

Building Resilience to Crime and Violence in Young South Africans

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Crime has been identified by the South African government as a priority issue in South Africa. Of particular concern for policy makers, the police and social crime prevention practitioners is the fact that young people are significantly more likely than adults to be either victims of crime or offenders. Children and young people make up a major sector of the South African population. The 2001 census indicated that approximately 26% of the country's population was 24 years of age or younger.¹ Research indicates that the ages between 12 and 21 are the peak years for both offending and victimisation.² If we consider that the 12–21 year age groups are the most likely to be involved in crime, then it is clear that a large proportion of South Africa's population falls within this 'high risk' age cohort.

Youth criminal and antisocial behaviour is generally viewed as a consequence of the interaction of a range of factors stemming from the individual, as well as the different social contexts in which he or she lives. What is less well understood is why certain young people remain resilient

to crime despite being raised in environments fraught with the risk factors for offending. In an attempt to fill this gap in understanding, particularly within the South African context, the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) designed and undertook a youth resiliency study. The primary objective of the study was to identify why young people from high-risk environments – the same environments from which the majority of young offenders originate – refrain from engaging in criminal or violent behaviour, and to prioritise those factors that can be shown through sound statistical analysis to be the most significant in determining positive behavioural outcomes.

Protective factors are considered to be those characteristics 'which can counteract risk factors possessed by children who are considered to be at high risk of involvement in anti-social behavior'.³ Resilience may be defined as 'the process of, capacity for, or outcome of, successful adaptation, despite challenging or threatening circumstances'⁴ – as 'health despite adversity'.⁵ Resilience factors, therefore, are those factors that diminish the potential to engage in particular behaviours. More specifically, these factors provide a buffer against

exposure to risk factors and the onset of delinquent and criminal involvement.⁶

The study used as its departure point a set of established risk factors drawn from international literature, which have been identified as the most influential in identifying those young people who might be predisposed to turn to crime. These risk factors are spread across a range of individual characteristics, family characteristics, and school and community factors. The selection of risk factors is influenced by the acknowledgement that risk factors are contextually specific, constructed and may be indefinite across different communities or populations.⁷ Similarly, resilience factors are likely to be multidimensional, context specific and constructed with a plurality of behaviours.

The study juxtaposed two sets of samples, namely: an offending sample (comprising young offenders, their parents/primary caregivers and siblings); and a non-offending sample (comprising young non-offenders, their parents/primary caregivers and siblings). Offenders' families were traced back to their home communities. The non-offender samples of young people, siblings and caregivers were drawn from the same com-

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munities as the offenders. It was presumed that young people who choose not to commit crime are best suited to provide information on the factors that discourage youth criminal behaviour. In both sets of samples each respondent's life history, community context, family and peer networks, access to resources and services, level of education, life opportunities and employment possibilities were explored.

Significant resilience factors

This research bulletin presents each of the key resilience factors identified through advanced statistical analysis and comparison between the offending and non-offending sets of samples. Nine key factors were identified from the range of risk factors that served to enhance the resilience of young people to engage in crime, namely:

- Education
- Gender
- Non-violent family environment
- Non-exposure to criminal role-models
- Substance abstinence
- Interaction with non-delinquent peers
- Victimization
- Neighbourhood factors
- Attitudes intolerant of violence and antisocial behaviour.

Education

Education appeared to be one of the most significant protective factors against offending in the study. Matriculants are nearly six times more likely to be resilient to engaging in crime than non-matriculants.

In addition to having completed Grade 12, one's attitude toward one's schooling was also found to be a significant resilience factor in youth offending. **Regarding schooling as personally important, wanting to obtain good marks at school and wanting to go to university or technician after school were found to significantly predict membership in the non-offending category.** Youth

who show an interest in their schooling by working hard to obtain good marks are 31 times more likely to abstain from engaging in criminal behaviour than those who do not show an interest in their schooling.

