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Risk-Focused Prevention of Juvenile Crime



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Risk-Focused Prevention of Juvenile Crime

By

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What Factors Lead to Juvenile Crime?

"Do we know enough to prevent juvenile crime?" The response to this question hinges on one of the most effective prevention models in the last 20 to 30 years—the risk-focused approach used to prevent heart and lung disease. This approach, which originated in the health field, focuses on risk factors for heart disease including high blood pressure, smoking, too little exercise, and a diet high in fat. Taking steps to eliminate or reduce these risk factors actually prevented heart disease (Hawkins, undated).

Juvenile crime, like heart disease, is influenced by a mosaic of risk factors. Ineffective parenting and early aggressiveness, for example, put a child in jeopardy. More risk factors mean greater danger. Prevention programs that work reduce these risk factors.

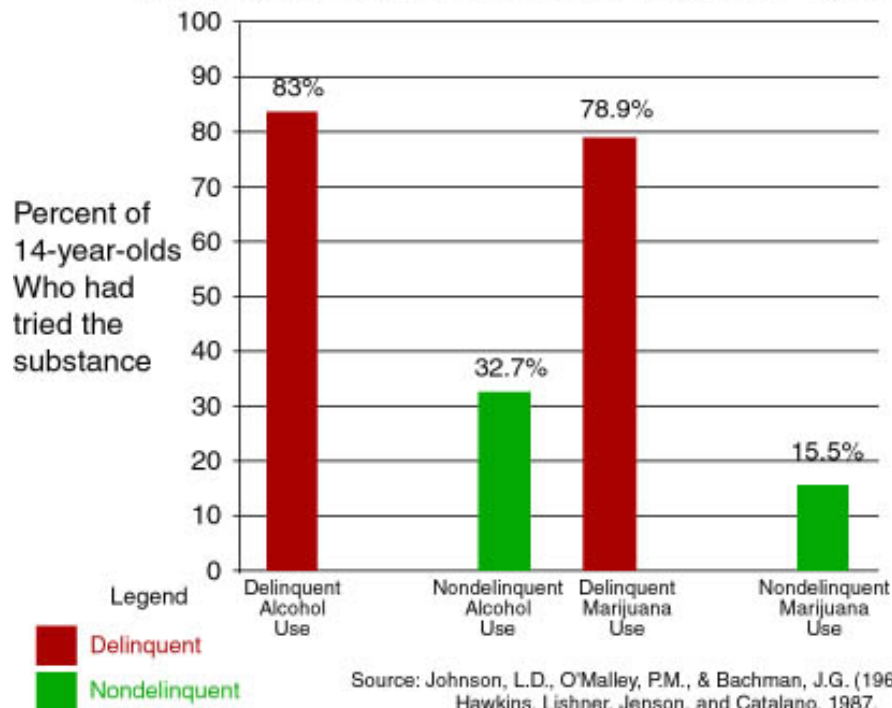
Thus, one of the first steps in preventing juvenile crime is to identify the risk factors that increase its likelihood. Based on a growing body of evidence, juvenile crime is not influenced by a single factor, but by many; furthermore, these factors are not confined to any one part of the adolescent's world. As in the health field, we cannot be certain that these risk factors cause problem behavior, but we do know they increase the odds that juvenile crime will occur (Bogenschneider, Small, & Riley, 1990). This review begins with factors in the individual and proceeds to factors in the family, peer group, school, and community.

Individual Risk Factors

Alcohol and Drug Use

Frequent use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs is more common among juvenile delinquents than nondelinquents. As indicated in Table 1, alcohol use was 2½ times greater among offenders than nonoffenders while marijuana use is over 5 times higher among offenders (Hawkins, Lishner, Jenson, & Catalano, 1987b; Loeber, 1987).

Alcohol/Marijuana Use Among Delinquent and Nondelinquent 14 year-olds



Alienation or
Rebelliousness

Youth who rebel or who feel alienated from their family, school, or community are more apt to commit crimes (Hawkins, undated).

Child Abuse

About 20 percent of abused children become delinquent compared with 5 percent of all children (Yoshikawa, 1994). Abused children are more apt to be aggressive with their peers during early childhood than their age mates who were not abused.

Cognitive Deficits

Cognitive deficits are related to both early antisocial behavior and later delinquency. Specifically, aggressive children display less empathy, have difficulty solving disputes, and tend to interpret others' actions as hostile, (Conduct Problems Prevention Group, 1992; Kazdin, 1987; Yoshikawa, 1994; Zigler, Taussig, & Black, 1992).

Early Aggressiveness

Boys who are aggressive at ages 5, 6, and 7 are more apt to commit delinquent acts during adolescence and repeat them (Hawkins, Lishner, & Catalano, 1987a; Hawkins, et al., 1987b; Loeber, 1987).

