



The Risk Factors Prevention Paradigm and the Causes of Youth Crime: A Deceptively Useful Analysis?

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Abstract

The risk factors prevention paradigm (RFPP) is currently the dominant discourse in juvenile justice, exerting a powerful influence over policy and practice in the UK, Ireland and other countries. This article argues that the predominance of the RFPP is in many ways an obstacle to a fuller understanding of, and more effective response to, youth crime. Part of the problem is the often over-simplified assumptions and exaggerated claims of the RFPP literature, which translates the findings of risk-focused research for policy makers and for popular consumption, but largely ignores the caveats of the scientific researchers themselves. Moreover, the RFPP has intrinsic, but generally neglected, methodological and theoretical shortcomings, which mean that it fails to account properly for key facets of youth justice, such as personal agency, socio-cultural context, psychological motivation and the human rights dimension.

Keywords: facts v. values, prevention, positivism, reductionism, risk factors

The Attractions of the RFPP

The risk factors approach to researching the origins of youth offending and devising preventative strategies appears to have considerable merits. This approach, sometimes termed the RFPP (the risk factors prevention paradigm), has over the last 15 years become the dominant discourse in juvenile justice and now exerts a powerful influence over policy and practice. This fundamentally epidemiological approach, which traces its lineage to the studies of Glueck and Glueck (1930) and through the ongoing, very influential Cambridge study (West and Farrington, 1973), is based largely on the analysis of statistical correlations between variables describing personal attributes and variables describing criminologically relevant outcomes, such as a history of arrest, of members of local community-based samples. The most influential studies are prospective, longitudinal investigations, which follow people over many years, often from early childhood, but retrospective and cross-sectional investigations also make a significant contribution. The RFPP is especially attractive to politicians and others, officially charged with the responsibility of doing something about youth crime, because it claims to identify precursors of delinquency and serious criminality, some of which are in theory preventable. It is also attractive because it provides the basic data for screening tools, which claim to target 'at risk' youth, who might benefit from preventative programmes.

The RFPP as a simplified interpretation of basic research

It is useful to distinguish risk-focused epidemiological research itself from the broadly disseminated RFPP, which interprets, elaborates and organizes research findings and underlying theories in a form suitable to policy and practice applications. Risk-focused epidemiological research in the criminological field is one of the most technically sophisticated and challenging areas of study within the social sciences. The daunting detail and conceptual and statistical complexity of the primary research ensure both that a simplified RFPP is required and that its mis- and over-interpretations are rarely challenged. After all, the purpose of the RFPP is to summarize and make comprehensible the findings of risk-focused research and this is achieved partly by ignoring the often scrupulous self-criticism of risk-focused researchers and the intricate qualifications and reservations with which they hedge their conclusions.

At the same time, risk-focused researchers in this area seem reluctant to criticize the exaggerations of the RFPP, perhaps because the success of the RFPP appears to affirm the relevance and importance of their work and because RFPP-driven preventative programmes based on their hypotheses present an opportunity to test their causal inferences. No doubt the very significant level of public and private funding required by, and now often provided to, risk-focused research also has a bearing on researchers' willingness to critique the more grandiose and less well-founded claims of the RFPP.

Among the attractions of the RFPP are that it is readily intelligible, seemingly based on scientific methods and evidence, and unquestionably comprehensive and inclusive. The approach avoids the pitfalls of monocausal or very narrowly drawn theories of the origins of youth crime, which exaggerate the role of one or two factors, such as parenting skills or brain dysfunction or peer influence. Risk-focused research acknowledges and, indeed, establishes that there may be many different pathways to criminality (equifinality), that divergent outcomes can result from similar initial conditions (multifinality) and that not all potentially relevant factors are in play in every case. Nevertheless, the RFPP claims an 'evidence-based' rationale for targeting 'at risk' children and risk factors, such as poverty, poor educational provision, unemployment, and inadequate parenting skills. Consequently, the RFPP is widely perceived to be self-evidently beneficial because it prioritizes the primary prevention of obvious social and personal harms.

The typical risk factor list

The list of 'known' risk factors is by now very familiar and long. An Irish example, which is by no means untypical of the RFPP translational literature, interpreting research for policy makers and practitioners, is provided by the National Crime Council's document *Tackling the Underlying Causes of Crime* (2002). The list is divided into five separate categories: Neighbourhood and Community Factors, Socio-economic Deprivation, Family Background/Parenting, Individual Factors and Academic and School Factors. The factors are catalogued as follows:

Neighbourhood and Community Factors:

- Community disorganization and physical deterioration
- High levels of mobility and lack of attachments to the community
- Majority of local authority or rented housing
- High proportion of single parent families

- Higher than average percentage of young people
- Poor levels of service provision

Socio-economic Deprivation:

- Low family income/consistent poverty
- Parents long-term unemployed
- Poor housing
- Large family
- Single parent family

Family Background/Parenting:

