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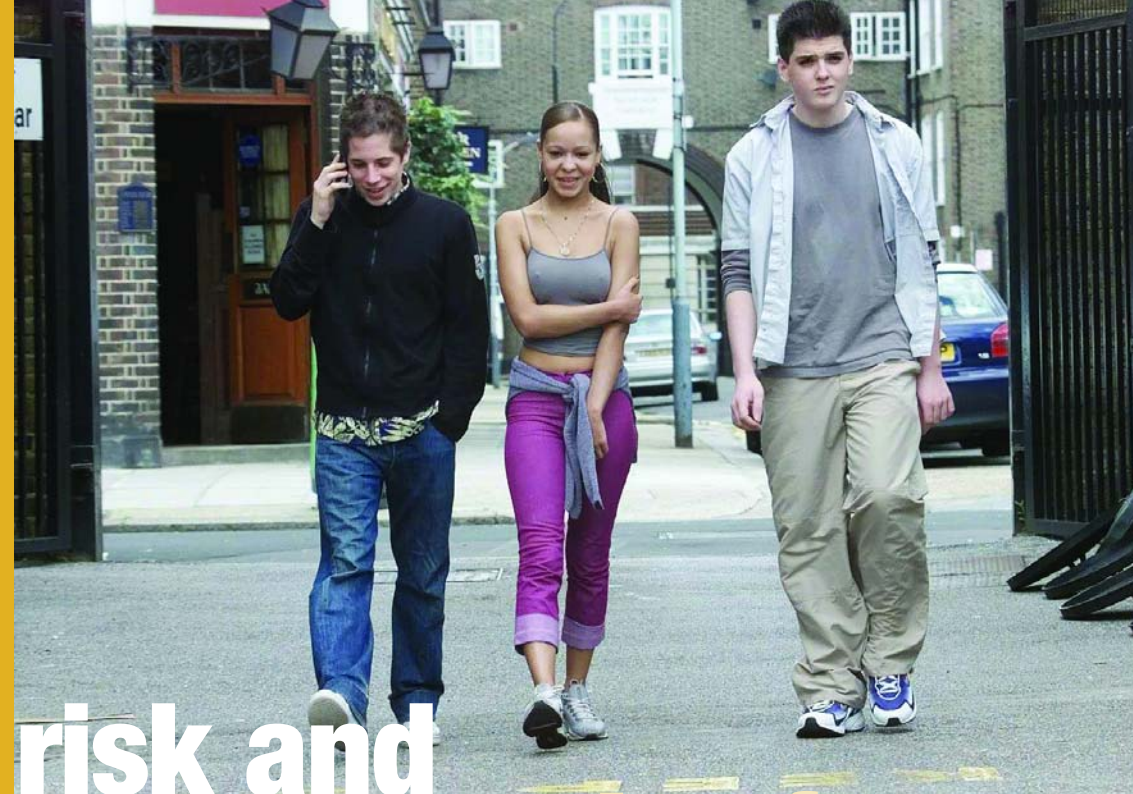
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risk and protective factors



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Youth Justice Board would like to thank Barry Anderson, Sarah Beinart, Prof David Farrington, Jonathan Langman, Pat Sturgis and David Utting for their work in compiling and writing the full report on which this summary is based.

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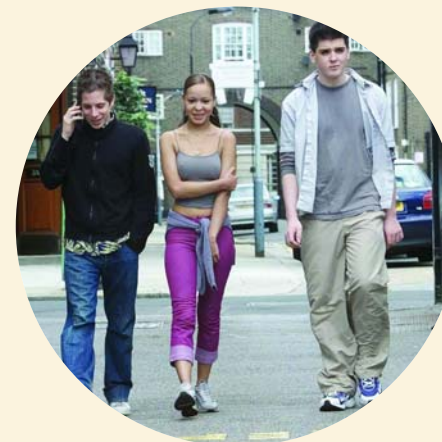


A summary of risk and protective factors associated with youth crime, and effective interventions to prevent it

INTRODUCTION

Why is it that some children, as they grow up, become involved in criminal activity, while others stay out of trouble and respect the law? To help answer this question, the Youth Justice Board commissioned Communities that Care to undertake a comprehensive review of risk and protective factors associated with youth crime, and the programmes that address these factors in order to prevent offending. This research has been used by the Board to inform its advice to the Home Secretary and the guidance on Effective Practice it issues to local services.

