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# The role of cumulative risk and protection for violent offending

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ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* Risk and protective factors for antisocial behavior have been shown to act in a cumulative manner. The purpose of this article is to examine the predictive power of risk factors and protective indices predicting violent offending.
*Methods:* We used longitudinal data across 25 years to predict violent offenses for 475 males. Cumulative childhood risk factors (age 10), and cumulative individual, family, peer and school protective factors (ages 13, 15) were analyzed.
*Results:* The likelihood for a conviction for violent offenses showed a fivefold increase with an increase in risk factors from 0 to 3. This increase was markedly reduced when controlling for protective factors. Similarly, controlling for risk factors, the likelihood for a conviction was almost ameliorated, showing a tenfold decrease, with an increase in protective factors from 0 to 10. Interactions between cumulative risk and protective factors were also found. Total number of protective factors significantly decreased the likelihood of violent offenses for those with and without childhood behavioral risk factors, however the decrease was significantly greater for those with no childhood risk factors.
*Conclusions:* Analyses of antisocial behavior should not be restricted to risk factors, but include protective factors, if the purpose is to better tailor interventions.

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## Introduction

Violent offending causes great harm and cost in our societies (see e.g., Cohen, Miller, & Rossman, 1994; Hemenway, 2011; Piquero, Jennings, & Farrington, 2013) and therefore constitutes one of the most important societal problems of our time. To produce knowledge that can be used to increase the chance for a positive development for children at risk is thus an essential challenge for research. The overall aim of the present study is to investigate the role of protective factors and their potential cumulative contribution to the decrease of risk for violent offending, in the presence of multiple risk factors.

It is quite well established in theories of antisocial development as well as empirical research that risk factors for criminal offending act in a cumulative manner (e.g., Rutter, 1979; Sameroff, 2000). That is, the higher the number of risk factors, the higher the risk for criminal behavior. Actually, when investigating the importance of multiple known risk factors for antisocial behavior, the content generally seems less important than the number of risk factors in predicting a negative development (see e.g., Richman & Fraser, 2001). A number of single risk factors on different levels or in different domains have been shown to increase the risk for antisocial behavior (for reviews, see e.g., Andershed & Andershed, 2015; Farrington, Loeber, & Ttofi, 2012; Murray & Farrington, 2010; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). When risk factors from these various domains are combined into risk indices, cumulative effects become very apparent (e.g., Appleyard, Egeland, van Dulmen, & Sroufe, 2005; Atzaba-Poria, Pike, & Deater-Deckard, 2004; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1998; Farrington, 2002; Herrenkohl et al., 2000; Loeber et al., 2005; Murray, Irving, Farrington, Colman, & Bloxsom, 2010; Owens & Shaw, 2003; Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2012; Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington, & Wikström, 2002). For example, in the 1970 British Cohort Study, a threefold increase of the likelihood for a conviction between ages 16 and 30–34 was found, with an increase from 0 to 3 + in number of risk factors up to age 5 (Murray et al., 2010). Similarly, in the Pittsburgh Youth Study, the likelihood for serious delinquency increased 7 and 35 times, respectively, for the 13–19-year-olds and 7–13-year-olds, with an increase from 0 to 5 + in number of risk factors (Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002).

Thus, youths with multiple risk factors should constitute a high priority group for intervention efforts because they exhibit an increased risk for criminal offending, including violent offending. But even in high risk groups, children may develop relatively well, and a majority of serious offenders desist over time (Sampson & Laub, 2003), likely due to a decrease in risk and increase in protective factors,

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circumstances and mechanisms. A risk based, or buffering, protective factor is a variable that predicts a low probability of a negative outcome, in our case violent offending, among a group of individuals at risk (Lösel & Farrington, 2012). Just as for risk factors, protective factors against criminal offending have been identified in multiple domains: in the individual, school, peer, and family contexts (for reviews, see e.g., Eriksson, Cater, Andershed, & Andershed, 2011; Lösel & Farrington, 2012).

Cumulative effects have been proposed and shown for protective factors as well (e.g., Eriksson et al., 2011; Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006; Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002), indicating in fact that the cumulative effects may be much more important than any individual protective factor or protective domain. An example, again from the Pittsburgh Youth Study, shows that none of the individuals with a large number (≥5) of protective factors developed persistent antisocial behavior, while about 50% of those with no protective factors did (Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002). Likewise, in the Seattle Social Development Project, an increasing number of protective factors reduced the likelihood for violent behavior regardless of number of risk factors (Herrenkohl et al., 2003).

In summary, studying children with multiple risk factors is important because they run a high risk for violent offending later in life. It is therefore imperative to focus on producing knowledge that can reveal which factors that can contribute to a decrease in the risk for violent offending in the presence of multiple risk factors. Few studies have studied this question in relation to violent offending, using long-term prospective longitudinal data. Thus, knowledge on this very important topic is in fact quite limited.