Genetic Influences	Aggression and adult crime appear to run in families, more so than juvenile delinquency; while genes create a capacity for violence, they do not guarantee it (Kazdin, 1987; Moffitt, 1993; Seville, 1990; Yoshikawa, 1994).
Hyperactivity	Hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder increase the risk of juvenile delinquency, but alone don't cause delinquency (Yoshikawa, 1994; Zigler, et al., 1992).
Medical Risks at Birth	Stress at birth such as premature and low birth weight are associated with behavior problems at ages 5 to 7, delinquency at age 18, and violent offenses (Yoshikawa, 1994); maternal alcohol or drug abuse, complications during delivery, poor prenatal and post-natal nutrition, lead exposure, and lack of stimulations during infancy may harm the baby's nervous system; a damaged nervous system may affect the child's response to later interventions (Moffitt & Harrington, in press).
Sex	Boys are at greater risk of delinquency than girls. According to FBI Uniform Crime Reports, girls under age 18 committed 72 percent fewer property offenses and 87 percent fewer violent offenses than boys (Yoshikawa, 1994).
Temperament	Children that are more difficult to manage may be more difficult to raise and at greater risk for later antisocial behavior (Moffitt & Harrington, in press; Patterson, 1986).

Family Risk Factors

Harsh and Inconsistent Parenting	Parenting that is too permissive, strict, uninvolved, and inconsistent has proven to be one of the most powerful predictors of delinquency (Hawkins et al., 1987b) and aggression during adolescence (Yoshikawa, 1994). Parents of antisocial children threaten, nag, and scold but seldom follow through (Patterson, 1986). According to recent estimates, about 30 to 40 percent of child antisocial behavior can be accounted for by family interaction (Patterson, 1986; Yoshikawa, 1994).
Insecure Attachment	Insecure attachment with the mother during the latter part of the first year may be an important risk factor for antisocial behavior during preschool and the early primary grades (Yoshikawa, 1994).
Low Social Support	When parents are socially isolated, their children are more apt to be antisocial (Yoshikawa, 1994).

Marital Conflict	Children raised in families or marriages with high conflict are at elevated risk for delinquency and problem behaviors (Hawkins, et al., 1987b; Loeber, 1987b; Kazdin, 1987; Yoshikawa, 1994).
Parent and Sibling Deviance	Children whose parents or siblings commit crimes are more likely to follow in their footsteps than children raised by nondelinquent parents and siblings (Hawkins, et al. 1987a; Kazdin, 1987; Loeber, 1987).
Poor Parental Monitoring	The risk of delinquency is higher when parents fail to monitor or supervise their children. Knowing where children are, who they are with, and what they are doing is one of the most powerful predictors of virtually any problem behavior (Hawkins, et al., 1987a; Kazdin, 1987; Loeber, 1987; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). Parental monitoring may be a prerequisite for other parenting behaviors; discipline can be applied only to those situations parents are aware of (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984).
Single Parenthood and Divorce	Some studies report that the offspring from single parent families are more likely to engage in delinquent acts (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, & Gross, 1985). Some studies report higher levels of misbehavior, aggression, or delinquency among children from divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993), while others do not (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).
Stress	Stress from outside the family affects parenting practices within the family. Parents, especially single parents, discipline less effectively under such conditions as daily hassles, unemployment, medical problems, and ongoing negative life events (Patterson, 1986).

Peer Risk Factors

Delinquent Peers	One of the strongest predictors of adolescent delinquency is association with delinquent peers (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1992; Hawkins, et al., 1987b). Aggressive or antisocial children are often rejected by both prosocial peers and an array of adults (e.g. parents, teachers, community members).
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Work Risk Factors

Long Work Hours

Among inner city populations, adolescents who work are no more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than nonworkers. In other samples of youngsters, however, working long hours places youth at risk of delinquency (Steinberg, 1991).

School Risk Factors

Academic Failure

Regardless of social class or race, poor school achievement is related to delinquency. Low IQ and limited vocabulary is associated with both antisocial behavior and delinquency (Hawkins, et al., 1987b; Kazdin, 1987; Yoshikawa, 1994). Working on school achievement alone, however, has not reduced antisocial behavior (Patterson et al., 1989).

Low Commitment to School

Students who don't like school are at higher risk for delinquency (Hawkins, et al. 1987a; Kazdin, 1987; Loeber, 1987).

School Transitions

When students move into a middle school, junior high, or high school, antisocial behavior increases, alcohol and drug abuse increases while academic achievement, extra-curricular participation, and psychological well-being decline (Carnegie, 1989; Hawkins et al., 1987b; Simmons, 1987).

Community Risk Factors

Family and Community Social and Economic Deprivation

Children from families and communities characterized by extreme poverty, poor housing, large family size, low status occupations, or unemployment are at elevated risk of frequent, serious crime (Yoshikawa, 1994; Hawkins, et al., 1987b).

Community Disorganization and High Mobility

Juvenile delinquency is more apt to occur when communities are overcrowded, crime-ridden and public places are poorly monitored. Youth are at greater risk for crime in cities and in neighborhoods with high mobility (Yoshikawa, 1994; Hawkins, et al., 1987b).

