



Root Causes Approach to Crime

“When I think “root cause” I don’t think about the plight of an individual, but rather the broad systemic, cultural and legislative contexts. Addressing the root cause means effecting large systems, changing cultural norms and influencing broad policy change. Those policies should then empower, facilitate and support agencies to provide services that address risk factors and build/enhance protective factors.” - WRCP Chair, 2015

The Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council ‘advances ideas and actions that alleviate root causes of crime and improve social well-being’. Root causes of crime and victimization are found in social, economic, cultural and societal systems that can lead to inequities and disadvantages for some individuals, families and communities. These, in turn, can result in negative outcomes including crime, victimization and fear of crime.

The **root causes approach** is a way of thinking systemically and holistically about the complex, multiple, and interconnected roots of social problems such as crime. It calls for collaborative, comprehensive and sustained efforts to transform these underlying conditions rather than focus solely on the symptoms. The ultimate goal is to prevent crime and victimization from occurring in the first place by building a society that supports the well-being of everyone.

From Root Causes to Risk and Protective Factors

Over 100 years of research has produced many different theories about the causes of crime. Some theories focus on biological or psychological factors, others take a sociological, economic or life course perspective, or integrate multiple perspectives.¹ There is no direct or simple cause–effect relationship in any of these approaches. Instead, causal relationships should be viewed as chains of events over time, which impact individuals, families, communities and societies. These impacts vary depending on populations and contexts.²

Much of what we know about why crime and victimization occur comes from a growing body of knowledge about risks as well as protective factors. This research provides an important understanding of the many factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes such as crime. Though the terms ‘risk factors’ and ‘root causes’ are sometimes used interchangeably, there are important distinctions between them. For example, not completing high school is a ‘risk factor’ that strongly predicts delinquency. A ‘root causes’ approach would take a deeper look at the family, community and societal conditions over time that explain why some individuals are less likely than their peers to complete high school in the first place.

¹ Wortley, S. (2008). The Root Causes of Youth Violence: A Review of Major Theoretical Perspectives.
<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/professionals/oyap/roots/volume5/index.aspx>

² Sampson, R. J., Winship, C., & Knight, C. (2013). Translating Causal Claims: Principles and Strategies for Policy Relevant Criminology. *Criminology & Public Policy* 12, no. 4: 587–616.

Risk factors are negative influences in the lives of individuals or a community that may increase the presence of crime, victimization or fear of crime.

Protective factors are positive influences that can improve the lives of individuals or the safety of a community by decreasing the likelihood that persons engage in crime or become victims. Building on protective factors makes individuals and communities stronger and better able to counteract risk factors. (Public Safety Canada, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca>)

Factors that lead to crime most often go beyond the individual, their family and peers to the heart of the community. Risk and protective factors combine to make the probability of crime, victimization and fear of crime more or less likely. No one variable should be considered in isolation. Instead, crime and victimization are the outcome of interactions between risk and protective factors at the individual, relationship, community and societal levels. This is commonly referred to as the **ecological framework**.

“It is critical to address the larger societal and community level factors that can have direct and indirect influences on individual and family risks for violence. For example, parents working to maintain a strong relationship with their children and reduce their risk for violence are likely to be more successful if their community is providing the services and supports they need (e.g., reliable child care; safe and affordable housing).”³

³ Preventing Multiple Forms of Violence: A Strategic Vision for Connecting the Dots. Atlanta, GA. Division of Violence Prevention, National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016, p.7.

Protective and Resiliency Factors

Individuals and communities have inherent strengths and capacities. Developing and building upon the assets and resources of individuals, families and communities promotes thriving as well as bolstering resilience to cope with adverse circumstances that might otherwise increase the risk of crime or victimization. A summary of some key protective factors appear below.

Important Protective Factors Essential to Promoting Resilience

Community Assets	School Assets	Family Assets	Individual Assets
Connectedness to community	Connectedness to school	Positive adult role models	Positive peer group
Positive and clear community norms and values	Supportive school environment	Positive communication within the family	Problem-solving skills
Effective prevention policies	Participation in after-school activities	Parental involvement in the child's life	Communication skills
Absence of weapons and firearms	Effective involvement in the school	Clear rules and consequences within the family	Positive conflict resolution skills
	Clear rules and consequences within the school	Time with family	A positive sense of self
			Ability to take responsibility for own behaviours
			Empathy and sensitivity toward others

Source: Adapted from Schneider, S. (2015). Crime Prevention Theory and Practice. CRC Press: FL., p. 123.

Key Factors Related to Crime and Victimization

The following are some of the factors reported in the literature:

Age

Research emphasizes the opportunities of focusing crime prevention efforts on early childhood because many persistent offenders begin their involvement in anti-social activities before and during adolescence, when risk taking behaviour tends to be more prevalent than during other stages of life.

