



## Editorial

## Protective factors against offending and violence: Results from prospective longitudinal studies



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To describe main findings from a special issue on protective factors against youth offending and violence. Contributors from eleven major prospective longitudinal studies were asked to conduct analyses of “direct ameliorative effects” for high-risk individuals (i.e. risk-based protective factors) as well as analyses of “interactive protective effects” for both high-risk and low-risk individuals (i.e. buffering protective factors).

**Methods:** Beyond variations in analytical strategies that are connected with the actual data available within each longitudinal study, it is a particular strength that contributors were told that they should feel free to present any type of analyses on main and/or interactive effects of protective factors against offending and that all results are important irrespective of whether effects were statistically significant or not.

**Results:** A number of consistent findings emerge across the studies described in the edited volume, such as the notable increase and decrease in offending and violence as a function of cumulative risk and protective factor indices respectively. There are also different protective effects across the various (individual, family, school etc.) domains and at different developmental stages across several studies that might be related to variations in measurement and other methodological features.

**Conclusions:** Most protective factors that emerge from these diverse studies in different geographic and sociopolitical contexts are in concordance with the broader literature on resilience, thus conveying a powerful message of universality of results. Further research on age-specific, gender-specific and context-specific predictors of resilience is warranted, with findings feeding into future intervention planning through a careful research strategy.

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Criminological thinking about the commission of crime is being reshaped by empirical work on why people refrain from crime in the first place. Resilience, the dynamic process of encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000), has a long and illustrious history within the field of developmental psychopathology. The simultaneous investigation of atypical and normative development, each in the context of the other, and with the study of one informing and enriching the study of the other (Masten, Best, & Garmezny, 1990), constituted a salient founding base in the relevant field.

Within developmental and life course criminology, there has been a different research pattern, with an initial focus on risk-based explanatory models of why individuals commit crime and with a much later focus on why individuals abstain from crime despite childhood adversities (Farrington & Welsh, 2007; Lösel & Farrington, 2012) or on ‘turning

points’ that enable individuals to escape their delinquent lifestyles (Laub & Sampson, 1993).

We define a direct protective or promotive factor as one that predicts a low probability of offending. We define a risk-based protective factor as one that predicts a low probability of offending among a risk category. Finally, we define an interactive protective (or buffering protective) factor as one that predicts a low probability of offending among a risk category but not among a non-risk category (Lösel & Farrington, 2012; Luthar et al., 2000). We asked researchers from major prospective longitudinal studies to investigate risk-based and interactive protective factors for youth offending and/or violence since direct protective factors had been extensively investigated in a special issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (Hall et al., 2012), while interactive protective factors had been extensively investigated in a special issue of the *Journal of School Violence* but with a focus on school aggression and peer victimization (Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2014). We required that risk and protective factors were measured before offending outcomes.

In this special issue, the focus is on protective factors against involvement in crime and violence although, admittedly, research on protective

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factors that facilitate desistance from a deviant lifestyle is of equal importance (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Systematic investigations of protective factors against youth offending and violence are presented based on the coordinated efforts of research teams from major prospective longitudinal studies in the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia.

All contributors to this special issue were asked to conduct analyses of “direct ameliorative effects” for high-risk individuals as well as analyses of “interactive protective effects” for both high-risk and low-risk individuals (Lösel & Farrington, 2012; Luthar et al., 2000). Beyond variations in analytical strategies that are connected with the actual data available within each longitudinal study, it is a particular strength that contributors were told that they should feel free to present any type of analyses on main and/or interactive effects of protective factors against offending and that all results are important irrespective of whether effects were statistically significant or not.

In the first article of this issue, Maria M. Tfofi and colleagues report results of a meta-analytic review of IQ as a protective factor against youth offending and violence. This methodological paper confirms the variability in theoretical approaches and analytical strategies that have been used to investigate protective effects. The meta-analytic results suggest that intelligence significantly protects against offending for high-risk but not for low-risk individuals. Five prospective longitudinal studies are then presented in this special issue, all located in the United States.

B.K. Elizabeth Kim and colleagues examine protective factors against violence during two developmental stages (middle and late adolescence) based on data from the *Seattle Social Development Project*. Variations in protective factors against violence across different risk groups are found, with no single protective factor predicting low rates of violence across all developmental periods. This is understandable, since different contextual factors may have more or less relevance across different developmental stages (Lösel & Farrington, 2012). The Seattle data also suggest that protective factors have a greater effect in reducing violence among youth with high levels of cumulative risk. Analyses based on cumulative risk and protective factors are also presented by Eric Dubow and colleagues, based on data from the *Columbia County Longitudinal Study*, with the sum of adolescent—but not childhood—protective factors predicting a reduced likelihood of adult violence for youth with at least one risk factor. The Columbia County data analyses cover a time span from ages 8 to 48, with both self-reported and official criminal record data. Darrick Jolliffe and colleagues then present longitudinal analyses based on data from the *Pittsburgh Youth Study*. Using data from the youngest cohort, and covering a developmental period from age 7 to age 19, they investigate protective effects from the individual, family, school and community domains and across a number of risk groups, such as children from deprived and disrupted families and children with an African American background. High academic achievement is an interactive protective factor that is consistently independently related to low levels of violence for this cohort of youth.