- Poor parenting skills – erratic or harsh discipline
- Lack of parental control, supervision and monitoring
- Poor or disruptive attachments with child
- Parental conflict
- Family breakdown/family dysfunction
- Criminal, antisocial and/or alcoholic parent(s)

Individual Factors:

- Hyperactive and impulsive
- Lower than average IQ
- Mental and/or physical health problems
- Low self-esteem

Academic and School Factors:

- Poor academic performance in primary school
- Disruptive and aggressive behaviour, including bullying
- Lack of concentration and motivation
- Poor attendance
- Lack of discipline and organization within the school
- Early school leaving

It is worth noting that the very title *Tackling the Underlying Causes of Crime* makes the unambiguous but erroneous assertion that it is the underlying 'causes' of crime which are identified. In fact, the risk-focused researcher Hinshaw (2002: 436) writes that 'there is distressingly little evidence for the causal status of nearly all of the entries (in the typical risk factors list)'. Most identified risk factors are, in fact, merely correlates of relatively vague proxies for criminality, such as self-reported offending, arrest, conviction or a history of persistent offending.

The British Critique of the Practical Implementation of the RFPP

A number of British writers including Gray (2005), Armstrong (2006), Goldson and Muncie (2006), Case (2006, 2007) and France (2007) have recently provided incisive and damning critiques of the RFPP. They write within a political and policy context which has enthusiastically

embraced the RFPP and used it to thoroughly refashion the British youth justice system (YJS), often in potentially detrimental ways.

Armstrong (2006) makes the general but frequently ignored point that ‘correlations between risk factors and offending tell us little about why young people behave as they do’. In fact, finding out who might be prone to offending is only a first tentative step in the process of answering much more crucial questions about how and why people actually come to offend. This easily made elision between correlate and cause characterizes both the RFPP and the risk-focused research literatures and generally serves to obscure rather than clarify the complex issue of causation. As Kraemer et al. (1997: 337) argue: ‘terms such as risk, risk factors, and especially the term cause are inconsistently and imprecisely used, fostering scientific miscommunication and misleading research and policy’.

Case (2007: 92) has raised many doubts about the RFPP, asking, for example, ‘how comprehensive, valid and appropriate is the “evidence” of risk that underpins “evidence-based” interventions in the YJS’. He warns against ‘stigmatising, marginalising and criminalising young people through risk-based targeting’ (Case, 2006: 173) and that the new managerial technology of measurement, performance indicators and risk assessment tools ‘deprofessionalises and neuters practitioners, robbing them of their ability to use discretion and experience when assessing risk and targeting interventions’ (Case, 2007: 99). However, in the final analysis, Case endorses the ‘considerable efficacy of the RFPP and risk assessment in the YJS’ (Case, 2007: 101) and simply recommends complementing the approach with qualitative consultation processes with practitioners and young people.

Gray (2005: 938) focuses on the gap between the rhetorical claims of both the RFPP and the restorative justice movement and the reality of practice. She identifies ‘responsibilization’ as one of the key techniques of contemporary risk management. She sees this as a project for actively involving offenders ‘in the reduction of their own risk of reoffending.’ The pursuit of responsibilization, she argues (Gray, 2005: 941), ‘has tended to overshadow that of restoration and reintegration in the delivery of restorative justice interventions’. In Gray’s own research (Gray, 2005: 952) it was found that ‘even when the negative effects of such factors as school exclusion and unemployment were taken into account, they tended to be blamed on young offenders’ antisocial attitudes and reasoning skills rather than broader structural barriers or inadequate resources’. In other words, RFPP-driven policy appears to address critically important issues of social exclusion, but actually focuses disproportionately on holding young people accountable. As Gray (2005: 940) states: ‘the eradication of social exclusion is not articulated via any vision of social justice which seeks to remove the structural constraints arising from the unequal distribution of socio-economic resources’. There is some focus on equality of opportunity but little real movement towards greater equality of condition or towards redistribution of power and wealth.

Goldson and Muncie (2006: 92), while recognizing ‘the “new” rhetoric of youth crime prevention, restoration and social inclusion.... and the increasing tendency to responsibilize children, their families and communities’, ultimately conclude that ‘the defining hallmark of contemporary youth justice in England and Wales is a “new punitiveness” characterized by rates of child imprisonment significantly exceeding those found in most other industrialized democratic countries in the world’. Goldson and Muncie are scathing in their criticism of contemporary, supposedly evidence-based policy formation. They point to a widespread lack of methodological rigour in the gathering of ‘evidence’ and to selectivity in the application of

'evidence'. They argue (Goldson and Muncie, 2006: 98) that 'selective "evidence" is privileged whilst a wider body of criminological "evidence" – both theoretically and empirically derived, particularly in relation to structurally mediated processes of criminalization – is peripheralized'. Finally, they make the charge of epistemological oversimplification, stating that 'the positivist assumption that quasi-scientific laws and rational prediction are not only possible and desirable, but also essential, for modernizing youth governance is flawed'.

