THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS OF YOUTH FIRST INVOLVED IN THE
JUSTICE SYSTEM WHO DESIST

by

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ABSTRACT

Research needs to examine what is right with youth to better design programs and allocate resources to those with the greatest need. This study examined protective factors of youth first involved in the justice system at detainment and which factors are still prevalent at 6 and 12 months in those who desist from crime. The main components of the family, community (peers, school, and juvenile justice), and individual are highlighted, and involve discussions of the conceptual framework and fluidity of risk and protective factors. Specific to youth at first involvement, a descriptive analysis of 871 youth found that family stability of pro-social models was important. Youth living with relatives were more likely to desist at 12 months and factor contributing to desistance was having an absence of family members involved in the justice system. If family sought help early, youth were more likely to desist at 6 months. The community component suggested that pro-social peers and school had little effect in determining desistance. There were also minor increases in desistance with youth who were not on medication and those involved in extracurricular activities. A logistic regression analysis was performed on a sample of 3343 youth with dichotomous outcomes of desistance and recidivism. This analysis adds to the ongoing discussion of youth at risk, disproportionate minority contact, and special education services. Additional research is needed to fully understand how these factors impact youth behavior problems and delinquency reduction.
CHAPTER 1
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

While existing research that examines youth involved in the justice system has focused on the identification of characteristics of delinquent youth at risk, fewer studies have examined what factors in this population might actively foster success (Bogenschneider, 1996; Burton & Marshall, 2005; Deković, 1999; Jessor, Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Losel & Bliesener, 1994; Mahoney & Bergman, 2002). Past studies have primarily used a deficit model of risk to evaluate why these children begin to get into trouble and then continue to do so as they mature (Christle & Yell, 2008; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Such studies analyze the predictors in terms of negatively-phrased outcomes such as lower dropout rates, diminished delinquency, and less criminal behavior. Further, most research on troubled youth has been concerned with the accumulative nature of risk, and as a result, serves to provide predictors of negative outcomes rather than positive ones (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Researchers have examined the relationships between predictors (e.g., family life, socioeconomic status (SES), poor academics, and runaway) and outcomes (e.g., problem behavior, delinquency, and incarceration) to better understand how they are connected and lead to delinquency (Freitas & Downey, 1998). However, a better understanding of the positive (protective) as well as the negative (risk) factors that influence a young person’s choice to desist from delinquent behavior will allow for a much needed predictive model of desistance similar to the risk model of recidivism.

Research has shown that the main risk factors for recidivism in juvenile justice stem from unstable home lives, ethnic or socioeconomic status, age of first arrest and severity of offense, prior justice history, educational achievement, and a clinical history of conduct and pathology problems (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001). While exposure to these risk factors can eventually lead to behavior problems with consequences that involve the justice system, predicting
delinquency is not always a linear process. Longitudinal research of youth in the justice system can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the developmental pathways that lead youth into court involvement (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). While it does represent an important contribution to the understanding of juvenile behavior, exclusively examining risk presents a one-sided view, not only of the justice and education system, but also of the youths themselves.

Impact of Youth Crime

Over 1.6 million youth under the age of 18 were arrested in 2007, representing approximately 15% of the total crime in the United States (FBI, 2008). More than three-quarters of the recorded arrests were for lesser crimes such as simple assault, disorderly conduct, curfew violations, and drug offenses. Twenty six percent of all youth arrests were for property crimes that involved burglary, theft of vehicle, and arson. Sixteen percent were for violent offenses such as murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Although these crime statistics may appear staggering, juvenile arrests have, nevertheless, declined by 23% over the last 10 years (FBI, 2008). Males make up nearly 87% of all the juveniles that are held in locked facilities, and their criminal activity is noted to peak at ages 16 and 17. Minorities comprised 63% of youth offenders with 40% being black, 19% Hispanic, and 2% each Native American and Asian (Sickmund, 2004).

Communities expend considerable financial resources to manage these youth, with previously arrested youth representing the greatest expense. Repeated offenses over the lifetime of a single individual can cost society $2.6 to $5.4 million (Cohen & Piquero, 2008). Intervening early in the process for high risk youth will amount to substantial cost savings. Osher, Quinn, Poirier, and Rutherford (2003) completed a cost analysis of national early prevention programs from the criteria specified by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Blueprint. They identified seven criteria for effective prevention programs: 1) using relevant and sound methodology to define effectiveness; 2) establishing goals that are clear and appropriate for
behaviors that require change; 3) making the underlying rationale clear and consistent with goals; 4) considering the individual characteristics of the population and setting; 5) creating programs that are engaging for the participants; 6) describing how each of the criteria is integrated with the educational mission; and 7) providing information and guidance for replication in other settings. Of the 124 programs included in the cost-benefit analysis, only nine programs met the rigorous criteria set by the 2003 study. The fact that the highest ranked program reported that every dollar spent on its intervention yielded almost $46 in benefits to the taxpayers over time highlights the extent to which proactive approaches can yield financial as well as social rewards to the communities that use them.

Although some early prevention programs have demonstrated that early deterrence is beneficial for individuals and society, others have suffered from limited funding and a failure to recognize evidence-based criteria (Kauffman, 2004; Osher, Quinn, Poirier, & Rutherford, 2003). Designers and directors of prevention programs will not clearly understand delinquency or effectively address it if protective factors in the youths’ environmental setting come to light. Additionally, focusing on the protective factors of prevention can lead to changes in social programs as well as public policy.

The Purpose of the Study

For decades, diagnosing youth by attempting to address a specific problem or problems deemed to be causing their delinquency has been the primary method of intervention. Rooted in the medical field, this deficit model presupposes the need to “fix” someone who is broken or sick (Bogenschneider, 1996; Farrington, 1987). It is only recently that an approach with a different balance has emerged: specifically, one that includes examination of protective factors. This newer approach has not been widely studied in the context of judicial systems, and provides only limited information on the ways to study delinquency as it relates to a positive outcome perspective and the chain reactions that foster resilience (Rutter, 1999). Rather, crime statistics and risk factors
continue to serve as the face of juvenile offenders. Society habitually labels these youth as “bad”, asking what is wrong with the individuals themselves that causes them to break the law and go against societal rules. Most likely, such questions surface because it is easier to look at behavior patterns, blame the youth, and connect the behavior to assumptions about continued patterns of crime than to attempt remediation. Further, some researchers view youths’ early criminal behavior as progressive in nature. Initial offenses predict future criminal conduct that will peak when they are in their 20’s (Siegel, Welsh, & Senna, 2006). Consequently, when a youth breaks the law, they are automatically looked upon as a potential long-term criminal.

While focusing blame upon the individual by labeling youth as delinquent can create possibilities for added services, this practice has strong disadvantages. Labeling marginalizes its targets, encouraging society to perceive the labeled youth as abnormal. It adds to situations that foster isolation and delinquency, and can play a substantial role in directing a criminal life course (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006). Since labeling has such a critical impact on a youth’s future options, juvenile justice must move towards a more balanced perspective of youth who become involved in the justice system. Instead of emphasizing individual deficits, systems of care should focus on the life stories of those who enter the juvenile justice system.

While wider social issues such as disproportionality and overrepresentation of minorities, poverty, public policy, transit patterns, and other factors provide important context to the life stories of delinquent youth (Anyon, 2005), these topics are not within the main scope of this research. Rather, it concentrates on protective factors that can immediately refocus efforts within current juvenile justice systems to prevent recidivism, and provide a deeper understanding of youth at risk that can be later related to a wider context.

*Predictive Components*

This chapter explores how a better understanding of protective factors can improve recidivism outcomes for youth. Six main components are introduced here, and discussed in
greater detail in Chapter Two.: (1) family predictors; (2) community predictors; (3) individual predictors; (4) risk factors; (5) protective factors; and (6) resilience. Building a conceptual framework around these components creates an ecological model that explains why some youth desist from delinquent behavior after their first involvement with the justice system, and others do not. The research focus and some common terms are then discussed.

As discussed previously, while focusing on risk can help evaluate the likelihood of future problem behavior, it provides little information on what protective factors or interventions may aid in preventing that future problem behavior from actually occurring. This information that can have a far greater effect on directing a youth’s life (Howard et al., 1999). This dissertation approaches delinquency through a prevention lens by examining which constellation of protective factors predicts positive outcomes for youth who desist from future involvement in the juvenile justice system after initial experience in the system.

The main components of this research are the factors that come into play when defining youth as they go through adolescence. The process can be a protective journey, one of risk, or most likely one with different levels of risk and protective factors. When youth are in detention, they are at varying stages of their lives in relation to their families, communities, and to themselves as individuals. Simply entering the juvenile detention system adds another risk factor to their future involvement (Wasserman et al., 2003). Discussing the complexity of each component the interplay between components can be difficult to label as either risk or protective factors. It is not until a better understanding of all components is reached can the reader see which factors are protective and to resilience and which, by contrast, are detrimental and constitute risk. This analysis leads to the conceptual model in Figure 1.

*Family Predictors*

Familiar foundations represent one of the most important primary components in socializing youth to the world around them (Howell, 2003). This protective foundation is
dependent on the relationships and behaviors within the family, with a caring relationship with an adult, most likely a parent, serving as the most powerful known protector from the negative effects of risk (Benard, 1991; Osofsky, 1999). Introducing the idea of the family unit as a predictor of delinquency can be controversial, since there are many components, such as structure and function, involved in each family construct. Generally speaking the structure of the family involves the presence or absence of parents and the function involves the quality of relationships within the family (Rosen, 1985). For example, in the early 1900s, family structures that deviated from the ideal of a home unit headed by two biological parents were widely accepted as being related to delinquency (Wilkinson, 1974). Over the years, the definition of family structure has been repeatedly extended to include homes headed by one natural parent, a combination of step-parents and natural parents, and extended family members. Changes in family structure also affect function. The function of the family has long been recognized as one of social control that helps produce youth behaviors that follow societal norms (Reiss, 1951).

For the purposes of this study, a family is considered stable (or functioning positively) if the family unit helps a youth make decisions that are socially acceptable and not contrary to the laws of the local geographic area. The protective influence of stable families in reducing the negative influences of society begins at a young age (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995), providing a simplistic understanding and limiting exposure to conflicting perspectives while a young person is developing his or her sense of moral right and wrong (Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Sung Joon, 1991).

Youth with unstable families are less likely to be held to societal standards of behavior within the home, but when they interact outside the home, their behaviors may be redirected. McDermott and Raley (2007) describe learning as interactions that take place within activities and the consequences that follow those interactions; in this model, stability is not a constant but rather an ongoing communication that takes place between the young person and their
environment. The relationships within a family can be highly supportive. Adolescents who describe their relationship with their family as open, warm, and intimate have been shown to have friends with relatively low levels of deviance or norm-breaking behavior (Werner & Silbereisen, 2003). Healthy families are protective and reinforce positive social behaviors, and the youth belonging to such families tend to adhere to these standards of behavior (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). However, this protection is not absolute. There can be periods when youth may rebel against these protective families to gain greater self-understanding. For the most part, families are protective by nature and guide their children in the acceptable ways of society, but this is not always the realized outcome (Unger & Powell, 1980).

Families can be supportive or can add risk to the youth in the family unit. As youth grow, they use their parents’ behavior as the first models with which to define their own behavior. If there is difference between what they see their parents doing (for example, breaking established laws), they may start to identify with the idea that law-breaking is acceptable because their parents do it. The youth’s reaction may range from minimal to extreme, such as in cases where there are families, participate in criminal organizations. A study of 531 incarcerated youth in Oregon found that juveniles with a family member convicted of a felony are twice as likely to show early criminal behavior than delinquent youth without a felon in the family (Alltucker, Bullis, Close, & Yovanoff, 2006). Even though these youth might have experienced growing up in a very loving family, that experience may have also been one that involved criminal activity as a part of day-to-day family operations. Thus, these families were supportive but in an antisocial way; as a result, a youth that is reared in a family with such risk factors is more likely socially to rebel and engage in risky behaviors. In some cases, if a youth recognizes that one or more members of their family is engaged in wrongdoing, that youth may decide to stop the generational chain of crime, rebel against the family tradition, and to do so, may seek help from the community.
Community Predictors

Role of school. Typically, if the family is unable to provide a positive base, the responsibility is extended to the community and its schools, because they are the next social system responsible for teaching youth. One of the major problems that youth at risk encounter in schools is that the educational system emphasizes waiting for students to fail before providing intervention (Kauffman, 2004). This policy of requiring youth to exhibit persistent academic or behavioral failure before providing intensive intervention is very damaging to the affected youth, to their families, and to society at large.

Without appropriate and timely intervention a lack of educational opportunities, both formal and informal, can lead youth to disengage and seek social success in other ways: possibly through rebellion, acting out, or defining success in life away from school (Erickson, 1987). Some research has indicated that these early antisocial behaviors are predictors of delinquency (Unruh, Bullis, & Yovanoff, 2004). Other studies have demonstrated that antisocial youth do not necessarily become antisocial adults (Mahoney, 2000). Clearly both findings can be valid, with their combination suggesting that ecological variables play a strong role in determining which antisocial youth go on to become troubled adults. Because some signs of antisocial behavior, such as rebellion, may be seen as a normal part of the maturation process, using antisocial behavior as the only risk factor can be inaccurate.

The recognition that a single aspect of a youth’s development (for example, adolescent rebellion) can serve as both a risk and a protective factor focuses attention on the maturation and situational changes that occur through adolescence (Bogenschneider, 1996). It is important to note that a youth’s community can introduce either risk or protective factors through their interactions over time and through positive or negative exchanges. Beyond schools, there are other governmental agencies that assist the highest risk youth (i.e. social services and mental
health organizations), and intervene at different levels for the youth and the family. Over a million delinquent youth made choices that required the justice system to step in (FBI, 2008), ultimately working to change the youths’ behaviors to be more pro-social.

Role of juvenile justice. If inappropriate behaviors continue to escalate or major problem behaviors are not appropriately addressed within the family or educational system, the responsibility to intervene may shift to governmental agencies such as the juvenile justice system. By default, the juvenile justice system then becomes the setting for secondary screening or the provision of intensified services once the family, school, or community have failed to redirect the youth to exhibit more appropriate behaviors (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). The juvenile justice system in the United States was designed in the 1800s to deal with youth who commit crimes. The purpose is to treat youth differently than adult offenders, under the assumption that since they are not fully developed, changing inappropriate behaviors before they reach adulthood can potentially stop a life of crime (Woolard, Fondacaro, & Slobogin, 2001). Once youth have problems with the law and become involved with the justice system, however, the time for the utility of the deterrent aspects of the juvenile system has passed. Tools used in the justice system to help divert further crimes then focus on removal and rehabilitation (Clarke, 1974). Isolating offending youth from society gives them no opportunity to commit more crime, and provides a setting that in theory is intended to rehabilitating. However, locking a youth up also increases their individual risk level by taking them away from educational and career opportunities in the community. This is of special concern since most of these youth are in highest need of increased mental health and educational service (Krezmien, Mulcahy, & Leone, 2008) but do not often get it.