The first part of the research identifies (and cites the evidence for) both the risk factors that are known to predict a subsequent involvement in youth crime, and the protective factors that buffer children and young people against the risks to which they are exposed. It goes on to explore how those risk and protective factors currently operate in England and Wales at a local and national level. The research concludes by examining the programmes found to be successful in reducing risk factors and promoting protective ones.



RISK FACTORS

In defining the risk factors for young offending, the focus is on reducing criminality, and on factors in children and young people's lives that can, to some extent, be influenced by practical, community-based prevention programmes.

Reference is, however, also made to such factors as gender, genetic influences and biological mediators. Although these are unchanging during development, they may contribute to the identification of children at risk.

The risk factors for youth offending and substance abuse overlap to a very large degree with those for educational underachievement, young parenthood, and adolescent mental health problems. Action taken to address these risk factors (and to increase levels of protection) therefore helps to prevent a range of negative outcomes. Moreover, because these outcomes are closely related (anti-social behaviour is strongly correlated with heavy alcohol consumption, for example, and vice versa), this broad-based approach to prevention offers the greatest prospect of securing lasting reductions in offending behaviour.

In this report, the risk and protective factors for youth crime are categorised across four 'domains': the family; school; community; and those which are individual, personal and related to peer-group experiences.

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Family

- Poor parental supervision and discipline
- Conflict
- History of criminal activity
- Parental attitudes that condone anti-social and criminal behaviour
- Low income
- Poor housing

These risk factors can first be identified at the prenatal and perinatal stages, and persist in influence throughout childhood and adolescence.



School

- Low achievement beginning in primary school
- Aggressive behaviour (including bullying)
- Lack of commitment (including truancy)
- School disorganisation

Community

- Living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood
- Disorganisation and neglect
- Availability of drugs
- High population turnover, and lack of neighbourhood attachment

US research has also cited the following community risk factors:

- **availability of firearms**
- **community laws and norms favouring drug use, firearms and crime**
- **media portrayals of violence.**

However, since these are referenced as increasing the likelihood of gang membership and/or involvement in violent crime, rather than youth offending per se, their relevance in a UK context is, at best, inconclusive.

Personal

- **Hyperactivity and impulsivity**
- **Low intelligence and cognitive impairment**
- **Alienation and lack of social commitment**
- **Attitudes that condone offending and drug misuse**
- **Early involvement in crime and drug misuse**
- **Friendships with peers involved in crime and drug misuse**

Risk factors as predictors of offending

The relationship between risk and protective factors, and the precise ways in which they interrelate is uncertain. It is, however, clear that risk factors cluster together in the lives of the most disadvantaged children; and the chances that those children will become anti-social and criminally active increases in line with the number of risk factors. Young people who have been exposed to the greatest risk are between five and 20 times more likely to become violent and serious offenders than those who have not.

The danger of stigmatising children below the age of criminal responsibility as ‘potential offenders’ has generally guided policy makers towards preventive approaches that target communities or schools, rather than individual children.

Risk factors for reoffending

For young offenders interviewed using *Asset* (the Youth Justice Board’s young offender assessment procedure), Youth Offending Team (Yot) practitioners rated the following as being most closely linked with risk of reoffending:

- **thinking and behaviour**
- **lifestyle**
- **statutory education.**

Young offenders, themselves, identified lack of training or qualifications as the most important factor, although problems with thinking and behaviour, lifestyle and neighbourhood were also rated highly.



Ethnicity

US studies suggest that the risk and protective factors described in this research appear consistently across races and cultures. The differences lie in their prevalence: for example, low family income and poor housing are more common among some minority ethnic communities in the UK than the majority white population, but the degree of parental supervision and discipline that children receive may be stronger.

Child abuse and experience of public care

Certain childhood experiences, such as abuse by adults or time spent in public care, have been shown to result in children being disproportionately likely to:

- leave school without qualifications
- become unemployed and young parents
- commit offences resulting in a prison sentence.



This may be due to the intensiveness with which the risk factors cluster together during these points in their lives. Abused children may also have less exposure to protective factors and processes.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

In a straightforward sense, factors signifying the opposite or absence of risk will help protect children and young people against involvement in crime, drug abuse and other anti-social behaviour. However, protective factors can also be defined as those that moderate the effects of exposure to risk. This helps to explain why some children can be exposed to clusters of the risk factors described above, yet do not grow up to behave anti-socially, or commit criminal offences.

