

# Psychosocial risk factors in young offenders

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Juvenile delinquency is a multi-causal social phenomenon, in which socio-cultural and economic, family and individual factors are interrelated. In young people with a greater number of associated risk factors, the measures seem to be insufficient, both in open and closed environments, since the rate of recidivism is higher.

**Objective:** Identify the psychosocial risk factors that exist at intra and interpersonal level in juvenile offenders, as well as determine if these factors are interrelated.

**Material and method:** A literature review of articles found in different databases was carried out. The articles containing the key words selected at the beginning of the study were reviewed, and of all of them, those that met the established inclusion requirements, which are date of publication and language, were included.

**Results:** The results of all the studies analyzed confirm the idea that a greater number of psychosocial risk factors occur in young offenders than in normalized young people. There are factors related to a family that has inadequate socialization styles, even negligent ones, accentuated by very substandard economic situations that are usually present. Along with this, the consumption of substances is a variable that is repeated continuously in these young people; united to a group of deviant pairs, that favor the appearance of criminal behaviours.

**Conclusion:** It is possible to identify the main psychosocial risk factors that occur in young offenders, and define an interrelation between these factors, but it is not linear nor can it be homogenized. More resources and prevention programs, as well as intervention, are needed at the individual, family and community levels.

**Keywords:** juvenile delinquency; minors; risk factors; psychosocial deprivation; prisons; risk groups; health risk behaviours; psychosocial support systems.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Magnitude

Juvenile delinquency is a growing problem in society. Adolescence is a crucial stage in which young people form their own social behaviours, and delinquents generally commit their first crimes at an early age. Young offenders often suffer from behavioural and emotional problems, which can later trigger anti-social conduct or behavioural disorders<sup>1</sup>.

Although the consensus is that delinquency is a multicausal social phenomenon, in which socioeconomic and socio-cultural, family and individual factors are all interrelated, the tendency in studies has been towards homogenisation, generalisation and

a reductionist vision of this reality, by emphasising an approach that is often decontextualised<sup>2</sup>.

### Epidemiological situation

According to data from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics for 2012, the total number of young people sentenced was 16,172 (of which 13,344 were male) and most had committed one crime (7,324 minors), the most frequent being crimes against property and the socioeconomic order, followed by theft and bodily harm. Divisions of this group into their respective ages give the following figures: 6,264 offenders were 14 to 15 years of age, while 9,908 were from 16 to 17, most of whom were convicted for serious offences (4,758)<sup>3</sup>.

## Major risk factors

The term “risk factors” refers to the set of individual, social and/or environmental factors that can facilitate and increase the likelihood of developing emotional or behavioural disorders such as criminal behaviour<sup>4</sup>.

Contextual, individual and family factors have been identified as those most likely to create risks. The environmental/contextual factors include education centres, which can act as an origin for students’ antisocial behaviour, as truancy from school can open the way to delinquency, since it creates time and opportunities for antisocial conduct; poor school performance can affect levels of self-esteem that, already being low, can then boost the development of antisocial behaviour; all of which takes place in an underprivileged, deteriorated, disorganised sociocultural context with little in the way of supervision<sup>5</sup>.

The family risk factors include delinquency and crimes committed by parents. Delinquency is one of the most influential factors in increasing the risk of criminal conduct amongst offspring; children subjected to abuse may manifest problematic conduct; there are parents with inadequate educational approaches; and the violence committed by parents and observed by minors is as hazardous as receiving the violence directly<sup>5</sup>.

It should be said that individual factors consist of a set of complex and multicausal phenomena, but they are related to characteristics such as dishonesty, antisocial beliefs and attitudes, favourable attitudes towards violence and hostility<sup>5</sup>, etc.

Two of the most interesting areas worked on within the psychosocial approach are the family and groups of friends. The family is recognised as a very important social framework for configuring attitudes, values, world views and lifestyles. The professionals who research delinquency consider the family environment to be a key factor in understanding why antisocial attitudes and behaviours appear. Experiences in groups of friends contribute towards cementing a person’s identity and expressing his/her own autonomy, and offer methods to extend the repertoire of skills and behaviours. They are also considered to have a crucial part to play in delinquency<sup>6</sup>.

A recurrent idea in many articles on the subject is that the peers closest to young offenders are characterised by tendencies towards illegal conduct, consumption of substances and a false perception of the legality of offences. Adolescents turn to the group as a defensive measure where they seek uniformity and mass identification, thus generating and reinforcing self esteem, while showing a lack of interest in

education, a family that is not consistent in terms of disciplinary attitudes and practices, and a low socioeconomic status, where basic needs are not covered<sup>7,8</sup>.

