



# Systematic reviews of explanatory risk factors for violence, offending, and delinquency



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## ABSTRACT

The main aim of this article is to identify systematic reviews of explanatory risk factors for violence, offending, and delinquency. Explanatory risk factors are factors that are clearly measuring an underlying construct that is different from antisocial behavior. Based on searches for articles published between 2000 and 2016, 216 relevant studies were located and screened, and 42 systematic reviews were included in the analysis: 11 concerned with crime or violence, seven with delinquency or youth violence, eight with sex offending, and 16 with dating or intimate partner violence. Twenty systematic reviews included meta-analyses, but few of these reviewed a wide range of risk factors. These meta-analyses show the strength of relationships between risk factors and outcomes. More systematic reviews and meta-analyses of risk factors are needed to advance knowledge. It is highly desirable to have reviews of longitudinal studies, reviews that focus on explanatory risk factors, and reviews that report both overall effect sizes and effect sizes after controlling for other risk factors.

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## 1. Introduction

The main aim of this article is to identify systematic reviews of explanatory risk factors for violence, offending, and delinquency. Explanatory risk factors are factors that are clearly measuring an underlying construct that is different from antisocial behavior. They include individual factors such as low intelligence, low achievement, high impulsiveness, low empathy, and attention deficit; family factors such as poor child-rearing, poor parental supervision, broken homes, and child abuse or neglect; and social factors such as low socioeconomic status, low family income, large family size, poor housing, and living in a high-crime neighborhood (see Farrington, 2015).

Non-explanatory risk factors are those that could be measuring the same underlying construct as antisocial behavior. For example, an aggressive attitude is a risk factor for violent behavior, but both an aggressive attitude and violent behavior could reflect the same underlying construct (of, for example, an antisocial personality). Similarly, bullying and gang membership are viewed as non-explanatory risk factors. The most contentious risk factor is peer delinquency. Some researchers argue that peer delinquency is an explanatory risk factor (e.g. that delinquent peers could cause a person to commit delinquent acts), while others argue that, because delinquency is usually a group activity, delinquent adolescents will inevitably have delinquent peers. In the Pittsburgh Youth Study, Farrington, Loeber, Yin, and Anderson (2002) found that changes in peer delinquency from one assessment to the

next did not predict changes in a boy's delinquency from one assessment to the next, whereas changes in parental supervision from one assessment to the next did predict changes in a boy's delinquency from one assessment to the next. They therefore concluded that parental supervision might be a cause of delinquency (or an explanatory risk factor) but peer delinquency was not.

Systematic reviews have explicit objectives, explicit criteria for inclusion or exclusion of studies, and searches for studies that are designed to reduce potential bias. They may include a meta-analysis, which is a quantitative summary of effect sizes and their variances. There were relatively few systematic reviews in criminology before the foundation of the Campbell Collaboration in 2000 (see Farrington & Petrosino, 2000). There were even fewer systematic reviews of risk factors; most systematic reviews and meta-analyses in criminology, both before and after 2000, have aimed to review the effectiveness of interventions (but see Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). A recent book edited by Weisburd, Farrington, and Gill (2016) assessed systematic reviews of a variety of types of interventions, including developmental prevention, situational prevention, community interventions, policing, sentencing, correctional programs, and drug interventions. However, the present article is the first effort to assess systematic reviews of risk factors in criminology.

## 2. Method

Systematic literature searches were conducted in order to identify systematic reviews and meta-analyses of risk factors for violence, offending, and/or delinquency. Several online databases, including Web of Science, PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, Google Scholar, Scopus,

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**Table 1**  
174 Excluded studies.

