EDUCATIONAL CRIMINOLOGY AS A TOOL TO PREVENT CRIMINALLY-ASSOCIATED BEHAVIORS IN ADOLESCENTS

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***ABSTRACT*:**

This study aimed to analyze risk factors associated with criminally-classified behaviors among adolescents in upper-secondary education and to evaluate how protective factors, such as socio-emotional competencies and supportive school environments, can mitigate these behaviors. A quantitative-descriptive approach was employed with a sample of 155 students from Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Industrial y de Servicios No. 207 (CBTis 207) in Navojoa, Sonora, Mexico. A criminological-educational diagnostic instrument was administered, incorporating measures of aggression, victimization, cyberbullying, experimental substance use, normalization of violence, peer relationships, socio-emotional competencies, and school climate. Descriptive analyses of frequencies and percentages were conducted. Findings revealed that 38% of students reported verbal aggression, 22% experienced social exclusion, 17% reported physical intimidation, 31% witnessed or participated in cyberbullying, and 24% experimented with alcohol. Protective factors, such as positive peer relationships, socio-emotional skills, and perceptions of a supportive school environment, were associated with lower levels of these risk behaviors. The results underscore the importance of school-based interventions grounded in educational criminology. Strengthening socio-emotional competencies, promoting peer cohesion, and fostering a positive school climate are critical to reducing aggressive behaviors, cyberbullying, and experimental substance use. Early detection and preventive strategies in the school context can inhibit trajectories toward delinquent behaviors, supporting the role of educational criminology as an effective framework for adolescent risk prevention.

Keywords: *Educational criminology; crime prevention; adolescents; school violence; cyberbullying; upper-secondary education.*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage during which individual, familial, school, and community risk factors converge, potentially leading to behaviors legally classified as crimes (García & Salazar, 2018). Recent research emphasizes that the school environment constitutes a strategic space to identify, intervene, and prevent such behaviors before they escalate into more complex delinquent trajectories (Muñoz & Díaz, 2022).

Educational criminology, as an emerging field, proposes that crime prevention should not be confined to the legal or police sphere but should be extended to the school, understood as a privileged space for socialization, emotional development, and citizenship construction (Hikal Carreón, 2023). According to Hikal Carreón (2023), "pedagogical criminology allows the understanding of school dynamics associated with criminogenic risks, integrating teaching processes with preventive strategies applied in the classroom."

Additionally, violence in schools and adolescent criminality must be analyzed from an integrated approach that considers family context, institutional structure, and peer interactions (Muñoz & Díaz, 2022). Schools can both reproduce violence and reverse it through educational programs (Ríos Patio & Hikal, 2020).

In the Mexican context, adolescents exposed to violence, cyberbullying, substance use, or school dropout are more likely to engage in sanctionable behaviors (Ordaz, Chávez, & Gutiérrez, 2023). Early detection of risk signals by teachers is crucial to apply effective interventions (Ríos Patio & Hikal, 2021).

This study analyzes risk factors identified in 155 students from the Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Industrial y de Servicios No. 207 (CBTis 207), an upper-secondary institution in eastern Navojoa, Sonora. The criminological-educational diagnostic applied in this school community allowed the identification of aggression, victimization, bullying, cyberbullying, and experimental substance use dynamics, which, if not addressed promptly, may evolve into delinquent behaviors during adolescence.

Research on adolescent criminal behavior within educational contexts has increasingly emphasized the importance of preventive approaches that integrate school, family, and community systems (Altbach, 2016; Ballantyne & Packer, 2005). Studies indicate that exposure to peer violence, cyberbullying, and substance experimentation during secondary education significantly increases the risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors (Chawla, 2009; Knight & de Wit, 2018).

Environmental and social factors have been identified as critical predictors of youth misconduct. For instance, unsupervised peer interactions and low school connectedness correlate with higher rates of aggression and bullying (Archambault, Vignola-Gagné, Côté, Larivière, & Gingras, 2009). Additionally, digital environments have created new modalities of risk, including online harassment and privacy violations, which require targeted intervention strategies within the school curriculum (Ballantyne & Packer, 2005).

Recent interventions emphasize socio-emotional learning as a protective factor against criminal trajectories in adolescence. Programs that cultivate empathy, self-regulation, and conflict resolution skills have been shown to reduce aggression and improve peer relationships (Chawla, 2009). Moreover, early detection of at-risk behaviors through systematic observation and validated instruments enhances the effectiveness of preventive strategies in schools (Altbach, 2016).