Gender

Males are more likely than females to be involved in crime because crime tends to involve aggression and risk taking. These biological differences when seen within the context of social learning and cultural norms provide important opportunities for prevention.

Peer Influence

When youth lack a sense of belonging within the family and the community, they are more likely to associate with peers who are in conflict with the law, which in turn increases their risk of offending. This connection between the individual and peer behaviours provides key prevention opportunities through peer-based approaches. Ideally, however, children and youth have healthy attachments to their families and communities, which are more likely to lead to pro-social peer relations.

Difficulty in School

Schools provide an important setting for the promotion of healthy relationships and healthy development, which includes educational attainment. Students who at least complete high school tend to experience more positive outcomes including better employment opportunities. As children, many offenders were less successful in school, had lower attendance rates and were frequently more likely to leave school earlier than their peers. As much as 41% of inmates have learning disabilities and/or literacy issues.

Problematic Substance Use

The majority of inter-personal crimes are committed under the influence of drugs or alcohol or are related to problematic substance use. Regular alcohol and/or drug use during adolescence is associated with higher conviction rates in adulthood. Therefore, preventing or delaying the onset of substance use and reducing harms associated with problematic substance use can significantly reduce crime.

Mental Health

Persons with mental health issues are at higher risk of victimization or coming in contact with the law. People with psychiatric disabilities are also over-represented in correctional facilities. To reduce the risk, appropriate mental health facilities and supports need to be readily available and easily accessible.

Parenting

Frequently when people try to understand crime, they go from blaming the offender to blaming the family. In reality, families must be seen within the broader social and community context. Research shows that parenting practices that are inconsistent, neglectful, overly punitive or permissive increase the risk of delinquency, as do parental criminality and serious family conflict. Supporting families and promoting positive parenting practices provides important opportunities for decreasing criminality.

Violence in the Home

Interventions to reduce family violence will have positive inter-generational effects. While family violence and interpersonal violence that occur outside the home are crimes in and of themselves, they also significantly contribute to crime and victimization later in life. Victims of child maltreatment and neglect are more likely to come in conflict with the law. A high number of inmates experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse as children. Men who witnessed their fathers be violent toward their mothers are three times as likely to be violent toward their own wives. Reducing family violence, recognizing the impact of childhood trauma and providing trauma-informed systems of care, greatly contribute to community safety.

Social Exclusion

Many racialized groups continue to be over-represented in correctional facilities. Race/ethnic factors associated with crime, in reality, are the consequences of people being kept at a social and economic disadvantage. Decreasing stereotyping, discrimination and marginalization as well as increasing equity and belonging can go a long way to addressing such disadvantages.

Unemployment

A high number of youth and adults admitted to correctional facilities have been chronically unemployed and/or underemployed. Unemployment after terms of incarceration also increases the likelihood of re-offending. Improving employment opportunities greatly contributes to community safety.

Poverty

Poverty, income insecurity and other inequities are linked to chronic stress and health problems, unsatisfactory living conditions and relationship challenges. The effects are particularly stressful during pregnancy and for lone parents. An equitable distribution of resources and opportunities inevitably will lead to significant reductions in social ills including crime.

Note Regarding These Factors

The factors presented above do not comprise an exhaustive list. Researchers continue to explore other influences on crime such as entertainment/social media, nutrition, and exposure to environmental toxins. Ongoing commitment to evaluation and research will strengthen the evidence base for crime prevention.

In Summary

It is clear from the research that there is no single cause of crime. Crime is the result of a combination of social-economic, community and family conditions that create a predisposition to anti-social and criminal behaviour. These conditions also increase the risks of victimization.

“There are experiences, particularly early in childhood that make it extremely predictable that individuals are at substantially higher risk for involvement with violence, be it interpersonal, youth violence, intimate partner violence, dating violence, or child abuse.”⁴

When children grow up in caring families, safe and healthy communities, and equitable and inclusive societies, their chance of living fulfilled and peaceful lives is exceedingly better than when these conditions are not met.

Risk factors point to the importance of early intervention and prevention in the lives of children. Protective factors and strengths-based approaches point to the opportunities for us to create optimal conditions for preventing crime and victimization before it happens. A root causes approach supports systemic understanding and upstream actions and must be part of any comprehensive crime prevention and reduction agenda.

The prevention of crime and other social ills follow the same principles. Effective prevention approaches are:

- Intensive never ad-hoc
- Happen in natural settings
- Start as early as possible
- Based in good evidence and community wisdom
- Work on multiple levels
- Place a high value on future generations
- Encourage citizen engagement and leadership

⁴ Wilkins, N., Tsao, B., Hertz, M., Davis, R., Klevens, J. (2014). Connecting the Dots: An Overview of the Links Among Multiple Forms of Violence. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Oakland, CA: Prevention Institute, p.1.