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As with risk factors, some protective factors are individual characteristics that it may be difficult, if not impossible, to instil in children who lack them – most obviously, being female (young men commit more offences and, despite being exposed to similar background risk factors as young women offenders, they are more likely to become serious offenders, and their criminal careers tend to be longer). But there are other protective factors and processes with a more obvious and important contribution to make in the design of preventive strategies.

Individual factors

- Female gender
- Resilient temperament
- Sense of self-efficacy
- Positive, outgoing disposition
- High intelligence

Social bonding

- **Stable, warm, affectionate relationship with one or both parents**
- **Link with teachers and with other adults and peers who hold positive attitudes, and 'model' positive social behaviour**

Healthy standards

- **Prevailing attitudes across a community**
- **Views of parents**
- **Promotion of healthy standards within school**
- **Opportunities for involvement, social and reasoning skills, recognition and due praise**

Children and young people can be influenced by the prevalent behaviour, norms and values held by those to whom they feel attached. Thus parents, teachers and community leaders who lead by example and hold clearly stated expectations regarding young people's behaviour are helping to protect them against risk.

PEAK TIMES AND LOCATIONS

One aim of the research was to determine the situations and times when offending by 8 to 16-year-olds is most likely to occur, in order to identify where and when the risk factors outlined above most frequently apply. The evidence for this, however, was revealed to be both rather limited in volume, and to have methodological flaws, mainly due to the inherent inaccuracy of the recorded crime statistics and self-reported offending on which the available data are based: only a small proportion of crime is reported, and there is a widely-held view that the youngest respondents to self-report studies are unlikely fully to understand and/or answer honestly questions about their offending behaviour.

Main sources

These can be organised into the following four groups:

- **Official reports based on recorded crime data**
- **British Crime Survey data (household interviews with a randomly selected sample of respondents aged 16 or over, and self-completion questionnaires for 12 to 15-year-olds)**
- **Other self-report crime surveys (including the Home Office youth lifestyles surveys, MORI youth survey and the Communities that Care national survey)**
- **Police and other Criminal Justice System data (including *Asset* and the Metropolitan Police crime reports database).**

Time of day

The vast majority (**78.1%**) of youth offending occurs in the afternoon and evening. The evidence highlights the period immediately after children leave school (3pm to 6 pm) as a peak time for offending, with **30%** of offences taking place during these three hours.

Time of year

Offending appears to occur equally at all times of the year, although there are peaks in the spring and November. There is no evidence of increased offending during school holidays.

Age of offenders

The data are striking: offending behaviour rises steeply as age increases, with over **80%** of offences committed by 14 to 16-year-olds (inclusive) and, in relative terms, very little offending by 10 to 11-year-olds (less than **3%**).

Location

The *MORI Youth Survey 2001* (which uses school-based self-completion questionnaires) offered the best information on location/target. The places where pupils were most likely to commit theft were:

- **shops (35%)**
- **school (23%)**
- **own home (19%)**
- **other houses (7%).**



PREVALENCE AND SALIENCE OF RISK FACTORS FOR YOUTH CRIME

Prevalence refers to how many children and young people aged between 8 and 16 years are exposed to each risk factor. When looking at how to prevent youth crime, however, it is equally important to consider:

- **the salience, or strength of relationship between a risk factor and outcome behaviour (in this instance, youth crime)**
- **the degree to which the risk factor is susceptible to change**
- **the relationship between risk factors (offending behaviour is often linked to several factors, rather than to one in isolation).**

Methodology

The research draws on data from:

- **the Communities that Care ‘risk and protection’ audit – a survey-based exercise designed to measure the prevalence of known risk and protective factors within a local neighbourhood**
- **Communities that Care’s national risk and protection survey of approximately 14,500 secondary school pupils aged 11 to 16 years, based on interviews conducted between October 2000 and March 2001, and providing national and local data on risk and protection levels.**

Three of the risk factors identified above – low income and poor housing, disadvantaged neighbourhood, and high turnover of residents and lack of attachment to neighbourhood – are excluded from the surveys. This is largely because the work necessary to pilot and validate data would have taken too long, but also reflects the fact that these risk factors are relatively difficult to modify at community level.