Close coexistence with groups of persons with criminal tendencies, added to a family that cannot guide or discipline, lead to a point where a young person ends up living in an organised system to the extent that any nearby external environment does not affect their assumptions, which justifies their behaviour as a rule breaker. The consequence is that the young person builds up a representation of themselves based on their criminal skills and their ability to effectively transgress the norms<sup>9</sup>.

Contact and exposure to models of antisocial behaviour are configured as one of the main factors to influence antisocial and criminal conduct. The relationship with a group of delinquent peers who consume drugs facilitates the adoption and maintenance of a permissive attitude towards drug abuse, which in turn increases acceptance and participation in high-risk behaviours, including criminal behaviour of a more serious nature<sup>10</sup>.

Minors with antisocial and/or criminal behaviours present a combination of high impulsiveness and low self-control; they tend to attribute their acts to external causes and are incapable taking responsibility for them, in such a way that the locus of external control is correlated with antisocial behaviour<sup>10</sup>.

There is a parallel increase in drug abuse and antisocial behaviour. This process appears at an early age, continues in early adolescence, and may be regarded as a powerful predictor of abuse of certain substances<sup>10</sup>.

Drugs, especially alcohol, are substances that affect behavioural control and play a part in an appreciable number of violent crimes committed by minors and the adoption of high risk behaviours<sup>11</sup>.

## Factors linked to the intervention process

Adolescents who present long-standing criminal and antisocial behaviours at an early age end up forming part of a group that runs a high risk of continuing with the same and more dangerous behaviours in adulthood. They also run a high risk of other problems such as difficulties at school, consumption of psychoactive substances and high-risk sexual behaviours. In fact, 40% to 75% of young people detained for offences and/or who present psychiatric criteria for behavioural disorders are also detained when they are adults<sup>12,13</sup>.

After reviewing the records for the detention measures applied to minors involved in criminal activities, it was found that most young people with a lower

number of associated often commence their criminal careers with minor offences and receive milder sentences, which appear to be effective since their rates of recidivism are low. However, for young people with a larger number of associated risk factors, the measures appear to be insufficient, in both open and closed regimes, since the rates of recidivism are higher<sup>14</sup>.

The data provided by the First Report on Jurisdiction of Minors: Analysis of antisocial and criminal behaviours of young people in Spain (Primer Informe sobre la Jurisdicción de Menores: Análisis de las conductas antisociales y delictivas de los jóvenes en España), a socio-legal study that uses data taken from 2006, contradicts certain appearances and shows that the frequency with which young people engaged in antisocial and/or criminal behaviour was once or twice in the previous year, with the exception of drug abuse, which was declared to have taken place in the previous month. The behaviour that generates most alarm in society is relatively infrequent, only 22.1% of the young people surveyed had participated in a fight at some point in their life, 8.1% in the previous year, and other violent behaviour and offences against property did not exceed 5%<sup>15</sup>.

The treatments designed to provide their subjects with new skills and competences in human communication and interaction to offer them new experiences for social integration and to promote the inhibition of certain attitudes that lead to criminal behaviour have generally obtained low to moderate levels of effectiveness. The most effective therapeutic approach is one of interventions based on behavioural and cognitive-behavioural models, along with those that set out to develop life skills<sup>16</sup>.

### **Objectives of the study**

The aim of this study is to identify and interrelate the psychosocial risk factors that exist amongst young offenders.

## **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

### **Design of study**

A bibliographical review of articles selected from different databases was carried out and information was obtained from a number of websites of interest (Table 1).

### **Search strategy**

A bibliographical search was carried out, as it appeared to be the most adequate way to gather

information about this issue, using a descriptive and retrospective approach. Documentary research was carried out, along with a concise and objective appraisal of the selected research work on different aspects of the psychosocial risk factors involved in juvenile delinquency. To do so, the following data bases were used: Pubmed, Cuiden, Scielo, Dialnet, Redalyc and Science Direct.

Websites of interest were also consulted, such as the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE)), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Juvenile Justice Observatory (IJJO) and the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial [CGPJ]).

The abstracts were reviewed for selection, and if they were found to be of interest, a review of the entire article was conducted in order to decide if the information that they contained was relevant. The information was then structured according to whether it contained epidemiological data about the magnitude of the problem, risk factors or other factors related to the intervention processes.