France (2007: 3) argues that the English YJS has been 'repositioned to aid the state in managing risk'. France criticizes the RFPP for its misunderstanding of human nature, and of human development through the life course and for its predilection for dichotomous thinking, as exemplified in the belief that people can be reliably distinguished into the 'criminal' or the 'non-criminal.' He also stresses that adolescence itself increases the risk of delinquency far more than having early childhood indicators of risk. France (2007: 11) believes that 'risk factor analysis has become important to government in that it shows it is "doing something" about crime without having to tackle the fundamental problems of social and economic inequality'.

The academic discourses on risk and the policy obsession with risk management

The broad scope of these direct and indirect criticisms of the RFPP reflects the complexity of the paradigm and of the underpinning concept of risk. Risk, indeed, has become a sort of superconductor term attracting and organizing numerous distinct but interrelated ideological, methodological and academic discourses. It is possible to identify at least four major risk discourses, each with its own large literature, that intertwine within the general youth justice debate – the discourses on:

- 1 The methodology of risk based epidemiology;
- 2 The study of decision-making under conditions of risk or uncertainty;
- 3 The development of actuarial risk prediction instruments; and
- 4 The mainly sociological analysis of risk as the guiding precept of the current socio-political zeitgeist.

This article focuses mainly on the first of these discourses and in particular on the methodological shortcomings of risk-focused research and on its uncritical over-interpretation in the RFPP. However, as the critiques already mentioned illustrate, it is impossible to entirely disentangle the RFPP from the other discourses on risk. In particular, it must be acknowledged that the political and media obsession with risk and its management has helped elevate the RFPP, with its emphasis on quantifiable risk factors and its promise of scientific prediction of risk, to its current pre-eminent position. On the other hand, it is largely the failure to take seriously the intrinsic shortcomings of the RFPP and the science that underpins it that has allowed the spread of the sort of 'bad faith' practices in the management of so-called risk, which the British critics of the RFPP decry.

The Epidemiological Critique of Risk-focused Research

Few risk-focused researchers make the basic mistake of explicitly confusing correlates with causes except, all too frequently, in the titles of their books and articles. However, they are often

guilty of forgetting that the measures in criminological epidemiological research are inherently weak and far less reliable than those used in medical epidemiology, which is the model they emulate. Risk factors epidemiology was developed within medicine, where it has had some success in tracing the precursors of diseases such as coronary heart disease (CHD) and lung cancer. Clearly defined, objective measures of both precursors and outcomes are essential to effective epidemiology. Death from lung cancer is this kind of reliably measurable outcome. The level of radon in the home and a person's daily smoking habit are objectively definable precursors. By contrast, a self-report questionnaire on acts of delinquency or a record of arrest is a questionable outcome measure and precursors like inconsistent parental discipline or poor parent/child attachment are not readily amenable to objective measurement.

In fact, risk-focused research has been subjected to fierce criticism even within the discipline of medical epidemiology with its more precise and rigorous measurement. For example, Shy (1997: 479) considers that most medical epidemiology is guilty of the 'biomedical fallacy' because it infers that disease in populations can be understood by investigating risk factors in individuals. He states that 'the ecology of human health has not been addressed, and the societal context in which disease occurs has been either disregarded or deliberately abstracted from consideration'. Skrabanek (1993: 1502), more generally, warns against the 'faulty paradigm of risk-factor epidemiology', which inevitably throws up numerous factors that are typically but often erroneously supposed to have a causal role in the outcome under investigation.

Medical epidemiologists are very aware that confounding variables, biases and weak measures can lead to the discovery of unreal risk factors. They are so wary of weak associations that they suggest (Taubes, 1995) that, unless the data indicate at least a three times greater relative risk for the exposed person compared to the unexposed, there should be no claim that one has found anything at all. Much risk-focused research on anti-social behaviour ignores this advice and treats weak associations as indicative of significant potential causes. According to Richters (1997), the general bottom-up approach of sample-based, risk-focused research, in which models of causal structure are constructed by combining the individual factors and processes that have been identified as correlates, is rendered incoherent by the phenomenon of equifinality. Richters (1997: 221) writes that 'to the extent that different causal structures may give rise to the same phenomenon across different individuals, the logic underlying bottom-up strategies breaks down'. Richters (1997: 226) believes that in the absence of top-down, holistic, person-oriented discovery strategies 'we may be unknowingly (and, within the constraints of the paradigm, *unknowably*) studying artefacts rather than facts, flawed theory and flawed data, and illusory phenomena of our own creation'.

