

## Prevention

Traditionally, the juvenile justice system has focused on dealing with youth after an initial contact with the local juvenile court. While this reactive emphasis on delinquent behavior is still prominent and necessary, the last 20 years has seen the emergence of a proactive approach to help stem the swell of delinquent youth. This new approach is known as the public health model of crime prevention.

The public health model focuses on reducing the risk of and increasing resiliency against illness and disease. With its emphasis on prevention of disease or injury, the public health approach to violence offers an appealing alternative to an exclusive focus on rehabilitation or punishment. Thus, other disciplines outside the public health field, such as criminal justice, have begun to adopt this multilevel approach to understand the nature of violence and identify potential points of intervention. In the context of delinquency prevention, the public health model focuses on reducing the risk of and increasing resiliency against problem behavior. It offers a practical, scientifically based procedure to promote and maintain prosocial behavior. In essence, the public health approach follows a four-step procedure to identify problems and develop solutions for entire population groups (Hamburg 1998). These steps are 1) define the nature of the problem using scientific methods (i.e., data); 2) identify potential causes through analyses of risk and protective factors associated with the problem; 3) design, develop, and evaluate interventions; and 4) disseminate successful models as part of education and outreach.

It should be noted that risk and protective factors are neither causes nor cures. Rather, risk and protective factors are statistical predictors that each have a strong theoretical base. They can be defined in the following manner:

- **Risk factors** are personal characteristics or environmental conditions scientifically established to increase the likelihood of problem behavior (Kirby and Fraser 1997).
- **Protective factors** are personal characteristics or environmental conditions that interact with risk factors scientifically established to reduce the likelihood of problem behavior.

The potential for an individual to engage in delinquent behavior is expressed as an algorithm of risk and protective factors that, over the developmental process, increase or decrease the likelihood that a given youth will engage in problem behaviors (delinquency, substance abuse, school dropout, HIV/AIDS risk behavior, or others). The framework indicates that no single factor is essential but rather multiple factors (both risk and protective) combine to contribute to and shape behavior over

**Suggested Reference:** Development Services Group, Inc. 2000. "Prevention." Literature review. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Prevention.pdf>  
Prepared by Development Services Group, Inc., under cooperative agreement number 2013-JF-FX-K002. Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

the course of adolescent development. It suggests that the more risk factors present in life, the greater the probability of problem behaviors (Bry, McKeon, and Pandina 1982; Newcomb 1995). The negative influence of risk factors, however, can be moderated by the presence of certain protective factors to build a resiliency against problem behaviors (Garmezy 1985; Werner 1994).

Some researchers advocated for a paradigm shift in the prevention field to concentrate exclusively on building resiliency rather than on trying to reduce risks (Bernard 1991; Benson 1997). These researchers argue that an emphasis on risks is an emphasis on deficits and that a prevention strategy would produce more significant outcomes by concentrating on building strengths. However, current research suggests that neglecting risk by concentrating solely on resiliency is incomplete as a strategy for reducing the prevalence of problem behavior. Pollard and colleagues (1999) found that a strategy that concentrates on resiliency at the expense of risks is less likely to reduce problem behaviors than a strategy that is effective in both enhancing protective factors and reducing risk factors.

Today, many juvenile delinquency prevention programs use variations of this approach but have been unsuccessful because they do not adequately address both risks and resiliency. In other words, they concentrate too heavily on risk factors without addressing protective factors that decrease the likelihood of problem behavior. Or they concentrate too heavily on improving resiliency without addressing the source of the risks. Instead, the design of effective prevention programs and strategies should consider the dynamics and interrelationship of both types of factors (Pollard, Hawkins, and Arthur 1999).

As a result, the prevention side of the MPG database offers two unique search options. First, it incorporates a search engine that utilizes the risk and protective factors framework to help guide communities through the public health model. Secondly, it offers a traditional option to search the universe of prevention and intervention programs to assist communities that are not interested in utilizing the risk and protective factor framework.

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