The key words used were: “juvenile delinquency”, “psychosocial risk factors amongst young offenders”, “risks in young offenders”, “psychosocial risks in young offenders”, “young offenders”, “young people in reform centres”. The Boolean operators were “and” and “or”.

The limits established were the language (Spanish) and the date of publication (2000 onwards). The reading and critical evaluation criteria were that it should comply with the limits for the search strategy, and then that the articles should provide data about studies with samples of adolescents, as well as the application of gender violence prevention programs amongst young couples. The exclusion criteria were non-compliance of the limits established at the outset of the study.

### **Period of study**

The study took place from March to June 2018. The information was organised into definition and objective data, epidemiology, published study data and data about the application of prevention programs.

## **RESULTS**

A total of 54 articles were evaluated, of which 18 were selected for study. The following information of interest (with references) was taken from the arti-

cles with studies related to the issue, which included samples of adolescents from a number of provinces in Spain and from other Spanish speaking countries worldwide.

Nine articles were selected for the discussion of the results, and after evaluation they were grouped into the following headings: two articles discussed family factors and other issues related to peer

Table 1. Description of articles by author, heading and results.

Author and article	Heading	Results
Gómez-Fraguela <i>et al.</i> <sup>6</sup>	Family and peer group factors.	Support from the family is a negative predictor of the criminal activity that takes place the following year. Existence of positive reciprocal effects between delinquency and involvement with delinquent friends.
Méndez <i>et al.</i> <sup>2</sup>	Family and peer group factors.	Groups of delinquent adolescents showed a lower perception of social support, had a reduced network of support and reciprocity and less psychosocial adaptation to their surroundings.
Sanabria <i>et al.</i> <sup>5</sup>	Associated antisocial behaviours.	Greater exposure by young offenders to fights in their neighbourhood, drug dealing and gang membership. Constant fighting, shouting, insults and physical violence are present in the families of young offenders.
Contreras <i>et al.</i> <sup>10</sup>	Associated antisocial behaviours.	Most young people consume drugs, with higher consumption in the age range of 16-17 years, and the most common type is poly-drug use.
Rico Fuentes <sup>7</sup>	Associated antisocial behaviours.	A constant lack of interest in school was noted. As regards the environment, minors related to peers characterised by criminal behaviour, drug abuse and a false perception of the legality of crime. In the family context, parents of young offenders were found to be hard or inconsistent in disciplinary attitudes and practices, reward delinquent behaviour and ignore pro-social behaviour.
Páramo <sup>12</sup>	Associated antisocial behaviours.	This group engages in high-risk sexual activity due to ignorance, inadequate sex education and high risk behaviours.
San Juan <i>et al.</i> <sup>11</sup>	Specific data linked to criminal behaviour.	Drugs and alcohol affect behavioural control and have an influence on a not inconsiderable number of violent crimes and high risk behaviours amongst minors. Membership of violent urban tribes and drug abuse act as facilitators, by emboldening minors to attack others and commit offences.
Sección de Estudios Sociológicos del Consejo General del Poder Judicial <sup>15</sup>	Specific data linked to criminal behaviour.	98.8% of the adolescents surveyed had committed an antisocial act or offence at some point in their life, 72.4% in the previous year, most of which were illegal computer use and alcohol consumption. Behaviours that most affect society were not very prevalent, only 22.1% had participated in a fight at some point in their life and only 8.1% had done so in the previous year.
Bravo Arteaga <i>et al.</i> <sup>14</sup>	Specific data linked to criminal behaviour.	Most young people with a low number of associated problematic factors usually start a life of crime with less serious offences and receive milder sentences, which appear to be effective, since their levels of recidivism is low. However, measures appear to be insufficient in the other associated risk factors, since the rate of recidivism is high.

groups and social support; four covered different issues of antisocial and criminal behaviour and three commented on more specific data about the types of such behaviour amongst young people.

In 2000, Gómez-Fraguela et al.<sup>6</sup> published an article whose objective was to use self-reports and questionnaires with a sample of 820 adolescents at schools in Galicia to explore two aspects that have sparked most interest in the study of delinquency: family and groups of friends. The study showed that family support negatively predicts criminal conduct throughout the following year, while delinquency has negative effects on family attachments. It also found that there were positive reciprocal effects between delinquency and involvement with delinquent friends. According to the authors, this type of deviance is the most important causal factor in adolescence<sup>6</sup>.

In 2008, Méndez et al.<sup>2</sup> compared the perception of social support in two groups of male adolescents between 14 and 18 years of age. One group consisted of offenders, while the other had none, but it did have a number of sociodemographic variables that gave them an equivalent status. They completed a number of questionnaires, which showed significant differences between both groups: that of the young delinquents showed a lower perception of social support, had a reduced network of support and reciprocity, and lower psychosocial adaptation to their surroundings<sup>2</sup>.