The tendency of risk-focused researchers to ignore the question of effect sizes, as long as statistical significance has been established, and to avoid testing the causal potency of apparent risk factors also promotes the production of artefactual risk factors. Putative risk factors are particularly suspect when they have been identified on the basis of statistically significant correlations which have been established in terms of relative risk (comparing prevalence in offending cases and non-offending controls) rather than in terms of absolute risk (examining the overall prevalence of the risky outcome). Estimates of absolute risk can be magnitudes lower than estimates of relative risk and need to be taken into account. So, for example, it might be found that a Martian youth has a 10 times greater risk of becoming an armed robber than a Venusian youth, but that in absolute terms only 1 in 100 Martian youths will ever become an armed robber. Focusing solely on the relative risk inevitably exaggerates the salience and meaningfulness of the marker variable.

Skrabanek and McCormick (1989) point out that it has become usual to describe diseases for which there is no known necessary or sufficient cause as multifactorial in origin. Observing that all disease or other outcomes are by definition multifactorial in origin, they conclude that the use of the term multifactorial in risk-focused research is tautologous and merely a euphemism for ignorance. Since prevention is only likely to be effective when the true causes of negative outcomes are understood, the derivation of over-inclusive lists of risk factors from possibly coincidental and frequently negligible correlations is not a sound approach to theorizing about the origins of youth criminality and is likely to throw up forms of prevention and intervention which are ineffectual or even do more harm than good.

The Intrinsic Limits and Theoretical Incoherence of the RFPP

A recent authoritative review of risk-focused research in the area of antisocial behaviour (Quinsey et al., 2004: 58) admits that 'despite the fact that the risk factors for juvenile delinquency are relatively well known, there is a lack of convergence on the aetiology of delinquency'. Hinshaw (2002: 432) makes a similar point, stating that 'the sheer size of the list (of risk factors associated with aggressive and anti-social behaviour) betrays the field's lack of ability to synthesize or to tell a fully coherent story about the development and maintenance of externalising behaviour'.

Rutter (2005: 2), a meticulous interrogator of the methodology of risk-focused research, states that there are four crucial questions about risk factors research:

Is the association valid?; if valid, does it represent a causal effect?; if there is a causal influence, what element in the experience or circumstance provides the risk and by what mechanism does it operate?; and does the risk operate in all people in all circumstances or is it contingent on either particular individual characteristics or a particular social context?

Rutter believes that research findings should lead to action only when these questions are answered. However it is clear that these questions are rarely posed, let alone answered, for the numerous risk factors in the RFPP.

The sheer number of risk factors from different domains and the lack of information on the comparative causal significance of these factors are clearly major problems, but the validity, meaning and status of individual risk factors are also often problematic. A major problem is that risk-focused research on anti-social behaviour is often based on questionable measures such as self-reports or teacher, parent and peer reports, which are notoriously susceptible to subjective judgement and to the tendency either to exaggerate or deny. It matters that, unlike in medical epidemiology which can typically access comprehensive, reliable data, for example, on deaths due to lung cancer, only a minority and sometimes a small minority of people who commit offences of all kinds – such as public order offences, criminal damage, sexual and domestic violence, theft, fraud, drunk-driving and the possession of illicit drugs – ever come to official notice or are arrested or convicted. It matters that central constructs such as deviance, cruelty or discipline are shaped by culturally variable beliefs, values and attitudes. For example, conventional methods of parental discipline or notions of what constitutes harshness in the punishment of children will vary substantially across different cultures and subcultural groups and across time. Loeber et al. (2003: 114), for example, found in the Pittsburgh panel study that physical punishment by parents predicted delinquency for Caucasian boys but not for

African American boys. It matters that presumed identical precursors and outcomes are actually defined and measured differently from study to study. It matters that conveniently numerical variables such as family size or income are inevitably favoured in quantification-oriented risk-focused research, despite the fact that they are vague, inadequate proxies for putative causal processes.

All these methodological weaknesses mean that risk-based epidemiological research in the area of anti-social behaviour is very open to over-interpretation, especially the elision of correlate and cause, and is very prone to merely feeding confirmation back to researchers of the theoretical assumptions they brought to the research. Epidemiological analysis inevitably throws up interpretable results and it is easy to forget that the resultant quantitative data are frequently based on loose definitions and imprecise measures and can at best lead to tentative causal inferences, which require further independent corroboration.

The RFPP's difficulties with contested and adult onset forms of criminality

Moreover, the supposed negative criminal justice outcomes in risk-focused research are themselves not just imperfectly measured (like most behavioural and psychological variables), but fundamentally open to question. In the case of CHD, for example, we understand that the same individual takes or is exposed to an identified risk and may or may not suffer the clearly identifiable, culturally invariant and unambiguously negative consequences. But for whom is delinquency or criminality a risk – the individual or society or both in different ways? This issue is often hotly contested or moot. So, for example, until recently (1993) homosexual activity was a criminal offence in Ireland, but there were many 'offenders' who defied the law and insisted that the criminalization of homosexuality was an unfortunate social construction based on a warped value system. Again, thieves often claim that they are simply making minor property corrections to a grossly unjust world that finds them seriously disadvantaged and others massively privileged, in both cases through no fault or talent of their own. The fact that some forms of offending, such as joy-riding or smoking cannabis, are experienced as thrilling expressions of autonomy or as personal affirmation by the young offender, but as deviance or unacceptable risks by the wider public and the criminal justice system, goes to the heart of the definitional problem. Similarly, terrorist outrages are often perpetrated by otherwise non-violent, conformist people who consider that they are acting in a moral, self-sacrificing, fully justified and even heroic manner. How meaningful can it be to establish correlations with inherently ambiguous, culturally variant and contestable definitions of criminality? Even when something approaching a reliable, precise quantitative measure can be found, value and belief issues about what exactly is harm and about who is actually harming whom will continue to lurk just below the surface.