Prevalence

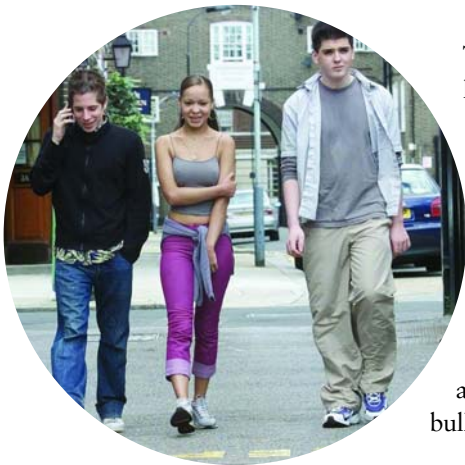
Assessing the prevalence of a particular risk factor is far from straightforward. For example, the proportion of children and young people in England and Wales who are exposed to family conflict simply cannot be measured. The important questions are as follows.

- **What is a normal level of exposure to a particular risk factor?**
- **How many people are exposed to significantly higher levels than normal?**

The results of the prevalence analysis suggest that, nationally, the most prevalent risk factors (i.e. those with the largest numbers of children and young people in the high-risk category) are as follows.

National prevalence of risk factors for youth crime

Risk factor	Percentage
Aggressive behaviour (including bullying)	25.3
Low achievement beginning in primary school	23.6
Family history of problem behaviour	22.2
Alienation and lack of social commitment	21.7
Peer attitudes condoning problem behaviour	21.7
Parents condoning problem behaviour	21.3
Family conflict	21.1
Lack of commitment to school (including truancy)	20.8
Friends involved in problem behaviour	20.6
Availability of drugs	19.4
Early involvement in problem behaviour	18.4
Community disorganisation	17.8
Poor parental supervision and discipline	17.7
School disorganisation	17.2



The fact that one risk factor ranks higher in this table than another does not necessarily mean that it is a more serious problem: the table shows, instead, how widespread a problem is. For example, slightly fewer than one in five secondary school children are at high risk from the availability of drugs, whereas approximately one child in four is at high risk from aggressive behaviour at school (including bullying) and/or low school achievement.

Saliency

The seriousness of a particular risk factor depends not only on its prevalence but also on both its saliency (the strength of its relationship to, and so ability to predict, youth crime), and on the extent to which it can be modified. Being a boy, for instance, could be regarded as a risk factor that is highly prevalent (affecting around half the 8 to 16-year-old population), clearly salient (the correlation between boys and youth crime is remarkably strong), but completely unmodifiable.

Three models were used, which predicted the odds of a child or young person being excluded from school; being arrested; and reporting stealing anything. These were estimated by analysing:

- **the presence of the 14 risk factors listed above**
- **the presence of three protective factors (good relationship with parents; positive aspects of school life; recognition from teachers)**
- **the negative or positive effect of seven demographic coefficients (male gender; number of additional rooms in household; white ethnicity; English as first language; number of times moved house; number of school years completed; presence of a car in household).**

Probability of exclusion

The risk factors and coefficients most clearly salient to being excluded from school are as follows:

- being male
- having fewer rooms in the household
- being non-white
- moving house many times
- being older
- having no car in the household.

Moreover, all 14 risk factors significantly increase the odds of being excluded, while the protective factors all serve to reduce them.

Probability of arrest

The most salient risk factors were found to be the same as those linked to being excluded, although the coefficient for ethnicity was reversed, meaning that white children are more likely to be arrested than non-white children. Again, all the risk factors significantly increased the odds of being arrested, and the protective factors decreased them.

all 14 risk factors significantly increase the odds of being excluded, while the protective factors all serve to reduce them

Probability of stealing

When examining the odds of a child being reported as stealing anything, again the likelihood was increased by:

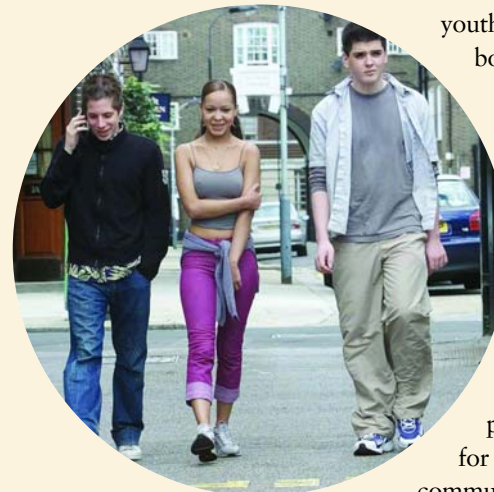
- being male
- moving house a lot
- being in a higher school year.