Thirty to 40% of youth who reach the justice system are diagnosed with disabilities, predominately emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD), learning disabilities (LD), and conduct disorders (Dembo & Schmeidler, 2003; Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005).
Academically, recidivism rates are strongly correlated to low academic achievement (Malmgren & Leone, 2000). High numbers of youth in the justice system also have specific language and reading problems. These problems lead to difficulty advancing in school and play a key role in the development of behavioral problems and subsequent criminal referrals (Platt, 2008; VanderStaay, 2006). In addition to identified disabilities, youth with behavioral needs are under-identified and hence do not receive the appropriate services. In addition to immediate academic effects, youth with disabilities are also more likely to have difficulty transitioning to the community then those without disabilities (Baltodano, Mathur, & Rutherford, 2005). Nationally, while research has shown that approximately 5% of students may require special services for mental health needs, only 1% of students with EBD receive special services in school settings (Cropsey, Weaver, & Dupre, 2008; Merrell & Walker, 2004). When both the family and community fail to act in meaningful preventative roles for youth at risk, individual predictors of youth involvement in the justice system take center stage.

**Individual Predictors**

Individual predictors of outcome for youth at risk consist of the accumulation of choices and interactions the youth has made while growing up, including personal dealings with their family and the activities and relationships the youth has had within the community. Either of these can add risk to the individual, such as in the case of a family with a history of crime, or a community with high gang activity. These aspects can also be as protective, such as in the case of a family that models good values or a community that reaches out to youth to protect them from gangs, leading to individual predictors of based on the choices that youth make. Youth make individual choices based on what they identify with, and as they get older, they settle into their patterns of decision-making. Those decision-making patterns are then reflected in their further choices and interactions within their family or community. An individual can be influenced and
taught by their families and communities, but ultimately, all of their choices, protective or risk, and decisions belong to the individual themselves and not to society at large.

No matter whether youth are surrounded by risk or protective factors, they are able to make choices based on one or the other. At a young age, a youth may struggle to make these choices and err towards risk. If they learn through the consequences that their choices put them at risk and they then choose not to make that choice again, their development is steered towards more desirable choices. On the other hand, the youth may also make choices of risk and start connecting with antisocial behaviors, which builds towards a more risky individual behavioral cycle.

**Risk Factors**

Risk is acquired in the different domains of the family, community, and through individual choices that lead to less-than-desirable outcomes (Wasserman et al., 2003). The more risk a youth accumulates, the more likely his or her behavior will escalate into delinquent behavior (Loeber, 1990). Cottle, Lee, and Heilbrun (2001) conducted a meta-analysis and found the main risk factors for recidivism in juvenile justice centered around the following four areas: (1) family and social factors such as abuse, single parent households, out-of-home placements, and delinquent peers; (2) demographic factors including gender (male), minority racial or ethnic status, socioeconomic status, age of first arrest, prior justice history, and severity of offense; (3) educational factors including achievement scores, low IQ, and special education services; and (4) clinical history of conduct and pathology problems. With exposure to multiple risk factors, behavior problems can increase and accumulate to the point where youth come in contact with police and authority figures in the justice system.

Longitudinal research of youth in the justice system provides a more comprehensive understanding of the developmental pathways that lead to delinquency. For example, Loeber and Farrington (2000) found that approximately seven years pass from the first onset of minor
problem behavior at age seven to the first involvement with the courts for criminal offences at age 14.5. Specifically, starting at an average age of nine, there is a progression from basic problems at home or in class to delinquent acts at age 11 or 12, and then to serious criminal acts at age 14.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are those that protect youth from problem behaviors and delinquency in the presence of risk and produce positive outcomes in difficult situations (Luthar, 2006; Rutter, 1999; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Benard (1991) conducted research in the home, school, and community and defined protective factors which included individual meaningful participation, supportive relationships, and social bonding. The individual attributes which qualified as protective factors included being socially competent, making positive choices, possessing problem-solving skills, and having high expectations. Within the family, some protective factors were defined as having supportive parents, high expectations, and modeling behaviors. Within the community, being engaged in education, social bonding with positive peers, and community interaction were found to be positive supports (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2002).

Further research specific to protective factors is limited, and the definition of what is protective or positive has generated much discussion when compared to the better-defined notion of what places youth at risk (Deković, 1999; Luthar, 2006; Rutter, 1999). What is widely accepted, however, is that protective factors help foster competence and promote positive development in difficult situations. This helps to explain why some youth who share the same risk-laden environmental factors as their adjudicated peers, realize much more positive experiences. One example is that of running away from home: while some youth run away from home and into greater vulnerability, for others running away is a way to productively get out of an abusive situation by running away to an appropriate place with extended family support. This can help protect the youth from becoming delinquent or further increase risk. Thus, a notable risk in one instance can be a protective agent in another. Understandably, the question of how
protective factors interact with risk and future help in desistance, resilience, prevention, and treatment continue to be the subject of much discussion. (Deković, 1999; Farrington, 1998; Hart, 2005; Luthar, 2006; Rutter, 1999).

The psychological perspective of protective factors, as they interact with risk, has been addressed primarily in three ways in the literature. First, protective factors have been described as the opposite or other side of risk; second, they have been considered free standing and not opposite of risk; and third, they have been viewed as an interactive part of risk serving to minimize or buffer the effects (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002; Deković, 1999; Farrington, 1998; Jessor et al., 1995). Each of these perspectives takes a different look at how protective factors interact with risk and how they affect the likelihood youth will engage in delinquent behavior again. Just as it would be inappropriate to consider risk alone when designing interventions, so too is it equally inappropriate to restrict our focus to protective factors exclusively. Both protection and risk can be simultaneously present and both contribute to how youth deal with their environment. Studies show the greater number of protective factors result in the fewer problem behaviors in those with the highest risk (Jessor et al., 1995). For those with greatest risk, youth detained, a focus on protective factors can help address problem behavior and delinquency by a shifting the focus from fixing perceived risk to building upon protective factors and creating resilience.

Resilience

Resilience can be defined as bouncing back from situations that would otherwise have a negative outcome (Luthar, 2006). Resilient behaviors are atypical responses to circumstances that, most would believe, lead to increased risk (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Pollard, Hawkins, & Arthur, 1999). Resilient behaviors can also lead to desistance from delinquent behaviors or serve as coping mechanisms in typically negative situations (Mahoney & Bergman, 2002). Resilience is not so much a characteristic as a dynamic process within a given
youth (Rutter, 1999; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). When placed in situations where risk is prevalent or a negative outcome is expected, the quality of resilience in a youth’s personality may allow them to make choices that do not lead to the otherwise predicted outcome. For example, the experience of being arrested might serve as a learning experience and a consequence for inappropriate behavior; behavioral research suggests that arrest as a form of punishment in and of itself does not lead to recidivism (Matza & Sykes, 1961). If desistance occurs, it may be more because of protective factors the youth has already acquired prior to arrest. While being incarcerated adds to youths’ risk accumulation and could lead to possible bonding with negative peers, it can also be protective and alter a possibly trajectory of criminal behavior and lead an adolescent to positive peers or supportive adults (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999).

Nevertheless, prevention at an early age is the best approach. With at-risk youth, it is better to develop protective factors early on than attempt to “repair” youth and focus on risk established overtime (Luthar, 2006; Rutter, 1999). Resiliency plays an important role in such early intervention because it is something that can be learned. Luther (2006) stated that resilience is built upon the inter-personal interaction with life situations and relationships which cannot develop without some interface with positive models or the presence of inner drive. Youth who run away from home, for instance, demonstrate that they are driven to escape a negative, abusive situation and by doing so are attempting to establish a better relationship with their extended family or the community. Engaging protective factors in situations of risk builds resilience in youth and can help them desist in negative paths of futures delinquency. While it is the accumulation of different factors together, rather than the presence of one or two individual factors, that make an individual resilient (Baltodano et al., 2005), some of the core characteristics of resilient youth are positive school performance, good parental interaction, and appropriate peers (Farrington, 1998). This focus on building resiliency is important to explore for helping school and justice systems shift away from a psychological perspective of fixing risk and toward
empowering youth to develop healthier responses to the negative stimuli in their lives. As such, these predictive components lend themselves directly to a conceptual shift in our perceptions of the ways youth can interact with their environment to achieve resilience.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual views of ecological risk and protective factors are based on an interactive relationship between the family, community (peers, school, and juvenile justice), and the individual (see Figure 1). Each identified factor serves both as a protective and risk aspect that contributes to a youth’s identity: it is the accumulation of these identity components (e.g., biological, value, bond, social cultural, and choices) at any particular time and space that defines the individual. Identity theory describes this intertwined aspect as the social and psychological planes (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). The social plane in this conceptual framework is the individual because of the interaction with the family and community, while the psychological plane refers to the internal identity.

The current literature on identity theory takes two directions, one that is concerned with the interaction with society and self, and one that is concerned with internal cognitive process (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The Figure 1 explains the main interactions of both but describes them as separate parts. The internal identity components are made up of four mechanisms (biological, value, bond, and social cultural) that together lead to choice a youth makes. The pivotal choice aspect within the identity construct adds to the individual that interacts with the family and community. A youth’s experiences can be either predominantly risk-heavy or largely protective based on the past interactions with family and community that contribute to their definition as an individual. There are many components in the conceptual understanding of the ecological model, and this draws points from Bronfenbrenner’s nested ecological model of different levels of understanding and interaction surrounding an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological model applied in this study does not go to the depths that Bronfenbrenner did but rather examines
the microsystems and mesosystems of the interaction internally and with the family and community dynamics (Rogoff, 2003).

An individual’s identity is formed through the interplay of biological factors, along with what they value in life, which they bond with, how these variables interact with the youth’s sociocultural environment; all of which lead to the choices they make. Although the perceptions of these interactions are not seen, they are integral in forming the choices youth make in their family and community settings. They further serve to accumulate as each individual’s protective or risk factors.

In this conceptual framework, the ecological model assumes an inherent interrelationship among the youth’s environment, risk and protective factors, and resiliency that plays a vital role in determining the probability that a first offending youth will desist. Youth are faced with certain choices in their lives, some of which, as discussed above, result from situations that they cannot control. For example, their family and the geographic area where they grow up, the community
they interact with, and the schools they attend, all place them in a particular peer group. The environments and associations with which the youth involve themselves help the individual define him or herself.

The conceptual framework of identity is built around the family, community, and individual situations, and serves as the main discussion within the research of risk and protective factors; however, the internal interplay between a youth’s developing identity, and biological, values, bonding, social cultural and choices will take research with far greater breadth than any single dissertation to fully understand the individual.

**Biological Characteristics**

Using the ecological model as a framework requires a holistic approach that looks at all parts of the system that come into play to predict whether youth will desist after their first offense or follow along on a trajectory of criminal life. A major component of human ecology is biological make-up (Losel & Bliesener, 1994). Biological make-up is part of what we are each given and can influence the choices we make (Siegel et al., 2006). Representing the initial ‘package’ of components through which we encounter the world, it can be considered the first element that contributes to who we are as a person - but one that can be altered by risk or protective factors that interact to shape the identity of youth (Hogg et al., 1995). While malleable, therefore, the implications of the biological make-up of an individual cannot be overlooked.

Some biological characteristics, such as genetic traits, cannot be changed. Others, such as brain chemistry and hormonal levels, can be monitored and adjusted with medications or therapy. As discussed, many youth in the justice system have disabilities that are genetic and require such monitoring. Examples of such conditions include hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention problems that can lead to more criminal type behaviors (Loeber, 1990). Fearlessness or low autonomic arousal that can lead to a youth seeking increased stimulus or taking unhealthy risks also occur among youth in the juvenile justice system (Farrington, 1998). Schizophrenia and
bipolar disorder account for some incidents. These and other conditions become part of a youth’s identity by affecting the way s/he sees him/herself and interprets the social world. Thus, biological factors have implications for the identity construction of youth interacting on a daily basis and can serve as protective or risk factors.

The perception of genetic disorders as either risk or protective factors strongly depends on the type of setting the youth is raised in. The BELLA National Study (Wille, Bettge, & Ravens-Sieberer, 2008) found that biological aspects of youth can add to risks associated with poor mental health. Other research has suggested that the biological factor of a low resting heart rate is a predictor of violent youth (Farrington, 1998). Changes inherent in different stages of youth development, such as puberty, can also psychologically build protective or risk aspects to healthy development (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). A strong, supportive family can give the youth an understanding of the genetic factors they have inherited and offer ways to overcome them that are protective. Support can occur most easily if the family identifies the need at an early age, rather than as an adolescent matures. As youth grow older, they become more able to learn about their own biology and may seek the needed help beyond their own family unit (Bynner, 2001). Alternatively, a disorder can be misidentified, poorly understood, or unsupported, leading it to function as an increased risk. Certainly, the biological aspect is complex and cannot be fully covered here, but studies are finding connections between the biological aspects of youth and delinquency.

Values

Deriving from internal family dynamics, the culture of the family and the community, the position of the family, and psychological and historical dimensions of the individual within the family, values are subjective to the individual and denote what is important to them. Within attachment theory there is discussion of attachment systems where a feeling of security is established with certain behaviors internally (Bretherton, 1985) similar to having a value towards
something. Understanding where an individual person places their sense of value can better help predict competencies and how a youth will meet challenges in their environment (Freitas & Downey, 1998). Critical decisions are made based on values. For example, while some youth place value on their families, peers, and education, they can value one, many, or all to varying degrees. Values are different for different people and may not be the same. A youth may value their family and decide not to choose delinquent behavior or they may value gang acceptance and become delinquent (Kobrin, 1951). If any of these individuals are at risk for further delinquency and social disassociation, then that individual must negotiate the circumstances, choices, and factors in their lives by weighing the value of each. The values behind delinquency are less deviant than they are often portrayed and represent an oversimplification of the middle-class (Matza & Sykes, 1961).

Often self-esteem is brought up as a descriptor for delinquent youth who are perceived to have poor self-esteem, which is also cited as a risk factor, but this can be far from the complete truth (Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989). If youth find acceptance with negative family or peer patterns and identify with antisocial behaviors, their self-esteem may be heightened. For example, fighting is wrong, moral or ethically, but for some, fighting is a way to defend and stand for what they feel is right. To some youth, fighting is a way to gain respect from peers and it is perceived to be morally right to fight and express your identity. There are also gray areas in society where fighting may be questionable based on individual opinion such as defending yourself if someone is threatening you or a loved one; or in war times to defend your country or religious beliefs. Situational circumstances (i.e. killing during war time) provide a view of strength for what society usually deems as inappropriate behaviors in one circumstance but part of the social order another (Matza & Sykes, 1961).

In a study of 1,800 youth, the reciprocal effects of self-esteem on poor school performance, depression, and delinquency were examined. It was found that low self-esteem in
school and depression can foster enhanced self-esteem in delinquent behaviors (Rosenberg et al., 1989). Rosenberg and colleagues (1995) later go on to explain the difference between a global self-esteem, looking to the psychological greater good, and a specific self-esteem, driving behavior. These can be in conflict as society has an expectation of a look at the greater good of behaviors and less of specific self-esteem. This conflict can serve to strengthen a youth’s connection in defining themselves apart from society, as delinquent and thus gaining greater self-esteem by committing more crime (Knowlton, 2007).