Gender

It has consistently been found that males commit more crimes than females. In this study too gender was found to be a significant protective factor against offending. **Females are 15 times more likely to be non-offenders than males.**

In an attempt to explain the relationship between gender and crime, researchers have been inclined to explore the socialisation processes of males and females within the home. Hirschi's social control theory has been used in this context to explain the differences in offending by males and females. Control theories are premised on the idea that certain factors – one of which is the family – restrain people from offending.⁸

Young people who are more attached to their caregivers and who accept and abide by their expectations and regulations are more inclined to accept and conform to conventional society. Therefore, these social bonds are believed to limit involvement in antisocial activities.⁹

Researchers have found that males are more likely than their female counterparts to have friends who engage in delinquent activities, and studies have found that males are more vulnerable than females to the negative influences of their deviant friends.¹⁰

Non-violent family environment

Being raised in homes where family members hardly ever lose their tempers, do not resort to physical violence when they become angry, and where parents/caregivers do not employ physical punishment as a means of effecting discipline significantly predict membership in the non-offender category. **Young people who are raised in homes where disputes are resolved without violence are 6.8 times more likely to**

refrain from engaging in criminal behaviour than those who are raised in violent homes. Furthermore, those who are not physically punished for their wrongdoings are twice as likely not to offend as young people whose caregivers physically hit them as punishment for their transgressions. **Although both offenders and non-offenders were exposed to various forms of violence within their homes, the offenders were significantly more likely to be exposed to more violent family relations.** Research has also identified the link between family violence exposure and subsequent criminal victimisation – which is also a risk factor for offending.¹¹ Particularly concerning is that family violence exposure heightens the susceptibility of young people to violent crimes such as assault and robbery.

Non-exposure to criminal role-models

Non-exposure to criminal role-models was found to be another significant predictor of membership in the non-offender category. That is, young people who are not exposed to antisocial role-models within their family environments are more likely to refrain from criminal behaviour than those who are exposed to such role-models. **Not having family members who had in the past year engaged in any activities that could have got them in trouble with the law, such as stealing, selling stolen goods, mugging and assaulting others, was also a significant variable in predicting resilience.**

These findings are consistent with mainstream theories which propose that children and youth learn to become offenders when they are raised in environments surrounded by antisocial role-models, and point to the considerable influence that family environments have on subsequent child and adolescent behaviour.

Substance abstinence

Young people were asked about their use of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine,

amphetamines, inhalants, over-the-counter substances, hallucinogens, opiates, mandrax, tik and any other illegal substances not included in the questionnaire. **The absence of substance use was found to be a significant protective factor against offending. That is, young people who do not use substances are 4.4 times more likely not to commit criminal offences than those who consume alcohol and other drugs.**

Interaction with non-delinquent peers

Interaction with non-delinquent peers was found to be one of the important predictors of being a non-offender. Having best friends who had *never* been arrested, dropped out of school, used illegal drugs, been suspended from school or had stolen or tried to steal a motor vehicle significantly predict membership in the non-offender category. Therefore, **young people who have best friends who have never been arrested are 5.7 times more likely to refrain from engaging in criminal behaviour than those who do interact with peers who have been arrested.** Similarly, **those whose best friends have never dropped out of school are twice as likely not to commit an offence as those young people whose best friends have dropped out of school.**

Victimisation

Having never been the victim of any crime has also been found to be a significant protective factor against offending. **Young people who had never been the victim of crime were six times more likely not to commit a criminal offence than those who had ever been robbed, assaulted, raped/sexually assaulted, hijacked, had their home burgled or their property stolen.**

Neighbourhood factors

Not having access to firearms within the neighbourhood was found to be a significant predictor for membership in the non-offending category even when

other variables were controlled for. **Young people who did not have access to weapons in the areas in which they lived were 2.7 times more likely to refrain from becoming involved in criminal activity than those for whom it was easy to obtain a firearm in their residential areas.**

The availability of firearms increases youths' susceptibility to crime by increasing their immediate opportunities to offend. The offenders' greater access to firearms could be reflective of the type of lifestyle they are likely to lead.

