

Eötvös Loránd University
Doctoral School of Law
Doctoral Program in Criminology

Child Protection and Crime Prevention

**The Scope, Tools, and Role Perception of Basic Child Welfare Services in
Preventing Children and Juvenile Delinquency**

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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1. Objectives of the Doctoral Dissertation

This doctoral research focuses on the intersection of child protection and crime prevention, with particular emphasis on exploring the scope of action, available tools, and task perception of basic child welfare services in preventing delinquent behaviour among children and juveniles.

The relevance of examining offences committed by children and juveniles is underscored by extensive research showing a strong correlation between age and criminal behaviour – one that transcends historical periods and social context. Juvenile delinquency is the outcome of a complex interplay of factors, among which the process of growing into adulthood, along with hormonal and neuropsychological changes, plays a central role. Such acts often reflect the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. As these internal changes stabilize, it is generally observed that offending behaviour tends to decline or cease altogether.

The importance of crime prevention was already recognized by Beccaria, yet the concept only gained significant traction in the 20th century. This shift was largely driven by the realization that the criminal justice system alone is insufficient to address the problem of crime (Borbíró 2009). However, the notion of crime prevention is far from uniform. Beyond its varying definitions, the different levels and approaches of prevention further refine the range of available preventive measures.

In my view, the long-term reduction of crime can only be achieved through measures that address its underlying causal factors. While situational crime prevention may be effective in averting specific offences, it does not engage with the root causes of criminal behaviour and therefore does not align with the objectives of my research. Similarly, prevention through the criminal justice system is not the focus of this study, as my research targets young people who have not yet committed a crime, or – if they are – the offence did not result in custodial punishment or placement in a correctional institution, meaning they continue to be raised within their family environment.

For this reason, I chose to focus on early intervention and community-based crime prevention, as these approaches offer opportunities to identify and address risk factors at an early stage, while also engaging the young person's environment – such as their family, school, and broader community – in efforts to prevent offending (Borbíró 2016).

The theoretical framework of my dissertation is grounded in developmental criminology, which – due to its complex perspective – does not rely on a single explanatory factor but rather views offending as a dynamic process shaped by biological, psychological, and sociological influences. With this framework, I draw particularly on Terrie E. Moffitt's (1993) typology of the life-course-persistent and adolescence-limited offenders, as well as David P. Farrington's (2019) Integrated Cognitive Antisocial Potential theory.

However, the risk-oriented approach applied here is not without dangers, as intervention in the lives of individuals and families is driven by the assumption that the individual carries inherent risks. This is particularly problematic when interventions primarily target children and their families, making it essential to distinguish between perceiving a child as being at risk and as a source of risk. From a fundamental rights perspective, viewing children as potential sources of danger raises serious concerns, as it increases the risk of stigmatization, thereby undermining their rights and human dignity. From an effectiveness standpoint, it is also important to consider that labelling a child as deviant during the course of intervention may prove counterproductive – according to the assumptions of labelling theory.

Throughout my research, I remained mindful of the fact that risk-focused approaches carry an increased potential for stigmatization and may contribute to the intensification of social marginalization. For this reason, my theoretical framework also incorporates labelling theory, as the inappropriate conceptualization or implementation of early intervention – such as identifying a child as a source of risk – can be not only stigmatizing, but also counterproductive and harmful. Such practices may reinforce processes of criminalization and social exclusion, rather than preventing them.

In my view, however, these risks can be mitigated if interventions are guided by a strong commitment to human rights, children's rights, and the core principles of crime prevention – particularly the principles of rule-of-law-based and social-policy-oriented prevention, as well as knowledge-based prevention.

This raises the question of which professional field is responsible for identifying and addressing risk factors. Such factors may manifest in various domains of a young person's life – for instance, within the family, at school, or among peer groups.

1.1. Research Questions of the Doctoral Dissertation

My preliminary assumption is that child protection – particularly the basic system of child and family welfare service – plays a key role in early intervention. This is based on the significant overlap between the risk factors that guide early intervention and the endangerment indicators that define child protection. In addition, the basic child welfare system operates an observation and reporting mechanism aimed at the early detection of problems, while also providing social support and services to prevent or eliminate child endangerment.

I examined this hypothesis from three perspectives.