What a youth values may also guide them away from delinquency. These include, but are not limited to, certain shared social values such as attending school regularly and respecting others. When these socially-sanctioned values clash with the youth’s values, however, there can be conflict and possibly disassociation with social norms that often leads to delinquency or resilience (Freitas & Downey, 1998). What is valued by a youth can also lead to what a youth bonds with as they develop (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

**Bonding**

The concept of bonding is derived from certain aspects of social control theory that address whether bonding to a conventional family unit and/or school would put a young person on an appropriate societal path (Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999). Within Identity Theory bonding is discussed as commitment towards a social group and the choice of continued interaction (Hogg et al., 1995). As such, what a youth bonds with can add to risk or be a protective aspect against delinquency. In a study examining the student school bonding of more than 4,500 6–8th graders, they looked to see if the bonding helps prevent problem behaviors. The study also found that it can be a potential mediator that directs youth toward socially acceptable behaviors (Simons-Morton et al., 1999). This model of bonding is very straightforward as youth will either bond with or reject things they are exposed to, with very little gray area. Parents are the first bond that a youth has experience with, creating a sphere of influence that comes through
direct interaction, identifying with their parents, and the passing down of family stories (Kagan, 1999). According to Attachment Theory, the bonding with a parent is an important determining factor in whether a youth will grow up to be mentally healthy or not (Bowlby, 1990). As the youth matures, this bonding moves to peers and community.

Bonding can take place with either risk or protective factors. This is because youth often choose things that are consistent with what they value and this helps them to identify people they want to surround themselves with as they mature. This bonding process solidifies the individual because it forms through interactions between the environmental factors, or school in one case, and psychological factors such as values and bonding in the other. Bonding can be with family or community as protective factors, which might be expressed by going to school and living a moral life. There can also be bonding with risk factors, leading to socially unacceptable behaviors, which in turn can lead to problem behaviors.

Youth surround themselves with others who make them feel comfortable; social acceptance is an important aspect of adolescent identity. These social bonds are all grounded in early family associations and community interactions as referenced above, but the bonding aspect of their identity is the social structure that youth use internally to identify who they want to be (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Over time, as youth develop protective or risk patterns, associations with criminal elements can become a major part of their lives as easily as socially successful elements. Repeated studies show that a small minority of criminals commit over half of all offenses (Farrington, 1987; Harris, Skilling, & Rice, 2001). This can lead to generational delinquency and a culture of deviant behaviors as their norm.

Social Cultural

The social-cultural aspect of protective factors addresses how youth fit or want to fit into society (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). There are many different levels of association a youth can have with their social cultural identity, for example ethnicity, poverty, gender, student, etc. Conflicts
arise when individual families and young people hold values that differ from the social cultural expectations that are prevalent where they live.

Studies have shown that interaction with pro-social peers was more important than a youth’s experience in the family or community (Boehnke & Bergs-Winkels, 2002). However, as a youth matures and has more interactions, he or she may choose to drift towards where they want to fit in based on a chosen peer group and how they will define themselves into adulthood.

Similar to Vygotsky’s descriptions of the zone of proximal development within the cognitive learning process, a youth can learn with the help of those around them as well as learn independently within their social cultural sphere (Rogoff, 2003). This means that those with whom youth associate can help build them towards risk or protective socialization. This can be as simple as a teacher praising a student in front of the class. It can be a risk or a protective aspect of their social cultural identity in the classroom. The only thing the teacher needed to do was to hold up the student’s paper up and say, “Great job! You got 100%”. If the student does not value social praise and takes it as a social embarrassment to the point where they do not want to be associated with major school success, the next time they may change their behavior and make sure not to get 100%. This is totally internal within the student but with the interaction and where the youth wants to fit can conflict with other aspects of their identity.

What to one may be simple (praising a student) to another it becomes compounded, (i.e. peer acceptance, teacher relationship, bonding) as youth mature and have more interactions that add complexity to their lives. For example, when a hypothetical youth who has aspects of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention problems (Loeber, 1990) enters school unprepared for the social standards of academia, it can be difficult for them to learn even though they value education. The school setting increases the young person’s ability to receive an acceptable level of education and yet may also separate them from their social setting. The youth values his association with his peers and does not want to feel different because he cannot learn as well in
the same way as others. This can alter their bonding with the whole school experience. In one possible scenario, the youth decides to act out in an unacceptable way (i.e. humorous school distractions, fighting, or dropping out) to compensate for lack of academic association. The youth is now in a social setting where the value of social interaction is perceived to be of greater value than academic success. The youth may also look for another place to fit in and bond with others in their milieu of social cultural association. In this hypothetical example, macro and/or micro socially acceptable cultures present themselves as a protective or risk factors within the youth’s identity.

With the majority of youth admitting to a delinquent act at one time (Siegel et al., 2006), the behavior itself is not what creates prolonged risk. Rather, over time, the choice of interactions and the adhering to, or straying from, social cultural norms leads to bonding with social or antisocial associations. Decisions to go against social-cultural norms may in fact draw youth to identify with subcultures. This is where delinquent youth can associate and build a life in antisocial acceptance that they would then identify with as normal (Werner & Silbereisen, 2003). They would also then be in an area where the supporting environment reinforces these socially unacceptable behaviors.

This is the basis of the cultural deviance theory, which emphasizes that those without the ability to adhere to the socially acceptable paths of school, work, and obeying the laws can find themselves supporting risky behaviors (Siegel et al., 2006). Additionally, youth that struggle with acceptance in social settings find they do not fit into the normal cultural values. Similar to generational crime, there can be certain high-crime areas with high drop-out rates, for example in urban areas with disadvantaged youth with expected high levels of school achievement as a standard (Mahoney & Bergman, 2002). This can help to disassociate those with cultural capital trying to find associations and acceptance leading to subcultures which may have problematic behaviors and delinquency as part of their foundation of social cultural practices.
Choices

From the rational choice perspective, youth make conscious choices to be delinquent or pro-social (Paternoster, 1989). Choices interact with both protection and risk based on what the youth learns from their experiences and identify with in their setting(s). This is unique within the youth’s identity as biological, value, bond, and social-cultural conditions can change throughout a youth’s life, but the choices they made in the past cannot be changed. Similar to Decision Heuristics theory (Schneider & Ervin, 1990), a youth makes decisions that involve framing a situation and searching their memories for new information, after which they craft their decision to action based on their values, context, opportunity, as well as reward and punishment.

In another hypothetical situation created for the purposes of this dissertation, a youth who decides to shoplift serves as an example. Even though the youth may be influenced by risk factors in the family and community (peers to be specific) to steal, ultimately they are the ones that make the choice and commit the act. Based on the outcome, the choice can become either a protective or risk factor. Decisions to avoid bonding with peers with risk, or the knowledge that they have socially acceptable values that guide them away from the behavior of stealing may have been learned from the family or community at a young age. So the experience of shoplifting can show protective aspects of their identity or further risk based on the actual choice to steal.

Youth at early developmental stages make choices based on the models within the family and community, and as they mature, they become more and more grounded in their identity (Rogoff, 2003). Choices first made to try different behaviors can be learning experiences, but a youth that continues to make particular choices over a period of time builds patterns that become identified with protective or risk interaction. The intellectual development of youth can be debated, but unless one knows the youth’s ecological components and the motives or underlying reasons a youth makes certain choices, protective and risk factors cannot be fully understood.
In summary, very few elements in the lives of delinquent youth are clear-cut as to whether they are protective or whether they increase risk towards future delinquency. Starting at the family base and adding the community interactions can be protective and help the youth gain pro-social support or be a risk and add antisocial support. This leads to peer, school, and juvenile justice interactions and how each can further build or help change the trajectory from protection to risk. Whether or not a youth is “knocked” off course depends on that youth’s developing identity, their biological characteristics, their individual values, who and/or what they bond with, and their social-cultural association and experiences, which they emulate through the choices they make, and ultimately the combination of these leads them to, or away, from continued delinquency.

The choices a youth makes are the main determining factor that delinquency relies upon and should always be the starting point. All the other aspects are of the identity are internal and have led up to or have helped to define the behavior. But if a youth does a delinquent act, it can be a pivotal point in either continuing down the criminal path or turning away from it. What they take away from the experience can help them identify bad decisions contribute to future resiliency, which most do as they age out of delinquency. With the different aspects of the risk and protective components, there needs to be a clearer understanding of how protective factors interact with risk and how youth are able to be in risky environments yet remain stable and productive within society. It is imperative to look at both risk and protective factors to understand the dynamics and resilience of youth. It is known that a youth’s personal identity is closely tied to their social identity (Damon, 2004). Although there is a critical need to incorporate these components into the framework of identity research designs (Stryker & Burke, 2000), this exploratory research will not get to that level of inquiry. It can, however, add to the discussion of identity and a protective model of delinquency.
Previously relied-upon deficit models are overwhelmingly focused on negative aspects of delinquent youth’s lives and the risk factors that predict recidivism. The ecological model developed in this study stems from the researcher’s long-standing belief that all individuals need to look for the good in others. Further, protective factors research must be conducted from an ecological standpoint by thoroughly examining the interrelationship of how at-risk youth interact with protectors and risk, their social-cultural responses to external pressures, their self-perceptions of who they are as people and where they belong, and their biological strengths and weaknesses.

It is also important to understand where youth are developmentally in their maturation process and how they adapt in risk situations. This can help to better understand the ecological components that come into play when directing youth to productive outcomes (Bogenschneider, 1996). Limited research has looked at youth at the time of first arrest and the protective factors that prevent these youth from returning. Being arrested is an event that increases the rate of risk for youth, and detention increases risk for further involvement in delinquent behaviors. This research is original in perspective and can yield important findings about the protective factors that non-returning youth possess. Situational research at the time of first arrest and in the developmental paths of risk can help define a possible turning point away from continued delinquency and illuminate what protective factors are present.

**Research Focus**

The current research model contends that protective factors of youth first arrested are specific to youths’ ecological factors including family, community, and individual characteristics. Acquiring information on these protective factors to better understand how risk and protective interact with the youth is done through an assessment when a youth is initially processed. There are a total of 44 questions the youth are asked in the self-report instrument when they enter detention. The individual components consist of the historical choices the youth made and
perception of their own interactions. The family components are defined by the youth’s immediate family as well as the extended family and any adult or peer support recognized by the youth. The community components delineate the boundaries of youth engagement in school, extra-curricular activity, and neighborhood interaction. Other court information will also be evaluated to measure intervention and services the youth received when getting involved in the juvenile justice system.

This research adds to the limited body of knowledge on protective factors and is original in how they contribute to desistance of youth who have experience their first incarceration. Better understanding these factors will contribute to the development of a predictive model of desistance similar to the risk model of recidivism in which predictions are made for youth returning to crime. The information yielded from protective factors models could potentially lead to a philosophical system change in education and justice as it looks at protective factors and moves away from looking at just the deficit model of risk. This change offers value while working towards a Delinquent Healthy Components Theory that will become a driving force for treatment and increasing protective factors within youth while building resilient youth.

Hypotheses

The primary purpose of this study is to explore and identify the most prevalent protective factor of youth from their first involvement in the justice system by monitoring the rate of desistance at 6 and 12 months. Based on the extant literature, three main hypotheses are forwarded:

1. Detained youth who report pro-social family support will be more likely to desist. This includes stability of family, reports of family fun activities, and family support.
2. Detained youth who report pro-social community group involvement will be more likely to desist. This includes regularly attending school, involvement in extra-curricular activities, and perceived community support.

3. Detained youth who report individual pro-social decision making will be more likely to desist. This includes reports of positive peer association, pro-social choices (e.g., not being assaultive, remaining drug free, and not running away from home).

As indicated by the ecological model of youth desistance, there can be many combinations of risk and protective factors, but the responsibility for action ultimately lies with the individual to make decisions and learn from personal experiences to avoid repeating behaviors that would lead to a life of crime and incarceration. This perspective is congruent with the holistic aspect of the ecological model, which acknowledges that there can be both protective and risk factors associated with the family, the community and the individual.

Lastly, because of its exploratory nature, this study also affords an opportunity to empirically assess for the presence of disproportionate minority contact (DMC) in one of the nation’s largest juvenile detention facilities, and to explore what specific factors may be of importance with regard to desistance by minority youth. As indicated by Cabaniss, et al. (2007), data review and decision-point mapping within juvenile detention facilities has consistently emerged as a “best practice” and critical step with regard to DMC reduction efforts (Cabaniss, Frabutt, Kendrick, & Arbuckle, 2007). Additionally, Hoytt et al. (2002, p. 14) have noted that data review is an essential preliminary step because it identifies “how DMC looks and how it operates in a system, without resorting to anecdotes or emotionally charged debates over individual bias.” (Hoytt, Schiraldi, Smith, & Ziedenberg, 2002). By gathering and exploring empirical data obtained from a critical decision point within the juvenile justice system (e.g., detainment), this study hopes to provide knowledge and information that may be useful in curbing DMC in juvenile detention settings.
Common Terms Defined

Definitions of main terms are important, because each can be contextual and are defined differently in different fields. The following terms are used frequently throughout this research study:

- **Protective factors.** Factors that help to moderate risk factors and problem behavior (Jessor et al., 1995) and can help a youth at risk to gain better than expected outcomes.

- **Risk factors.** Factors that contribute to and are associated with negative outcomes and future criminal behaviors (Deković, 1999). Risk or being at risk is a complex term used in a variety of ways depending on what risk is facing the youth. Risky behaviors alone cannot define an at risk youth. It could be a risk for failure in school, a risk for progressive behavior problems, a risk for smoking, but risk is relative to the behavior and any future negative outcomes. Risk also brings an uncertainty or fear that a youth will become a future threat, and it is used to predict the probability of negative events, framing risk as a causal component to negative values within youth. For this paper, risk will be defined as a probability for continued delinquency or criminal behaviors. Risk is both objective and subjective, because a youth can have delinquent behavior and have risk factors but not be officially defined as delinquent (Siegel et al., 2006).

- **Delinquency.** A youth committing a crime and receiving a police submitted referral for breaking the law. Delinquency in general can range from a youth that is a nonconformist in a classroom, has defiant behaviors, or fits into a formal definition of breaking the law. It cannot be explained or understood with a single factor but is a complex phenomenon that is not easily understood but often used to criminalize youth (Johnson, 2003). For the purpose of this paper, delinquency will be defined as a youth committing a crime and receiving a police submitted referral for breaking the law.
Recidivism. A youth returning to delinquent behaviors (Jimerson, Sharkey, O'Brien, & Furlong, 2004). This means that the youth made choices to break the law and after that experience committed other delinquent acts.

Desistance. A youth not repeating a delinquent act after first committing one (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002), is the opposite of recidivism. With both recidivism and desistance there is a causal process why they occurring (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Pro-social. This is the opposite of antisocial where a youth or family is connected with socially acceptable behaviors within their communities. This is learned and established by society with complex aspects including voluntarily and positive outcomes (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989).

Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC). This is the phrase used in the justice system describing the disproportionately large number or minorities that come into contact with the criminal systems (Kakar, 2006). There are governmental mandates to reduce over representation of minorities in the justice and educational systems (Hill, 2004).

The juvenile justice system is a governmental agency designed to help youth rehabilitate and desist from criminal behaviors based on the belief that they are different then adult criminals and are treatable (Woolard et al., 2001).
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the literature surrounding delinquent youth and the historical and conceptual perspective of risk and protective factors. An in-depth look at the effect of risk and protective factors on the three main components of delinquent youth family, community, and the individual will then focus on defining the developmental stage of youth when they experience their first arrest. The mistake of relying solely on risk is revisited throughout the chapter. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of resilience and theories surrounding risk and protective aspects of delinquent youth.

Delinquency

As referenced above, nearly all youth (80 to 90%) admit to delinquent acts (fighting/assault, stealing/theft, cheating/fraud, etc.), but only about 20% are ever officially defined as delinquent; and only about 3% a year are adjudicated delinquents (Siegel et al., 2006). The definitions of delinquency and risk are unclear and some believe they do not exist because the words have such a wide range of uses (Hart, 2005). The words “delinquency” and “risk” create individually built mental images that place a value on a youth through the personal definition of one’s perceived delinquency characteristics. These perceptions can vary based on the individuality of the person labeled or the labeler and include the situational context and specific environment setting.