Four articles that discussed different situations in antisocial and criminal behaviours were selected. They highlighted the psychosocial risk factors involved in young offenders.

In 2010, Sanabria et al.<sup>5</sup>, analysed the risk factors linked to antisocial and criminal behaviour, in this particular case by using a sample of 179 adolescents divided into two groups: one of young offenders interned in private institutions, and another of adolescent non-offenders studying in state education centres, with an average age of 15 years.

The data obtained was grouped according to whether it belonged to the exosystem, the macrosystem and the microsystem.

The findings for the exosystem showed that young offenders were more frequently exposed to fights in their neighbourhood, drug dealing and gang membership. The macrosystem in families of young offenders showed constant fighting, shouting, insults and physical violence. There were no major differences between groups as regards shouting by the mother, but there was greater frequency of shouting by the father amongst young offenders. Notable features of the microsystem included the fact that young offenders were more likely to present attitudes and

beliefs of the following type: getting things no matter what, here and now, making no effort to prepare for the future, taking risks for pleasure, not feeling guilty when breaking rules<sup>5</sup>...

Contreras et al.<sup>10</sup> studied all the detention records filed in the Young Persons' Justice Service of Jaen province in Spain (1,046 in total, of which 654 were assessed: 368 of the cases were male, and the average age was 15.8 years). The study analysed demographic variables such as gender and age, and psychosocial variables such as violent behaviour, drug consumption, peer groups, self-control, tolerance of frustration and antisocial style<sup>10</sup>.

Notable results of the study include the fact that most of the minors consumed drugs, with the highest consumption levels in the age group of 16-17 years. Poly-drug use was the most frequent common type of consumption, and there was no difference between men and women in frequency of consumption<sup>10</sup>.

Most of the subjects who consumed substances had a delinquent peer group and showed higher levels of violent behaviour. The young people who showed violent behaviour started to consume drugs at an earlier age. The link between the delinquent peer group and drug abuse facilitated the adoption and maintenance of such behaviours. There was also a parallel increase in drug abuse and antisocial behaviour. Furthermore, the young people who consumed had low tolerance levels to frustration, lacked self-control and an external control locus, along with high impulsiveness<sup>10</sup>.

Another article to discuss psychosocial factors, also written in 2016, is the one carried out by Rico Fuentes<sup>7</sup>, who conducted an interpretative, subjective and diagnostic analysis of 18 young persons at the training centre of de Los Patios (Colombia), which set out to describe the psychosocial factors of contexts (family, school, surroundings) that have the greatest influence on the criminal behaviour of young offenders of 14 to 18 years.

Notable findings of the study included a constant lack of interest in school, relationships with peers characterised by criminal behaviour in the environmental context, along with drug abuse and false perceptions of the legality of crime. Findings for the family context showed that the parents of young offenders tended to be hard or inconsistent with disciplinary attitudes and practices, to reward criminal behaviour and ignore pro-social attitudes. An added factor in all the young offenders in the sample was a low socio-economic level, which meant that their basic needs were not covered<sup>7</sup>.

Páramo<sup>12</sup> likewise indicated in 2011 that there is often an associated problem of addiction, in which

the factors of individual, family and cultural risks run together in the same way as in antisocial behaviours. Alongside this problem there is also a high risk group that engages in sexual activity where constant features are ignorance, inadequate sex education and high risk behaviours.

There were three studies that provided more specific data about this type of behaviour: two that assessed young persons' records in different areas and one that evaluated the Juvenile Offenders' Act.

In 2009, San Juan et al.<sup>11</sup> carried out a retrospective study of the sentence records in the juvenile courts of San Sebastián, Bilbao and Vitoria from January to December 2003. From 2003 onwards, monitoring was carried of young drug users who entered the juvenile criminal justice system up to 2007. The results showed how drugs and alcohol are substances that affect behavioural control, and play a not inconsiderable part in violent crimes and high-risk behaviours amongst young people. In many cases, the combination of belonging to violent urban tribes and drug abuse acts as a facilitator by emboldening young people to attack others and commit offences<sup>11</sup>.

A document that should be taken into account in this context is the report drawn up in 2006 by the Sociological Studies Department of the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary, which is the first part of a socio-legal study of young people in Spain. The report contains details about antisocial (behaviour that cannot be clearly defined as offences) and criminal behaviours (those that are defined as such)<sup>15</sup>.