Within the theoretical framework, my aim was to explore the connection between the concept of endangerment, as used in the field of child protection, and the risk factors identified in longitudinal research. This required a thorough review of both the child protection system and the complex structure of crime prevention, as well as the conceptualisation of key terms.

Subsequently, I examined the relationship between the two policy areas through the lens of relevant legislation. First, I analysed the child protection aspect of crime prevention strategies by applying a predefined set of criteria to the National Strategy for Social Crime Prevention, the National Crime Prevention Strategy (2013-2023), and the National Crime Prevention Strategy (2024-2034). Following this, I reviewed the legal regulations guiding child protection to determine whether crime prevention appears as an explicit responsibility within frameworks.

Finally, I examined the relationship between the two professional fields through an analysis of the practical functioning of the child protection services, drawing on the findings of my empirical research. Given that my study focuses on basic child protection services, the target group of the research comprised Family and Child Welfare Service and Centres, as well as professionals operating within the child protection signalling system.

The main research question of my study was what scope of action professionals working in basic child protection services have to prevent norm-violating behaviours among children and young people.

I examined this question on four levels, corresponding to the structural divisions within the child protection system. These levels represent a progression from situations of minor endangerment toward more severe form of vulnerability.

The first level is the signalling (notification) system of child protection, as this network of professionals acts as a form of social safety net surrounding every child. In the life of each child, there is a health visitor, a general practitioner of paediatrician, a kindergarten teacher or

schoolteacher. When functioning effectively, the signalling system is capable of detecting endangerment at an early stage and transmitting a report to the institution responsible for addressing the issue.

The operation of the signalling system is examined through the following research questions:

- Where is the boundary between problems managed within the professional's own competence and situations that require an official notification of endangerment?
- How does the signalling system function as a social safety net around families?
- How is cooperation realised between family support services and the members of the signalling system?

The second level pertains to social support activities within kindergartens and school. Although this form of assistance is still considered universal (as it does not depend on whether the child is at risk), it is only limited to children who are either of preschool or compulsory school age.

- What is the role of social workers in schools and kindergartens within the child protection signalling system?
- How does social support activity in kindergartens and schools contribute to early intervention? Do these professionals carry out crime prevention tasks, and are there group sessions specifically aimed at preventing delinquent behaviour?

The third level corresponds to the child welfare services, which are responsible for children and young people already considered to be at risk. The fourth level pertains to child welfare centres, where, due to the severity of endangerment, an official intervention has either been initiated or ordered. For both the third and fourth levels, the research questions were identical:

- How do professionals define crime prevention?
- In the opinion of professionals, which problems fall within their own field of competence?
- How do professionals understand the concept of "being at risk"?
- Do they consider crime prevention as part of their professional responsibilities?
- What factors influence whether crime prevention appears as part of their role perception?

From the perspective of the structure of the child protection system, the fifth level would be specialised care; however, this level is not subject of the current research, as the study specifically focuses on children raised in their families.

The primary aim of the research is to explore the crime prevention potential embedded within the basic child protection services and to support the development of a child protection system that actively contributes to the prevention of juvenile delinquency. This contribution must be grounded in a conscious, rights-based approach that respects human rights and seeks to minimise the risk of stigmatisation.

Furthermore, the research intends to provide recommendations for the development of both policy and practice, particularly by strengthening the operation of the signalling system and enhancing the professional mindset of those working within it.

2. Methodology of the Doctoral Dissertation

The research was conducted within a qualitative methodological framework, as its primary aim was to explore the crime prevention role perceptions of child protection professionals and to examine the practical functioning of basic child protective services. The qualitative approach enabled a deeper understanding of individual and institutional experiences, interpretations, and dilemmas – particularly in relation to the practical intersections between early intervention and crime prevention.

A case study was carried out at a Family and Child Welfare Centre in Budapest, during which nine expert interviews were conducted with family support workers, case managers, school and kindergarten social workers, as well as with a signalling system coordinator.

To examine the functioning of the signalling system, I conducted nine expert interviews with key actors, including teachers, kindergarten educators, designated child protection officers, health visitors, and paediatric general practitioners. Although the signalling system comprises a broader range of professionals, **analysing it in its** entirety would have exceeded the scope of this dissertation. Therefore, I focused on those members who most frequently come into contact with basic child welfare services.

