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The term *delinquency* or *delinquent behavior* often refers to acts that are illegal, to differentiate delinquency, as a legal phenomenon, from antisocial behavior, which harms others or society but is not necessarily unlawful. In the present entry, the term delinquent behavior refers to both officially registered and unregistered delinquent behavior, as the behavior is the same and can be explained by the same factors. This entry focuses on delinquency from a life-course perspective. The risk and protective factors for development and persistence of delinquent behavior are explained, followed by suggestions for prevention programs and intervention to prevent and/or decrease delinquency.

Delinquency is a heavy burden for society and costs societies a lot of money. These costs concern the legal system, costs made for support and treatment of victims, costs of crime prevention agencies, costs of imprisonment or other safety measures such as alarm systems and fencing, physical health costs, and the costs of mending any damage caused by delinquent activities. Apart from those concrete costs, delinquent behavior has a large impact on the general feelings of safety and well-being of individuals in society.

Given the costs of delinquent behavior for society, many prevention efforts have been carried out with mixed success rates. To develop effective prevention and intervention programs, it is important to examine delinquent behavior from a developmental perspective. A large body of longitudinal research has shown that the developmental trajectory leading toward delinquent behavior often starts with physical aggression and non-compliance in infancy and the preschool years. When such behavior is not addressed properly, it tends to continue. In early and middle childhood, increasingly oppositional children are likely to experience social rejection by peers and to receive more negative reactions from teachers, which might reduce the opportunities to learn appropriate social skills and effective problem-solving. By early adolescence, these children tend to become more susceptible to deviant peer group influences, setting the stage for further escalation of problems, and involvement in delinquent behavior in later adolescence and adulthood.

Risk and Protective Factors for Development of Delinquency

Most criminological theories are based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. In this model, all behaviors, and thus also delinquent behavior, are conceptualized as resulting from interactions of an individual with his or her social context. Within the social contexts in which children operate, risk and protective factors can be distinguished. Risk factors are factors that increase the likelihood of adverse outcomes, whereas protective, or promotive, factors decrease this likelihood. Protective factors function as the opposite of risk factors or as buffers to the harmful effects of risk factors. Solely focusing on the presence of risk factors is insufficient to explain the development of delinquent behavior; one must also consider the presence of protective factors.

Risk and protective factors that play a role in the onset and persistence of delinquent behavior can be divided

into *individual* factors (characteristics of the child), *family* factors (characteristics of the family), and *contextual* factors (risk factors that can be found in the broader social context of the child).

Individual Risk and Protective Factors

One individual risk factor for the development of delinquent behavior is a low intelligence level. Both low verbal and nonverbal IQ predict delinquent behavior, which might be because low IQ predicts low school attainment and school failure, which are additional risk factors for delinquent behavior. Additionally, high impulsivity, low concentration levels, and low acceptance by peers are risk factors associated with delinquency. Biopsychosocial risk factors such as problems with the central nervous system also have been identified. High intelligence levels as well as high academic performance have been identified as individual protective factors. Structured leisure time activities are also associated with less delinquency.

Family Risk and Protective Factors

The parenting behavior that is most consistently identified as a risk factor for delinquent behavior is poor parental supervision. Poor parenting skills in terms of inconsistent and harsh parenting behavior are also related to the development of delinquent behavior. A warm and positive parenting climate, accompanied by positive discipline strategies, has been identified as a protective factor.

Having a single parent, exposure to parental conflicts, exposure to violence in the home, young age of the mother, and having a depressed or convicted parent or delinquent sibling all increase the likelihood to become delinquent.

Risk and Protective Factors in the Broader Social Context

Low socioeconomic status (SES) of the family is associated with delinquency. In criminological literature, this risk factor has been seen as one of the often-cited explanations for development of delinquency. The *strain theory* explains that children of low SES families become delinquent out of economic necessity: There is no way for those children to get what they need other than this illegal way. However, it may not be low SES per se causing delinquent behavior, but that low SES parents have poor parenting skills, which are a risk factors for their children's delinquency.