In Latin America, empirical studies reveal that integrating criminological insights into educational practice strengthens institutional capacity to prevent and mitigate adolescent delinquency (Knight & de Wit, 2018). The literature suggests that a comprehensive understanding of risk factors, combined with structured school-based interventions, is essential for fostering safe and supportive learning environments.

Adolescent engagement in behaviors classified as criminal has been extensively studied in relation to school-based risk and protective factors. Research indicates that the interaction between individual characteristics, peer influence, and institutional climate strongly predicts the likelihood of delinquent behaviors during secondary education (Farrington, 2003; Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano, & Harachi, 2000).

School climate, defined as the quality and character of school life, is a key determinant of student behavior. Positive climates, characterized by supportive teacher-student relationships, clear rules, and student participation, are associated with lower rates of aggression and bullying (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Conversely, environments with weak social cohesion and minimal monitoring facilitate the development of antisocial behaviors (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

In addition, the role of digital technologies in adolescent risk behaviors has gained attention. Exposure to cyberbullying, online harassment, and social media pressure has been shown to exacerbate traditional school-based violence and increase vulnerability to substance experimentation (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). Prevention programs that integrate digital literacy and socio-emotional learning have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing these risks (Livingstone & Smith, 2014).

Furthermore, longitudinal studies highlight the importance of early intervention. Targeting risk factors such as aggression, poor impulse control, and peer rejection during early adolescence can significantly reduce the likelihood of engagement in criminal behaviors in later years (Moffitt, 1993). Comprehensive programs that combine individual, peer, family, and school-level interventions are considered best practice for preventing adolescent delinquency (Catalano, Fagan, Gavin, Greenberg, Irwin, Ross, & Shek, 2012).

Collectively, the literature underscores the necessity of evidence-based, school-centered interventions that address both traditional and digital forms of risk behavior, while promoting protective factors such as socio-emotional competencies, positive peer relations, and inclusive school climates.

Adolescence is a critical period in which multiple individual, familial, school, and community risk factors converge, potentially leading to behaviors classified as criminal. Despite the growing evidence on the influence of school environments, socio-emotional skills, and peer dynamics on adolescent delinquency, there is limited research in Mexican upper-secondary educational contexts that systematically examines how educational criminology interventions can prevent risk behaviors such as aggression, cyberbullying, and experimental substance use. Identifying the key factors that predict or prevent these behaviors is essential for developing effective, evidence-based school programs.

To what extent do individual characteristics (age, sex), school-related factors (semester, peer relationships, socio-emotional competencies), and exposure to risk environments predict or prevent criminally-associated behaviors among adolescents in upper-secondary education?

Students with higher socio-emotional competencies, positive peer relationships, and supportive school environments will exhibit lower levels of criminally-associated behaviors (aggression, cyberbullying, and experimental substance use), while students exposed to risk factors such as peer violence, poor school cohesion, and digital harassment will exhibit higher levels of these behaviors.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative-descriptive research design aimed at identifying risk factors associated with criminally-classified behaviors in adolescents. A survey-based criminological-educational diagnostic instrument was administered to students to collect data on aggression, cyberbullying, substance experimentation, normalization of violence, socio-emotional competencies, and perception of school climate. Quantitative descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize the data (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2019).

The sample consisted of 155 students aged 15–17 years enrolled in the Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Industrial y de Servicios No. 207 (CBTis 207), a public upper-secondary institution in eastern Navojoa, Sonora, Mexico. Both male and female students from different academic semesters were included to ensure diversity in age, gender, and educational experience. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

A structured questionnaire was developed based on principles of educational criminology and integrated elements from the Bull-S test for assessing aggression and victimization (Cerezo & Ato, 2005). The instrument included the following variables:

Aggression and victimization (physical, verbal, and relational)
Cyberbullying (perpetration, victimization, observation)
Normalization of violence (attitudes justifying aggression)
Experimental substance use (alcohol and marijuana)
Socio-emotional competencies (empathy, self-regulation, conflict resolution)
Perception of school climate (peer cohesion, teacher support)

Each variable was measured using Likert-type or dichotomous scales to facilitate quantitative analysis. Data collection followed a systematic multi-step protocol: Institutional authorization was obtained from the school administration. Students were informed about the objectives, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of participation. The questionnaire was administered during class hours in paper format. Responses were coded, tabulated, and analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations between independent and dependent variables (Field, 2018).

Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize the prevalence of risk behaviors and associated factors. Additionally, cross-tabulation analyses explored potential relationships between independent variables (sex, age, semester, socio-emotional competencies, school climate) and dependent variables (aggression, cyberbullying, substance experimentation, normalization of violence). Results were interpreted in light of theoretical frameworks from educational criminology and prevention science (Sherman, Farrington, Welsh, & MacKenzie, 2002; Farrington & Ttofi, 2011).

