

RESEARCH AGENDA:

Resilience to Offending in High-Risk Groups – Focus on Aboriginal Youth

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RESILIENCE TO OFFENDING AMONG ABORIGINAL YOUTH

Introduction

This document outlines a plan for extending research previously commissioned by the Criminology Research Council, which sought to identify the various factors that promote resilience to offending, particularly in high-risk groups such as young Aboriginal people. It briefly situates the suggested research agenda with regard to current research in this area and provides a suggested agenda for progressing this research. As requested by the Criminology Research Council, the focus of the paper is on Aboriginal youth.

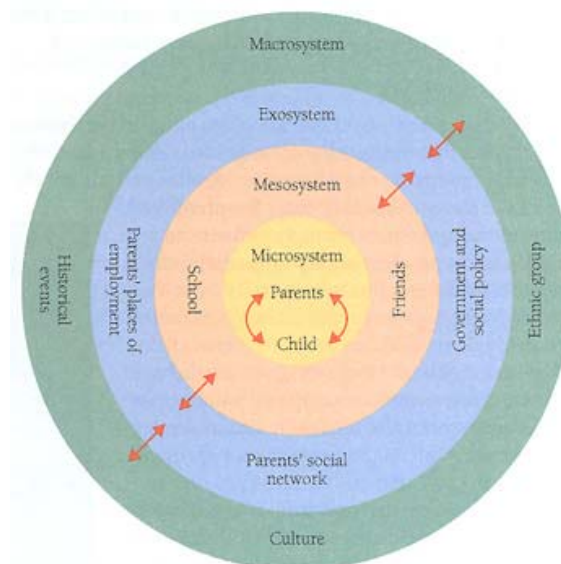
Previous research in this area

Two prior research papers sponsored by the CRC form the foundation for this research agenda. These include:

- Samuelson & Robertson's 2002 paper addressing factors and issues of importance in development/maintenance of resilient behaviour among Aboriginal youth.
- Howard & Johnson's 2001 paper that considers protective factors and processes as they operate in the lives of 'at-risk' adolescents, and how these promote resilient youth.

Both these studies use an eco-systems approach as a framework to explore factors operating at a range of levels, which impact upon resilience to offending among 'at-risk' youth. Likewise they adopt a developmental prevention approach, which is congruent with the eco-systems framework (described below in Figure 1).

Figure 1: An eco-systems framework



Adolescence is a period in which individuation from family, and formation of identity, are crucial. The above studies focus on points proximal to the period of adolescence. This is typically the time when young people are most likely to begin offending. However, the path toward or away from offending, and other adverse outcomes such as substance abuse and suicide, begins much earlier than this. The two diagrams below (Figures 2 & 3) are an attempt to elucidate these pathways, which operate at individual level, over time, and are situated within the context of the broader eco-system. A broader perspective that considers intervention points across the developmental trajectory would be a useful extension of the above work.

Figure 2: Pathways to offending

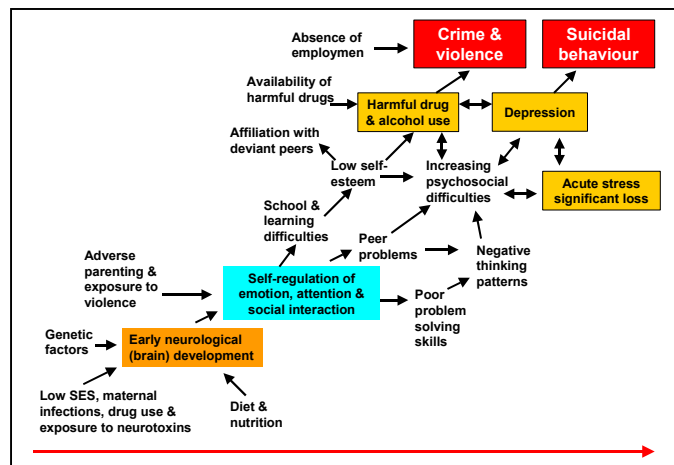
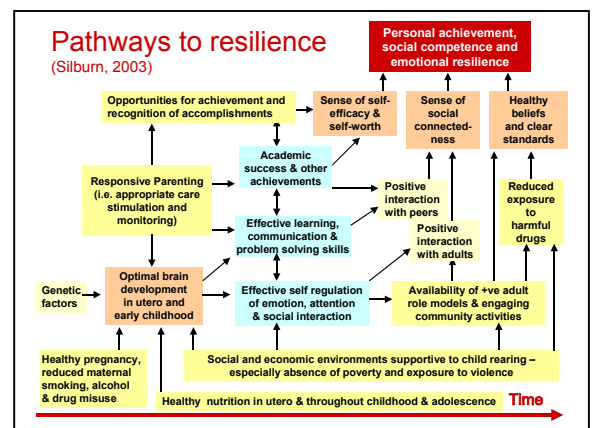