In order to conceptualise the key terms, I conducted three focus group interviews. Each group included a mix of family support workers, case managers, professional supervisors, as well as kindergarten and school social workers. In total, three focus group discussions were held, each typically involving 5-6 professionals.

The entire research was conducted with a focus on Budapest. This choice is justified by the significant disparities in the functioning of child protection services between the capital and rural areas.

3. Findings of the Doctoral Dissertation

- 1) **Based on the diversity of theoretical and practical approaches, the dissertation develops a new conceptual typology that classifies crime prevention tools along three levels of intervention: societal, community, and individual.**

The societal level includes normative and/or structural interventions targeting the entire population (e.g., legislation, public awareness campaigns). The community level refers to targeted, local or group-specific measures (e.g., development of community spaces, strengthening the effectiveness of the signalling system). The individual level refers to targeted, local or group-specific measures (e.g., development of community spaces, strengthening the effectiveness of the signalling system). The individual level comprises personalized interventions tailored to specific risk and protective factors (e.g., family support, counselling), which – unlike previous typologies – are not limited to post-offense (tertiary; Brantingham & Faust 1976) reintegration, but enable person-centered prevention already at the stage of endangerment (secondary prevention; Brantingham & Faust 1976).

This typology allows for the categorization of crime prevention tools based on target groups and mechanisms of impact, and facilitates the exploration of connections between child protection measures and crime prevention.

- 2) **A close connection can be identified between the system of child protection and crime prevention at both theoretical and practical levels, as the risk factors for juvenile delinquency significantly overlap with the indicators of endangerment recognized in child protection.**

The link between the two professional fields is not merely theoretical but carries substantial practical relevance. Although the activities of basic child protection services are not explicitly designed for crime prevention purposes, they frequently fulfil a latent crime prevention function (Szöllősi, 2009). Tools and services applied during family support – such as strengthening the parent-child relationship or addressing school-related issues – contribute to the prevention of deviant behaviour by targeting key risk factors associated with future offending.

- 3) **Although the role of child protection is acknowledged in crime prevention strategies, the legal framework does not assign a clearly defined set of responsibilities to the child protection system.**

The Child Protection Act (Gyvt.) typically frames crime prevention as a reactive activity, delegating it primarily to the competence of the probation officer for juvenile offenders. This approach contrasts with crime prevention strategies, which formulate tasks and expectations also for the basic child protection services, thereby recognizing their potential contribution to early intervention and prevention efforts.

- 4) **In light of the potential risks associated with early intervention, it is important to distinguish between exclusive-controlling and inclusive-supporting models.**

Crime prevention interventions can only serve as legitimate and effective tools within child protection if they are implemented with full respect for human rights and the best interests of the child, while minimizing the risks of stigmatization and social exclusion. In my view, early intervention can be achieved without stigmatizing or excluding individuals only within the framework of inclusive-supportive model.

I. Findings Related to the Child Protection Signalling System

- 5) The functioning of the child protection signalling system is crucial for early intervention; however, in practice, there are significant discrepancies between the expectations set out in professional protocols and actual operations. The decision to submit a report is heavily influenced by subjectivity, lack of professional support, and the presence or absence of trust-based relationships. The effectiveness of the child protection signalling system is not primarily improved through stricter legal regulation, but rather through enhanced professional support, appropriate information flow, and the establishment of a unified threshold of concern.
- 6) The crime prevention potential of the members of the signalling system is present but underutilized, as many lack adequate knowledge about child protection procedures and their specific role in crime prevention. Although professional guidelines and protocols are available to support the identification of endangerment, members of the signalling system are often unaware of these resources or do not apply them. Most members rely on intuition to determine whether a situation has reached the threshold that warrants a formal report.
- 7) The presence of personal relationships and active, local cooperation is crucial for the effective functioning of the child protection signalling system and for crime prevention. The research clearly revealed that where members of the signalling system and child protection professionals had personal ties, communication was smoother and problem-solving more efficient. Collaboration built on trust facilitated quicker reporting and

more targeted interventions. In contrast, formal and distant relationships often led to a lack of information and increased uncertainty.