Another criminological theory, the *social ecological theory*, suggests that delinquency develops in areas with

less social control and supervision. In line with this are the findings that living in an urban area is a risk factor for delinquent behavior, crime rates tend to be especially high for inner-city boys. But again, it is unclear if living in an inner city has a direct effect on delinquency or if this effect is mediated by other related factors such as SES, parental supervision, and general poverty levels.

Finally, as the child grows older, the child comes into contact with other socialization figures (peers, teachers). During preadolescence, the social network of the child becomes considerably larger than it was in childhood. The importance of different people in this social network changes. The central position of the parents is taken over by peers during adolescence. Children spend more time with their peers without adult supervision. The affiliation with deviant, antisocial peers is one of the best predictors of delinquent behavior during adolescence. In contrast, involvement with prosocial peers seems to work as a protective factor.

Knowledge about the relation between risk factors and delinquent behavior is mostly based on studies that do not allow firm conclusions about the direction of causality. Because only experiments can answer the causality question and for ethical reasons experiments in this area are difficult to implement, cause and effect are often indistinguishable. Influence is likely bidirectional. So it is plausible that a punitive, harsh upbringing leads to more resistance, rebellion, aggression, and antisocial behavior, but it is equally plausible that parents respond to disobedience and aggressive behavior by increasingly harsh measures. Many risk factors are linked to one another. In addition, risk factors have a cumulative effect (i.e., they reinforce each other's negative effect). The presence of only one risk factor within the family may increase the likelihood of problem behavior, but if several factors are present, the likelihood of problematic developmental outcomes increases exponentially. Generally, the more risk factors and the fewer protective factors, the larger is the likelihood that delinquent behavior will develop and persist.

Timing of Risk Exposure

Terrie Moffitt proposed a developmental theory that distinguished two types of delinquent offenders: Those who show problematic behaviors all their lives (life-course persistent offenders) and those who start showing delinquent behavior during adolescence with behavioral problems restricted to this period (adolescence-limited group). The life-course persistent offenders start showing conduct problems as early as in toddlerhood, and the problems increase over time. Many risk factors are present in the lives of these children. In the adolescence-limited group, fewer risk factors are present. Although this theory is widely confirmed, including by genetic research, it also has been criticized for being too limited: Not every offender can be categorized into these two descriptions. Moreover, the taxonomy is less suitable to describe delinquent behavior in girls who sometimes do show severe problem behavior that develops during adolescence but is not restricted to that

specific period. It is important to be aware that males show more delinquent behaviors compared to females. Consequently, most theories have been developed on research on males.

Rolf Loeber described the age–crime curve, which indicates that delinquent behavior is most prevalent during mid- and late adolescence. Additionally, the relative importance of risk factors for the development of delinquent behavior changes with the age of the child. Between birth and school age, family factors, individual factors, and neighborhood factors are important, with family factors as most important, but as soon as children start school, peers and school factors start playing a more important role. This role increases during adolescence.

Prevention and Intervention

Depending on the age at which problems become visible, prevention programs or interventions can be carried out to stop the delinquent development. Some risk factors cannot be influenced (gender, ethnicity); these are referred to as *static risk factors*. Others, *dynamic risk factors*, can be changed and are often the focus of prevention or intervention strategies. An example of a changeable risk factor is parenting skills. When timing an intervention, it is important to consider the risk factors that are most important at a specific stage of life: Infants may be helped by a parenting intervention, whereas teenagers may need adjustments of their peer group in order to desist from delinquent behavior.

A meta-analysis recently showed that programs aiming to prevent delinquency can be effective, but that the effect sizes are generally small in magnitude. Moreover, when identifying effective ingredients of delinquency prevention programs, it turned out that especially behavioral-oriented programs, which use models to teach positive behaviors and use behavioral contracts to reinforce the positive behaviors shown by participants, tend to be successful in preventing delinquency. Moreover, largest effects were visible for family-based programs that aim to improve parenting skills and when a multimodal program format was used (individual, family, and group sessions).

See also [Adolescence](#); [Crime](#); [Risk and Protective Factors](#)

- delinquency
- delinquent behavior
- risk factors
- adolescence
- parenting skills

- risk
- prevention programs

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Further Readings

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