruct their personal criminal networks – and you will help pave the way for their future success in life.