Families at risk: The impact of the familial environment on juvenile delinquency

**Issue:** What are the factors within the family environment that contribute to, or prevent, juvenile delinquency?

**Context:** Families play a vital role in the development of children and youth. Studies of juvenile delinquency have shown that the family environment can present as either a risk or protective factor.

A risk factor is a characteristic that, when present, promotes the adoption of harmful behaviour (e.g., delinquency). Research has shown that as the number of risk factors to which youth are exposed increases, so does the probability that he/she will engage in delinquent behaviours. Moreover, the presence of one risk factor may promote the existence of another risk factor, which in turn leads to a greater likelihood of problematic behaviour. Families exposed to multiple risk factors are considered “vulnerable families” or “at-risk families.” In contrast, a protective factor is a characteristic that offsets the negative effects of risk factors and reduces the likelihood of delinquency.

Being able to identify and understand the effects of these family-based risk and protective factors is important in preventing children and youth from becoming involved in illegal, harmful, and/or inappropriate conduct.

**Method:** A literature review was conducted to identify the key risk and protective factors within the family environment that have been examined in prior research in Canada and abroad.

**Results:** An analysis of research literature suggests that family-based risk and protective factors vary with respect to the age of the youth. They generally fall into three broad categories:

1. **Factors related to family dynamics and functioning**

Risk factors in this category include:
- **Ineffective parental behaviour** (e.g., poor supervision, over-permissiveness, inconsistent or overly strict discipline, a weak bond of affection and the inability to set clear limits);
- **Parental and/or sibling criminality**;
- **Family conflicts**;
- **Mistreatment during childhood** (e.g., being a victim of, or witness to, violence, neglect, physical and/or sexual and/or psychological abuse); and
- **Parental substance abuse**.

Protective factors in this category include:
- **A close and positive bond with parents** (e.g., the presence of an affectionate relationship, a supportive environment and parents who are respectful of their child’s friends); and
- **Adequate parental behaviour/practices** (e.g., consistent disciplinary methods, sufficient parental supervision).
2. **Factors related to family characteristics**

Risk factors in this category include:
- **Single parenthood** (i.e., a lone-parent family);
- Mental health of parents;
- The number of children in the family;
- The past/life-history experiences of parents;
- Having a young mother; and
- **Instability in the family** (e.g., unpredictable family income, multiple family transitions, broken home).

Protective factors in this category include:
- Parental level of education;
- Financial stability; and
- Stability of the family unit.

3. **Factors related to the neighbourhood or area of residence**

Risk factors in this category include:
- **The presence of criminal elements** (e.g., crime, young offenders and/or youth gangs);
- **Living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood** (e.g., poverty); and
- The availability of illicit and/or illegal goods (e.g., drugs, firearms).

Protective factors in this category include:
- **The integration of families into the community** (e.g., being active and participating in community, extracurricular and/or scholastic activities); and
- **Positive community supports** (e.g., relationship-building with neighbours, availability of resources and services).

Implications: Understanding the family-based risk and protective factors that influence delinquent behaviour can help to enhance the design and development of effective crime prevention programs for vulnerable families. At present, there are three categories of family-based interventions that show promise as crime prevention strategies: parental training, family therapy or integrated approach programs that involve several key partners (e.g., health and social services, education, justice, substance abuse, mental health). Research has demonstrated that by targeting family-based risk factors, and/or reinforcing protective factors, these programs can have an impact on reducing the incidence of juvenile delinquency.


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