The RFPP is premised on the utility of predicting to serious and persistent juvenile offending, especially that pattern of offending which continues into adulthood, but the RFPP tends to ignore the risk factors for those criminal behaviours that typically have an adult onset. For example, sexual predation on children, corruption, fraud and embezzlement, domestic violence and drunk driving – offences, which, as writers like Braithwaite (1979) argue, cause the greatest amount of harm in society – are largely missing from the RFPP's scope. The RFPP's undue focus on visible crime – the crime which tends to be targeted by the CJS and punished by imprisonment – casts serious doubt on the RFPP-based discourse about the causes of crime. Corrupt businessmen, child sex abusers and drunk drivers are frequently well-educated, socially

successful, conventional people, lacking any history of adverse personal experience or serious misbehaviour. The investigation of the determinants of these offenders' decisions to succumb to temptation later in life might well throw up a set of very different risk factors from those in the typical RFPP list, but it would be wrong to assume that these factors are irrelevant to the understanding of the genesis of juvenile crime.

The RFPP's implicit but untenable claim to be culture-free

Risk-factor based research largely ignores fundamental definitional issues. It automatically undergirds its own approach with a set of uninterrogated, supposedly culture- and jurisdiction-free assumptions about what is harm, what is crime and what risks need to be managed. The positivist RFPP assumes a shared common sense understanding of offending and other relevant concepts across all the studies that have helped establish the RFPP, in spite of the fact that the 'evidence' is actually derived at different times and from very distinctive samples of people operating in different cultural contexts with inevitably variable definitions, perceptions, and meanings. The RFPP is a one size fits all framework, which, by side-stepping definitional issues and ignoring socio-cultural and temporal variation, tends to support the legal and political status quo and to marginalize radical discourses that question fundamental definitions and mainstream values and practices in all cultures.

A related problem is the RFPP's focus on the individual as the unit of analysis. Although risk-based research investigates groups, it is specifically aimed at uncovering between-individual differences, for example in the propensity for anti-social behaviour or aggression. As Thornberry and Krohn (2003) point out, this focus hampers the examination of situational dynamics and group processes, both of which are vital to the understanding of youth crime. Rutter (2003) reminds us that the focus on between-individual differences also diverts attention from key cultural and period effects, exemplified by the much higher crime rate today than in 1950 and the much higher homicide rate in the US compared to Europe. Rutter contends that such group differences and secular trends may be more important than individual differences and that the underlying causal processes may not be the same. In other words, the RFPP not only wrongly claims culture-free findings by obscuring the culturally specific origins of those findings, but also almost entirely fails to capture the key historic and cultural factors which have a major influence on youth offending.

Farrington (2002: 661) states that 'risk factors that cannot be changed feasibly are excluded from consideration' in risk-focused research. He gives race and gender as examples. This can be regarded as powerful confirmation of the limitations of the RFPP. Gender and race are enormously important to the understanding of crime – gender everywhere and race particularly in the US and Britain and similar countries, where there are large ethnic minorities. As Farrington implies, the biogenetic realities of race cannot feasibly be changed, but these aspects of race probably have very little to contribute to our understanding of crime. However, in contemporary society, race is more of a social and cultural construct than a biological fact and as such it is a highly relevant, variable and potentially malleable factor. Psychological reactions to racially based devaluation, disadvantage and discrimination are almost certainly germane to some patterns of offending and, despite their neglect by the RFPP, are clearly culture specific and amenable to modification, for example by forging changes in social attitudes and the law.

Examples of Questionable Factors in the Established RFPP List

The RFPP promiscuously gathers risk factors from all kinds of domains and levels of analysis but fails to seek precise causal mechanisms and relate them one to the other. This creates an atheoretical mishmash of ideas which inevitably fails to provide a meaningful and compelling explanation of the origins juvenile offending. For example, unsurprisingly, the RFPP confirms low IQ, poor housing and neglectful parenting as risk factors for criminality. However, this does not bring us much closer to a real understanding of what makes one child rather than another a serious delinquent since such variables, although they may have a significant impact in interaction with other specific factors, do not have a predictable, unidirectional, causal influence on anti-social behaviour. After all, a background of below average IQ, poor housing or even neglectful parents is no impediment and may even be a stimulus to success, pro-social attitudes and law-abiding conduct. The list of RFPP risk factors is in fact a jumble of disparate factors some of which probably have a central role in the genesis of offending, while others have a far more contingent, minor contributory or modulatory role and still others are unlikely to have any meaningful, causal role whatsoever.

