



# Long-term predictors of crime desistance in juvenile delinquents: A systematic review of longitudinal studies



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## ABSTRACT

Criminal and anti-social behaviors are mainly perpetrated by adults with a history of juvenile delinquency. In order to prevent recidivism, it is urgent to understand the factors that contribute to young offenders leaving their criminal careers. Following the PRISMA guidelines, we conducted a systematic review of predictors during childhood and adolescence related to crime desistance in males or females with a history of juvenile delinquency. Web of Science, Pubmed, Scopus and PsycArticles were searched by three independent reviewers from their start until December 2014. Longitudinal studies, with independent analysis for males and females with follow-up during the adulthood, were included. Studies with less than five years of follow-up were excluded. Fifteen articles were considered eligible for inclusion and 23 predictors were evaluated in more than one study in men and/or women. Inconsistencies between studies were detected in all 14 predictors, and 12 predictors were consistently not predictive. Strong differences between studies were found in the predictors of desistance from crime. The lack of consistency between studies could be related to the absence of controlling for social marginalization predictors in adulthood and the use of different methodologies. Future research should focus on consensus using gold standard measures and research designs.

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## 1. Introduction

Crime is a major concern in western societies, particularly violent crime. According to the latest data from the European Union, in 2012, 2,520,815 violent crimes were committed (Eurostat, 2012) and in the same year in the United States 1,214,462 violent crimes (FBI, 2012) occurred. In this context, juvenile delinquency is especially important because the perpetration of crimes during adolescence is a major predictor of criminal and anti-social behavior in adulthood (Farrington, 2007; Ferguson, Ivory, & Beaver, 2013; Piquero, Farrington, Fontaine, Vincent, & Coid, 2012; Piquero & Buka, 2002).

Some of the main studies revealed that the vast majority of adult criminal offenders have perpetrated acts before 18 years of age. The results of the Pittsburgh Youth Study (Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Loeber, & Masten, 2004) indicated that 37.5% of young offenders recidivated in serious offenses between 20 and 25 years old. Similarly, in the Cambridge Study (Farrington, 2003) individuals convicted between 10 and 16 years old were about 4.6 times more likely to be convicted of serious offenses between 17 and 24 years old and 5.6 times more between 25 and 32 years old, compared to those not convicted during adolescence.

Juvenile delinquency can be understood in several ways, depending on the scientific and cultural background and legal aspects of a particular country. A common definition characterizes juvenile delinquency as an illegal act committed before 18 years of age (Burfeind & Bartusch, 2011; Moeller, 2001; Regoli, Hewitt, & DeLisi, 2011). Committing delinquent acts during adolescence is especially concerning, because it occurs during the formation of the individual's personality and derives from a number of not only static, but also dynamic factors and has future repercussions on the ability to develop empathy and internalization of social rules and norms (Farrington, 2007; Moeller, 2001; Mulder, Brand, Bullens & van Marle, 2011; Piquero et al., 2012; Tuvblad & Beaver, 2013).

Several studies have indicated that the majority of individuals with criminal records were delinquents during adolescence, even though the majority of young offenders do not become criminals (Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Farrington, 2003; Farrington, Ttofi, & Coid, 2009; Piquero & Buka, 2002; Sarnecki, 2001; Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2004). Since no deterministic relationship exists between a history of juvenile delinquency and a trajectory of crime throughout adult life, research and intervention in the casual predictors of desistance from crime in young offenders is therefore a major goal (Farrington, 2007).

Currently the majority of researchers have defined desistance from crime as a complex multi-causal process over time (Kazemian, 2007). For example, Laub and Sampson (2001) described it as a: "variety of complex processes—developmental, psychological, and sociological and thus there are several factors associated with it" (p. 3). However, the definition of desistance is controversial, mainly in operational aspects. Intermittent criminal careers, with long periods of no criminal activity, are not rare and for this reason some authors argued that the ideal follow-up period for evaluating desistance is up until the participant's death (Bushway et al., 2003; Laub & Sampson, 2001).

The majority of studies considered five years (Trulson, Marquart, Mullings, & Caeti, 2005), three years or less (Kazemian, 2007), as a good time period to evaluate desistance from crime because after that period the probability of recidivism drops abruptly (e.g. Kurlychek, Bushway, & Brame, 2012) and the risk of a false desistance is minor. Nevertheless, the number of years, the best measurement method and the decreased level of delinquency required for real desistance from crime, are the main scientific dilemmas (Kazemian, 2007; Uggen & Massoglia, 2003). Therefore, one of the major barriers in this field is to summarize findings and achieve generalizations about predictors of desistance from crime because the definition of desistance varies across studies as well as their relationship with the predictors (Kazemian, 2007). Another challenge for researchers is the difference between male and female criminal careers and their interaction with predictors

of desistance from crime during adolescence is nowadays an important research topic (Ferguson et al., 2013; Loeber & Farrington, 2012).

Consequently, studies about predictors of desistance from crime in juvenile offenders, with systematic methodology, are practically nonexistent. However, an extensive literature review about empirical studies and the main theoretical frameworks were available in Laub and Sampson (2001). Recently, some of the major findings and practical guidelines about the process of desistance from crime between adolescence and adulthood were summarized in two books: "From juvenile delinquency to adult crime" (Loeber & Farrington, 2012) and "Persisters and desisters in crime from adolescence into adulthood" (Loeber, Hovee, Slot, & van der Laan, 2012). Knowledge about the predictors of desistance from a criminal career is a key aspect for the prevention of future crime as well as for the definition of effective interventions for children and youth with delinquent behavior. The aim of this systematic review was precisely to answer this research question: "What are the predictors found during childhood and adolescence that are related to crime desistance in adulthood in individuals with a history of delinquency?"

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Eligibility criteria

Methods for qualitative analysis were structured in accordance with PRISMA Statement (Liberati et al., 2009) and were detailed in a protocol. Studies were considered for inclusion if: a) social or psychological factors were evaluated during childhood or adolescence, that predict the desistance from crime during adulthood in men or women with a history of juvenile delinquency; b) are published in peer-reviewed journals; and c) written in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese. The outcome measure selected was the official criminal record. When that was not available, self-reported delinquency was considered. For a study to be excluded, one or more of the following criteria were verified: a) absence of follow-up measures until a minimum of 18 years old; b) without a minimum of five years of follow-up; c) only evaluating a particular type of crime or seriousness of the crime (e.g. presence versus absence of a serious delinquency); or d) psychiatric (e.g. with mental illness) characteristics; or e) without independent statistical analysis for men and women, that predicted desistance from crime.

### 2.2. Information sources and search process

Studies were identified in four electronic databases: Web of Science, SCOPUS, PubMed and PsycArticles. All articles were searched from their start. The latest search was run on December, 2014. In addition, the hand-search method was used. The search was limited to published papers with quantitative data written in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese. We used the following equation searching by title, abstract and keywords for: (risk factors OR protective factors) AND (juvenile delinquency OR youth delinquency OR adolescent delinquency) AND (adult criminal behavior OR adult crime OR adult sentence), that resulted in 72 combinations.

### 2.3. Study selection and data collection process

After removing duplicates, abstracts were read and the papers were selected for full-text analysis by three investigators independently. Discrepancies were discussed between authors and consensus was reached. Decisions about eligibility were supervised by a third reviewer. We developed a data extraction sheet for data collection with the follow topics: a) source; b) participants' age; c) sample size and specific characteristics; d) independent variables; e) statistical methods; f) outcomes and follow-up period; and g) results.

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