A parent, teacher, community leader, and a juvenile justice worker could define delinquency and risk in different ways and at different levels. The definitions are dissimilar based on individual filters of how they view delinquent youth. In other words, when we look at a youth’s behavior, we also look at a mirror of how we individually define that behavior. We attach judgments and our own reasons for the youth’s motivation. We assume that a youth who is
assertive when speaking to a teacher or law enforcement officer is defiant. But being assertive can
be positive; in adulthood, it is viewed as a quality of great leaders.

Studies show that the majority of adolescents desist “naturally” from delinquent behavior
in young adulthood with the existing interventions and social systems (Woolard et al., 2001). With such a high percentage of youth that show problem behavior at one time in their lives, it is encouraging that only a small minority end up with a pattern of continuous crime leading into adulthood; however, a clearer understanding of delinquency and risk is seriously needed (Yoshikawa, 1995).

Views of Delinquency

*Historical View*

Over the last 80 years, research has been consistent in defining which risk factors contribute to future delinquency. Ernest Burgess was the first to develop an instrument to statistically predict recidivism with adult parolees in 1928. It was the first risk model. Models continue to be validated as tools to predict recidivism (Schwalbe, 2007b) and have been the main focus of delinquent youth research. In the 1950’s, related educational research first discussed youth “assets” and scholars believed a change required a departure from the traditional deficit model of exploring only risk (Howard et al., 1999). This was the start of looking at what was right with youth. In the 1980's Garmezy and Rutter were the first to use the word “protective” in related research. These researchers conducted comprehensive studies on risk factors of stressful youth and first described protective factors as having an interaction with risk in youth in tough family situations, divorce and matters of neglect (Rutter, 1999). Protective factors were determinants to explain why two youth with identical risk factors experienced different outcomes (Woodward, 2008). Exploring protective factors will add to the discussion of delinquency and help design programs that change policy to better serve this underrepresented population.
Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics associated with negative outcomes and future criminal behaviors (Sharpe & Litzelfelner, 2004). Typically, risk starts in the family where there are restrictions placed on youth during their upbringing. These limitations extend to the community and help develop productive citizens (Bynner, 2001). They are quantitatively assessed and predict delinquency based on aspects of a youth’s biological (family, genetics, individual evolution), environmental (family, neighborhood, peer, school), and behavioral (crime, peers, risk) actions. The main body of research on risk is typically on career criminals and defines factors that are consistent among adults and youth incarcerated in long-term facilities.

In these studies, youth are typically designated as low, medium, or high risk depending on particular factors. In some research (Bogenschneider, 1996; Hart, 2005), as few as one risk factor can define a youth as at risk, but in most research, multiple factors or an accumulation of risk leads to an increased likelihood of future delinquency. Unfortunately, these definitions are broad and vary from citing just one risk to as many as 71 characteristics a youth possesses to define him or her as at risk (Howard et al., 1999).

Research also shows that early conduct problems are consistently correlated with future delinquency and adult crime (Farrington, 1987; Loeber, 1990; Mason & Windle, 2001). Other research identifies substance abuse, low academics, and gang membership as the universal risk factors in different cultural settings (Piko, Fitzpatrick, & Wright, 2005). Further research studies defines risk more by associations and life events according to five factors that lead to delinquency: one or more parents being arrested; the involvement of child protective services; at least one family transition (divorce, death, traumatic event); participation in special education; and/or the youth having early antisocial behaviors (Walker & Sprague, 1999).

Predicting delinquency is not always a linear process. Yet, it is the presumption in education and justice that if a youth has accumulating risk factors it is more likely that he or she
will continue to engage in delinquent behaviors (Gerard & Buehler, 2004; Loeber, 1990).

Examining risk exclusively presents a one-sided view of the youth. It is similar to getting to the end of a person’s path and looking back at how they got there.

Individually, a person tends to develop certain rituals that they use in their daily routines to gain acceptance into groups that will support and further their beliefs (Matza, 1990). These rituals keep the individual on the path to becoming a delinquent. Similarly, when looking at risk after youth have many years of delinquency under their belt, investigations find that they are not engaged in socially acceptable activities, have been reinforced in negative behaviors, and over time, the youth are surrounded by groups that support and further their beliefs.

With different attempts to find which components lead to delinquency, there are some consistent findings in the field of juvenile justice. In a meta-analysis of 23 juvenile risk assessments, Cottle, Lee, and Heilbrun (2001) found ten risk factors that consistently predicted continued delinquency. These were: 1) age of first police contact; 2) age of first commitment; 3) increased stress and/or anxiety; 4) family problems; 5) use of leisure time; 6) conduct problems; 7) delinquent peers 8) length of first incarceration; 9) number of out of home placements; and 10) number of prior commitments. These ten predictors were shown to be valid risk factors for youth over time, are consistent elements of long-term patterns of criminal involvement, and are predictive of future delinquency (Losel & Bliesener, 1994; Miller & Lin, 2007; Schwalbe, Fraser, & Day, 2007).

The generic nature of these identified factors provides minimal information about the youth and all stress family problems to some degree. These factors show long-term patterns that need more substantial analysis. For example, four of the ten factors have to do with duration of problems. If a youth continues to get into trouble with the law at an early age, is incarcerated, or committed, they will continue with delinquency and become an adult criminal. Some of the other risk components have little to do with the youth’s choices and are to a certain degree out of their
control. These include out of home placements, family dynamics, and family problems. Focusing on circumstances that society or their families place them in, this diverts attention from the factors youths can control. Thus, the process of becoming a delinquent is not an individual journey, but a progressive negotiation of individual behavioral choices and an ever changing social renegotiating as a group member (Salmi & Kivivuori, 2006). Using risk factors as the only standard may have been proven valid over the years (Schwalbe et al., 2007), but it stops short of understanding delinquency and how youth interact with factors they have little to no control over. Risk also does not take into consideration the continuing changes and choices youth encounter through adolescents and into adulthood or the protective factors in their lives (Graydon, 2007; Loeber, 1990).

When adding in protective factors, a clearer picture of youth emerges. For example, a risk factor for delinquency is running away (C. Schwalbe, 2007a; Wasserman et al., 2003). Yet for some youth, as in cases of abuse, running away is a protection or coping mechanism. Projecting a deficit perspective can lead to teacher and system biases where youth are misunderstood. When this occurs, the only tool available is a prevention model that is used as an attempt to repair or alter the youths’ risk. Besides misunderstanding many factors that put youth at risk are historical or predetermined by nature, which makes reducing or eliminating these risk factors difficult, if even feasible. Risk factors such as abuse, single parenting, gender, IQ, and disabilities, cannot be changed by the youth or by the systems that serve them. Focusing solely on risk factors limits the identification or creation of effective interventions for these youth (Loeber, 1990). It is then imperative to shift from a deficit model to one that examines protective factors that are critical to helping youth succeed.

While risk factors have been found to be highly predictive of future criminal behavior, certainly, not all youth with them continue down a path of crime. Looking only at risk is overly simplistic, and a more accurate model of delinquency needs to be established and tested. Seldom
discussed is how fluidity and the individuality of risk affect delinquency. When predictions and trajectory are used to look at future delinquency, longitudinal research needs to examine the protective components of change and not just continued delinquency. A youth who may be performing poorly at present may in actuality be on an overall positive path when their history is accounted for (Mahoney & Bergman, 2002). What may be a risk to one youth may not be to another. In some cases, it may be a protective aspect of their life such as with the example given in Chapter 1 about a runaway. This example also demonstrates that youth who have risk also have protective factors. The holistic approach of the ecological model as applied in this research is more effective for evaluating delinquency and provides a more in-depth look at both the protective and risk base of youth.

Protective Factors

It is difficult to differentiate between youth at risk that will desist and those that will recidivate by accounting for risk factors alone (Loeber, 1990). A look at protective factors helps define a youth in more detail. The protective factors can show a change of trajectory from risk that only produces negative outcomes to a focus on how youth have both risk and protective factors, which will produce better than expected outcomes (Garmezy, 1985; Luthar, 2006; Masten et al., 1999). Like risk, protective factors, are biological (family, genetics, individual evolution), environmental (family, neighborhood, school), and behavioral (positive, peers, attachments) (Crew et al., 2007; Middlemiss, 2005). These factors strengthen a youth and allow them to bounce back from an otherwise negative outcome.

A lack of research exists on delinquent youth from a protective factors perspective. No meta-analysis of variables exists that look at desistance from delinquency. Very few empirical data are available to guide theory or foundational understanding of protective factors at the delinquent stage (Stouthamer, Loeber, Wei, Loeber, & Masten, 2004).
When protective factors interact with risk, they become more complex and difficult to evaluate. Their complexity stems from the interplay between multiple factors and across multiple settings (Yoshikawa, 1995). The complexity is demonstrated by several studies that contend protective factors have two effects (Crosnoe et al., 2002; Hart, 2005; Jessor et al., 1995). First, protective factors may directly influence risk by changing delinquent behaviors. For example, when a youth loses his biological parents, he may be cared for by a relative and gain pro-social support. The risk of not having a parent is directly changed by someone filling that role. The second type of effect protective factors can have involved shielding or buffering the youth from the risk. In this case, negative neighborhood peers or gang involvement is buffered by joining a sports team or community church. The involvement in positive activities mitigates the negative impact of delinquent peers on a youth. They are not away from the negative peer influence because it is still where they live, but these protective factors can act as a buffer for the effects of risk that gangs present. Protective factors add to the youths’ socialization towards activities that foster greater ties to their positive family and society interactions. When this occurs, youth show stronger bonds of support, especially in times of risk.

Protective factors assume the existence of positive family or social influences. The majority of social norms may not be reinforced at the micro social level. The unspoken expected path of youth with protective experiences is not always followed, but services and systems like school and the juvenile justice system exist to help keep youth on this expected path toward education and career. These paths combine to build the youth’s identity, including the biological characteristics, values, bonding, and social cultural elements that are shown through their choices. As youth grow and mature, they interact with risk and protective factors in these different components to build who they are, how they identify themselves, and how future choices are made. Consequently, protective factors need to be assessed in the context of their function as they
can be moderated and influenced by many factors (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). The risk and protective aspects of each of these will be explored.

Predictive Components of Risk and Protective

*Family*

The family is the foundation for youths’ lives. There are many different definitions of family for today’s youth. A family can be led by two parents, single parent, grandparents, sibling, or extended families, and even neighbors. There are youth that are being raised in group homes with no parents but staff that rotate shifts working to take care of youth. The family structure can build a youth’s perspective from an early age (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009); one that has a stable look at what life is about from one or two parents or one that may have a diverse look at different perspectives from different people. No matter what the family looks like, it is believed that the more stable a youth is the better they will interact in socially acceptable ways (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Baltodano, Platt, and Roberts (2005) research supports this notion. In an analysis of 150 incarcerated youth, they found that if the youth reported a stable home they had less prior detainments, thus less involvement with the justice system.

There are also families that are abusive and have generations of incarcerated members’ that model antisocial behaviors, which they perceive as normal into their adulthood (Farrington, Coid, & Murray, 2009; Gavazzi, Yarcheck, Sullivan, Jones, & Khurana, 2008). In the Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS), 1,500 African-American youth in low-income areas were studied for early intervention from preschool to 17 years of age. These data demonstrate that a family is one of the most critical aspects of the formation of a youth’s social construction and bonding that lasts into their adulthood and affects later relationships that youth have with their peers, authority figures, and society (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Another study of 531 youth in an Oregon juvenile system defined early and late start delinquency. Youth classified
As early start were twice as likely to have family members that had been convicted of a felony and four times more likely to be in the foster care system (Alltucker et al., 2006).

As a protective factor, families are the closest most caring unit a youth can have. Although most families do the best they can to protect their children, they are typically the first blame besides the youth when there is delinquent behavior. Dearing (2004) studied restrictive and supportive parenting values across ethnicity and neighborhoods. A negative association with restrictive parents and academic performance were consistent across all and had a positive association with depression. With supportive parents values it was positively associated with academic performance (Dearing, 2004). Additionally, in some neighborhoods more restrictive parenting was protective for academic performance but diminished over time. Being a restrictive parent is not a clear answer to stopping delinquent youth. It can be a protection and risk at different times and in different situations. Parents’ behavior influences children’s behaviors but not often discussed is how children’s behaviors also influences parents’ psychologically and behaviorally (Luthar, 2006)

Regardless of the risk and protective factors, most youth will eventually pull away from the family and build their own social support system and gain new ways of looking at life (Paternoster, 1989). When this happens, youth may be drawn to deviant peers to get away from their family. Crosnoe et al., (2002) found that parental monitoring offered no protective value after a certain age because youth cannot be watched all of the time. It could also be the opposite, where the family has major risk and the youth wants to escape the generational path and, therefore, are surrounds with protective components to shield them from their family risk. A strong family relationship is protective if the family is socially compliant with the law. Just as a protective family can have effects of rebellion from a youth, a risk family could drive a youth to protective communities.
Besides the effects of family on the youth’s criminal patterns, there is also how the youth interact with their families. It is this bidirectional influence changes as youth and their parents experience life (Masten et al., 1999), which in turn creates the need for a more ecological perspective when looking at risk and protective factors (Knowlton, 2007). It is precisely because relationships are bidirectional that the family is a base for protective or risks at a very early age that give rise to patterns and habits early in a youth’s life. Additional studies focused on youth at different developmental levels and at pivotal roads are needed to continue gaining insight into delinquency and how youth interact with their surroundings.

Community

The community is defined as an interaction circle outside the family that either helps to protect or adds risk, but is close in proximity to the youth’s geographical upbringing (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). This includes peers, neighborhoods, religious and governmental systems (schools, juvenile justice, mental health, and welfare services). Because the focus of this paper is aimed at delinquency and desistance, the concepts of peers, schools, and the juvenile justice system are developed more fully below. In general, however, the community encompasses those outside the family that help strengthen and build the identity of a youth to be productive at school and work (Bogenschneider, 1996; Murray & Belenko, 2005). The geographic surroundings and interactions a youth has are first governed by the family unit and are based on where the parents decide to live and associate. The greater community is expanding with increased technology and communication so youth are able to see and explore outside their families more then ever before. But for the most part the family is in one or multiple areas, if transient, at an early age.

Into adolescence, the community expands or changes based on what the youth identifies and interacts with. Identity theory is part of the interaction needed in life to help build an aspect of the individual (Hogg et al., 1995). For example, the youth may be in an area considered low risk and have community support for moral development, such as in the family attending
religious services each week that can help guide certain peer interaction, instill certain values, and engage the youth at a young age with socially acceptable behaviors (Crew et al., 2007). A youth may also be in the same area and have a family that does not hold to community involvement and does not socialize at all with the community or engage with the available resources. In each community there are protective factors that can help, but there are also risk factors where youth can associate with others with socially unacceptable behaviors. This only becomes more complicated as we consider more components and interactions.

All possibilities cannot be explored, and governmental involvement in the lives of youth is controversial. Looking at some of the components and how they interact to build the youth is also important. For example, governmental agencies are part of the greater community. If the family is not fulfilling the needs of the youth or if assistance is needed for financial or behavioral support, then the welfare, foster, or religious systems can help with food, counseling, housing, or parental support. Also, mental health issues can be addressed with help for diagnoses and treatment (Cropsey et al., 2008). The community is, or should be, a help to the family, but unfortunately they are not always available (Luthar, 2006). Systems of care can be a great help but can also add risk.

