

Social risk factors for involvement in crime

This brief provides an introductory discussion of five areas of social risk factors for involvement in crime: family, education, economics, community and peers, and alcohol and other drugs.

Family

Parental behaviours play a strong role in shaping a child's risk of later involvement in criminality.

Parental criminality appears to be strongly correlated with an increased risk of a child of developing conduct problems and later criminal involvement. The influence of parental criminality is complex because of the multiple mechanisms (shared environmental factors, genetic and other biological risk factors, negative modelling by parents) involved that potentially pass on a parent's risk of criminal involvement to their child.

Poor parenting practices, such as poor parental supervision and parents' rejection of a child, are modest predictors of subsequent delinquency by the child. Children who experience severe or harsh parental practices have increased rates of conduct problems, substance abuse, depression and anxiety and violent crime in early adulthood, compared to those whose parents did not use physical punishment.

Family violence and maltreatment of children have significant inter-generational effects on an individual's likelihood of becoming involved in crime. Some research suggests that maltreatment during childhood doubles an individual's probability of engaging in many types of crime.

The effect of family influences appear to be greatest during the early years of a child's life and reduces as they get older, although poor parental supervision and low levels of warmth between parents and their teenage children have also been identified as a contributing risk factors for future offending.

Family environment and parental behaviour are important risk or protective factors for involvement in crime because of their influence on a child's development

Success in education reduces the economic benefits of crime and thus the incentives behind criminal offending

Education

Education has an important role in influencing an individual's opportunity for success in society. Non-participation in school level education is a risk factor for later delinquency and criminal activity. Education changes the relative opportunities afforded by crime, and in particular property crime, compared to legitimate employment. Greater levels of education ensure greater returns from employment, making it more attractive than crime.

A low level of parental education (neither parent having a school qualification) have also been identified as a risk factor for future offending for children aged under 13 years.

Economic

Economic factors that influence criminal behaviour include relative wealth (disparity), poverty (deprivation) and unemployment.

The balance of evidence suggests a link between disparity and violent crime. The strength of this relationship is debated but international analysis suggests that a relationship exists after controlling for other factors.

Evidence suggests that deprivation is associated with criminal offending across the spectrum. Analysis from the Christchurch Health and Development Study argues that socio-economic deprivation is associated with self-reported crime and officially recorded convictions, even after controlling for parental, individual, school, and peer factors.

Unemployment is a predictor of involvement related to crime, but in particular property crime and not violent crime. The strength of the relationship between unemployment and crime is contested, it is unclear how significant this relationship is compared to other social and economic factors.

Community and peers

Community and neighbourhood effects on criminality are hard to measure but they do appear to exert an influence on antisocial behaviour and crime. Neighbourhood effects become more important as a child gets older.

Many studies have shown that antisocial peer groups play an important part in the development of deviancy and violence.

Economic factors, such as disparity, deprivation and unemployment, put individuals at risk of criminal offending

Community and peers primarily appear to affect antisocial behaviour

Alcohol and other drugs present a risk for particular individuals and are often associated with other risk factors

Alcohol and other drugs

The exact nature of the relationship between alcohol and other drugs (AoD) and crime is complex. Not all consumption of AoD directly leads to criminal offending but sustained abuse of either drugs or alcohol does appear to increase an individual's chance of becoming involved in crime. Offending committed by individuals under the influence of AoD is often affected by other factors, such as mental health, temperament, geographic location and peer influences.