This time, however, neither ethnicity nor having access to a car in the household had a significant impact.

All the risk factors had a strong positive effect on the likelihood of the child stealing, with poor school achievement and family problem behaviour seeming to exert particularly strong influences. Again, the protective factors all reduced the odds of the child reporting involvement in stealing.

Prevalence, salience and risk distribution

The most salient risk factors are not necessarily the most prevalent. Therefore, in considering which risk factors are likely to be contributing most to an increase in youth crime, salience and prevalence both need to be taken into account.



It can be said with certainty that living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood increases the level of exposure to eight of the risk factors identified in the research. Therefore, it is important to recognise the different risk and protection factor profiles to which young people are exposed according to, for example, their different communities and ages.

It should, however, be remembered that the same risk factors predict youth crime and anti-social behaviour at every age; it is their interaction and prevalence at particular points in young people's lives that make individual factors more or less significant.

The data strongly support the picture of risk distribution that has eight-year-olds exposed to much lower levels of risk and higher levels of protection than 16-year-olds, with the family and school domains playing a more important role, and community and peer group factors having rather less influence.

Overall, the evidence in this section suggests that the risk and protection model derived from the literature review can be confirmed by the data contained in the Communities that Care survey.



REDUCING LEVEL OF RISK – WHAT WORKS

There is a considerable degree of overlap between the risk and protective factors for youth crime, and those relating to substance abuse, educational underachievement, young parenthood and adolescent mental health problems. It is also true, therefore, that programmes preventing youth crime can contribute to the reduction of these harmful phenomena that, taken together, underpin social exclusion.

As seen above, the risk factors for youth offending range across the domains of community, family, school and peer groups, as well as including individual attributes. Similarly, programmes that can reduce offending, by reducing risk or increasing protection, can be identified in all these fields. The evidence presented here is, therefore, categorised as family, school, youth and community-based.

Criteria for identifying successful programme strategies

The research design allowed comparisons to be made between the outcomes observed for those who took part, and a group of similar non-participants. Because, in general, programmes have not been rigorously evaluated in this country, those available in Britain but only evaluated elsewhere – usually in the USA – are also included, along with well-evaluated US programmes that currently have no British equivalent.

The programme strategies described in this research have been proven to fulfil the following assessment criteria:

- reduction of the known risk factors
- ability to strengthen protective factors
- intervention, at the appropriate stage, in children and young people's development
- early intervention
- ability to reach those at greatest risk
- sensitivity to the needs of different racial, cultural and economic groups
- ability to make a significant contribution to the overall reduction of risks.

The importance of selecting interventions carefully cannot be emphasised enough. There are many parenting programmes, home visitor services and family literacy schemes, for example – and some are much more effective than others at reducing risk (specific examples of successful schemes are given in the full report on which this summary is based).

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Effective programme strategies and the risk factor they address

Risk factor	Evaluated in the UK	Evaluated outside the UK	Identified as good practice
Poor parental supervision and discipline	Prenatal services; family support using home visiting; parenting information and support; pre-school education	After-school clubs	
Family conflict	Family support using home visiting; parenting information and support		
Family history of problem behaviour	Prenatal services; family support using home visiting; family literacy		
Parental involvement in/attitudes condoning problem behaviour	Prenatal services; parental information and support; family support using home visiting; family literacy		
Low family income/poor housing	Prenatal services; family support using home visiting	After-school clubs	Housing management initiatives
Low achievement beginning in primary school	Prenatal services; parenting information and support; pre-school education; family literacy; reading schemes; reasoning and social skills education; organisational change in school; after-school clubs; mentoring; youth employment with education		Preventing truancy and exclusion; further education for disaffected youth
Aggressive behaviour, including bullying	Parenting information and support; pre-school education; reasoning and social skills education; organisational change in schools	Mentoring	Preventing truancy and exclusion; youth work
Lack of commitment, including truancy	Pre-school education; family literacy; reading schemes; reasoning and social skills education; organisational change in schools	Mentoring; youth employment with education	Preventing truancy and exclusion; further education for disaffected youth; youth work
School disorganisation	Reading schemes; reasoning and social skills education; organisational change in schools		Preventing truancy and exclusion
Alienation and lack of social commitment	Parenting information and support; reasoning and social skills education; organisational change in schools	After-school clubs; mentoring; youth employment with education	Preventing truancy and exclusion; further education for disaffected youth; youth work; peer-led community programmes
Individual attitudes that condone problem behaviour	Parenting information and support; organisational change in schools	After-school clubs; mentoring	Preventing truancy and exclusion; youth work; peer-led community programmes
Early involvement in problem behaviour	Parenting information and support; reasoning and social skills education; organisational change in schools	After-school clubs; mentoring	Preventing truancy and exclusion; youth work; peer-led community programmes