The evidently relevant variables in the RFPP list are usually there because they were key parts of the theoretical framework that researchers brought to their investigation. For example, researchers, who set out to measure impulsivity, aggression and lack of self-control in early childhood, cannot be surprised when these variables correlate with conduct problems and predict to later problem behaviours, because impulsivity, aggression and lack of self-control are essentially definitive of problem behaviour. Although risk-based researchers are often concerned with important and difficult questions about characteristic patterns of interplay between bio-genetic and environmental factors and about the continuity of early childhood problems into adulthood, the identification of evidently meaningful causal factors by risk-focused research can usually be counted as confirmation of preconceptions rather than new discovery.

However, there are a number of more dubious factors in the typical RFPP list, including, for example, family size and low self-esteem. Farrington (2002: 659) asks 'does large family size predict offending because of the consequent poor supervision of each child, overcrowded households, poverty or merely because more anti-social people tend to have more children than others?' In fact, sampling bias and culturally specific patterns in family formation might offer a more parsimonious explanation for this correlation. In Ireland, while prisoners tend to come from unusually large families, it is quite likely that inquiry would show that doctors, for example, also tend to come from much larger than normal families. Family processes are obviously key in the socialization of children, but it is highly unlikely that family size *per se* is a critical causal influence. Indeed, all of Farrington's possible explanations for the discovered correlation actually shift the focus away from family size to quite different potential, causative processes, such as lack of parental attention or of material resources.

Similarly, the evidence from panel studies on self-esteem is itself conflicting, suggesting that the presence of low self-esteem in the RFPP list is unwarranted and misleading. For example, Huizinga et al. (2003: 59) state:

There is a rather traditional view that low self-esteem causes or is an instigator of violence; that aggression or violence is one way of gaining prestige and esteem. However, there is sufficient justification to question this view and to argue that it is high self-esteem and threats to this high self-esteem that lead to violence.

The RFPP's Failure to Describe the Essential Role of Relative Disadvantage

The RFPP list includes many factors concerned with social and educational disadvantage. These are rather remote, speculative correlates of offending, since poverty and disadvantage in themselves have little direct connection with criminality. These social disadvantage variables are most probably significant correlates of offending because they are linked to highly individualized, social psychological processes such as the young person's experience of and reaction to discredited identity, injustice and inequality. It is almost certainly the experience of inequality and relative deprivation, and not poverty itself, which are criminogenic (Marmot, 2004; Wilkinson, 2005). Given the RFPP's implicit support for the legal and political status quo and its failure to address the core psychological and emotional reactions to relative disadvantage, it is unsurprising that the RFPP's concern with social justice and its promotion of interventions aimed at social inclusion often amount, at the practical level, to little more than token improvements. Preventive interventions inspired by the RFPP, as Gray (2005) argues, offer some limited new opportunities to targeted disadvantaged citizens but at the not inconsiderable price of responsibilizing them. Preventative interventions typically leave society's inequality- and injustice-creating political and economic structures untouched or even strengthened.

The RFPP's disjointed recital of social disadvantage risk factors and its failure to address the key underlying social psychological processes, which mediate the link between relative deprivation and criminality, promote partial understanding and ineffectual societal responses. Loeber et al. (2003: 112) hint that what is actually required is a truly radical transformation of social institutions, when they state: 'If all children found school as rewarding as the brightest children do, schools could be a powerful delinquency-prevention tool'. Radical transformation of the institution of school is required in order to produce schools that empower and fulfil all their children. The transformation of wider society to reduce the criminogenic effects of poverty and relative deprivation is certainly an even more challenging task.

Adverse experiences as protective factors

Risk factors, when they are relevant, do not work together in a simple additive way, as the RFPP usually assumes. On the contrary, they interact, if they do at all, in a highly dynamic and complex way. So, biological, psychological and social determinants may on occasion act to catalyse, potentiate or reinforce each other, but on others to nullify, dilute or divert each other. A key insight is that particular adverse events or processes such as poverty or physical abuse are not only neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for future offending but may actually have a reductive rather than an augmentive contributory effect. In fact, adverse, unjust and cruel experiences in childhood can lead to anger, resentment, defiance and a knowing or unconscious thirst for revenge or, conversely, they may 'steel' the child (Rutter, 1985) or even have an ultimately positive role in shaping a strong, moral commitment to not causing similar pains to others in the future. In other words, the notion of protective factors must encompass the presence of biogenetic strengths such as high intelligence or a sunny disposition and the absence of adverse influences such as harsh and inconsistent parenting, but also, sometimes, exposure to experiences that are usually regarded as definitively adverse by the RFPP. It would be useful to know when and why the same type of adverse experience is a protective or a risk factor but

while a few risk-focused researchers address this issue, the RFPP itself is too simplistic to even accommodate the question.

