

## Risk Factors and Causal Mechanisms for Offending

This brief provides an introduction to the factors associated with an increased risk of offending, those factors which may ameliorate risk, and the causal mechanisms by which some factors lead to offending behaviour.

### Risk and protective factors

**Risk factors indicate an increased likelihood of offending, but may not be the underlying cause of offending.**

Risk factors are characteristics that indicate an increased probability of offending. They may be causally related to offending, or simply correlated with such behaviour.

One risk factor alone is unlikely to lead to offending: risk factors interact and accumulate in complex ways over time and at key life stages. Risk factors that have been identified at a population-level may operate and differently at the level of the individual.

**The presence of protective factors can reduce the likelihood of future offending by those who might otherwise be at risk.**

Protective factors are factors that mitigate the effect of risk factors, reducing the likelihood of future offending.

Risk and protective factors tend to fall into one of two inter-related categories: social context and individual development. More detailed information about social and individual risk factors can be found in the Strategic Policy Briefs '*Social Risk Factors for Involvement in Crime*', and '*Biological Risk Factors for Involvement in Crime*'.

There is a great deal of empirical evidence about the risk and protective factors for offending. The 'top ten' risk and protective factors for offending identified in New Zealand longitudinal studies are outlined in Table 1 of this strategic policy brief. As this table indicates, family risk factors appear to exert the greatest influence when children are young, with community risk factors (such as anti-social peers) having a bigger effect during adolescence.

**Causal mechanisms are those factors or processes that lead to offending. There are a number of theories of the causal mechanisms of offending**

## Causal mechanisms

Causal mechanisms explain why particular factors lead to offending by an individual. The literature on causal mechanisms is focused on understanding the nature of the relationship between cause and effect.

The causal mechanisms that link social and individual factors with the development of criminal offending are poorly understood – in part because they are often unobservable, or unable to be isolated and controlled for in empirical studies.

A number of different theories have been posited regarding the causal mechanisms for offending, but there is no single unified or widely accepted theory to draw on. An overview of some of the key theories about causal mechanisms is provided in the Strategic Policy Brief *'Theories on the Causes of Crime'*.

## Implications for understanding and responding to the drivers of crime

**Knowledge of risk factors enables the effective targeting of interventions; knowledge of protective factors and causal mechanisms assists in the design of interventions.**

Risk and protective factors, and causal mechanisms, are all relevant to understanding the drivers of crime. Knowledge of risk factors helps in targeting interventions; knowledge of protective factors and causal mechanisms helps in the design of interventions that focus on the things that matter, such as building resilience, and directly tackling underlying causes.

Despite the range of theories and a limited understanding that exist about causal mechanisms, there is a sound basis for the design of successful interventions. There is also good information about 'what works' – the evidence about interventions that have been shown to be effective in reducing the likelihood of offending by those at risk, or which successfully promote desistance from offending.