Figure 3: Pathways to resilience



Developmental Prevention – Some Basic Concepts

Chronic offending (as opposed to a single minor offence) represents a significant developmental problem. It places large burdens on the individual young person, their family and community. In thinking about how to prevent offending by promoting resilience it is important to adopt a “population perspective” on offending.

It is now recognised that most of the developmental problems that represent a significant burden to human populations are multifactorial. Many are caused by the joint action and interaction of genes, biology and environment. Consequently, it is seldom possible to identify a single principal cause analogous to (say) an infectious agent. This changes the way we need to think about the causes of offending. Given the complexity of the causal path, an aetiological determinant of offending is more properly viewed as being any factor that *modifies (as distinct from being merely associated with)* the risk of the development of offending behaviour (Susser & Susser, 1989). Thinking of causes of offending in this way is crucial for two reasons.

First, the determinants that predict persistence of offending (prognostic variables) are not the same as those that predict onset (risk variables) of offending (Offord et al., 1992). The former determinants are critical to treatment and management of offending while the latter are critical to preventing offending. This distinction is of central concern to those who wish to advance the prevention of chronic offending by young people. Risk variables may no longer be current and their control (if still current), by the time the young person is identified by agencies, may be irrelevant to treatment or management.

Second, normally a finding that a risk factor is only a weak cause of a problem has resulted in little if any effort being spent either in determining the nature of the association or in attempting to prevent the problem. However, if a large population of young people is exposed to a weak causal risk factor, then preventing or interrupting the exposure to this risk factor can result in a valuable level of prevention (Doll, 1996). Offending is a complex problem – that is it involves the interplay of a number of causal factors. Very importantly, large populations of aboriginal young people are being exposed to multiple risks that have *weak* causal associations to the development of these disorders. A critical feature of this pattern of risk exposure is that *multiple risks have a cumulative effect on outcome*. A consequence of this pattern of exposure is that a large number of young people exposed to a small risk may generate many more problem cases than a small number exposed to a high risk (Rose, 1995). Furthermore, because the association between exposure and outcome is weak when applied at the individual level, preventive efforts that secure a large benefit for the community bring relatively little benefit to each participating individual. In other words, the benefits of offending prevention are seen and best understood by their effects on whole populations or communities, not at the individual level.

What are some of the candidate risk exposures for offending being targeted for modification via population prevention? Table 1 shows some of the principal risk pathways associated with increased rates of developmental problems in populations. They have been differentiated into those that are distal versus proximal risks. Distal risk exposures are those that influence and characterise large populations. They operate at some distance from the immediate outcome of interest (i.e. offending behaviour), but through their action morbidity (eg. offending) may be potentiated – that is, distal exposures often influence the rate or extent of exposure to more proximal risks. Ecologically, distal exposures are more likely to describe communities or nations. Thus, communities and populations may be described, for example, by their exposure to market deregulation, regional levels of poverty, or high rates of family reformation.

Proximal exposures are those that are closer to individuals and families. In terms of direct impact on offending outcomes, proximal exposures such as biological dysmaturational, non-secure attachments, poor quality parental skills, poor quality care, family conflict, violence and stress, lower levels of social support, and drug and alcohol abuse are particularly powerful modifiers of human development in populations (Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Rutter & Smith, 1996).

These exposures have the capacity to modify human development because they: 1) occur close to the developing individual, 2) are fairly regular in their occurrence, 3) present over extended periods of time, and 4) are reciprocal – that is, they involve an ongoing developmental exchange between the individual and their social and physical environments (see also “proximal processes” in Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p 620).

Table 1: Distal and proximal exposures associated with poorer developmental outcomes in children and young people

Distal exposures	Proximal exposures
Market deregulation	Biological dysmaturations ¹
Socio-economic inequality	Non-secure attachments
Extended work preparation	Poor quality parental skills
Increased mobility	Poor quality care
Increased levels of work	Family conflict, violence and stress
Increased family re-formation	Lower levels of social support
	Drug and alcohol abuse
	Lower or eroding social capital

¹ This includes intra-uterine growth retardation, pre-term birth and low birthweight.