The Lure of Prediction and Control

Of course, most risk-factor researchers, particularly those who take a developmental and dynamic systems approach, are aware of the limitations of their data and methods and that they are involved in a complex and tentative process of detection and theoretical clarification. As this article illustrates, risk-factor researchers themselves often point out the serious flaws in their methods. Very significantly, they even warn against the RFPP's over-promotion of prevention. For example, Huizinga et al. (2003:86) state that:

... identifying future serious delinquents at an early age is likely to be inaccurate. Thus targeting problematic children for various 'treatments' although done with the best of motives and intentions, may through labeling and other processes be counterproductive and potentially increase the number of future serious delinquents.

However, prominent proponents of the RFPP, like Farrington, often appear to pay only perfunctory attention to the paradigm's inherent flaws and continue to oversell the approach or at least allow policy makers to do so. In his essay on the RFPP in the *Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Farrington (2002) admits that 'there is often only a tenuous link between risk factors and prevention programmes' (Farrington, 2002: 664) and that 'the difficulty of establishing causes and the co-occurrence of risk factors encourages the blunderbuss approach' (Farrington, 2002: 661). However, this admission does not stop him citing approvingly the essentially hypothetical, myth-building claims of the evaluation of the Perry School Project that each dollar spent on that early intervention project later saved seven dollars in public expenditure (Schweinhart et al., 1993). Farrington also makes the bizarre, oxymoronic admission that 'typically, prospective prediction (based on the RFPP) is poor, but retrospective prediction is good'. Hindsight is always 20/20, but tools promoted by the RFPP, such as the British ASSET, are by definition designed to predict the future.

One of the strongest findings of longitudinal research in this area is that a small number of offenders (frequently around 5 per cent of people studied) are responsible for a disproportionate amount (typically more than 50 per cent) of the whole group's offences whether officially punished or self-reported. This finding has been central to RFPP myth-building, as exemplified recently by Moffitt (2005). She states that 'in the 1970s, the astounding discovery that fewer than 10 per cent of individuals perpetrate more than 50 per cent of crimes prompted researchers to investigate individual career criminals and examine the childhood origins of such persistent re-offenders'. In fact, the existence of prolific, particularly defiant and incorrigible offenders surprises no one involved in the CJS and, as if to prove the point, the recently announced British government proposal to expend over £100 million on mandatory interventions with targeted, at risk juveniles proposes to dispense with the newly minted RFPP-based technology of prediction and assessment altogether and rely instead on the old-fashioned capacity of teachers, doctors and social workers to identify obvious candidates. However, these professionals are likely to be no more accurate than the supposedly scientific prediction tools of the RFPP, because, as Sampson and Laub (2005) point out, 'one of the lessons of prospective longitudinal research is that there is considerable heterogeneity in adult outcomes that cannot be predicted in advance'.

The RFPP's Difficulty with Personal Agency, Justice and Issues of Value

The inadequate sensitivity and specificity of RFPP-based prediction and screening tools – their tendency to miss positive cases and identify false positive cases – are by no means the only reasons why the RFPP's encouragement of the targeting of at risk children for early intervention is problematic. Perhaps even more important is the unequivocally deterministic nature of the RFPP and its consequent inability to dialogue with the value based systems of criminal law and human rights. Intrinsic to the RFPP's scientific determinism is the consequentialist claim that preventative interventions are justified chiefly, if not solely, by empirical proof of beneficial results and are not subject to the normal safeguards applicable in criminal justice.

The law is unavoidably concerned with the moral issues of responsibility and guilt and, therefore, in punishing offending it relies on the doctrine of free will. On the contrary, risk-focused research is totally preoccupied with the search for causal determinants, which explain why offending occurs. The RFPP catalogues the risk factors identified in this research and claims to promote the avoidance of offending through prevention not punishment. The law seeks to identify a blameworthy individual as the 'cause' of a crime and the legal finding of guilt effectively ends the law's interest in the causation of offending. This legal perspective is anathema to the RFPP, which does not concern itself with criminal responsibility and has no place for the concept of free will.

However, the law and indeed society require the free will doctrine in order to hold offenders fully criminally responsible in spite of all the evidence gathered by deterministic science that the wrong-doing was ultimately caused by factors outside the individual's control. Moreover, the free will doctrine is not the isolated invention of the criminal justice system, but is a reflection of the universal human experience of personal agency. It is not necessary to concede the truth or rightness of the law's 'free will perspective' and its individualization of blame in order to appreciate that this doctrine has a powerful and self-validating presence at the heart of the criminal law. In fact, most people not only accept but jealously guard their capacity to be held responsible by the law. The RFPP's failure to encompass the concept of personal agency and to describe its role in offending is undoubtedly a major limitation.