Risk factor	Evaluated in the UK	Evaluated outside the UK	Identified as good practice
Friends involved in problem behaviour	Parenting information and support; reasoning and social skills education; organisational change in schools	After-school clubs; mentoring	Preventing truancy and exclusion; youth work; peer-led community programmes
Disadvantaged neighbourhood		Community mobilisation; community policing; youth employment with education	Housing management initiatives
Community disorganisation and neglect		Community mobilisation; community policing; youth employment with education	youth work; housing management initiatives
Availability of drugs	Organisational change in schools	Community policing	Youth work; peer-led community programmes
High turnover and lack of neighbourhood attachment	Organisational change in schools	After-school clubs; mentoring; youth employment with education; community mobilisation; community policing	Further education for disaffected youth; peer-led community programmes; youth work; housing management initiatives

Family-based strategies

- Prenatal services
- Family support using home visitors
- Parenting information and support

Community factors

- Community mobilisation
- Peer-led community programmes
- Community policing

School-based strategies

- Pre-school education
- Family literacy
- Reading schemes
- Reasoning and social skills education
- Organisational changes in schools
- Preventing truancy and exclusion
- Further education for disaffected young people

Youth strategies

- After-school clubs
- Mentoring
- Youth employment with education
- Youth work programmes

PREVENTING REOFFENDING: WHAT WORKS

Interventions focused on the risk factors in the lives of individual offenders have achieved reductions in reoffending. The 'what works' principles involve analysing the risks that individual offenders will continue to commit crime, and recognising the criminogenic needs that intervention should address.

Research does not identify any single approach as suitable for all young offenders. However, in general programmes should:

- **target high- and medium-risk offenders**
- **be well-structured with a clear rationale**
- **use an approach that challenges the offender's reasoning and perception as well as behaviour**
- **address a full range of criminogenic risk factors, including family and environmental factors as well as personal deficits**
- **adhere to agreed objectives and procedures**
- **be present in a menu for working with young offenders as part of a 'multimodal' package.**



CONCLUSION

There is no single factor that can be specified as the cause of anti-social or criminal behaviour. This can more accurately be found in the way that multiple risk factors clustered together can interact in the lives of some children, while important protective factors are absent.

The research identified within the full report, together with the evidence of the Communities that Care data, make a compelling case for the adoption of a 'risk and protection factor' model in understanding and preventing youth crime. Taken together with analysis of the Communities that Care survey data, which demonstrates the strength of the correlation between the risk and protective factors identified, and self-reported offending and other anti-social behaviour, it represents a body of evidence that can be used to inform a strategy for youth crime prevention based firmly on 'what works'.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Further analysis of data**

While there already exists a solid body of empirical evidence for ‘what works’ in reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors, more could (and should) be done, in particular on the relationship between risk factors: more detailed analysis of some of the data presented here would enhance both knowledge and understanding of youth crime and its prevention, but perhaps most importantly, the continuing collection and consideration of further evidence on an ongoing basis would allow further development. Further research is needed on the relationship between risk factors, and the influence of protective factors with different sub groups

- **Research focused on particular groups**

It is important to establish whether different groups of young people are influenced by different risk and protective factors. There is, for instance, little research on approaches to reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors for young women offenders, or those from minority ethnic groups. More work is also needed into which kinds of programme are most appropriate to use with offenders of different age groups or who pose different levels of risk of offending. In addition, researchers need to address the position of looked-after children and asylum seeker children (especially unaccompanied minors), and draw some conclusions about their exposure to risk and protection.

- **More rigorous evaluation of programmes**

A basic problem in the UK is the lack of rigorous evaluation studies: those that occur usually involve only small numbers of participants, and are of limited duration (often due to lack of funding). In addition, few include a comparable control group. Ideally, the impact of interventions should be evaluated using randomised experiments.