Attitudes intolerant of violence and antisocial behaviour

Intolerant attitudes toward violence and antisocial behaviour significantly predict membership in the non-offender category. While the participants were asked to respond to a number of questions aimed at eliciting their attitudes toward antisocial behaviour, it was only those young people who did not believe that people who hurt them deserve to have bad things happen to them that are significantly more likely to refrain from committing criminal offences than those who feel that people who hurt them deserve to have bad things happen to them. Specifically, **young people who do not believe that people who have hurt them deserve to have bad things happen to them are twice as likely not to offend as those who hold the opposite opinion.**

Implications and recommendations

Resilience does not only stem from individuals but also develops and is maintained within particular contexts. The identification of the school environment as a context which gives rise to factors that have a diminishing effect on children's potential to commit crime is an important finding emerging from the study. Violence within schools, in particular, has emerged as a cause for serious concern given the recent spate of attacks within South African schools that have claimed the lives of both pupils and educators.

Violent victimisation has serious implications for the physical and emotional well-being of children and young people, and affects their educational outcomes.

Many intervention strategies aimed at reducing and preventing youth delinquency have had little impact on the levels of youth violence and crime at South African schools. What is required are more detailed analyses of the reasons why many young South Africans are able to desist from becoming involved in delinquent and criminal behaviour despite being subjected to an array of factors that are known to heighten their susceptibility to offending. This knowledge will be useful in informing crime prevention strategies that are geared toward developing resilience in youth and in this way diminish young people's involvement in criminal activity.

- Focusing on the school as a context for fostering youth resilience to crime will not only benefit children academically but will also have a ricochet effect on the other factors that have been found to increase youths' vulnerability to crime. Earlier research has consistently found that young people who are strongly committed to their schooling are less likely to interact with deviant peers,¹² use and abuse alcohol and drugs¹³ and engage in violent and other delinquent activities¹⁴ – factors that have long been identified as increasing the likelihood of youth to engage in antisocial behaviour. Fostering a strong attachment to schools among children and youth and a commitment to completing schooling will not only increase the employability of young South Africans but will have a diminishing effect on the levels of youth crime and violence by increasing the resilience of youth to this social phenomenon.
- The study also points to the need to reduce the levels of violence exposure within South African families since non-violent home environments buffer children against the onset of delinquent and

antisocial involvement. Much of the violence within families stems from an inability to resolve conflicts constructively. These findings point to the need for targeted interventions aimed at raising awareness about appropriate conflict-resolution techniques. Alternative methods of discipline are also required, particularly aimed at families since the latter constitute the primary role-models for children and youth.

- Violence exposure has also been found to heighten youths' susceptibility to criminal victimisation – a known risk factor for offending. Thus, reducing the levels of violence that young people are exposed to in their families and communities will diminish their vulnerability to victimisation, and in this way increase their resilience to crime.
- Interventions aimed at addressing the high levels of youth crime should also include substance abstinence as a focus point. Researchers have long identified the link between substance use and abuse, and violent and criminal behaviour.¹⁵ Substance use is common among young people arrested for criminal activity.¹⁶ Health professionals have consistently drawn attention to the high rates of substance use among young people in South Africa, particularly in the Western Cape.¹⁷
- Resilience factors interact with each other to increase young people's resilience to criminal behaviour. Thus, increasing protection in one domain will often impact resilience in other aspects of young people's lives. For example, if attempts are made to enhance the school environment as a context for fostering youth resilience to crime, this will have a diminishing effect on

youth's tendency to engage with deviant peers, use and abuse alcohol and other illegal substances, as well as reduce involvement in violent and other antisocial behaviours. Similarly, when intervention strategies are geared toward reducing the levels of violence within the family environment, this reduction may decrease youths' susceptibility to subsequent criminal victimisation and hence provide a buffer against the onset of criminal involvement. In addition, non-violent family environments may influence the development of attitudes intolerant of violence and antisocial behaviour.

- A more comprehensive youth strategy is needed that comprises various interventions aimed at increasing the resilience of young people to criminal behaviour. Included in this strategy should be targeted interventions aimed at fostering children's attachment to their schooling, addressing and reducing the levels of family violence by educating parents and caregivers about non-physical means of resolving conflicts, promoting substance abstinence among the youth, discouraging association with deviant peers and lessening young people's vulnerability to the negative influences of their peers.

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ISBN 978-098143625-8



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Published by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention
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