

Key Features of Risk and Protective Factors

When identifying, assessing, and prioritizing the risk and protective factors present in their communities, prevention planners should consider that:

- Risk and protective factors exist in multiple contexts.
- Risk and protective factors are correlated and cumulative.
- Risk and protective factors are influential over time.
- Not all people or populations are at the same risk.

These are described in greater detail below.

Risk and Protective Factors Exist in Multiple Contexts

All people have biological and psychological characteristics that make them vulnerable to or resilient in the face of potential behavioral health issues. Because people have relationships within their communities and the larger society, each person's biological and psychological characteristics exist in multiple contexts. A variety of risk and protective factors operate within each of these contexts. These factors also influence one another. Targeting only one context when addressing a person's risk or protective factors is unlikely to be successful because people don't exist in isolation.

Risk and Protective Factors are Correlated and Cumulative

Risk factors tend to be positively correlated to one another and negatively correlated to protective factors. In other words, people with *some* risk factors have a greater chance of experiencing even *more* risk factors and are *less likely* to have protective factors. Risk and protective factors also tend to have a cumulative effect on the development of behavioral health problems, including substance misuse. Young people with multiple risk factors have a greater likelihood of experiencing substance misuse problems or engaging in other related harmful behaviors. On the other hand, young people with multiple protective factors are at a reduced risk. These correlations underscore the importance of early intervention and programs and practices that target multiple, rather than single, factors.

Individual Factors Can Be Associated with Multiple Outcomes

Although preventive programs and practices are often designed to produce a single outcome, both risk and protective factors can be associated with multiple outcomes. For example, negative life events are associated with substance misuse as well as with anxiety, depression, and other harmful behavioral health problems. Prevention efforts targeting a set of risk or protective factors have the potential to produce positive effects in multiple areas.

Risk and Protective Factors are Influential Over Time

Risk and protective factors can have influence throughout a person's entire lifespan. For example, risk factors such as poverty and family dysfunction can contribute to the development of mental and/or substance use disorders later in life. Risk and protective factors within one context—such as the family—may also influence or be influenced by factors in another context. Effective parenting has been shown to mediate the effects of multiple risk factors—including poverty, divorce, parental bereavement, and parental mental illness. The more planners understand how risk and protective factors interact, the better prepared they will be to develop appropriate programs and practices.

Not All People or Populations are at the Same Risk

Prevention programs and practices are most effective when they are matched to their target population's level of risk. Prevention programs and practices fall into three broad categories.

- **Universal programs and practices** take the broadest approach and are designed to reach entire groups or populations. Universal prevention programs and practices might target schools, whole communities, or workplaces.
- **Selective programs and practices** target biological, psychological, or social risk factors that are more prominent among high-risk groups than among the wider population. Examples include prevention education for college students or peer support groups for adults with a family history of substance use disorders.
- **Indicated programs and practices** target individuals who show signs of being at risk for a substance use disorder. These types of interventions include

referrals to support services for young adults who violate drug policies. They also include screening and consultation for the families of older adults who are admitted to hospitals with potential alcohol-related injuries.