



## NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION CENTRE

Building the Evidence – YOUTH AT RISK

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# FAMILY-BASED RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON JUVENILE DELINQUENCY: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Available scientific knowledge indicates that, depending on context and circumstances, families can be both a risk factor and a protective factor for juvenile delinquency.<sup>1</sup>

## RISK FACTORS

Some of the risk factors associated with family are static, while others are dynamic. Static risk factors, such as criminal history, parental mental health problems or a history of childhood abuse, are unlikely to change over time. However, dynamic risk factors, such as poor parental behaviour, family violence or parental drug addiction, can be modified through appropriate prevention and treatment programs.

Risk factors have a cumulative and interactive effect: a family exposed to several risk factors is considered a high-risk family. Furthermore, children and adolescents exposed to several risk factors will also be considered at high risk of embarking on a life path that will lead to delinquent behaviour.<sup>2</sup> This is because not only do the effects of risk factors accumulate, but the factors also interact with each other: the effects of one multiply the effects of another and so on. For example, parental alcoholism causes family conflicts, which then increase the risks of substance abuse.

## Risk factors associated with family dynamic and functioning

### *Ineffective parental behaviour*

- An inadequate family dynamic caused by poor parental practices, such as a lack of supervision,<sup>3</sup> rules that are too permissive, discipline that is inconsistent or too strict, a weak bond, and the inability to establish clear boundaries, were identified as strong risk factors for delinquent behaviour,<sup>4</sup> drug use,<sup>5</sup> poor academic performance<sup>6</sup> and membership in youth gangs.<sup>7</sup>
- Adolescents from families characterized by a lack of order and discipline are four times more at risk of engaging in delinquent behaviour as adults than children from structured families.<sup>8</sup>
- According to the International Youth Survey (IYS), 56% of youth who stated that their parents *never* knew who they were with had engaged in delinquent behaviour during the past 12 months, compared to 35% of youth whose parents *did not always* know who they were with and 12% of youth whose parents *always* knew who they were with.<sup>9</sup>

### *Parental criminality*

- The Pittsburgh<sup>10</sup> and Cambridge<sup>11</sup> longitudinal studies show that having a father, mother, brother or sister who displays criminal behaviour is a significant risk factor for delinquent behaviour in boys.
- Among the risk factors related to parental criminality, criminal behaviour by the father is one of the most influential: 63% of boys whose fathers are involved in criminal activity are at risk of doing the same, compared to 30% of other boys.<sup>12</sup>

### Mistreatment during childhood and family violence

- The presence of family violence and being mistreated during childhood are two significant risk factors associated with adolescent delinquent behaviour and violence in adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

### Parental substance abuse

- Fifteen-year-olds whose parent use drugs are twice as likely to use drugs themselves.<sup>14</sup>
- Fifteen-year-olds whose parents have a drinking problem are not at higher risk of developing a drinking problem.<sup>15</sup>
- Amongst 15-year-olds, peer pressure is a more significant risk factor than having parents who drink.<sup>16</sup>

### Risk factors associated with family characteristics

- Considered in isolation, the risk factors associated with family characteristics have a less obvious effect on adoption of delinquent behaviour amongst youth. The negative effects are sometimes the result of other factors, sometimes the result of a combination of risk factors.<sup>17</sup>
- Boys from broken homes are more at risk of engaging in delinquent behaviour than boys whose parents are still together, but they are no more at risk than boys whose parents are still together but who come from conflictual family environments.<sup>18</sup>

Table 1 – Juvenile delinquency risk factors associated with family according to age of children and adolescents

Cumulative and interactive effects of risk factors				
	6-12 years	13-17 years	18 and older	
Cumulative and interactive effects of risk factors	<b>Family dynamic and functioning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor parental practices</li> <li>• Parental and/or sibling criminality</li> <li>• Anti-social parents with attitudes that support violence</li> <li>• Family conflicts</li> <li>• Parents with substance abuse problems</li> <li>• Physical abuse and neglect</li> <li>• Family violence</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor parental practices</li> <li>• Parental and/or sibling criminality</li> <li>• Family violence</li> <li>• History of poor treatment</li> </ul>
	<b>Family characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstable family income</li> <li>• Broken home</li> <li>• Family mobility</li> <li>• Mental health of parents</li> <li>• Young mother</li> <li>• Number of children in the family</li> <li>• Single parent family</li> <li>• Parental past</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstable family income</li> <li>• Broken home</li> <li>• Family mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstable family income</li> </ul>
	<b>Area of residence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor area</li> <li>• Presence of young offenders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor area</li> <li>• Crime in the area</li> <li>• Presence of youth gangs</li> <li>• Availability of drugs and firearms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poverty</li> <li>• Crime</li> <li>• Youth gangs</li> <li>• Drugs and firearms</li> </ul>



- After controlling gender, income and parental supervision, researchers conclude that increased family transitions<sup>19</sup> are significantly related to a higher rate of delinquent behaviour and substance abuse.<sup>20</sup>
- According to the Rochester study results, 90% of youth who experienced five or more family transitions showed signs of delinquent behaviour, compared to 64.1% of youth who never experienced family transitions.<sup>21</sup>

## Risk factors associated with area of residence

- Family functioning is influenced by social context<sup>22</sup>. Families with few resources and who live in underprivileged areas have more difficulty providing their children with an upbringing that will keep them away from deviant and at-risk behaviour.<sup>23</sup>
- Areas characterized by extreme poverty, broken homes and high residential mobility tend to weaken the social networks and community socializing of children, and exacerbate ineffective parental behaviour.<sup>24</sup>
- Young children who live in underprivileged areas and grow up in families in which parental supervision is lacking are at risk of engaging in delinquent behaviour as adolescents.<sup>25</sup>

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors help us to better understand the characteristics and situations that protect and distance youth from delinquent behaviour.<sup>26</sup> Protective factors are characteristics or conditions that act as risk moderators, i.e., they help reduce the negative effects associated with risk factors and help youth better handle their situation.<sup>27</sup>

Protective factors are cumulative and interactive. However, they are not necessarily always the opposite of risk factors; for example, growing up in a poor area can be attenuated by parental involvement, participation and support.<sup>28</sup>

Table 2 illustrates the protective factors associated with family;<sup>29</sup> some examples are listed below.