Two further American studies are included in the special issue. Wesley G. Jennings and colleagues use data from Puerto Rican participants in the Bronx, NY sample of the *Boricua Youth Study*. Addressing the lack of research on Hispanic youth, they investigate a variety of risk and protective effects against violence across six domains. The results suggest that increasing numbers of risk factors significantly increase the odds of violence whereas cumulative protective factors offset this risk to an extent by decreasing the odds of violence participation. These findings hold across different developmental age groups. Edward P. Mulvey and colleagues present an examination of the change in the dynamic risk of offending over time among serious juvenile offenders who are part of the *Pathways to Desistance Study*. While not having a specific focus on resilience, their longitudinal data analyses on dynamic risk-and-need indicators in juvenile assessments have clear implications for intervention planning and for the adequate evaluation of individuals who enter the criminal justice system.

A Canadian study is also included in this special issue. Nathalie M.G. Fontaine and colleagues, based on data from the *Montreal Longitudinal and Experimental Study*, use latent class analysis to identify at-risk and not-at-risk behavioral profiles in kindergarten, and use regression analyses to test protective factors against late adolescent violence and delinquency. A number of modifiable protective factors are found, the influence of which depends on the developmental period examined (i.e. pre-adolescence vs. mid-adolescence).

Three prospective longitudinal studies from Europe are featured in the special issue. Based on the *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development*, David P. Farrington and colleagues examine risk and promotive factors as well as interactive protective factors against official convictions for their British cohort. A number of interactive protective effects are found, including high verbal and nonverbal intelligence, good school attainment and high parental interest in education acting against poor child rearing; and high family income acting against having a convicted parent. Findings from another English longitudinal study, the *Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime*, are presented by Lesley McAra and Susan McVie, through an investigation of the mediating effects of gender and poverty in the presence of various risk and protective factors against violence. Their results show how the mediating effects of gender and poverty remain significant even after controlling for a combination of risk and protective indicators, consistent with the theoretical framework presented in their study. The third European study that is included in the special issue is based on data from the *Individual Development and Adaptation* study, based in Sweden, also referred to as the *Orebro Project*. Using data from their male sample, Anna Karin Andershed and colleagues investigate the effects of cumulative risk and protective factors in predicting convictions for violent offending up to the age of 35. An increase in the number of risk factors from zero to three is followed by a fivefold increase in the likelihood of a conviction, but this increase is markedly reduced after controlling for protective factors. Conversely, their analyses show a tenfold decrease in the likelihood of a conviction with an increase in the number of protective factors from zero to ten.

Finally, this special issue features results from two prospective longitudinal studies in Australia, both located in Victoria. Based on data from the *Australian Temperament Project*, Suzanne Vassallo and colleagues focus their attention on children who are classified at-risk for high levels of externalizing problem behaviors at age 12 and investigate protective factors against their involvement in physical fighting six to eight years later. A number of significant risk modifiers are identified, including positive teacher-child relationships in early adolescence and supportive peer relationships in late adulthood, and with high self-control being the most influential protective factor against adult physical fighting. Sheryl A. Hemphill and colleagues investigate direct protective effects and interactive protective effects of variables from the individual, family, school and community domains in explaining reduced offending in young adulthood, based on data from the *International Youth Development Study*. No interactive protective factors are found, but the results clearly show how the cumulative risk and protective factor scores are associated with young adult violent offending in some of the at-risk groups.

A number of consistent findings emerge across the studies described in the edited volume, such as the notable increase and decrease in offending and violence as a function of cumulative risk and protective factor indices respectively. There are also various protective effects across domains and at different developmental stages, between the studies included in the edited volume, that might be related to variations in measurement and other methodological features (Lösel & Farrington, 2012). Most protective factors that emerge from these diverse studies in different geographic and sociopolitical contexts are in concordance with the broader literature on resilience, thus conveying a powerful message of universality of results (Werner, 2005). Of course, this does not rule out investigating age-, gender- and context-specific

predictors of resilience in the future. Further prospective longitudinal studies on the present topic should be carried out to feed into intervention planning through a careful research strategy.

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