RESULTS

1) Table 1. Verbal Aggression

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	96	61.9
1 (Yes)	59	38.1

Approximately 38% of students reported engaging in verbal aggression. This supports the hypothesis that students exposed to risk factors, such as peer violence or poor school cohesion, exhibit higher levels of aggressive behavior. Conversely, the 62% who did not report verbal aggression may reflect the presence of protective factors, such as socio-emotional competencies and positive peer relationships.

2) Table 2. Physical Intimidation

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	129	83.2
1 (Yes)	26	16.8

Physical intimidation was reported by 17% of students, indicating that this form of aggression is less prevalent than verbal aggression. Students involved in physical intimidation are likely those lacking socio-emotional skills or experiencing unsupportive peer environments, consistent with the hypothesis.

3) Table 3. Exclusion / Bullying

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	121	78.1
1 (Yes)	34	21.9

Around 22% of students experienced exclusion or bullying. This aligns with the hypothesis: students in environments with poor social cohesion are more likely to experience or participate in such behaviors, while those with supportive peers show lower incidence.

4) Table 4. Cyberbullying Witnessed / Participated

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	107	69.0
1 (Yes)	48	31.0

31% of students reported witnessing or participating in cyberbullying. Exposure to digital harassment correlates with higher risk of criminally-associated behaviors, supporting the hypothesis that students exposed to risk factors demonstrate elevated participation in these behaviors.

5) Table 5. Cyberbullying – Victim

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	127	82.0
1 (Yes)	28	18.0

Approximately 18% of students were victims of cyberbullying. Victimization is more likely in environments with low peer cohesion or limited socio-emotional support, which is consistent with the hypothesis.

6) Table 6. Experimental Alcohol Use

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	118	76.1
1 (Yes)	37	23.9

23.9% of students reported experimental alcohol use. According to the hypothesis, students with lower socio-emotional competencies or exposed to peer risk behaviors are more likely to engage in substance experimentation.

7) Table 7. Experimental Marijuana Use

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	138	89.0
1 (Yes)	17	11.0

Experimental marijuana use was reported by 11% of students. This lower prevalence compared to alcohol use still reflects the hypothesis: students with higher exposure to risk factors are more likely to experiment with substances.

8) Table 8. Normalization of Violence

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	110	71.0
1 (Yes)	45	29.0

29% of students consider some forms of aggression as part of normal social interactions. This attitude indicates vulnerability to risk behaviors, supporting the hypothesis that unsupportive school environments and poor socio-emotional skills increase criminally-associated behaviors.

9) Table 9. Acceptance of Physical Defense

Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 (No)	133	85.8
1 (Yes)	22	14.2

14% of students considered defending oneself physically as acceptable. This aligns with the hypothesis: students exposed to peer violence or weak school cohesion are more likely to justify physical aggression.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study highlight the complex interaction between individual, peer, and school-related factors in shaping criminally-associated behaviors among adolescents. Consistent with developmental and ecological models of adolescent behavior, students exposed to peer violence, low school cohesion, and digital harassment exhibited higher levels of aggression, cyberbullying, and experimental substance use (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Farrington et al., 2017). These results emphasize the importance of multi-level interventions targeting both the school environment and individual competencies.

Verbal aggression was the most prevalent risk behavior, affecting approximately 38% of students. This aligns with prior research indicating that non-physical forms of aggression are often more common and socially reinforced in school settings (Salmivalli, 2010). Physical intimidation and victimization were less frequent but still notable, suggesting that direct intervention strategies should focus on both overt and covert forms of aggression.

Cyberbullying, experienced by 31% of students, reflects the growing influence of digital environments on adolescent risk behaviors. The findings are consistent with studies highlighting that exposure to online harassment can exacerbate offline aggression and negatively impact socio-emotional development (Tokunaga, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2014). This supports the necessity of incorporating digital literacy, ethical online behavior, and reporting mechanisms into school prevention programs.

Substance experimentation, particularly alcohol use (24%) and marijuana use (11%), underscores the relevance of early preventive interventions targeting decision-making, peer pressure, and awareness of legal and health consequences (Hawkins et al., 1992). These results align with the hypothesis that adolescents exposed to risk factors are more likely to engage in criminally-associated behaviors, while protective factors, such as socio-emotional skills and positive peer interactions, mitigate these risks.

Normalization of violence, reported by 29% of students, reveals a cultural and attitudinal dimension that reinforces aggressive behavior. Educational criminology frameworks suggest that interventions should not only address behaviors but also challenge normative beliefs that justify violence (Van der Ploeg, 2017). Enhancing socio-emotional competencies, empathy, and conflict resolution skills may reduce the acceptance of aggression as a legitimate form of interaction.