Studies show that there are overrepresentations of minority youth involved in the justice system, and more involvement increases the likelihood of continued risk (Hill, 2004; Osher et al., 2003). Community agencies need to continue to assess their involvement to better understand how they are adding to the risk or protective aspect of youth. The main networks that delinquent youth have interaction with are their peers, school, and the juvenile justice system. The protective and risk aspects of each will be explored in more depth and in terms of how they strengthen and weaken socially acceptable behaviors and act as protective or risk factors.

Peers. The peer component of a youth’s life is typically the first interaction outside the family. The association with peers is an important facet of youth because they spend a majority of
time either with their family or friends (Bouffard, Roy, & Vezeau, 2005; Dishion et al., 1999). They interact with peers confiding in them, exploring their identity and developing themselves. Peers can give definitions and socially acceptable perspectives of defining life that are consistent or inconsistent (Simons-Morton et al., 1999). For some youth, peers become a safety net or a family-type connection for bonding and social interactions that they resonate with to build their identity (Mahoney, 2000).

Bonding can occur with more socially acceptable or unacceptable interactions dependent on the youth’s choices. Peers can offer strength as in a social network to support youth against a gang or abusive family; or it can pull the youth away from society and be destructive, as in joining a gang even when the family is pro-social (Boehnke & Berge-Winkels, 2002; Deković, 1999). By establishing peer relationships, they “bounce” their identity off one another to help formulate who they will become. Youth may have many friends or few. The relationship may be very close or more distant depending on how it is impacted by the family structure or the youth’s needs. The youth’s peers are established from their neighborhood at a young age and often expand when they enter school.

Youth have opportunities to interact and explore learning and life together with their peers in a different way than in an authority relationship with a parent or teacher. This stems from being the same age and having similar learning experiences and interactions. They draw close to those peers that are like them and create distance from those that are different. Peer groups can change as youth mature and go through different experiences. For example, at a young age if a youth has peers that encourage law breaking, the youth might experience risky behaviors and may decide to break the law by shoplifting. This could lead to the youth changing friends as they may get caught and find themselves in trouble. That experience may help them understand that they do not want to take risks in the future. It could also draw them closer to the friends with risk if they
get something free from stealing, for example, and are socially rewarded with acceptance by these peers in making wrong decisions.

Crosnoe et al. (2002) conducted a longitudinal study designed to examine the tools that would help youth acquire appropriate behaviors focused on the protective functions of family and school on deviant behavior. These researchers studied over 4,000 adolescent youth in nine diverse schools in California and Wisconsin and examined the patterns of interaction with families, schools, and friends. They found that school and family factors reduced delinquency and protected against deviant peers over a two year period. A strong family and school base of socialization can help overcome the influence of deviant friends. But, not all youth have strong families and are connected with school. The progression from a good family foundation to a school connection is the ideal path to avoid delinquent peers; but, there are also positive peer associations not often studied that help protect youth from poor families and school problems.

It was also found that low academics and identification with learning disabilities had odd ratios between 3 and 4 for longitudinal gang involvement (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999). When discussing delinquent peers, typically gangs are a main focus as examples of peer groups that are specifically focused on criminal behaviors. In a study to understand gang involvement, over 800 Seattle youth between the ages of 10 and 12 were studied to see what predicted gang involvement between the ages 13–18. The study showed that youth in one or no parent homes were more likely to be in a gang than youth in a two-parent home. This suggests that the gang could be a replacement of a caring relationship or security within the community and a place to find acceptance and association. In this instance, there can be a social protective aspect of the peers but a risk factor for criminal behavior. Multiple components lead youth toward choosing their peers, and one of the main environments youth gain association from is their school.
School. The school is typically the first structured environment outside the family where youth interact with peers and adults. The school’s responsibility has two focuses, social and academic, regardless of whether the youth is from either a protective or risk family situation (Crooks, Scott, Wolfe, Chiodo, & Killip, 2007; Crosnoe & Elder, 2004). They move from a life directed typically by their family to one with added responsibility to become educated. The school’s responsibility is also to help the youth in their development into adulthood as school attendance is legally mandated up to a certain age. Those students who don’t follow the socially acceptable rules of the school come into conflict as teachers work to control the inappropriate behaviors and bring them into compliance with expectations in the classroom (Lane, Frankenberger, & Lambros, 2001). If they cannot conform, they are removed from the general population either through the youth’s choice of dropping out or the school’s by expelling or isolating the student until they comply.

The role of the school in changing a youth’s trajectory from risk and violence towards pro-social behaviors is not easy to study (Christle & Yell, 2008). In one attempt, a study of over 1,700 maltreated youth in 9th grade from 23 different schools were given interventions of 21 relationship classes focused on improving pro-social skills over a year’s time. They were also engaged in supplemental programs like guest speakers and school fairs. The interventions were found to have a positive effect on school climate, but more importantly, there was a change over only a 4–6 month period with delinquency. The effect was mediated by the youth’s perception of the school’s safety (Crooks et al., 2007). The schools cannot fulfill the parent’s role of socialization but only act as one influence for directing youth and projecting an expected path to adulthood.

Social bonding with peers and adult authority figures can strengthen their protective aspects or increase risk associations (Pollard et al., 1999). Youth may have a positive experience if they resonate with teachers and the expectation; or they could have a negative experience if
they socially clash with their teachers or authority figures and peers. In a study of 11,788 students, grade 7 through 12, The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that schools could be a protective factor but only among certain adolescents. The greater finding was in the complexity and interplay that can interact during adolescent stages and the myriad of context specific understandings that come into play when looking at risk and protective factors (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004). In other words, if parents are not appropriate social models, then schools can be a potential force to engage them in meaningful ways that protect them from risk associations.

Research shows, however, that interactions in schools can have different effects. For example, youth that engage in extra-curricular activities or sports are thought to have increased protective factors. In a longitudinal survey of close to 700 youth, Mahoney, (2000) found that early patterns of extra-curricular activities reduced dropout and arrest rates for high risk youth over a decade (Mahoney, 2000). Yet in another study of over 150 youth that engaged in extra-curricular sports that were surveyed, membership in extra-curricular activities seemed to be a risk factor for increased rule breaking and more aggressive behaviors (Burton & Marshall, 2005). There can seemingly be contradictory research as in this case of extra curriculum activity, but this may not be engaging and protective for all youth.

The school is also a place where there are great opportunities to bond and build a protective identity. Conversely, it can be a place that adds risk and either isolates a youth or causes her to retract further from society. This is based on most teachers’ perception that an academic focus in which student’s must progress to each successive grade working towards going to college (Freitas & Downey, 1998), and if a student deviates they should not be in schools.

The academic expectation that youth should progress uniformly meeting specified standards at certain times based on their age and grade is prevalent in schools. Programs like Head Start reconcile the potential that youth can come into school at risk. The programs are
designed to offer increased services to youths from families that are unable to supply all the necessities for the youth’s education. The underlying expectation is that youth will progress through the standards and go on to a life of higher education and a successful career. If the youth can maintain the appropriate levels, they are considered protected from risk. If they fall behind, they are considered at risk and placed in programs designed to build educational importance and help in the youth’s personal life. Many youth who are at risk for delinquency receive special education services. These services can start at birth if the child has risk factors, and the family is able to both detect the need and get services in their local school.

Special education was designed to help students that are not academically or socially fitting in and attempt to keep them engaged in school, but the state of special education in dealing with delinquent youth is dismal. Minority youth diagnosed with EBD are overrepresented (Kauffman, 2004; Osher et al., 2003; Pope, Lovell, & Hsia, 2002). Further, it is estimated that only 1% of EBD youth are being served by special education under the category of ED. At minimum, 3% of school age youth to upwards of 6% are expected to have some form of EBD (Kauffman, 2004; Merrell & Walker, 2004). In the Chicago Longitudinal Study of 1,500 youth, researchers found that frequent school transitions and a placement in special education with an Emotional Disorder (ED) was associated with increased delinquency (Mann & Reynolds, 2006). Yet in another study of the 531 Oregon youth, there was no significance with the association of special education diagnosis and early start of delinquency (Alltucker et al., 2006).

These findings were viewed as puzzling, because they go against the professional understanding that early assessment of youth with behavioral, social, and emotional problems can reduce further problems that lead to delinquency later in life. For some youth, school is just a social negotiation to get what society demands (to graduate) and they understand the social interaction yet may struggle with the academic (Pope, 2001). If a youth is diagnosed, they may accept the help or they can reject and not want the help. The problem lies with those youth who
do not get diagnosed early and do not receive increased services when they enter school. Even though special education services can help their social and academic needs and deal with their disability, they do not identify this as a problem. For example, if a youth cannot read, the young person may get agitated and act out. Youth do not fully understand why behavior problems are the critical component at the time, and the teacher only addresses the behavior symptom while failing to discuss the true problem with the youth.

Thus, the social aspects of education may be more important than the academic expectations within the school. The school system is designed to help and assist youth in increasing academically to meet the standards. A youth who is below the standard and not able or willing to resonate with the school objective has to negotiate what he or she must do to mentally accomplish or understand. As they get older, they find themselves in a position that requires them to make decisions as to whether they should continue involvement or drop out when they legally able. Dropping out, however, is considered a social failure for the youth, school, and the community. There are no easy answers, as dealing with these youth can require special teaching skills, patience, and school systems that are not designed to deal with individual differences.

*Juvenile Justice.* There is an overrepresentation of youth with disabilities in the justice system. A conservative estimate indicates that 34% of youth in the justice system are diagnosed with a disability, mostly ED and learning disabilities (LD) (Christle & Yell, 2008; Quinn et al., 2005). The juvenile system screens youth with problems that were unsuccessfully addressed in other systems (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). It can be said the youth went through an upbringing from the family, protective or risk base, then to the community, protective or risk based, entered the school system, protective or risk based, and is now involved with the juvenile justice system.

Their needs were not previously met; they are now engaged with increased services and are faced with yet another layer of authority figures and standards. In this setting, youth show that they cannot manage their behavior and need increased help and monitoring to make better
decisions than those that lead them into law breaking activities. The levels of services mandated are based on the seriousness of the crime and the need of the youth to stop their delinquent behaviors. As shown, most youth that exhibit patterns of delinquency or behavioral problems have years of criminal experience before ever getting involved in the justice system. These services are described by some families as disjointed and not focused on positive factors and families but only on specific problems (Brookins & Hirsch, 2002). As protective, the justice system offers the addition of more structure, monitoring and rules that they may have not received from their parents; conversely, the system could be a risk by providing more exposure to other antisocial youth.

The juvenile justice system is designed to increase services to help protect the youth from further problems once they are caught and brought into the system. Just as in the schools, the juvenile system, in an effort to get the needed services to the youth and family, has early intervention programs for minor delinquency. The goal of early intervention is to avoid full court involvement and mandates. If the crime is more serious or if the youth cannot or will not follow the diversion help, then a judge and probation officers get involved. The delinquent youth are arrested or put on probation and monitored for a year or more. For the most part, over half of the referrals each year are for youth that have no prior criminal record and another twenty percent have only one prior referral (Maricopa county juvenile probation data book, 2007).

Only one fourth of the youth with referrals have a history with continued criminal problems. Some youth that are brought into the justice system early and receive the needed help do continue breaking the laws. Studies have shown that there is increased risk by increased association, labeling, and isolation with other delinquent youth. In a study of 1,000 seventh and eighth graders in New York, youth labeled as delinquent were more likely to associate with delinquent youth and give a social shelter to continuing in delinquency (Bernburg et al., 2006). The interactions of the youth from the family through the community of peers, school, and the
justice system accumulate within the youth and are added to the blocks that form their individual identity.

**Individual**

The individual encompasses what the Identity Theory calls the social and cognitive interactions that define an individual (Hogg et al., 1995). The individual is the person at that moment in time, encompassing their environment and situation. Youth are at all levels of delinquency and able to adjust pro-socially given protective background and resources (Mahoney & Bergman, 2002). They are viewed as their patterns of behaviors and not just the few choices they make at a young age while exploring different experiences and learning from decisions. This is similar to Bourdieu’s description of Habitus, or the world view of an individual acquired through their experiences of thought and social interaction (Bourdieu, 1977). This helps youth form what is normal or the way things are done. The individual may be making different decisions than what is considered acceptable in society, for example breaking the law. Society may see them as going against truth or common sense, which can lead to moral or intellectual judgments from the outside community. But, to the individual, it is an acceptable normal behavior (Abelev, 2009).

This can lead to labeling youth to explain why they are out of the normal population with their behaviors. There is uneasiness between those youth who are labeled and those who are not as youth get older. These awkward interactions can lead to separation and isolation between groups (Bernburg et al., 2006). Labeling theorists argue that individuals involved in the justice system increase criminal behavior as opportunities in law abiding activities diminish, and the individual adopts the labels’ characteristics (Schneider & Ervin, 1990). Meaning youth that gets arrested are labeled as “troubled,” and schools blackball them and work to get them out to avoid further problems. Also the youth may internalize the label and bond with it as a badge of pride such as when a youth boasts that he or she was locked up in detention.
An individual’s internal characteristics include the cognitive skills needed for thinking through situations and social skills needed for interacting with others (Crew et al., 2007). The individual also possesses physical characteristics over which youth have no control such as ethnicity, gender, and biological make-up. In a study of over 8,000 urban youth in 65 counties in the northeastern states, researchers studied the effect of contextual and individual characteristics on being detained. Minority youth were found to be detained at significantly higher percentages prior to adjudication (Armstrong & Rodriguez, 2005). There was more to youth being detained than their crime but lean to contextual factors as discussed with disproportionate overrepresentations.

Some of the individual’s characteristics are not under the control of the youth such as ethnicity or others referenced earlier including who they live with or the community where they live. But, what can be attributed to the individual is how they deal with these situations presented in their lives and the choices they make. Those youth that are able to negotiate within their environment and able to build a protective components into risk filled situations are considered resilient and are able to avoid risk (Ungar, 2004).

**Resilience**

Much of the empirical research focusing on protective factors explores resilience as an outcome of the interaction of risk and protective factors with youth in adverse situations. Protective factors reduce the negative effects of problem behavior at all levels, including those at highest risk (Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Pollard et al., 1999; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Some of the findings are broad and describe as few as one protective factor such as positive relationship as having a profound effect on youth and giving them the power in directing or redirecting their own inappropriate behaviors (Howard et al., 1999). Research explains those that were resilient had the important protective factors of: 1) the ability to cope with stress and/or problems; 2) at least an average level of intelligence; 3) self efficacy and /or confidence; 4)
coping characteristics of flexibility; 5) a stable emotional relationship with someone; 6) a supportive educational climate; and 7) a community social support (Garmezy, 1985). Even though the study subjects were not all delinquent youth they helped provide an idea of what components play a part in resiliency with this population.

In the Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment Project, researchers wanted to advance the understanding of the complexity of promoting healthy behaviors towards positive development of youth. Their three main protective factors were a caring relationship, high expectations, and meaningful participation, which they studied to understand resilience. It was found to be a great tool to have practical and theoretical implications in addressing risky behaviors (Constantine, Bernard, & Diaz, 1999).

