# Risk factors and protective factors

Knowing the risk factors and protective factors is key when designing a program because it allows you to identify specific areas that, if addressed, could lead to better outcomes. By distinguishing between these factors, you can craft strategies that lower risks and boost protective influences, leading to better results for young people.

**Risk factors**

Risk factors are conditions or characteristics that may increase the likelihood of negative outcomes or behaviours among young people. These factors can encompass various aspects of a young person's life, including individual, family, peer, school, and community influences. Recognising these risk factors allows program designers to target specific areas of vulnerability and tailor interventions accordingly.

While risk factors may increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, they are not predictors of offending (i.e., not all young people who have experienced these risk factors will offend).

Examples of risk factors for Australian young people include:

It is important to note that risk factors are not limited to the above, and there may be intersecting elements as well.

**Some risk factors are *static* and cannot be changed or may require broader societal changes or systemic interventions to address them effectively.**

***Dynamic* risk factors are more subject to change through targeted interventions, support systems, and positive influences.**

**Understanding intersectionality of risk factors**

Understanding the intersectionality of risk factors is crucial in designing effective programs that address the complex needs of individuals and communities. The goal is to ensure fair and equitable outcomes for all participants right from the start.

Intersectionality acknowledges that people can face multiple forms of disadvantage or marginalisation at once, making them more vulnerable and shaping their experiences in unique ways. For example, a young person from a low-income background who also lives with a disability will face compounded challenges, from limited access to services to potential discrimination.

This perspective encourages program designers to consider a variety of factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, among others. While this list is not exhaustive, it provides a starting point for understanding the complexity of intersecting identities and experiences.

Recognising intersectionality also emphasises the importance of hiring diverse staff and offering proper training and resources to ensure programs are culturally responsive and inclusive. By tackling the root causes of inequality, programs can foster fair outcomes and drive positive change in communities.

**Protective factors**

Protective factors, on the other hand, are conditions or attributes that buffer young people from the negative effects of risk factors and promote resilience and positive development. These factors serve as sources of strength and support, enhancing young people's ability to cope with adversity and thrive in challenging environments.

Examples of protective factors for Australian young people may include:

**Protective factors are dynamic and can be strengthened *through targeted interventions, fostering resilience*, and *promoting positive outcomes* among young people.**

## Why is this relevant for you?

**Importance of context**

Understanding the importance of context is key when examining the factors that influence youth development. For example:

* **Cultural identity:** Cultural identity can offer a strong sense of belonging and support, acting as a protective factor. However, it can also lead to risk if it results in discrimination or marginalisation within a community. It is essential to look beyond ethnicity and consider the broader social context to understand a young person's risk level.
* **Family structure:** A stable and supportive family environment can protect and nurture young people. On the flip side, dysfunction, conflict, or instability within the family can introduce risks and potentially harm a young person's development.

These examples show how what protects someone in one situation can become a risk in another, based on a person’s own experiences, society's views, and their surroundings. That is why it is crucial to think about how different factors interact in any given context when designing programs or interventions.

**Importance in program design**

Understanding the difference between risk factors and protective factors is essential for program designers to effectively address the specific needs and strengths of young people.

Programs that focus on building protective factors empower young people by enhancing their strengths, assets, and resources, fostering resilience, and promoting long-term well-being.

By addressing both risk and protective factors, programs can maximise their impact and empower young people to reach their full potential.