- 8) One of the most pressing issues identified within the signalling system relates to the limited capacities of the support services. Ideally, the service infrastructure should align with the needs of the population – this is especially critical in the case of psychological and psychiatric care for children. However, according to the findings, this has been a longstanding issue that has not improved over time; in fact, it has significantly deteriorated.
- 9) Another significant shortcoming is the scarcity of financial resources, particularly in relation to the insufficient support available for families facing housing difficulties. The number of places in temporary family shelters is inadequate, and the availability of municipal housing continues to decline. This reveals a fundamental ambivalence within the system: while financial hardship alone should not constitute grounds for the separation of the child from the family, such decisions nevertheless occur in practice. This operational logic severely infringes upon the best interests of the child, as removal from the family can only be justified by the need to protect the child and ensure their well-being. Every child has the right to be raised by their parents, and in the absence of abuse or serious neglect that endangers the child, the appropriate response to family difficulties should not be separation (Rácz, 2010, 2016).

II. Findings related to Kindergarten and School Assistance Activities

- 10) Kindergarten and School social workers play a key role within the child protection signalling system, as they not only provide direct support to children but also serve as a bridge between the child protection services and educational institutions. Their activity is also of crucial importance in the field of crime prevention, both at the community and at individual levels – through thematic group sessions on the one hand, and individual support consultations on the other.
- 11) The effectiveness of the work of social workers in kindergartens and schools is significantly influenced by the openness of institutional leadership, the receptiveness of the school environment, as well as the personality and the degree of local embeddedness of the social worker. Based on the research findings, true integration of the social worker into the life of the institution is achievable primarily when the head of the institution supports their presence and is open to cooperation. In addition, the length of time the

worker has been present at the given location and the extent to which a trust-based relationship has developed with the teaching staff are also of key importance. Schools vary in their approach to the role of the social worker: while some actively involve them in addressing problems, others remain entirely disengaged. The social worker's personality, professional attitude, and ability to build relationships are crucial factors in determining the acceptance and effectiveness of their activities.

- 12) A significant proportion of group sessions led by school and kindergarten social workers address topics that are highly relevant from a crime prevention perspective, such as school bullying, substance abuse, attitudes toward property, or conflict within peer relationships. However, based on the findings of the research, the themes of these sessions are often incidental, with social workers primarily relying on their own experiences or on trainings provided by civil society organizations. This results in a fragmented practice, the effectiveness of which may vary across institutions. In order to strengthen crime prevention efforts, the development of standardized, nationally accessible lesson plans and professional support materials would be justified.

III. Findings related to Basic Child Protection Services

- 13) The crime prevention function of child protection typically manifests in a latent manner: although it is not explicitly targeted, its activities indirectly exert a significant impact on reducing the risk of juvenile delinquency. Harnessing the crime prevention potential of child protection requires a conscious shift in the professional mindset and targeted training programs that reflect both the opportunities and risks of prevention.
- 14) **The effectiveness of crime prevention is significantly hindered by the overburdened state of the child protection system, which prevents the implementation of preventive, personalized interventions.**

The overload of the child protection system poses a serious problem. The research clearly demonstrated that the number of cases per professional far exceeds the statutory limits, resulting in a work approach often characterized by crisis management rather than prevention. A preventive approach can only be implemented with an adequate number of professionals. In the absence of this, child protection cannot fulfil its potential crime prevention role, despite its theoretical capacity to do so.

- 15) Among professionals working in the child protection system, it is unclear whether crime prevention is considered part of their responsibilities, a perception rooted in legal inconsistencies, conceptual ambiguity, and workload pressure.**

Empirical research revealed that most professionals view crime prevention as a distant field requiring specialized knowledge, rather than an integral component of their everyday work.

- 16) It is essential to raise awareness within the child protection system of its inherent crime prevention potential.**

On the one hand, professionals are already working with numerous cases in which crime prevention tasks are explicitly present (Szöllősi 2009). However, the tools applied in such situations are mostly deterrence-oriented. By recognizing and harnessing the crime prevention potential, the overall effectiveness of interventions could be enhanced. Nevertheless, it is crucial that this process is accompanied by awareness of the potential risk associated with early intervention.

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4. List of Publications Related to the Topic of the Doctoral Dissertation

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