Conducting research on resilience is difficult, because it is multidimensional, conceptually based on the youth, and requires some measurement as to what is “bouncing back.” In an effort to study resilience factors, Losel and Bliesener (1994) divided 100-14 to 17-year-olds and compared two groups; high-risk resilience youth and high-risk adolescents with behaviors problems, and found that there were more personal resources for the resilient youth. Each of the youth grew up with stressful life circumstances and events. The youth participated in interviews, questionnaires, and tests over a two year period that focused on four domains: biographical; problem behavior; personal resources; and social resources. They were also more satisfied with their social resources and support than the behavior problem youth. The study emphasized that research should focus on very specific contexts and characteristics of youth at different developmental stages (Losel & Bliesener, 1994). Therefore, looking at youth at the stage of first involvement with the juvenile justice system can yield important findings about risk and contribute to studies of what protects them from coming back. Other research indicated (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998) that having more responsibilities was a protective factor when
examining the criminal history of 500 youth who were followed into adulthood. They also found marriage and work to be a changing point in life course trajectories of those at highest risk.

With connections to social support systems like school and community, youth gain a sense of meaning and an inner connection in protecting themselves from risk (Bynner, 2001). The social aspects of protection are opportunistic, which means that when one form of support is not there, other forms present themselves and can replace the absent support in the protection or positive modeling. This in turn, will help to define the youth as a productive member in society (Fitzpatrick, 1997).

Other research specific to delinquency and desistance becomes relevant at this point. For example, there are multiple components that Laub and Sampson (2001) summarized in their literature review of how desistance from delinquency occurs. They defined them in six ways: 1) maturity, physical and mental changes; 2) crime naturally declines with age; 3) developmental or identity changes; 4) rational choice or understanding; 5) social control or bonding with others; and 6) social learning or an initiation to society. The majority of protective factors or findings that have the ability to make changes in delinquency involve changes in natural maturation and bonding to societal norms. Resilience is a process that some researchers feel should not be looked to for a solution (Knowlton, 2007). Others feel that we may benefit from a narrower conceptual focus on specific outcomes at developmental points (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008).

Nevertheless, it is clear that these constructs are ever changing and dependent on the interactions a youth has with family, community, peers, schools, and the juvenile justice system as well as their own psychological perceptions of themselves.

Theory

More is known about the pathology of delinquency than about how some of these youth maintain positive outcomes during the stages of delinquency (Ungar, 2004). A theoretical framework for discussion that draws upon the findings of the protective aspects of delinquent
youth is needed (Mahoney & Bergman, 2002). There are certain grounded theories that take into consideration the protective aspects of youth, but few are used in the assessments currently being used (Jimerson et al., 2004). There are different perspectives of the theories when associating them to delinquent behaviors like looking at social learning theory and gaining understanding of where, when, and how delinquent behavior can be rewarded socially. For example, a youth can gain respect by fighting and getting something for free by stealing.

At many levels of social cognitive theory, youth witness role models in society breaking the law and in extreme cases they may be in a generational family of criminals. Risk factors are reinforced and embedded in their life at birth from their families’ history of gang involvement and social isolation. It will continue for these socially maladjusted youths that are at highest risk for delinquency (Bynner, 2001). Just as we may have generational families of career professionals (i.e. doctors, lawyers, teachers), there are generational families of criminals or gang families dating back to the old mafia days. This presents a different understanding of social control theory and social bonding when a youth is raised in an environment where they can look at societal authority figures and compare them to their own family. Teachers, juvenile justice professionals, and case workers can then become a true disconnect with what the youth are living. Sometimes these authority figures become the only socially acceptable positive role model that the youth has to escape a life of risk and crime.

Hoffman (2002) defines strain theory, and explains why youth are not able to obtain societal goals of school achievement or become productive citizens because of the strain that leads to achieving success in other unacceptable social acts such as stealing, fighting, or gaining attention through negative means. There is a small minority of youth at the highest risk that most likely will continue, but there are many youth involved in some type of delinquency at a developing stage of understanding themselves and risk (Farrington, 1987). With youth at all different levels of risk and delinquency, a single factor approach that looks at risk needs to
explore a better ecological theory based model of defining how delinquency develops or desists with protective factors (Bogenschneider, 1996). An ecological examination of youth needs to take into account risk and protective factors as well as the developmental stages of delinquency.

With an extensive history of research into risk factors of delinquent youth, a more balanced approach and focus on protective factors is needed. This study fills the gap in the research by examining youth at the first stage of being detained and identifies the protective factors in youth that will prevent them from returning to delinquent behaviors. This research will also add to the field’s understanding of the influence of protective factors at the early stages of delinquency by determining whether youth with pro-social families, community groups, or individual pro-social decisions will be more likely to desist after their first offense. The following chapter sets forth the sample population and data analysis.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Exploratory in nature, the study was conducted with secondary data collected from juveniles ranging in age from 8 to 17. The data was examined using logistical regression and a descriptive analysis that shed light on the relationships between the independent and dependent variables of desistance and return.

Setting and Sample

The setting was two detention centers in a major city in the southwestern United States. In any given year in this city, about 5% of the juvenile population between the ages of 8 and 17 are referred at least once to the Juvenile Court. In 2007, there were 34,738 referrals representing 25,437 juveniles. Of these, 9.8% resulted in a juvenile being detained (Maricopa county juvenile probation data book, 2007). The detention facilities were designed to hold youth in protective custody until the facility staff or a judge decided that they were safe to be released into the community. Detention is used for temporary custody of a youth to protect the community and youth from further crime while the youth awaits legal action (Gamble, Sonnenberg, Haltigan, & Cuzzola-Kern, 2002). The police department is the only agency that can bring a youth to the facilities with a referral for breaking a law.

According to the facility data book, in 2007, 8,805 youth were admitted to the two facilities with an average daily population of 413. Approximately 38% of the detained youth were brought in for committing delinquent or incorrigible acts. The remaining youth were detained for past involvement with the courts. Court involvement includes an outstanding warrant or holding request for another jurisdiction. Almost half of the referrals, 48%, were status or public peace offenses. Status offenses are behaviors that are illegal because they are committed by a juvenile such as incorrigibility, truancy, runaway, and curfew violations. Public peace offenses are minor,
generally misdemeanors, involving acts such as disorderly conduct, giving false information, trespassing, and weapons misconduct (*Maricopa county juvenile probation data book*, 2007).

When youth are brought to detention they are placed in a plexiglass holding room while the juvenile detention officer (JDO) reviews the referral with the police. If all the paperwork is complete, the officer can leave. The Juvenile Detention Assessment Center (JDAC) is an area with several glass rooms with an open area in the middle and about eight seats facing toward a television mounted on the wall. There is a central desk and small side office where the JDO can bring the youth for privacy. The JDOs introduce themselves to the youth and explains what happens in detention. In addition to giving the youth information about court and the assessments, the JDO then make decisions whether the youth stays detained or is released.

The lobby and television area was designed to attempt to provide a feeling of comfort or distraction so the youth may relax, because being arrested and detained is a tremendously stressful situation in itself. The youth is treated with respect and staff is sensitive to the fact that this may be their first experience with being taken away from their home. The JDO calls the parents of each youth and explains the detention and court process and gathers information about the youth. The JDO runs an index on the youth that assesses their risk to the community. The index included information on their current charges, past criminal referrals, past court involvement, and possible mitigating or aggravating factors. If the index indicates they are safe to be released, their parents are called to come and get the youth. If they are deemed to be a continued risk, they see a judge within 24 hours to decide if the youth is actually a risk as indexed.

If the youth is to remain in detention, they are given mental health/suicide and medical screenings by the JDO to determine the critical safety needs of the youth. The JDO also sits with the youth and administers the JDAC assessment (see Appendix A). The officer has the option of administering the JDAC assessment during the initial intake or within the first 72 hours of
detainment, depending on the youth’s emotional or physical state at arrival. The assessment includes 41 questions that the youth answers while the JDO enters the information into the computer. After the assessment, the youth are further processed into detention by going through a search and shower process and waiting for their court proceedings within the next 24 hours.

**Instrument**

The JDAC instrument was designed by a committee of probation staff with over 200 years of probation and detention experience, collectively, including administration and line staff from the facilities. More than a year was spent designing the assessment and overhauling the JDAC office. The changes were prompted by an effort to get away from the jail mentality of a detention center toward a more relaxed setting that may help with habilitation of youth first entering the justice system. The changes and JDAC assessment were implemented in 2004 with minor revisions for more clarity to the assessment in 2006.

There are two philosophies in designing the assessment. First, the guiding principle stems from ten established state risk factors for continued delinquency: 1) current offense; 2) family conflict; 3) juvenile has been assaultive; 4) drug use; 5) truancy; 6) current school/ work status; 7) behavior or mental health issues; 8) peer involved in delinquency; 9) runaway; and 10) previous involvement in the justice system. These criminogenic factors were established in 1990 and collectively represent the most prevalent risk factors in the state in defining and predicting the probability of repeat offending. These factors were reevaluated in 2007 for the third time and found to be significant in defining risk with this population (Schwalbe, 2007a).

The second philosophy of the JDAC assessment includes gathering protective factors to better define the youth brought to detention. The 41-question instrument is a self report about their past and current behaviors. The questions have four components that include: 1) interaction and definition of the youths family, e.g., “What is your parents marital status?” , “Do you have extended family support?” , “Are there drug or alcohol abuse in your family?” , “Do you have
family fun activities?”, 2) interaction and defining of the youth’s community, e.g., “Are you currently going to school or working?”, “Do you have neighborhood support?”, “Do you have a religious/spiritual affiliation?”, and “Are you involved in extracurricular activities?”; and 3) choices or behaviors the individual youth is or have been involved in, for example, “Have you run away within the last year?”, “Do you take drugs or alcohol?”, “Are you on medications?”, and “Are you a member of a gang?”.

This assessment was designed to help JDO staff make better decisions on detaining or releasing youth and give the officer and court more information on protective components of the youth that in the past were not collected nor considered. Since implementation of the JDAC, it has been administered to an estimated 35,000 youth (Maricopa county juvenile probation data book, 2007).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected on each youth by the JDO within 72 hours of detainment. The questions were asked of the youth in a one-to-one setting with the JDO. The computer assessment utilized a drop down option for each question. A comment line was provided for more information as needed for comments or to record alternate answers. Self-report has been demonstrated to be one of the best methods in understanding delinquency (Junger-Tas & Marshall, 1999). In a study to assess emotional and behavior disabilities in adolescents with intellectual disabilities (ID), self report data were used. Researchers compared a Youth Self-Report (YSR) interview of participants with ID and a YSR completed by youth without ID. Parents also completed a behavior checklist. It was found that parent-adolescent agreement showed construct validity across all groups (Douma, Dekker, Verhulst, & Koot, 2006). Further, face-to-face methods have been proven generally effective in research to gain meaningful answers compared to a self administered assessment. Further, it has been found to be a valid tool with delinquent youth (Junger-Tas & Marshall, 1999).
Using a self report approach, information was gathered regarding the youths’ perceptions of their lives, their relationships with their families, and their relationship to their communities. The current study was limited to only the youths’ perspective, as it was their perception of the protective factors present in their lives that was of interest. Although, the perspectives from the family or community were considered critical to developing a clearer composite of the youth, collecting such data were not within the scope of this study. Indirectly, however, a partial view of the community perspective was provided in that the youth were considered to have broken a civil law defined as inappropriate.

Data collected were stored on the facility’s computer server with access available only to the Court Technological Services (CTS). The data from the JDAC assessment was grouped by age, ethnicity, and sex. The criminal history of these youth first detained in 2007 also included referrals received after first detainment and those brought back to detention after first detainment. To protect confidentiality of the participants, youths’ personal information such as name and identifying numbers were removed. The data were extracted by authorized personnel at CTS and provided to the researcher in Microsoft Excel form.

As a precursor to this research in 2006, the data from the JDAC assessment were requested by CTS for a descriptive analysis of the youth and to review the utility of the assessment. The data included results from 4,233 youth that completed the JDAC assessment between October of 2004 and July of 2006. The main findings were that 52% said that they were truant or had excessive absences from school, and 17% reported involvement in special education at some point. A few personal responses showed that 42% had a close friend or relative die, and 13% reported gang membership. Of the responses, 15% were on psychotropic medication, and 13% reported suicide attempts. A multivariate analysis of dependent variables was not conducted, but the information was used internally to drive programming for the detained youth. For example, grief program was started in the facilities with the awareness that almost half the youth
detained had someone significant die. Even though these data will not be used here, the previous findings help understand the utility of the JDAC assessment tool and the population of youth from 2004 to 2006.

The Current Study

There were a total of 8,875 youth in the data set of all youth detained in 2007. Of these 8,875 youth, there were 871 that reported it was their first time in detention and their first involvement with the justice system. Of these youth, there were 474 that did not return after the first six months and 180 did not return after twelve months (see Figure 2). First, a descriptive analysis was performed to more closely examine the experiences of youth whose first contact with the courts and/or first detainment occurred in 2007. For this purpose, frequency analyses were conducted on the 41 JDAC questions that compared the protective and risk factors of youth who desisted at six and twelve months to those that returned. All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Second, a logistic regression analysis was performed on the entire sample of youth, those at first involvement as well as those with multiple involvements with the justice system in 2007. From the total of 8,875 youth detained, there was a total 3,343 youth in the logistic regression analysis. Some youth were removed from the total sample because of missing data, because they were not detained for referral or warrant purposes, they were not in detention for more than 24 hours, or because they did not participate in the JDAC assessment. Some of the youth who were not included in the sample were also omitted because they were being held for other agencies including: the Department of Juvenile Corrections; warrants issued from other counties or states; and Federal holds. These youth typically would not be returning to the county and hence could not be followed for the purpose of this analysis.
The logistic regression was used as a method to predict which youth variables increase the likelihood of desisting. Many of the questions on the instrument required a yes or no response from the youth being interviewed. As a result, the items on the JDAC questionnaire lent themselves to being coded dichotomously where a zero indicated a no response and a one indicated an affirmative response (e.g., a code of 0 was given for a youth who was not employed and a 1 was given for youth who had secured employment). Two separate analyses were conducted. One analysis was conducted to examine significant predictors at six months. The second analysis examines significant predictors at twelve months.

Twenty-nine JDAC items were entered as the independent or predictor variables that were explored in the logistic regression analysis (Peng, Lee, & Ingersoll, 2002). The items are detailed in Table 1.
Table 1. JDAC questions used in the logistic regression analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there family mental health issues?</td>
<td>Do you have friends involved in the justice system (e.g., suspected or currently involved-detention, etc.)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you had previous involvement in the justice system?</td>
<td>Has your family sought help from other services?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your family have prior involvement with child protective services?</td>
<td>Is your family receiving services from another agency?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever been sexually assaulted?</td>
<td>Were the services completed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever or do you set fires?</td>
<td>Did the services or program help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever had a close relative/friend die?</td>
<td>Do you participate in extracurricular activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a member of a gang?</td>
<td>Do you have a religious/spiritual affiliation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you on psychotropic medication?</td>
<td>Do you have extended family support?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you runaway in the last year?</td>
<td>Are you currently going to school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever been assultive (i.e., intentionally caused injury or attempted to cause injury or hit/spit/kicked/pushed/thrown items/bit/or engaged)?</td>
<td>Are any of your family members involved in the justice system (e.g., jail, probation, prison, parole, detention, juvenile corrections)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there physical abuse in the home?</td>
<td>Have you ever been excessively truant or absent from school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you drink alcohol?</td>
<td>Are you currently employed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you take drugs?</td>
<td>Have you been in special education classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever been previously locked up in detention/correction?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This study examines the protective factors that are most prevalent with youth who desist from returning to detention at 6 and 12 months. It also takes a close look at the factors, their associations, and strength for predicting desistance. The chapter starts with a description of the sample demographics and a broad look at how the youth answered the questions. This background information leads to the hypotheses that form the architecture of this chapter. Family, community, and the individual are discussed.