In their principal mode of operation they change human development through their individual and joint action on the development of 1) attachment 2) emotional regulation, 3) exploratory behaviour, 4) self-direction (initiative), 5) intellectual flexibility, 6) introspection, and 7) self-efficacy. These individual developmental characteristics in turn influence socialisation and how individuals come to use their social and physical environment for their own growth and that of others. When these seven skills occur together they increase the pro-social capacities of individuals. As Keating and Hertzman note, the environments that increase these developmental capacities include 1) responsive language environments, 2) encouragement of exploration, 3) mentoring basic skills, 4) guided rehearsal and extension of new skills, 5) celebration of developmental advances, and 6) protection from inappropriate disapproval, teasing or punishment (Keating & Hertzman, 1999).

Note that the influences that are present and affecting the development of a young person are of two types: 1) Exposures to risks that increase the likelihood of a poorer outcome 2) Exposures to protective factors that increase the likelihood of a better outcome. A developmental research agenda considers both proximal (those factors that are nearer the young person) and distal factors (those factors that operate at a level more removed from the direct environment of the young person). For Aboriginal children distal exposures include such factors as socio-economic inequality, land ownership and increased family reformation. Proximal exposures include such factors as biological dysmaturations, parenting skills, levels of social support, family relationships, drug and alcohol use, and social capital.

Such an approach considers that the manner in which the challenge of adolescence is negotiated, is dependent upon the youth's individual characteristics, their prior trajectory of development, and significant historical and contemporary factors within the environment in which they negotiate this transition.

For Aboriginal youth, given the historical and contemporary context of economic, political and social marginalisation and displacement of Aboriginal people, finding

their 'place' in the world can be a highly complex task. They operate within 'two worlds' – which have different, and not necessarily congruent, systems of belief/perspectives, values etc.

A Developmental Prevention Approach in the Aboriginal Population

Developmental approaches within mainstream populations tend to emphasise risk and protective exposures at an individual level rather than consider exposures affecting entire communities. In seeking to understand the concept of resilience to offending among Aboriginal youth, there is a tension between the distribution of risk and protective factors at an individual level (a developmental psychology perspective) and understanding how specific features of Aboriginal people's history, culture and position in the social structure, help to shape their environments and influence their relationships, interactions and developmental pathways (a broader sociological perspective on developmental prevention). It is also important to recognise there will be variance in individual and community responses and pathways, given the heterogeneity of culture and experience for Aboriginal peoples across Australia.

By nature of their historical and contemporary circumstances, Aboriginal people, at a population level, have significantly higher risk exposure than the mainstream population. Likewise, the extensive and inclusive nature of kinship relations within and across Aboriginal societies means this population as a whole is disproportionately affected by adversity. There is thus a need to reduce risk exposure at the population level. Goldney's (1999) concept of a 'threshold' or 'tipping point' and Hunter's (1999) concept of 'community at risk' are critical to understanding risk and protective exposures for Aboriginal people, and to achieving a balance between more individually oriented treatment paradigms and community level responses to promoting key change.

Most preventive interventions, while acknowledging distal exposures, focus on addressing proximal exposures at individual or family level, as these are more easily identified and addressed. Homel et al., (1999) hypothesise that for Indigenous or minority ethnic groups, the nature, meaning and impact of risk and protective factors over the life course may be quite different from the mainstream. However data that empirically informs this is scant. It is important to go beyond existing understandings of risk and protective factors to understand the culturally bound meaning and interactions of these factors, and the 'meta-risk' factors underlying them. Failure to do this may render interventions irrelevant. It also risks blaming the individual. Homel et al (1999) provide a useful example of this –

...when designing programs to address high alcohol consumption, the cultural and social factors related to the practice should be taken into account before, for example, assuming that people are individually pathological and developing treatment programs based on such assumptions...Bolger (1991) found that often men remained violent after treatment for alcoholism because the underlying 'cause' of the violence [and alcohol use] – their dependent state – had not been addressed.

In support of such a position, research with first nation communities in Canada, shows that those communities where issues such as land-ownership and self-governance (which may be considered distal exposures), have been positively resolved, have significantly lower rates of suicide and self-harm (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

Resilience as a cultural construction.

Current understandings of resilience are potentially problematic – and vary somewhat from the original articulation of the concept. Masten, who pioneered this concept initially intended it to mean –

A class of phenomena characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development (Masten, 2001:228).