The limitations of the RFPP's deterministic perspective

The crucial point is that the law balances and legitimates its stern 'free will perspective' with absolute, civil libertarian guarantees, such as due process, the presumption of innocence and the prohibition of punishment in the absence of legal process and of disproportionate punishment. The law's notion of free will and its endorsement of counterbalancing human rights principles, designed to protect the freedoms of the individual, are alien to the relentlessly deterministic RFPP.

In the case of children, matters are greatly complicated by the fact that the law must adapt to the child's gradual maturation to the point where it is appropriate to hold him or her criminally responsible. However, youth justice, like criminal justice in general, is inextricably bound up with issues of value and prescription as well as with scientific facts and description. The RFPP's exclusive focus on description and its neglect of the prescriptive role of criminal justice is indefensible and facilitates the introduction of purely utilitarian actions, often involving unwarranted intrusions on the lives and freedoms of people. For example, the kind

of 'responsibilization' associated with RFPP-driven policies does not involve acknowledgement of and respect for the unique perspective and agency of the individual and his or her right to justice but is a one-sided bargain designed to hold the socially deficient accountable while at the same time avoiding due process and other legitimating constraints on the powers of the state.

The RFPP, because of its intrinsic deterministic and consequentialist bias, gives virtually no consideration to key issues of value like justice, equality, criminal responsibility, human agency, moral development, human rights and restrictions on the state's power over the individual. The RFPP struggles to even acknowledge the existence of the domain of values. This is largely because risk-focused research is irredeemably reductionist, following the model of the biological sciences and placing its faith in positivist quantification and the measurement of observables. Rutter (2003: 19), while acknowledging the chaos of the current RFPP explanatory model of antisocial behaviour, sets out a reductionist agenda when he writes: 'the histories of biology and of medicine indicate that it is usually possible to reduce complex multifactorial causation to a much more limited set of causal mechanisms. That is the challenge that we must meet'. However, there is actually no prospect of reducing the myriad causal influences on crime to a few clear-cut causal mechanisms. Crime is not that kind of biological event. The concept of offending is so heterogeneous, value-laden and indeed ambiguous, and the actions of offenders are so tied to personal and social contexts, emotional experience and accidents of history, that there can be no such limited, generalizable set of causal mechanisms. The irreducible subjectivity and intentionality of the offender, the specific contextuality of offending and its relational dimension are indispensable to adequate explanation. Reductionist risk-focused researchers who exclude the prescriptive world of values from their analysis and fail to treat offending in the holistic, person-oriented manner which the law employs (Bergman and Magnusson, 1997), will inevitably fail to adequately explain crime and criminality.

Conclusion

This article has argued that, despite the seeming advantages of the approach, the current dominance and broad, generally uncritical acceptance of the RFPP are regrettable. This is because the RFPP oversells the risk-focused research upon which it is based and has actually become a significant obstacle to the construction of an adequate understanding of and response to youth crime.

The emphasis of risk-focused research on between-individual differences and its extraction of purportedly universal explanations from very particular, socio-cultural research contexts ensures that the RFPP fails to give due regard to cultural and period effects and to group and situational dynamics, including vital influences like race and gender. The failure of risk-focused research to deal with adult onset offending, such as domestic violence and white collar crime, and its failure to acknowledge the massive scale of hidden crime and the contested nature of some crime thoroughly undermine the RFPP's claim to be identifying the correlates, let alone the causes of crime.

Reductionistic, deterministic and quantification-dependent risk-focused research makes no effort to encompass the domain of values, personal agency and human rights, all of which are central both to our understanding of crime and to the criminal justice system's response to crime. The RFPP, despite its inclusiveness, also contrives to overlook key social psychological and motivational processes, which many risk-based researchers themselves believe to be absolutely

crucial to the understanding of offending. So, for example Farrington (2003: 166–167), who has theorized that ‘the main energizing factors that ultimately lead to long term, between-individual variations in anti-social tendency are desire for material goods, status among intimates, and excitement’, would look in vain in the RFPP for any substantial examination of desires and needs or, indeed, of intentions, emotions, perceptions and motivations.

In short, the RFPP flatters only to deceive. Its indiscriminate embrace of an embarrassing wealth of risk factors creates only the illusion of explanation. The RFPP strongly and correctly affirms the role of biological, psychological and social factors in the emergence of criminality, but fails to provide a framework for, on the one hand, the integration of these diverse factors and, on the other, the differentiation of the factors in terms of their centrality and significance. The approach not only flattens the contours of the causal landscape, but also fails to resolve its own inherent inconsistencies and to do justice to both the strengths and weaknesses of the risk-focused research on which it ultimately relies.

The RFPP's apparently beneficent focus on social disadvantage and preventative interventions is subservient to its obsession with risk and the potential for offending, rather than the actuality of it. It routinely promotes intrusive, coercive and potentially criminalizing interventions, without providing the normal, countervailing criminal justice checks on state power, like due process. The RFPP's promotion of screening tests for ‘at risk’ youth and prediction in the service of pre-emptive intervention goes well beyond what the science can justify and is capable of opening the door to even more dubious forms of social control and social engineering.

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