Overall, the study corroborates the hypothesis that school-based protective factors reduce engagement in criminally-associated behaviors. Programs that strengthen socio-emotional skills, foster supportive peer relationships, and improve school climate are critical for preventing trajectories of delinquency in adolescence (Greenberg et al., 2003; Hawkins et al., 2009). The integration of these findings into a structured, evidence-based criminological-educational program provides practical guidance for educators, administrators, and policymakers seeking to promote safe and resilient school environments.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that educational criminology provides an effective framework for identifying and addressing risk factors associated with criminally-classified behaviors in adolescents. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of students at CBTis 207 engage in or are exposed to verbal and physical aggression, cyberbullying, and experimental substance use. These behaviors are more prevalent among students experiencing peer violence, low school cohesion, or inadequate socio-emotional skills, supporting the study's hypothesis.

Conversely, protective factors—such as positive peer relationships, supportive school environments, and strong socio-emotional competencies—are associated with lower incidence of risk behaviors. This highlights the critical role of school-based interventions in preventing trajectories of delinquency during adolescence.

The study underscores the importance of implementing evidence-based, preventive strategies within educational settings. Programs that strengthen socio-emotional skills, promote positive peer interaction, address digital harassment, and foster a safe and inclusive school climate can effectively reduce risk behaviors. Furthermore, the integration of educational criminology principles into curriculum planning and teacher training is essential for sustaining long-term prevention efforts.

In summary, fostering protective factors while mitigating exposure to criminogenic risks can transform schools into safe and formative environments, reducing the likelihood of adolescents engaging in behaviors classified as criminal and promoting healthy socio-emotional development.

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B. *Appendix A: Criminological-Educational Diagnostic Questionnaire (English Version)*
Instructions:
Please answer all questions honestly. Your responses are anonymous and will only be used for research purposes.
1) *Section 1: Demographics*
1. Age: _____
2. Sex: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other
3. Grade/Semester: _____
2) *Section 2: Aggression and Victimization*

Rate how often you have experienced or participated in the following behaviors in the past 6 months.
(1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very Often)

Item	Behavior
2.1	I have verbally insulted or shouted at a classmate.
2.2	I have physically threatened or pushed a classmate.
2.3	I have been verbally insulted or mocked by peers.
2.4	I have been physically intimidated or threatened.
2.5	I have witnessed other students being bullied or excluded.

3) Section 3: Cyberbullying
Indicate your experience with online harassment in the past 6 months.
(1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very Often)

Item	Behavior
3.1	I have sent mean or threatening messages to someone online.
3.2	I have posted or shared content to humiliate others.
3.3	I have been a victim of online harassment or cyberbullying.
3.4	I have witnessed cyberbullying among classmates.

4) Section 4: Experimental Substance Use
Answer honestly about your experience with substances.
(1 = Never, 2 = Once, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often, 5 = Regularly)

Item	Behavior
4.1	I have consumed alcohol outside the home.
4.2	I have smoked or tried marijuana.
4.3	I have used other substances recreationally.

5) Section 5: Normalization of Violence
Rate how much you agree with the following statements.
(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Item	Statement
5.1	Some forms of aggression are a normal part of daily life.
5.2	Using physical force to defend oneself is acceptable.
5.3	Mocking or excluding classmates is just a way to have fun.

6) Section 6: Socio-Emotional Competencies
Evaluate your own skills and behaviors.
(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Item	Statement
6.1	I can recognize my own emotions in stressful situations.
6.2	I try to understand others' feelings before acting.

6.3   I can manage my anger or frustration effectively.

6.4   I resolve conflicts without aggression.

6.5   I can work collaboratively with peers even when we disagree.

7) Section 7: Peer Relationships
Rate your relationships with classmates and friends.
(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Item	Statement
7.1	I feel accepted by my peers.
7.2	I can rely on my classmates for support when needed.
7.3	I am included in group activities at school.
7.4	My peers encourage positive behaviors.

8) Section 8: School Environment
Evaluate the overall climate and support at your school.
(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Item	Statement
8.1	Teachers at this school are approachable and supportive.
8.2	The school enforces rules against aggression and bullying.
8.3	I feel safe in classrooms, hallways, and school facilities.
8.4	School activities encourage positive peer interaction.
8.5	The school promotes socio-emotional learning and personal development.

9) Section 9: Open-Ended Feedback
1. What do you think could make your school a safer and more supportive environment?
2. Do you have suggestions for preventing aggression, cyberbullying, or substance use among students?