The present study analyzed data from a prospective longitudinal study covering 25 years of the participants' life-span, from age 10 to age 35. Official, registered convictions of violent offenses were combined between the ages 12 and 35 to create a prevalence measure of violent offending. Risk and protective factors were measured in childhood at age 10 and adolescence at ages 13 and 15, respectively. We examine several research questions. First, does a cumulative index of childhood risk factors (i.e. aggression, motor restlessness, and concentration problems) increase the likelihood of violent offending? The particular factors we examined have support in previous research as risk factors for antisocial behavior (see e.g., Andershed & Andershed, 2015; Moffitt, 1993; Murray & Farrington, 2010; Murray et al., 2010: Waschbusch, 2002). Second, do variables from the individual, school, peer, and family protective domains decrease the likelihood of violent offending, when controlling for cumulative risk in childhood? The domains of protection we examine have support in previous research, and are associated with decreases in antisocial behavior as well as with positive development in general (see e.g., Eriksson et al., 2011; Lösel & Farrington, 2012). Third, do domain-specific indices of protection and total number of protective factors across domains, reduce the risk for violent offending, when controlling for childhood risk factors? Finally, in the presence of childhood risk factors, do particular domains of protection and/or total number of protective factors reduce the risk for violent offending?

## Methods

### *Participants*

Study participants came from the longitudinal research program Individual Development and Adaptation (IDA, sometimes also referred to as the Orebro Project; see Bergman, 2000; Magnusson, 1988; Trost & Bergman, 2004), encompassing all children in an entire school grade cohort of a mid-sized Swedish town. The present study focuses on the males in the sample. The participants have been followed since 1965, from the age of 10 ($n = 519$; 3rd grade) to age 47. Children who moved to Örebro and into the school grade cohort were continuously added to the sample, resulting in a small increase in number of participants over time, up until age 16. The analysis sample consisted of 475 males.

### *Measures*

The extensive information collected in the IDA program derives from multiple sources, i.e., the participants themselves, parents, teachers, psychologists, medical doctors, as well as official records.

#### *Violent offending*

Official records indicated the participants' number of convictions for violent offenses, from ages 12 to 35 years (for details, see Stattin, Magnusson, & Reichel, 1989). Of the 475 males, 8.42% ($n = 40$) were convicted for violent offending.

#### *Risk factors*

At age 10, teachers were asked to rate each boy's behavior on seven-point scales, in relation to the other boys in the classroom. The teachers were asked to aim for a normal distribution within gender in each classroom (see Bergman & Magnusson, 1984, for frequencies and distributions). In the present study, teacher ratings of aggression, concentration difficulties and motor restlessness were included. An index was constructed from the three variables. Each variable was dichotomized so that 1 indicates risk and 0 other. Classification of risk was determined by using the top 75 percentile or above in the distribution of scores for each variable. The index ranged from 0 to 3 and was then examined in the multivariate analysis as a series of dummy variables with 0 being the reference group to show the differences in risk for violence between males having 1 to 3 childhood behavioral risk factors. Of the male sample, 11.79% ($n = 56$) had 3 risk factors, 12.42% ($n = 59$) had 2 risk factors, 16.63% ($n = 79$) had 1 risk factor, and 59.16% ($n = 281$) of the male sample had 0 risk factors of the three examined in our analysis ($M = 0.77$; $SD = 1.07$).

#### *Protective factors*

We examined 10 variables measured during adolescence that may have protective influences on violence during adolescence and adulthood. We defined and measured variables by four protective domains: individual, school, peer, and family. Included variables were assessed at age 13, except for questions regarding rule breaking and delinquency which were posed at age 15. To provide a detailed assessment of the associations between protective factors, childhood behavioral risk, and violent offending, we analyzed each of the 10 potential protective factors separately, as domain indices, and as a total protective factor index. Indices by domain were created to gauge the number of protective factors subjects had within each domain.

The protective factors within the *individual* domain consisted of results on intelligence tests, teacher ratings of aspiration, and self-reports of attitudes toward rule breaking and delinquency (e.g., alcohol intoxication, shoplifting, truancy, disobedience toward parents). The *school* protective index consisted of self-reports of school attachment, school motivation, and results on standardized tests of Swedish language and mathematics. The *peer* protective index consisted of self-reports of low peer antisocial behaviors and attitudes toward rule breaking and delinquency. Finally, the *family* protective index consisted of self-reports of low conflicts with mother and father.

With the exception of the family domain variables, each protective factor was dichotomized at the 50th percentile, so that 1 indicated the half of a variable's distribution representing high protection and 0 representing the other half of the variable's distribution indicating low protection. For the two family domain variables, one assessing conflicts with mother and the other conflicts with father, responses indicating that conflicts almost never occurred represented high protection, and responses indicating a range from occasional to very frequent conflicts represented low protection. The distribution for mother–child conflicts after recoding was 23.58% ($n = 112$) representing high protection and

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