Demographics of the Sample Set

Youth reported both being detained for the first time and that it was their first involvement with the justice system, from the sample of first timers (N=871), frequency analyses are calculated based on their demographic characteristics. As the youth reported, 80.4% were male, and 19.5% were female. They ranged in age from 10 to 17 years old, with an average age of 15.1 (Table 2). The ethnic breakdown was 43.1% Hispanic, 35.9% Caucasian, 16.3% African American, 5.4% Native American and 1.1% other.

Table 2. Age at First Detainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>5.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>18.10</td>
<td>18.10</td>
<td>33.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Frequency analyses are also conducted on the JDAC self report assessment’s main components and the facility data. The data include whether the youth was detained or received a subsequent referral at 6 and 12 months and if the youth had a dependency petition. In the initial research question, desistance was defined as not being detained and not receiving a new referral. The referral data was complex in how it was reported and was not used, but desistance was reported as not being re-detained at 6 and 12 months. The length of stay for these youth ranged from as little as a few hours up to several days, with the average being 22 days. Of the 871 youth, 54.4% did not return at 6 months and 38% did not return after 12 months.

The descriptive analysis of the first timers compares those that desisted at 6 months with those that desisted at 12 months and reveals that at 6 months, 54% of the youth had not returned and that by 12 months, 21% of the youth had still not returned to detention. Comparing percentages of 6 months at first involvement, six percent more males and 5.8% fewer females returned to detention. At six months, African American youth were 2.3% and Native Americans were 1.6% more likely to desist and Anglos were 2.1% more likely to return. At 12 months, 3.5% more Hispanic youth returned and 4.7% less Anglo youth returned (Table 3).
Table 3. Demographics of Overall First Involvement Youth who Desist Compared to Those that Return and Percentages within Ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>6 months</th>
<th>12 month</th>
<th>6 months</th>
<th>12 month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Return (n=474)</td>
<td>Return (n=397)</td>
<td>No Return (n=180)</td>
<td>Return (n=691)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>77.6</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>78.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>&gt;13</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentages within Ethnicity</th>
<th>6 months</th>
<th>12 month</th>
<th>6 months</th>
<th>12 month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Return (n=474)</td>
<td>Return (n=397)</td>
<td>No Return (n=180)</td>
<td>Return (n=691)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-American</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Protective factors for desistance

Taking a broad look at these 871 first offending youth, the percentage of youth that answered questions the same, ranged from minimal (average less than 20 percent) to the majority (average more than 80 percent). For example, the majority (100%) of this population reported not having tried to commit suicide, while the minority (14.1%) of youth in this population reported having a member of their family involved in the justice system. The general risk and protective factors of these youth include: court involvement; no reported suicide attempts; come from divorced families; and have alcohol, drug abuse, or mental health issues in their families. The majority stated that their problems started 1–2 years prior. They had not been subjected to abuse (sexually, verbally, or physically), had not set fires, did not belong to a gang, did not drink or take drugs, and do not have children of their own. The top protective factors for youth not returning were decided by the greatest difference between youth that desisted at 6 and 12 months compared to those that returned. The greater the difference between groups the more likely the variable was a determining factor of desistance.

Hypotheses

Family

1. Detained youth who report pro-social family support will be more likely to desist. This includes stability of family, reports of family fun activities, and family support.

   In general more than half of the youth reported living with their mother only, that their families had sought help prior to their current involvement, that they had insurance coverage, that they had the support of extended family, or that the family participated in fun activities.

   Within the family category, the largest differences between groups are found in variables related to dependency and services. Further, living with relatives or other family members besides the mother appear to be a protective factor for youth who desisted. At six months, there was a 14.4% difference between those that desisted (i.e., 58.9% lived with their mothers) and those that
returned (i.e., 73.3% resided with their mothers). There was a 4.8% difference between those that desisted (i.e., 27% lived with other family members) and those that returned (i.e., 22.2 lived with other family members) at six months. At the twelve month mark, there was a 15.9% difference between groups (i.e., 52.8% of desisters living with their mothers and 68.7% of those who returned residing with their mothers). The difference grew substantially at the twelve month mark to a difference of 18.4% (i.e., 39.4% of desistors living with other family members and 21% of those who returned living with family members respectively).

Family criminality also appears to be a factor with substantial effects on whether youth desisted at 6 or 12 months. Youth who reported not having a family member involved in the justice system are consistent in desistance over 6 and 12 months at 11.2% and 12% over those youth that return. Furthermore, youth who reported that their family members had sought help from other service providers prior to their juvenile justice system involvement are also more likely to desist. At six months the difference between groups was 10% (i.e., 53.8% of desistors and 43.8% of those that returned) and at 12 months the difference was 5.9% (i.e., 53.9% of desistors and 48% of those that returned) (see Table 4). When more closely examining data pertaining to those youth who reported that their families had sought services, a total of 147 (17% of the first timers) provided comments pertaining to the types of services sought. The breakdown of services from the 147 comments revealed that 78% were involved in counseling and 14% were involved in some type of psychiatric services (i.e., medication, mental hospital, etc). About 8% reported services through the welfare system like food stamps or medical services.
Based on these findings, it appears that Hypothesis 1 is valid and that a detained youth that has a pro-social family will be more likely to desist; however, the pro-social family is not necessarily the mother. The results suggest that living with a relative helps youth desist at almost a 20% difference at 12 months. Additionally, if a family sought services prior to their first detainment, the youth desisted by almost 6%. This was also a significant finding within the logistical regression with the overall large sample that will be discussed later (see Table 7).
Community

2. Detained youth who report pro-social community group involvement will be more likely to desist. This includes regularly attending school, involvement in extra-curricular activities, and perceived community support.

Within the community category, the protective factor that seems most prevalent for desistance is not having dependency petition files, meaning the court was not looking into the fitness of the parent to govern the youth. The difference between those that desisted and those that returned is 4.4% at 6 months and 12.5% at 12 months. There is also a difference between groups for those who reported receiving special education services for their learning disabilities and those that did not. At both the 6 and 12 month marks, students with learning disabilities are more likely to desist with a difference of 1.2% at six months and 4.7% at twelve months between the two groups. Involvement in extra curricular activities also appears to be a protective factor for those who did not return within the first six months. If a youth is involved in extra curricular activities, he or she is 7.3% less likely to return than those who do not participate in such activities (i.e., 48.6% and 55.9% respectively). At twelve months after their initial justice system involvement, the difference between those that desisted and those that returned who engaged in extra curricular activities shrinks to a 1.7% (Table 5).
Table 5. Community Protective Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics and Questions</th>
<th>Drop-down and Protective Option</th>
<th>12 months</th>
<th>6 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Return (n=180)</td>
<td>Return (n=691)</td>
<td>No Return (n=474)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependency Court Involvement</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why were you in Special Ed classes?</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EBD</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you involved in extra-curricular activities?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* LD refers to learning disabilities; ED refers to emotional disability; ADHD refers to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

In summary, slightly over half of the subsample reported that they were enrolled in school, but here there is no noticeable difference in desistance based on whether youth actually went or not. There is, however, a 12.5% difference with those youth involved with the dependency court, but this stems back to the family stability even though this community involvement defines it. Short term extra curricular involvement at 6 months has a slightly over a
7% difference, but this is not sustained at 12 months. No other community factors showed a big
difference with desistance.

_Individual_

3. Detained youth who report individual pro-social decision making will be more likely to
desist. This includes reports of positive peer association, pro-social choices (e.g., not
being assultive, remaining drug free, and not running away from home).

Overall, three quarters of youth reported that they did not take psychotropic medicine.
More than two thirds reported that they had not runaway within the last year. Slightly over half
were not assultive, or had friends involved with the justice system.

The main findings within the individual category are that youth who desisted had fewer
close friends or relatives die, were not on psychotropic medication at 12 months, did not have
children, and did not report drinking alcohol. At six months, those that desisted are 4.8% less
likely than their peers who returned to have experienced the loss of a close friend or relative (34%
and 29.2% respectively). The difference is nearly three times greater (12.5%) at 12 months with
41.7% of desistors reporting loss compared to 29.2% of those who returned. Respondents’
comments helped to further decipher the nature of the losses experienced. Three hundred seventy
two respondents (43%) provided comments. Thirty-six percent reported loss of a close friend;
33% reported loss a grandparent; 21% reported loss of relatives; and 9% reported loss of a father.

Whether or not a youth reported being on psychotrophic medication appears to be a factor
at the 12 month interval. Youth who reported not taking psychotropic medications are less likely
to return. There is a difference of 7.1% between those youth that desisted at 12 months. With
15.6% of those who desisted having reported taking such medications compared to 22.7% of
those who returned. The presence of parenthood also appears to have an influence on desistance
and return rates. Those who reported not having a child are nearly 5% more likely to desist (with
a difference 4.7% at six months and 4.9% at twelve months between groups). Finally, within the
individual category, alcohol consumption plays a role in desistance. More youth who desisted (84.6% at 6 months and 88.3% at 12 months) reported abstaining from drinking alcohol when compared with youth who returned (79.1% at 6 months and 80.5% at 12 months) (see Table 6).

Table 6. Individual Protective Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics and Questions</th>
<th>Drop-down and Protective Option</th>
<th>12 months</th>
<th>6 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Return (n=180)</td>
<td>Return (n=691)</td>
<td>No Return (n=474)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever had a close relative or friend die?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you on psychotropic medication?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any children?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>91.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you drink alcohol?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results of the logistical regression suggest that individual choices yield significant findings with the larger sample of both youth at first involvement and those with continued involvement (N= 3343). At the six month mark, whether or not youth had reported previously attempting suicide, using drugs, being involved in the justice system prior to the current contact,
or having friends who were also involved in the justice system appears to have a significant relationship to whether or not youth are able to desist.

As the model suggests, the log odds of youth desistance are positively related to previous suicide attempts (i.e., as the likelihood of desistance increases, the likelihood of attempting suicide decreases) and negatively related to prior drug use, prior involvement in the juvenile justice system, and having friends involved in the justice system. Thus, youth who were less likely to attempt suicide were more likely to desist rather than recidivate. Youth who had used drugs, had prior contact with the juvenile justice system, and had friends in the juvenile justice system were less likely to desist.

Table 7. Logistic Regression Analysis of Significant Predictors of Desistance at the 6 Month Interval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors at 6 months</th>
<th>ß</th>
<th>SE ß</th>
<th>Wald’s $x^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$e^\beta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.101</td>
<td>1.089</td>
<td>1.023</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.312</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide attempts</td>
<td>-.375</td>
<td>.160</td>
<td>5.505</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug use</td>
<td>.295</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>12.723</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1.344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior justice system contact</td>
<td>.288</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>7.482</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>1.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends in justice system</td>
<td>.177</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>5.445</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>1.194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wald’s $x^2$</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall model evaluation</td>
<td>154.748</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ß = individual regression coefficients; SE ß = the standard error of the individual regression coefficients; Wald’s $x^2$ = chi-square statistic used for testing statistical significance of regression coefficients; df = degrees of freedom; p = significance of regression coefficients at .05 and below. Cox and Snell $R^2 = .045$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = .062$; McFadden $R^2 = .035$; and NA = not applicable.
At the twelve month mark (see Table 8), the variables found significant at the six month analysis held constant. Plus, two additional variables were found significant. Whether or not youth reported previously being a member of a gang or having family members that sought help from other service providers also appears to have a significant relationship as to whether or not youth are able to desist during this time period. As was the case in the six month analysis, the log odds of youth desistance are positively related to previous suicide attempts and negatively related to prior drug use, prior involvement in the juvenile justice system, and having friends involved in the justice system.

In addition, those who reported being a member of a gang and seeking family services outside of the juvenile courts are negatively related to desistance. Thus, again youth who had not attempted suicide were more likely to desist. Youth who reported using drugs, being gang involved, being previously involved in the juvenile justice system, having friends in the justice system, and having sought outside help were youth less likely to desist.

Table 8. Logistic Regression Analysis of Significant Predictors of Desistance at the 12 Month Interval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors at 12 months</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>SE β</th>
<th>Wald’s x²</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>e^β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.695</td>
<td>1.089</td>
<td>11.333</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide attempts</td>
<td>-.340</td>
<td>.152</td>
<td>4.967</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug use</td>
<td>.438</td>
<td>.082</td>
<td>28.363</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1.549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior justice system contact</td>
<td>.266</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>6.614</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>1.304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang involvement</td>
<td>.376</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>8.959</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>1.456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends in justice system</td>
<td>.292</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>14.899</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1.339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family sought help from other service providers</td>
<td>.284</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>6.516</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>1.329</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results yielded important differences between youth at their first involvement with the justice system that desisted at six and twelve months as compared to those that came back. The focus was in the areas of family, community, and individual decision making. The analysis also found some significant components in the overall group of all youth to add to the discussion from this exploratory study.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the results of the study and identifies the protective variables that were present for first offending youth who desisted from further involvement with the juvenile justice system over a six and twelve month period. It must be emphasized that the findings in this descriptive analysis are exploratory and represent a suggestive look at protective aspects of youth at their first interaction with the justice system. The conceptual understanding of the family, community, and individual protective components are discussed and lead to an overall summary and comparison to risk. The chapter concludes with limitations of the research and future considerations that have educational implications for better understand youth who are at risk and desist.

Within the conceptual framework of the interaction between protection and risk within the family, community, and individual, there were specific protective findings at each level that showed a higher percentage of desistance along with risk. The protective components highlighted a fuller picture of the youth’s life and what was going on at certain developmental stages. Risk and protective factors can be bidirectional within the family, community, and individual. This research is a snapshot in time that possibly represents a “teaching moment” where the youth will learn to not break the law again or decide to continue along a path of delinquency. The interaction of risk and protective within the family, community, and the individual are discussed.

Predictive Components

Family

As previously discussed, protective factors, are those that keep a youth from repeat-offending or provide resiliency in situations of risk. Protective factors are complex, because risk to one youth may be protection to another. For example, a protective factor in this sample was not living with their mother but instead, living with other family members. A youth was 15.9% more
likely to return within 12 months if they lived with their mother in a single-parent home. If a youth was living with another family member, they were 18.4% more likely to not return at 12 months after their initial release. Although the assumption might be that youth should not live with their mothers, a clearer view of the family dynamic presented in this sample shows that the mothers of almost 10% of these youth have been involved in the justice system. Consequently, the familial patterns of justice involvement appeared stronger than the protection of living with a biological parent (Alltucker et al., 2006; Farrington et al., 2009; J. Murray & Farrington, 2005). This finding also shows that if another close relative is able to fill the parental role for that youth, they have a better chance of not returning to the justice system. Our social norms dictate that a youth should do better living with their mother based off the Western belief of the mothers role as being more attached to their children (Bretherton, 1985; Rogoff, 2003). Within this sample, 20–30% showed a protective aspect for living with a relative.