Resilience research aims to understand the processes that account for good outcomes. It can only be seen to occur in the context of ‘demonstrable risk’. Resilience is an inferential and contextual construct – that is, adaptation, ‘demonstrable risk’ and ‘good outcome’ need to be defined. The criteria by which they are defined are culturally determined. Adaptation in particular is a contentious concept in a cross-cultural setting. Clarity is required with regard to the ‘what’ of adaptation – to what cultural norms for example, are Aboriginal youth adapting – those of their community or society, or those of mainstream Australia?

Given the overwhelming level of adversity experienced by Aboriginal people within Australia, the concept of resilience itself needs to be viewed with some caution. Understanding how, despite this level of risk, some individuals remain resilient to adverse outcomes, may be useful. It should not however, divert attention from the very real need for systematic and concerted efforts to address the adversity, which leads to such a saturation of risk factors for Aboriginal people.

Understanding the proportion of the ‘at risk’ population who have ‘good outcomes’ in the context of ‘demonstrable risk’ is important. If the number is very small and/or highly heterogeneous then the concept of resilience in this population may have little meaning or relevance for policy and interventions. It may make more sense to focus on decreasing risk exposure in Aboriginal populations – that is addressing preventable adversity, via genuine efforts toward relevant and responsive health and education.

Shaping a potential research agenda

Research is now at a point where much is known of vulnerability and the pathways into such outcomes as delinquency and crime, within the mainstream population. Likewise research seems quite consistent on the nature of protective factors that build or result in resilience to these outcomes, despite risk profiles. However several observations can be made with respect to Aboriginal young people:

- Little is known of the resilience or vulnerability pathways for Aboriginal youth.
- In furthering current understandings of resilience to offending among Aboriginal youth, both quantitative and qualitative approaches are indicated.
- There is a strong need for sound interpretive research, that seeks to expand the work undertaken by Homel et al (1999), and Samuelson & Robertson (2002), in developing an understanding of risk and protective factors for Aboriginal people. Quantitative work can complement this understanding, through comprehensive analyses of the multiple factors contributing to resilience in the context of adversity, and through modelling of possible pathways.

In light of this the proposed research framework should be based upon the adoption of (1) An eco-systems approach, which takes a broad view of risk and protective factors

across the context in which children grow. (2) A developmental prevention approach that considers not just individual risk and resilience, but takes a broad ‘whole-of-community’ perspective, and which recognises the diversity of Aboriginal populations across Australia; and (3) A lifespan view, which considers risk and resilience profiles as building across the lifespan, rather than limiting study to events and context proximal to the offending.

Priority should be given to studies that seek to disentangle the following basic questions:

- What is the relationship of community characteristics to the risk and protective profile of individuals?
 - What factors in a community are particularly powerful in contributing to growth and resilience in children and young people?
- What is the relationship of individual and family characteristics to the risk and protective profile of communities?
 - What factors in individuals and families are particularly powerful in contributing to the growth and resilience in communities?

Specific research questions that address these two broad approaches include:

- Among Aboriginal groups / communities, constructs such as ‘adolescence’ offending and resilience are likely to have different and varying meanings to the manner in which these concepts are understood in mainstream literature. What do these constructs mean for the Aboriginal population?
- What do pathways to resilience or vulnerability look like for Aboriginal youth? That is -
 - What are the ‘*serious threats to adaptation or development*’ that lead to offending for Aboriginal youth?
 - What do concepts of resilience, mastery and ‘*good outcomes in spite of serious threats*’ look like from an Aboriginal Australian perspective?
 - How are these operationalised into measures that are meaningful, reliable and valid?
- What factors are important in fostering resilient Aboriginal youth? For example -
 - Specifically, what are the common family practices among Aboriginal families?
 - What is the contribution of cultural and spiritual beliefs to resilience in Aboriginal youth?
- At what levels within the social structures that surround youth, do such protective factors (and risks) to offending and contact with the justice system manifest themselves? For example, how may we better understand the impact of distal factors on outcomes for youth? Research which may better inform such a question could for example use a comparative case study of a distal factor such as satisfactory negotiation of native title agreements – what are the outcomes for youth, in a community where native title has successfully been negotiated, compared to a setting where this negotiations have been conflict ridden and as yet, irresolvable?

- What is the pattern of connection and interaction between these factors?
- What are the best points of intervention for positive change in these pathways?
- What is the proportion of the population 'at risk' for offending?
- What proportion of this population demonstrate 'resilience to offending'?

Editors note. Three methods for investigating the topic are offered by Professor Zubrick and Ms. Robson.

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