It was found that 98.8% of the adolescents surveyed had committed some type of antisocial or criminal act at some point in their lives, and 72.4% in the previous year, had used the computer illegally and consumed alcohol. However, behaviours that had most social impact were not very prevalent, only 22.1% had participated in a fight at some point in their lives, and only 8.1% had done so in the previous year<sup>15</sup>.

A study by Bravo Artega et al.<sup>14</sup> in 2009 assessed the impact of Organic Law 5/2000, which regulates the criminal liability of young people, analysing recidivism and its associated factors by reviewing the completed legal cases of young people who had been convicted between 2001 and 2004 in the province of Asturias (Spain). A noteworthy point is that most young people with a lower number of problematic factors usually start their criminal careers with minor offences, for which they generally receive milder sentences that appear to be effective since their rates of recidivism are low.

However, the sentences appear to be insufficient in the other associated risk factors, as levels of recidi-

visms are high. The conclusion is that intervention at family and community levels alongside intervention with the young person is a major priority<sup>14</sup>.

## DISCUSSION

Juvenile delinquency is a social problem that generates considerable interest, and has become an international public health concern. Many young people who engage in antisocial and/or criminal behaviour also have a number of mutually interrelated risk factors, which act as facilitators for such behaviours or minimise the discomfort caused by engaging in them, to the extent that they can become normalised.

There are authors who state that there are three types of factors and processes required for children and adolescents to develop antisocial and criminal tendencies. Firstly there are the motivators of such behaviours, which include the desire for material goods and social prestige, the need to find stimuli, the level of frustration and stress and drug abuse. Secondly, there are the processes that guide behaviour towards antisocial conduct. This basically depends on whether the young person can habitually opt for the use of illegal methods to bring things about. Finally, another contingent factor is if the young person possesses adequate "inhibitions" that move them away from criminal behaviour. These include beliefs, pro-social attitudes, empathy, values, etc. that are the outcome of the capacity of parents or significant adult figures who can adequately act as educational supervisors.

Another frequently observed characteristic is association with a group of friends with antisocial tendencies and behaviours. They often have a group of delinquent peers or even belong to violent gangs. They seek to be someone within the tribe, have a role, feel important and valued, and so minimise the costs that this can generate, as the sensation of belonging to a gang reduces their malaise and makes them feel better.

In addition to the external characteristics, the individual factors at play in many youngsters is minimal tolerance of frustration, a tremendous inability to manage their emotions, to define them and to give each one their space, with zero coping skills.

In recent years more importance has been given to working with the young person at family and community levels as well as at an individual one, in order to enable a complete intervention, to facilitate change and improvement and encourage an adequate exosystem that can enable a young person to develop other activities in the right conditions.

The main limitation of this study is the language used, as only articles written in Spanish were included. Another limitation to be borne in mind is the wide margin used for the study, as articles from 2000 were collected, giving a timescale of 20 years, so some of them may now be obsolete. Therefore, it would be interesting in future studies to apply a shorter time period and take into account developments in non-Spanish speaking countries.

At the same time, many of the conclusions taken from these studies are still valid, since years of experience at education and detention centres have shown that the very same psychosocial risk factors can be observed in young inmates, the main ones being a completely destructured family, peer groups that engage in criminal behaviour and activities that are hazardous to health, low or zero coping and social integration skills, lack of interest at school and a high degree of truancy.

This is a field that still requires a great deal of work and research, but it is essential for organisations working in this area to provide more resources, since if measures are taken with primary or even secondary interventions, using adequate and effective interventions, many of these young people can be prevented from embarking on a criminal career in their adult life.

The need is to utilise brief but effective interventions, given that a young offender's interest in activities is limited. The realities of their exosystem and macrosystem would have to be taken into account, as it is very difficult to change them, or to take a young person away from them, and so an essential part of an intervention would be to work on the situation of marginalisation or social vulnerability that the person is immersed in, while making them participants in the opportunities for integration at a social level into more normal systems that are distanced from violence or rule breaking.

This aspect of the intervention is essential but not easy, because some of youngsters work properly in a structured environment like a centre, they comply, acquire autonomy, learn, participate in healthier surroundings. But when they return to their own environment they go back to crime, with all the frustrations that this entails.

For all these reasons it is essential to provide the financial, physical and, above all, human resources needed to study and assess cases, and adopt personalised strategies that can protect young offenders and give them the opportunity to live in stable situations that enable them to distance themselves from a life of crime.

## CORRESPONDENCE

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