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# Major Risk Factors for Antisocial and Delinquent Behaviour among Children and Youth

Research Matters

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## Issue:

What are the factors that put children and youth at increased risk for antisocial and delinquent behaviour?

## Context:

The prediction and prevention of crime is grounded on knowledge of its causes. Over the past few decades, considerable efforts in both theory and research have contributed to elucidating these causes. Despite these advances, the causes, and their interplay, of crime and delinquency, as with any human behaviour, remains a complex task.

The complexity lies, in part, in the many factors that may influence the development (i.e., onset, course and desistance) of the criminal behaviour within individuals. These factors cut across various domains, and operate at multiple levels and different time periods. For instance, an individual may be at an increased risk for antisocial or delinquent behaviour because of certain cognitive deficits evident in early childhood, which may result in poor school performance and negative peer interactions. Adding another layer of complexity to the issue is the fact that these factors do not merely interact with each other, but also with broader social and cultural values (e.g., mass media portrayals of criminality, societal tolerance for certain forms of aggressive or violent behaviour).

Furthermore, the development of a comprehensive explanation of the causes of crime may be restrained by the somewhat mechanistic and reductionist research methodologies used to test predictions derived from the developmental theories of human behaviour. Unfortunately, the existing research strategies lack the necessary sophistication to fully capture the complexity of human functioning as it unfolds over time, and so remain limited.

## Method:

The primary objective of this report was to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature on risk factors for antisocial and delinquent behaviour in children and youth, and to identify the major risk factors associated with these outcomes. Risk factors were identified through a review of the extant literature that included both published articles and unpublished research reports and studies available on websites (often government websites). Searches were conducted of

electronic databases together with reviews of the references section of each of the articles to identify additional sources.

Emphasis was placed on articles published in the past ten years, with particular attention paid to articles published since 2005. An attempt was also made to contact authors of studies to obtain as much information as possible on their work. The risk factors that showed the strongest associations with antisocial and delinquent behaviour in multiple studies were reported as most important.

## **Results:**

Results of the literature review confirmed that the major risk factors for antisocial and delinquent behaviour among children and youth fall into five life domains:

### *A. Individual*

- Demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender)
- Aggression, particularly early onset aggressive behaviour
- Antisocial beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, including early onset antisocial behaviour and conduct problems, and psychopathy/callous-unemotional traits
- Impulsivity
- Low intelligence, particularly verbal IQ

### *B. Family*

- Antisocial/criminal family members, including parents and siblings
- Parent-child separation, which may be either permanent or temporary, resulting from family disruptions, including out-of-home placement (e.g., foster care or other residential or institutional care)
- Parental conflict, including witnessing domestic violence
- Poor family management practices, including lack of parental monitoring and supervision, harsh, inconsistent and/or lax discipline, and low parental support
- Positive attachment as a protective factor
- Child maltreatment, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, and physical and emotional neglect
- Large sibship (i.e., 4 or + children/family)
- Low family socioeconomic status

### *C. Peer*

- Antisocial/delinquent peer associations
- Gang membership
- Peer rejection

#### *D. School*

- Poor academic performance
- Poor school attendance, including suspension, expulsion, truancy and dropping out
- Low school bonding

#### *E. Community/neighbourhood*

- Community disadvantage
- Community safety/violence

### **Implications:**

1. It is evident that no single risk factor or set of risk factors emerges as the most salient predictor of antisocial and delinquent behaviour. Rather, a range of factors from across five life domains interact together and contribute to the emergence and maintenance of such patterns of behaviour.
2. Understanding the causes of antisocial and delinquent behaviour is best viewed through a developmental lens. That is, young people who manifest antisocial and delinquent behaviour may experience different developmental pathways, comprised of both unique and common risk factors, with certain risk factors likely having their greatest influence at certain developmental periods during the life course (e.g., the effects of family factors are likely strongest during early and middle childhood, whereas peer factors exert their primary influence in adolescence).
3. From a policy and practical perspective, findings from this literature review underscore the importance for interventions to be targeted to the risk factors that reflect the specific pathways and that are most salient during different developmental periods. This is important to ensure maximum impact of the interventions, and so most efficient and cost-effective use of resources.
4. Most of the research on the risk factors for antisocial and delinquent behaviour has been conducted on males. Mental health problems and intimate/romantic relationships appear especially relevant for females with respect to antisocial and delinquent behaviour. However, developing a better and more refined understanding of the causes of crime among young girls is critical and warrants further investigation.

### **Source:**

Day, D.M., & Wanklyn, S.G. (2012). *Identification and Operationalization of the Major Risk Factors for Antisocial and Delinquent Behaviour among Children and Youth*. NCPC Research Report. Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada.

## **For more information:**

Lucie Léonard  
National Crime Prevention Centre  
Public Safety Canada  
269 Laurier Avenue West  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0P8  
Telephone: 613-957-6362  
Email: [Lucie.Leonard@ps-sp.gc.ca](mailto:Lucie.Leonard@ps-sp.gc.ca)

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