Another promising finding was that families who sought help from social support agencies before the youth was arrested served as a proactive factor, possibly showing the strength of the family to solve problems in the home. Those youth whose families sought help were 10% less likely to return at 6 months and 5.9% less likely to return at 12 months. Families that sought service were also found in the logistic analysis at 12 months as a significant factor in the overall group to show desistance. More than three-quarters of the current sample were already involved with counseling, which may have been why they desisted at higher rates than those youth’s families who did not seek services. Similar to other research findings that suggest that youth start breaking the laws and getting into serious trouble a few years later (Loeber & Farrington, 2000), over 90% of youth in this study reported problems starting 1-2 years prior. Having a family environment in which early services were made available in school or community also helped. Although there was only about half of the youth in this first involvement category, meaning family seeking help within the community alone was not always enough, it did show increased
desistance. This was also found within the logistic regression for the overall group of all youth that desisted over 12 months to be a significant factor.

Community

Community facets included relevant findings for agencies and systems that provided dependency care, mental health needs, peer involvement, and education. If the court system deems there is a need for a dependency petition, they will start the process through the child welfare system to ensure appropriate services are provided for a youth. Often, this leads to the youth being classified as a dependent of the court. While only about 20% of the first-offender population in the sample was classified as a dependent of the court, the variable yielded a 12.5% difference at 12 months and 4.4% difference at 6 months for youth who were not involved with a dependency petition. Youth have little to no control over placement decisions and are sent where the courts decide it is best that they live when the parents’ competency is questioned. Dependency determinations and child welfare involvement are one indication of major family issues, but if it results in a youth living with a relative, it can help with desistance.

Mental Health Services

Involvement with the mental health services was assumed if youth indicated on the JDAC assessment that they were on psychotropic medications, had attempted suicide, or had a family history of mental health issues. Notably, at 6 months, there was little difference between youth that desisted and those who did not based on mental health. At 12 months, however, an increase of 7.1% was reported for youth that desisted who were not on medication. Meaning that youth who were not on medication, were assumed to not have mental health needs, and were more likely to desist at 12 months. At 6 months there was no difference between those on medication and those not. Over-time, the affects seemed to follow the research that those with mental health needs were more likely to be involved with the justice system (Cropsey et al., 2008). Only about 21% of the youth in this study reported taking medication.
With suicide, it was assumed that if a youth did not report an attempt, there was no mental health issue. Of the 180 youth that desisted at 12 months, none reported an attempt. Within the logistical regression of all youth, attempted suicide had a significant correlation with desistance at 6 and 12 months. As for family mental health problems, 98% of youth in this study reported that they did not have any suspected issues in their family. The literature on children at risk and protective factors shows that when several risk factors occur simultaneously, aspects of mental health problems markedly increase. Those with the highest risk require complex intervention that not only reduces risk but that increases protective resources (Wille et al., 2008).

**Peers**

Peer associations focus on the community in which the youth lives and friends that they make in their environment. It involves individual choices of friends that serve to define them by their chosen peer group. The youth that desisted at 12 months reported 41% of their friends were involved in the justice system. There was not much difference with desistance with first timers, but with the overall group, the logistic regression showed significance at 6 and 12 months. This indicates that a little less than half of youth first involved did not come back, but still had friends in the justice system. This association and social environment shows that a youth can have delinquent friends yet desist. With reported gang membership, there was little change in desistance with first offenders, but significance with the larger group and the logistic analysis at 12 months. Friends and associations are important as discussed earlier, but this analysis shows they have little importance in desistance with first time offenders and desistance overall.

**School**

It is promising that half of the youth at first involvement that desist at 12 months are going to school part or full time. About a third drop out, and only about 4% are suspended or expelled. It is not clear why a youth drops out, but regardless of the reason, there is little to no difference in outcome of youth who desist. This means that the few youth (4%) who are being
kicked out, or are dropping out (30%) are still not continuing in delinquency at 12 months. Finally, services provided through the educational system are often delivered through special education. Twenty-one percent of the youth detained in this sample reported receiving services through special education. This is a little lower than the national findings of about 33.4%, but it is still an overrepresentation when compared to the 8.8% of youth in special education in public schools (Quinn et al., 2005). It was also found that there was little to no difference with desistance over 6 and 12 months indicating that youth are not more likely to continue in delinquency over time because of special education needs. This is similar to Alltucker et al. (2006) findings that there was no significant correlation between early start delinquency and special education diagnoses.

The special education diagnoses these youth received service under did not appear to determine desistance rates at 6 months; however, youth who were determined eligible for special education as LD were 4.7% more likely to desist over 12 months. This is difficult to define with certainty because diagnoses can overlap. Nevertheless, results showed that a small percentage of the youth in the sample received special education services: 13% LD; 4% EBD; 3.2% ADHD; and 2.4% other. This shows that first offending youth reported LD more frequently than other special education labels in this population of youth. These finding are different than a national study that found that out of 8,000 incarcerated youth, 48% were diagnosed as EBD and 37% as LD (Quinn et al., 2005). The issues of incorrect or lack of diagnoses cannot be explored with this study, but it is a prevalent topic and a valid problem as Kauffman (2004) argues. A better universal system of diagnosing youth at early ages is important to deal with disabilities at early stages of problem behavior.

**Individual**

The individual aspect of a youth’s life involves their responses to circumstances, personal choices they make given social pressures and expectations, and their choices about engaging in
socially acceptable activities. Certainly, their behaviors cannot be fully understood by the results of the JDAC assessment questions, but the responses provide a first look at the experiences these youth encountered, perceptions of their surroundings, and the choices they made. Specifically, attention should be given to their experiences with death and grief as well as the choices they make regarding sex, drinking, and involvement in extra-curricular activities. In discussing youth’s circumstances, one of unfortunate reality is their experiences with loss. Sixty-eight percent of the youth that desisted at 12 months had experienced the loss of a significant person in their lives. The relationship between the death of a close friend or relative also had a 12.5% difference between those that desisted at 12 months and 4.8% at 6 months. This strongly suggests that more youth who experience death in their lives continued in delinquency.

With grief, there are many considerations leading to why so many youth that don’t experience a close death desist. Some of these may include issues of bonding and not having to deal with separation from friends, grandparents, relatives, or fathers when they pass. There is little research in the area of grief and delinquency, but loss of parents can lead to problems, including juvenile delinquency (Shoor & Speed, 1963). The JDAC did not ask how the person died but potentially, it could have been through natural causes or violent acts. The numbers were split between friends, relatives, and grandparents of those youth that made comments.

This uncontrollable outcome of life is not the real the issue. Rather, how a youth copes is more important in risk and protective factors. Dealing with stressful situations has been shown to lead to resiliency (Losel & Bliesener, 1994), but seventy percent of the youth that experienced a death of someone close to them returned to the justice system. Again, this is complicated and leaves much to be explored. Possible areas to study can be post traumatic stress disorder, depression, anger, or emotional disorders in helping youth to desist. This finding illuminates a critically important issue that needs further exploration and attention by service providers at all stages of delinquency. There are possible grievance programs to help youth in schools or
detention centers. More research into understanding the connection of loss of a loved one to desistance is needed, but again this is a factor the youth cannot control but can have an affect with desistance.

Choices that a youth makes in particular circumstances and under peer pressure, appears to play an important role in desisting. This study also found that youth who did not engage in sex, or used protection against pregnancy and disease if they did, were almost 5% more likely to desist at both 6 and 12 months. The choice to abstain from drinking alcohol improved desistance by 5.5% at 6 months and 7.8% at 12 months. Also, the choice to participate in extra-curricular activities was highly protective with youth that desist. The results showed a 7.3% change for youth returning at 6 month but only 2% at 12 months for youth in extra-curricular activities. The findings supported that being engaged in extra-curricular activities increased desistance in the short term but over time there was a diminishing effect. This may have been because youth were engaged in other activities over time.

Using self report has its drawbacks, but asking youth about themselves and their current perception is a powerful tool in understanding what they identify with. This snapshot helps understand the youth at a specific moment in time and potentially enlightens educators and administrators regarding decisions a youth may make in the future. It is important to understand not only the decisions that precipitated the youth’s referral to the justice system, but also that at one time these youth made decisions that were responsible in many of the areas discussed in this protective factors study.

For example, the current sample of youth that desisted decided to abstain from sex (or use protection) and drinking, and to be engaged in activities outside of school. These choices placed the youth in certain societal groups that can encourage them to continue on the path of desistance. It is also difficult to make long term interpretations of adolescent behaviors, because these responses are a snapshot of a youth’s life at a very specific point in time. Certainly, it is possible
that their behaviors and responses may all change within the next day or year. So continuous
assessment, for example every 6 months, would provide an understanding of where the youth are
at different points along their adolescent journey.

Disproportionate Minority Contact

With regard to DMC in juvenile detention, an interesting pattern emerged from this
study’s data that can only be construed as a preliminary trend, but which nonetheless remains
intriguing. Namely, the descriptive data analysis revealed that both African American and Native
American youth were more likely to desist at 6 months following their initial detention compared
to Anglo youth. At 12 months, a larger proportion of Anglo youth were found to have desisted
overall. In other words, the pattern of desistance appears to have initially been more robust in
certain ethnic minority groups, but this pattern shifted between the 6 and 12 month marks. What
is not known at this time, however, is whether these fluctuations were merely random in nature,
or whether a moderating variable was responsible for producing them. While only preliminary in
nature, this pattern does raise some intriguing questions and points a direction for future research
efforts regarding DMC. Among the questions to be addressed by future research is whether an
intervening variable was responsible for allowing some minority youth to desist earlier in their
juvenile justice involvement compared to their Anglo counterparts, and whether identifiable
factors that lead to the erosion of such desistance can be identified and isolated.

Summary of Research Findings

A picture of these youth that got into trouble with the law and desisted encompassed a
family component, community involvement, and individual choices. Within the family, living
with relatives was one of the main protective factors for youth that desisted. This adds to the
research that having a close bond with at least one person can help (Bernburg et al., 2006). Also it
shows that families are seeking help from many resources including counseling before the youth
gets to this stage, and it helps youth not come back. Community involvement did not yield major
areas of desistance for this population but consistently showed that dependency and mental health was prevalent in youth that continued in the justice system. Most youth were involved in school, and there was a slight change at 6 months with those engaged in extra curricular activities but not over time. The individual aspects of those that desisted indicated that they had less death in their lives. The good decisions of not having kids and not drinking were correlated with desistance over time.

Stepping back and looking at who these youth are that are first involved with the justice system shows a picture that the majority, over 80%, had problems that started 1–2 years prior, no dependency court involvement, came from divorced families, had no suspected alcohol or drug abuse in family, and had no mental family health issues. Also, they reported no suicide attempts, had never been (sexually, verbally, or physically) abused, never set fires, did not claim gang membership, didn’t have children, and didn’t drink or take drugs.

About half of the youth reported that they lived with their mother only, that their families had sought help from other services (i.e. counseling, special programs, drug or anger classes), had insurance coverage, had no other family member involved with the justice system, that they had extended family support, or had family fun activities (i.e., movies, out to eat, playing game). These kids also reported that they were not on psychotropic medication, had not runaway within the last year, were not assaultive, did not have friends involved with the justice system, and were enrolled in school.

When comparing these findings to the risk research with the national meta-analysis (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001), it was found that single parenting households and delinquent peers were found consistent with risk, but out of home placement was found to be a protective factor for first timers if it was a relative. In comparing these findings to the state’s risk research (Schwalbe, 2007a), 45% of the youth who were new to the justice system that desisted at 12
months reported that they were assaultive; 58% were truant or having excessive absences; 50% were enrolled in school; and 28% were runaways (see Table 9).

Table 9. Comparison of first time involvement with valid risk assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st time No return after 12M</th>
<th>Ten Arizona risk factors (Schwalbe, 2007a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>1. Current Offense is a Status Offense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2. Juvenile’s relationship with his/her family Involves frequent/intense conflict or is alienated/assaultive (known or suspected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.8%</td>
<td>3. Juvenile has ever been assaultive (answer or based on previous charges)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.6%</td>
<td>4. Used or is suspected of using drugs within the past year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>5. Ever truant or extensive absenteeism from school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.1% (1.1 gang)</td>
<td>6. Currently enrolled in public, private or home school regularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28%</td>
<td>7. Has behavioral problems/mental health issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8. Friends involved or suspected to be involved in delinquency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Runaway, runaway attempts, known or Suspected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Additional Prior Complaints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The complexity of youths’ lives results in the changing dynamics of their needs. To continue to expose layers of complexity and create understanding of protective factors, growth points should be followed to identify which components play a part in helping youth mature into
pro-social adults. The fluidity of behaviors may add to the misunderstanding of youths’ decisions. Getting at youths’ personal experiences can better help identify which youth will desist as a result of their learning and which youth are at highest risk and be most likely to associate with long term delinquency. Research focused at early stages of a youths’ delinquent involvement and choices they make may help them disconnect from the path of continued delinquency through appropriate educational services and programs.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are two major limitations to this research. First, this research only looks at desistance for one year. Looking over multiple years of adolescence would yield a better ecological look over time at components that are prevalent at short vs. long durations of youths’ developmental years. The second limitation pertains to the self assessment tool used to gather youth characteristics. Even though research shows self report instruments to be valid tools when conducting research within the justice field (Junger-Tas & Marshall, 1999), the fact that the JDAC instrument has not been validated allows questions regarding the validity of the information. The JDAC tool yields social validity to the facility in helping make decisions; however, more analyses should be conducted to confirm that the questions are appropriately worded and used in finding the information sought.

With these limitations in mind, it is believed that there are two predominant focus areas for future research. First, who the youth resides with is a critical aspect of youth development. Future researchers should inquire as to whether youth live with their parent, a relative, or some other individual or entity and whether or not these individuals are involved in the justice system. The second direction for future research is the aspect of experiencing the death of a close friend or relative and the connection this loss has to recidivism and desistance. Further understanding of risk and protective at different levels of development (e.g., like starting school, having discipline
issues at school, etc.) would help to identify the protective aspects of youth at earlier stages and track changes over time.

Future research needs to explore a protective and risk scale that can help measure youth resilience over time to build a balanced protective-risk model of desistance. This should include family dynamics, community engagement, and the individual youth attempting to get to what they identify with and their aspects of biology, value, bonding, social-cultural milieu, and personal choices. While a paradigm shift is always difficult, it is sometimes necessary to shift the research focus from things that youth can not change to aspects of delinquency that they can change. Youth live in risk and protective environments, and what they identify with greatly determines if they continue down the path of delinquency or desist. Shifting perspectives and research foci can allow educators and administrators in all aspects of society to help youth avoid delinquent behaviors before they reach first level of delinquency.

It must be emphasized that these findings are a youth’s perspective. Even though interesting, they need to be understood within the context they were given. This study is based on the self reported data of youth and how they perceive in their life. Further, youth may not have a full comprehension of their environment and this is a glimpse of a youth’s voice in what they perceive within their interaction with their families, community, and self. A youth may have a good family or be involved in a great school or program, but if that youth feels it is not productive, that is what they report. The program may be helpful in the long run but that is not the youth’s perspective at that moment. Listening to the youth’s views is an important part of helping them, and if further research was collected from the family and community more would come to light. This analysis is just one component.

Educational Implications

The youth studied in this protective factors research had escalated their behaviors to a level where the justice system was required to get involved and help them divert their paths from
further problems. Most were involved in school and had wrap around services early that may have helped redirect these youth. Families of youth who sought services were more likely to have an initial involvement, but were not likely to come back. Agencies need to work together with these youth who are most vulnerable in our society to support a stable family life and guide them in making good choices and identifying with pro-social behaviors in order to further desistance.
References