Complacent or Permissive
Community Laws and
Norms

Youth are more apt to engage in problem behaviors in the context of permissive, complacent or inconsistent laws, school policies, and community standards. Even though we will never be able to legislate away delinquency, laws are important because they communicate the norms and beliefs of society (Hawkins, undated). These strategies only work, however, for those people who are connected to family, school, and community; they do not deter high risk youth who are alienated from their families, failing in school, and don't care if they get caught because they have little to lose (Hawkins, undated).

Media Influences

The link between television viewing and aggression in children is firmly established (Eron, 1982; Huesmann, Lagerspetz, & Eron, 1984). In addition, aggressive children watch more violent shows and may be more apt to imitate violence than their nonaggressive peers.

How Can Knowledge of Risk Factors Benefit Prevention Programming?

The ability to identify the risk factors that increase the odds of juvenile crime leads to the possibility of prevention (Yoshikawa, 1994); the multitude of risk factors in multiple parts of the child's world, however, presents a remarkable challenge for prevention programmers (Kazdin, 1987).

According to a risk-focused approach, the more risk factors, the greater the danger. Research on juvenile crime indicates that one risk factor alone isn't likely to put a child at risk. One study measured 10 risk factors during the first 5 years of life; the average number of criminal offenses at age 33 was .7 for those with no risk factors, 2.9 for those with 1 or more, and 5.1 for those with 3 or more risk factors.

Prevention efforts that target multiple risk factors could have an impact many times stronger than those limited to only one or two (Yoshikawa, 1994). Yet politicians, citizens, and programmers often search for single factors and simple solutions to complex problems like juvenile crime. Unfortunately, there are no magic bullets; prevention efforts with the greatest chances for success are comprehensive and multi-dimensional, reducing multiple risk factors in diverse parts of the child's world.

Are Some Risk Factors More Important for Some Offenders than Others?

While this risk-focused approach helps identify targets for prevention, some questions remain unanswered: Are all juvenile delinquents the same? Do some factors have more power or potency for some offenders than others? Are the factors that lead to nonviolent crimes the same as those that lead to violent crimes?

To assume that all teens who commit crimes are psychologically similar is a big mistake and could thwart efforts to develop effective policies and programs. Instead of one grand theory for delinquency, it may be more accurate to think of one explanation for those who begin their criminal careers at a later age and one for those who begin their criminal careers earlier. The causes of these two patterns of delinquency are quite different and require different responses from policymakers and practitioners.

Late bloomers"—young people who begin delinquent activity at age 15 or later—are more apt to straighten out their lives after a few petty offenses. Late bloomers usually are socially skilled, popular and have no history of previous problems. Late-blooming adolescents can be found in most communities, their families appear to be less disadvantaged than those of early-occurring delinquents, and the parents appear more skillful in family management practices (Steinberg, 1987). They are influenced primarily by factors such as negative peer pressure, poor parental supervision and few opportunities to demonstrate their maturity other than delinquency.

Conversely, "early starters"—those who begin criminal activities before age 15—are more apt to become frequent offenders, commit violent crimes, and continue criminal activity as adults. Their families tend to be low socioeconomic status, frequently unemployed, and oftentimes divorced (Patterson & Yoerger, 1993; Steinberg, 1987). Early starters often are antisocial as preschoolers. Their parents tend to be harsh and inconsistent. Children learn that they can successfully resolve conflict by whining, yelling, throwing temper tantrums, and attacking others physically. Their aggressive behavior tends to alienate peers and may cause trouble in school.

The best predictors of who will become violent offenders are youth who commit their first crime at an early age and continue their criminal careers. No special explanation for violent crime is needed; if you can determine who starts early, you can predict frequent offenders, and frequency appears to predict violent offenses.

Which Approaches Work Best for Preventing Juvenile Crime?

For "late bloomers," broad-based programs are needed that address the individual, peer group, family and community. Adolescents should learn peer refusal skills and parents should learn the importance of monitoring their children more closely. Communities need to take steps to provide definite consequences for youth misbehavior, but avoid labeling first-time offenders as "delinquent." Communities can also take steps to support families, alleviate family stress, and provide opportunities for youth to demonstrate their maturity in ways that benefit society.

For "early starters," prevention programs that begin early hold the greatest promise, based on evidence that aggression is quite stable much like IQ. The first five years may be a "turning point" when change is more likely (Yoshikawa, 1994) and programs are less costly. During the preschool years, parents should be taught less harsh and more consistent discipline tactics. Prevention strategies that reduce stress on families (i.e. poverty, low social support, unemployment, frequent moves, divorce, single parenthood, violent media messages, and Permissive laws and norms) may also put parents in a better position to be effective (Reid, 1993).

For more information on teen offenders, different approaches for preventing juvenile crime, and summaries of seven promising prevention programs, you can order a copy of the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar Briefing Report, "Promising Approaches for Addressing Juvenile Crime" from my secretary at (608) 262-0369.

November, 1994

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