Risk Factors
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Prevention is a complex and multi-faceted process. Effective prevention strategies are based on an understanding of the factors that place individuals at risk. The prevalence data regarding youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system suggest that the presence of a disabling condition itself is a risk factor. Other risk factors for antisocial and delinquent behavior include poverty, educational failure, family stress (e.g., single parent home, substance or physical abuse, coercive styles of family interaction), deviant peer networks, and lack of recreational or vocational opportunities. Furthermore, these risk factors can have a negative effect on the academic achievement of students, increasing the likelihood of school failure and problem behavior.

What Risk Factors Are Identified With Juvenile Crime?

A relatively small number of juveniles commit crime. Of those juveniles who do commit crimes, the majority of them will only commit one or two offenses. For these individuals, the experience of the juvenile justice system—being arrested by a law enforcement officer, facing their parents, having to spend a night in juvenile hall, interacting with a probation officer or a judge—is enough to keep them from offending again.

Nevertheless, a small number of individuals who are chronic recidivists are responsible for a large proportion of juvenile crime. Much research has shown that these juveniles commit their first offense at an early age (usually age 11), and even at this early age, these juveniles display a variety of serious problems indicative of an "at-risk" juvenile:

- **Failure in School.** This factor manifests itself at an early age. Failure at school includes poor academic performance, poor attendance, or more likely, expulsion or dropping out of school. This is an important factor for predicting future criminal behavior. Leaving school early reduces the chances that juveniles will develop the "social" skills that are gained in school, such as learning to meet deadlines, following instructions, and being able to deal constructively with their peers.

- **Family Problems.** This factor includes a history of criminal activity in the family. It also includes juveniles who have been subject to sexual or physical abuse, neglect, or abandonment. It is also manifested by a lack of parental control over the child.

- **Substance Abuse.** This risk factor includes not just arrests for drug or alcohol possession or sale, but also the effect of substance abuse on juvenile behavior. For example, using alcohol or drugs lowers a person's inhibitions, making it easier to engage in criminal activity. Also, drug abuse can lead to a variety of property offenses to pay for drug habits.

- **Pattern Behaviors and "Conduct" Problems.** Pattern behaviors include chronic stealing or running away. Juveniles with "conduct" problems can be characterized as those individuals who have not outgrown aggressiveness by early adolescence.

- **Gang Membership and Gun Possession.** Gang membership and gang-related crime is primarily a juvenile problem. Gang membership, especially at an early age, is strongly

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associated with future criminal activity. Juvenile gun possession is a factor that "magnifies" juvenile crime by making offenses more likely to result in injury or death.

Having these risk factors does not guarantee criminal behavior, but simply increases the likelihood of such behavior. Because young offenders who exhibit multiple risk factors are the most likely to become chronic recidivists--"career criminals"--early intervention that alleviates these problems could potentially have a long-term beneficial impact on the level of future crime.

Risk factor data

Juvenile delinquency at the local or county level may be more easily addressed with an understanding of associated risk factors—conditions or circumstances of an individual that increase the likelihood that the youth will engage in delinquency.

This section begins with a general review of the literature examining juvenile delinquency risk factors. Loeber and Farrington, members of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s (OJJDP’s) Study Group on Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders, compiled the following research on risk factors. Delinquency research has focused on three types of risk factors: individual, situational, and environmental.

Individual risk factors

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Individual risk factors include individual traits or qualities, including various types of mental and physical health problems that may contribute to delinquency. Studies examining the effects of individual risk factors on juvenile delinquency have found that aggressive behavior, anti-social attitudes or beliefs, hyperactivity, impulsiveness, attention deficits, and risk-taking behaviors are strongly linked to juvenile delinquency. Several studies have also found evidence of links between medical or physical conditions impacting development, general problem behavior, and negative internalizing behaviors, such as nervousness, worrying, and anxiety, to juvenile delinquency. IQ, low resting heart rate, depression, substance abuse, and obsessive-compulsive behavior also have been identified as potential risk factors. 

**Situational risk factors**

Situational risk factors are related to the circumstances that magnify the likelihood of a delinquent act occurring. Examples of potential situational risk factors include the presence of a weapon and behavior of the victim at the time of the incident. Situational risk factors act as triggers for minors who exhibit one or more of the other two types of risk factors. Although a number of potential situational risk factors have been identified, researchers have not determined which situational factors exacerbate the likelihood that a minor will commit a delinquent act. Thus, situational factors are not addressed in this report.

**Environmental risk factors**

Environmental risk factors include community, social and school risk factor subsets. While county-level data on the environmental risk factors that Illinois youth are exposed to are available, these are limited in their ability to describe the environments in which specific youth live. While these data show the level at which certain factors are present in a county, they are not indicative of any individual’s exposure to risk factors.

**Community risk factors**

Community risk factors are related to the broader social environment in which minors reside. Studies examining the impact of environmental factors on juvenile delinquency have found evidence that communities with high levels of poverty or that are socially disorganized also tend to have high levels of juvenile delinquency. Research also has revealed that juvenile delinquency is correlated with drug availability, high levels of adult criminality, exposure to violence, and exposure to racial prejudice in the community.

**Social risk factors**

Social risk factors are circumstances that are present in a minor’s immediate environment and typically include family relationships and peer relationships. Strong evidence suggests weak parent-child relationships including poor parental discipline style and lack of parental involvement, as well as relationships with antisocial or delinquent peers, are related to juvenile delinquency.

Researchers Lipsey and Derzon (1998) reported results of a statistical review of longitudinal research examining juvenile delinquency risk factors. They found that certain family-related risk factors, such as antisocial parents and parent criminality, were more predictive of serious and violent juvenile delinquency for six to 11 year olds than for 12 to 14 year olds. Peer-related risk
factors including antisocial peers or peer criminality were more predictive of serious and violent juvenile delinquency among 12 to 14 year olds. Family and/or marital conflict, separation from family, and sibling delinquency also are proven risk factors for juvenile delinquency. In addition, abusive parents, low family bonding, high family stress, weak social ties including unpopularity with peers and low levels of social activity, and high family residential mobility may be linked to juvenile delinquency. Additional research to further explore and support these findings is needed before conclusions regarding these potential risk factors can be made.

**School risk factors**
Research on predictors of serious and violent juvenile delinquency has revealed that truancy, dropping out of school, and poor academic performance are related to juvenile delinquency. In a meta-analysis of risk factors for delinquency, Hawkins et al (1998) found that academic failure and low school attachment were significant predictors of juvenile delinquency.  

### Single Parenthood is a Risk Factor

**Social-Scientific Research:**

“Teens in both one-parent and remarried homes display more deviant behavior and commit more delinquent acts than do teens whose parents stayed married.”

“Teens in one-parent families are on average less attached to their parent’s opinions and more attached to their peer groups. Combined with lower levels of parental supervision, these attitudes appear to set the stage for delinquent behavior. However, some research indicates that the link between single-parenthood and delinquency does not hold for African American children.”

“[S]tudies indicate that adolescents in cohabiting families are more likely teenage in delinquent behavior, to cheat, and to be suspended from school.”

“Boys raised in non-intact families are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior.”

“Teens in both one-parent and remarried homes display more deviant behavior and commit more delinquent acts than do teens whose parents stayed married.”

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** See Parenting Resources

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