- Adequate parental practices are a significant protective factor against deviant behaviour such as delinquency and drug/alcohol abuse.<sup>30</sup>
- The quality of family ties is a protective factor against delinquency for girls and boys of all age groups.<sup>31</sup>
- The integration of families into the life of their community, the involvement of families in extracurricular and scholastic activities, and the availability of resources and services are also considered to be protective factors.<sup>32</sup>

Table 2 – Protective factors associated with family

At every age <sup>33</sup>		
Family dynamic and functioning	Family characteristics	Area of residence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship based on family bond</li> <li>• Positive support within the family</li> <li>• Adequate parental supervision</li> <li>• Respect for friends by parents</li> <li>• Closeness between parents and children (affection)</li> <li>• Consistent disciplinary methods</li> <li>• Adequate parental behaviour and practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental level of education</li> <li>• Financial stability</li> <li>• Stability of the family unit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integration of families into the life of the community</li> <li>• Relationships established with neighbours</li> <li>• School activities involving the family</li> </ul>

### CONCLUSION

Families that present risk factors for juvenile delinquency must be considered as a complex reality, influenced by various risk factors. The concept of the “at-risk” family must be understood as a whole. Furthermore, we must not forget that family is at the crossroads of many other areas of influence: circle of friends, school and the community.

Families play a key role in the development of children and adolescents. It is therefore important to address those who are at risk by focusing on protective factors and offering training to parents and youth, family therapy, integrated treatment plans or other effective strategies to prevent and reduce juvenile delinquency.<sup>34</sup>



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## Notes

- 1 McVie and Holmes, 2005; Welsh and Farrington, 2007; Leblanc, 1999; Lacourse et al., 2006; Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber, 2004; Wyrick and Howell, 2004; Farrington et al., 2006; Loeber, Farrington and Petechuk, 2003; Hoeve et al., 2007; Claes et al., 2005; Shader, 2003; Wasserman and Seracini, 2001; Wasserman et al., 2003; Éthier et al., 2006; Éthier et al., 2007.
- 2 The duration of exposure to risk factors and the nature of the factors are also variables that must be considered in order to understand the links between risk factors, family and delinquency (Wasserman et al., 2003); see also Schonert-Reichl, 2000.
- 3 In general, supervision refers to the control parents exert over their children's comings and goings, social network, homework, pastimes, knowing whether they smoke or use drugs (Mucchielli, 2001).
- 4 Claes et al., 2005 ; Lacourse et al., 2006.
- 5 Smith, 2004; McVie and Holmes, 2005
- 6 See Claes et al. 2005; Dornbush and Wood, 1989.
- 7 Claes et al., 2005; Lacourse et al., 2006. See also Phelan et al., 2004; Hill et al., 1999; Le Blanc and Lanctot, 1998; Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry et al., 2003.
- 8 Hoeve et al., 2007
- 9 Savoie, 2007
- 10 Loeber et al., 1998
- 11 Farrington, 2006; see also Farrington et al. 1996; 2001; 2002.
- 12 Farrington, 2002; Farrington et al. 2006
- 13 This fact is supported by several other researchers (notably CCSJ, 2006; Carlson, 1991; Dauvergne and Johnson, 2001; Hotton, 2003; Jaffe et al., 1986; Ristock 1995; Rodgers, 1994; Health Canada, 1997; Health Canada, 2004; Widom and Maxfield, 2001) in Hotton, 2003.
- 14 McVie and Holmes, 2005
- 15 Ibid
- 16 Hotton and Haans, 2004
- 17 See notably Mucchielli, 2000; Smith, 2004
- 18 Farrington et al., 2006
- 19 "Family transitions" refers to a group of events associated with change: for example, in terms of the family structure (divorce, re-marriage) or family mobility (moving). As the researchers have pointed out, these results must be considered in the context of prevention programs: youth who are undergoing family transitions are more likely to have trouble handling their emotions; therefore, one of the solutions is to improve their skills and ability to control them. (Thornberry, T. et al., 1999).
- 20 Ibid
- 21 Ibid
- 22 Sampson, 1997
- 23 Smith, 2004
- 24 Sampson in Turner et al., 2007
- 25 Turner et al., 2007; See also Larzelere and Patterson, 1990.
- 26 Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1985; Werner and Smith, 1982; 1992
- 27 Shader, 2003; Lawrence, et al., 2001
- 28 Ibid
- 29 Slee P., 2006; Claes et al., 2005; Lawrence, 2001; Smith, 2004; Mucchielli, 2000; Barbara et al., 2001; Herman et al., 1997; Allen and Land, 1998; Kobak and Sceery, 1984; Rice, 1990.
- 30 Claes et al., 2005; See also Barbara et al., 2001; Herman et al., 1997
- 31 Claes et al., 2005; See also Allen & Land, 1998; Kobak and Sceery, 1984; Rice, 1990
- 32 Mucchielli, 2000; Sampson et al., 1997; Slee, 2006;
- 33 Current research on protective factors is not detailed enough to allow us to distinguish them based on age.
- 34 See the research report by Savignac, Julie. Families, Youth and Delinquency: the State of Knowledge, and Family-Based Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Programs. Available in English and in French. Ottawa: Public Safety Canada, National Crime Prevention Centre, 2008.