Reference	Description
<i>(A) Narrative/theoretical reviews (41)</i>	
Ali and Naylor (2013)	Narrative review of studies exploring the biological and psychological explanations of intimate partner violence.
Baldry, Farrington, and Sorrentino (2015)	Narrative review of cyberbullying and cyber victimization.
Barnett and Mann (2013)	Theoretical overview of empathy deficits between different types of sexual offenders, and how they vary according to offender typology.
Baxendale, Cross, and Johnston (2012)	Narrative review of gender differences in adolescents' perpetration of violence.
Benton (2007)	Narrative review of the relationship between diet and various violence-related behaviors.
Black, Heyman, and Slep (2001)	Narrative review of risk factors for sexual abuse in heterosexual relationships.
Buker (2011)	Theoretical review of the application of self-control in relation to criminal behavior and offending.
Chambers (2010)	Narrative review of the main personality traits typically associated with violent offending.
Corvo and deLara (2010)	Theoretical review of the similarities between domestic violence perpetrators and bullies. Implications for an integrated theory of relational violence risk factors.
Deptula and Cohen (2004)	Narrative review of the relationship between peer friendships and delinquency, aggression and antisocial behaviors in children.
Duncan and Miller (2002)	Narrative review of literature on the association between experiences of familial childhood abuse with violence and animal cruelty in adulthood.
Eisenbraun (2007)	Narrative review of risk factors associated with violence in schools.
Eme (2009)	Narrative review of neuro-developmental risk factors associated with persistent adult male antisocial behavior.
Eme (2013)	Narrative review of the association between genetic conditions, MAOA syndrome, and male antisocial behavior.
Houtepen, Sijtsma, and Bogaerts (2014)	Narrative review of characteristics of child pornography offenders and contact child sex offenders. Also reviews the risks associated with cross-over from online pornography offending to contact offending.
Ioane, Lambie, and Percival (2013)	Narrative review of individual, family, and community level risk factors of youth offending in Pacific Island region.
Jennings, Piquero, and Reingle (2012)	Narrative review of the overlap between victimization and offending.
Kaukinen (2014)	Narrative review of risk and protective factors associated with dating violence in college and University student samples.
Kwako et al. (2011)	Narrative review of the association between traumatic brain injury and intimate partner violence.
Leen et al. (2013)	Narrative review of the literature surrounding dynamic risk factors, prevalence and prevention of adolescent dating violence.
Liu (2011)	Narrative review of the impact of early 'health risk factors', including child sexual abuse, and outcomes in adulthood, including juvenile delinquency, violence, and engagement in criminal behavior.
Markowitz (2003)	Narrative review of the association between socioeconomic status (SES) particularly low SES, and violence.
McGrath, Nilsen, and Kerley (2011)	Narrative review of the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and later delinquent behavior; no clear method of searches outlined, or inclusion/exclusion criteria provided.
McPhedran (2009)	Narrative review of the relationship between empathy, violence and cruelty against animals.
van der Merwe and Dawes (2007)	Narrative review of risk factors, causal pathways and effective interventions for youth violence perpetration.
Morgado and da Luz Vale-Dias (2013)	Narrative review of the literature concerned with antisocial behavior in adolescents, and its related correlates.
Moskowitz (2004)	Non-systematic review of the role of dissociation in violent behavior.
O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, and Thomas (2013)	Narrative review of the risk and motivational factors associated with various criminological outcomes, specifically youth gang affiliation, but also delinquency, violence and criminal activity.
Ostrowsky (2010)	Narrative review of the relationship between self-esteem and violent behavior.
Ouzir (2013)	Narrative review of the link between impulsive behavior and schizophrenia.
Pinto et al. (2010)	Narrative review of the biological and neurological factors associated with the perpetration of intimate partner violence.
Piquero, Jennings, and Barnes (2012)	Narrative review of life-course violent offending, including the associated risk factors.
Proctor (2006)	Narrative review of the outcomes for children exposed to community violence.
Raine (2002)	Narrative review of studies exploring the biosocial risk factors associated with antisociality and violence in both children and adults.
Reidy et al. (2015)	Narrative review of the relationship between psychopathy and violent behavior.
Sappington (2000)	Narrative review of the relationship between childhood experiences of abuse and violence-related outcomes.
Savage (2014)	Non-systematic review of the literature surrounding the relationship between attachment/parental bonding and aggression and violence in children.
Taillieu and Brownridge (2010)	Narrative review of the prevalence and risk factors associated with intimate partner violence perpetrated against pregnant women.
Tyler (2002)	Narrative review of the social, behavioural, and emotional outcomes related to childhood experiences of sexual abuse. No relevant criminological outcomes are included.
Varker, Devilly, Ward, and Beech (2008)	Narrative review of the relationship between empathy levels and sexual offending in adolescents.
Zagar, Busch, Grove, and Hughes (2009)	Narrative review of methods and instruments used to predict violent recidivism.
<i>(B) Biological/neurological risk factors (15)</i>	
Allely, Minnis, Thompson, Wilson, and Gillberg (2014)	Systematic review of case study reports of neurodevelopmental factors such as traumatic brain injury, head injury, autism-spectrum disorder and suspected neuro-developmental disorder, in convicted serial and mass murderers.
Book, Starzyk, and Quinsey (2001)	Meta-analysis of the association between testosterone and aggression.
Farrer, Frost, and Hedges (2012)	Meta-analysis of differences in the prevalence of traumatic brain injury between perpetrators of intimate partner violence and the general population.
Fazel, Philipson, Gardiner, Merritt, and Grann (2009)	Systematic and meta-analytic review of the association between neurological disorders, specifically epilepsy and traumatic brain injury, and the perpetration of violence.
Gow and Hibbeln (2014)	Review of the relationship between omega-3 fatty acid deficiency and neuro-developmental outcomes related to ADHD and violent behaviors in children and adolescents.
Grant et al. (2013)	Meta-analysis of the effects of exposure to 'e-waste' on several outcomes, such as low birth weight and premature birth, but also criminal behavior and violence.
Hosseini, Adha, Zainol, Isahak, and Nemati (2014)	Systematic review and meta-analysis of neighborhood stress and circadian cortisol.
Joyal, Beaulieu-Plante, and de Chant��rac (2014)	Meta-analysis of 23 studies reporting neuropsychological factors in sexual offenders.
Kim-Cohen et al. (2006)	Review of the interaction between the MAOA gene and child maltreatment, and resulting outcomes, such as child mental health difficulties and antisocial behavior.
Lorber (2004)	Meta-analytic review of the relationship between heart rate and aggression, psychopathy and conduct problems.
Ortiz and Raine (2004)	Meta-analytic review of the relationship between resting heart rate and antisocial behavior.
Portnoy and Farrington (2015)	Meta-analytic review of the relationship between resting heart rate and antisocial behavior.
Shiroma, Ferguson, and Pickelsimer (2012)	Meta-analysis of the prevalence of traumatic brain injury in a sample of offenders.
Vassos, Collier, and Fazel (2014)	Systematic and meta-analytic review of the association between genes and violence and aggression.
Yang and Raine (2009)	Meta-analysis of functional brain imaging studies and findings concerning prefrontal structural abnormalities in antisocial, violent, and psychopathic individuals.

(continued on next page)

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