Figure 1: Risk and Protective factors and Causal Mechanisms for Offending

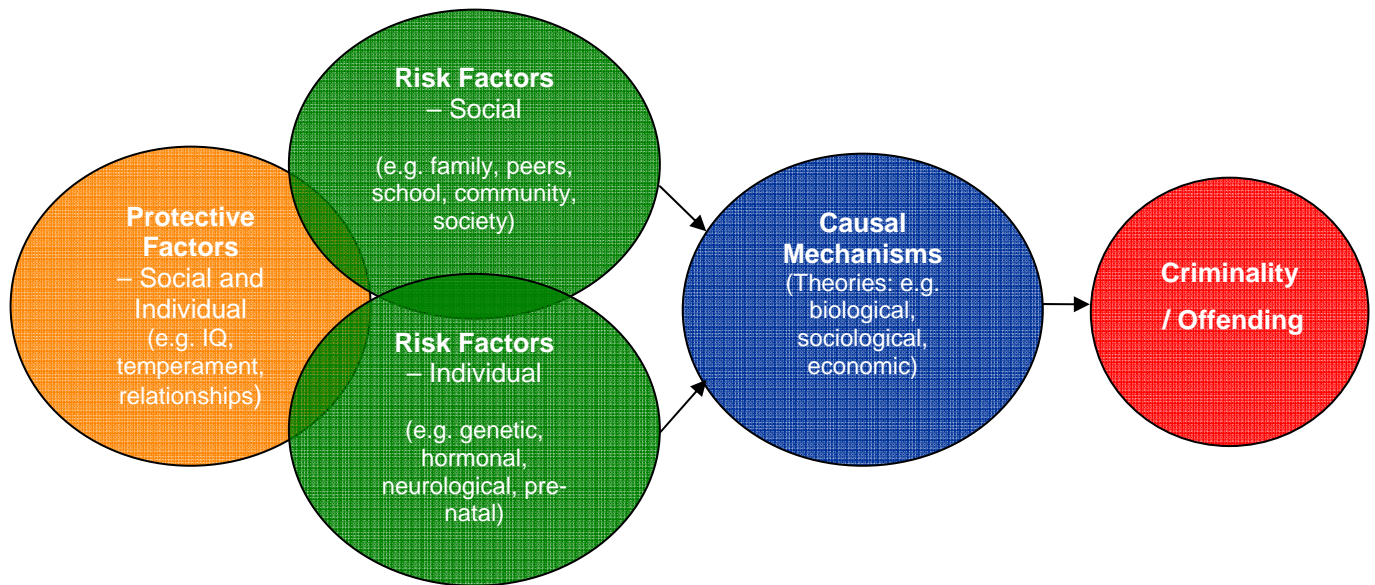


Table 1: ‘Top Ten’ Risk and Protective Factors for Future Offending\*

‘Domain’	Risk Factors – under age 13 yrs	Risk factors – adolescents 13 yrs+	Protective factors
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviour problems (anti-social, conduct disorder, contact with law before 12)</li> <li>• Use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs before age 12</li> <li>• Male gender</li> <li>• Impulsivity, poor self-control</li> <li>• Hyperactivity, poor attention</li> <li>• Aggression, fighting, violence before age 12</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior offences (more prior offences, higher the risk)</li> <li>• Aggression, fighting, violence</li> <li>• Impulsivity, poor self-control</li> <li>• Hyperactivity, poor attention</li> <li>• Tendency towards anxiety, stress</li> <li>• Length of first incarceration (longer period, higher risk)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher self-esteem</li> <li>• Greater cautiousness and self-control</li> </ul>
Social (Family)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low family income</li> <li>• Both parents unemployed or in unskilled or low-skilled jobs</li> <li>• Neither parent has school qualification</li> <li>• One or both parents has history of anti-social behaviour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor supervision by parents / caregivers</li> <li>• Low level of warmth, affection, closeness between parent(s) and young person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater supervision and monitoring by parents; reasonable and consistent rules and consequences</li> <li>• Greater emotional attachment and closeness to parents by young person</li> <li>• Lower levels of family adversity (social and economic disadvantage, family dysfunction, marital conflict)</li> </ul>
Social (Community)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Few friends and social / recreational activities</li> <li>• Contact with anti-social / criminal peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater ties and associations with pro-social peers</li> <li>• Lower levels of contact with delinquent peers</li> <li>• Good academic performance at school</li> <li>• Staying longer at school</li> <li>• Positive adult-youth relationships in the community</li> </ul>

\*As identified in the Christchurch and Dunedin longitudinal studies.

(Source: New Zealand Criminal Justice Sector Outcomes Report, Ministry of Justice, June 2008)

**Further reading:**

Jacobsen, V et. al. (2002) *Investing in Well-being: An Analytical Framework*. Working Paper 02/23, New Zealand Treasury. [Investing in Well-being: An Analytical Framework \(WP 02/23\) - The Treasury - New Zealand](#)

Ministry of Justice (2008) *New Zealand Criminal Justice Sector Outcomes Report*.  
<http://www.justice.govt.nz/pubs/reports/2008/criminal-justice-sector/Final%20outcomes%20report%20080829.pdf>

Wasserman GA, Keenan, K et al (2003) *Risk and Protective Factors of Child Delinquency*. Child Delinquency Bulletin Series. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org>