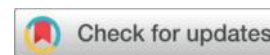


Structural Inequality and Juvenile Delinquency: A Marxist Class Analysis of the Institutional Mechanisms of Youth Crime

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Abstract: Amid China's ongoing market reforms and intensifying class stratification, juvenile delinquency has emerged not merely as a moral or behavioral concern but as a structurally embedded outcome of institutional exclusion. This study adopts a Marxist class analysis, enriched by critical criminology, to examine how entrenched inequalities in education, labor markets, governance, and ideological discourse interact to criminalize marginalized youth. Drawing on 2025 national statistics, judicial reports, and media content analysis, the research reveals that rural, migrant, and vocational-track youth remain systematically excluded from opportunity structures while being disproportionately subjected to punitive interventions. Theoretically, the study challenges prevailing individual-centered approaches in youth crime research, advancing instead a structural framework that situates delinquency within broader processes of class reproduction and symbolic violence. It highlights how dominant ideological narratives deflect attention from systemic culpability by recasting structural failure as personal deviance. Empirically, the paper documents the persistence of selective enforcement, disciplinary governance, and stigmatizing media portrayals, despite modest gains in prosecutorial discretion and educational access. Policy recommendations urge a shift beyond reactive or punitive models toward structural solutions grounded in redistributive justice, inclusive institutional reform, and narrative de-stigmatization. The findings underscore that juvenile delinquency cannot be meaningfully addressed without confronting the deeper architecture of social inequality shaping the lived realities and constrained choices of youth in contemporary China.

Keywords: Marxist criminology; Juvenile delinquency; Structural inequality; Class analysis; Ideological criminalization; Youth governance; Symbolic violence

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, China's socioeconomic landscape has undergone dramatic reconfiguration, driven by intensified marketization, entrenched class hierarchies, and large-scale rural-to-urban migration. These structural shifts have fundamentally altered the conditions of youth socialization, engendering new patterns of marginality, exclusion, and behavioral deviance. Juvenile delinquency, once treated predominantly as a moral deficit or psychological anomaly, now increasingly reveals itself as a systemic consequence of institutionalized inequality (Bruce, 2000; Schepers, 2016).

Recent official data lend empirical weight to this reorientation. According to the 2023 White Paper on Juvenile Prosecution, Chinese prosecutors handled over 58,000 juvenile cases in 2022, marking an 8.6% year-on-year increase. Notably, the majority

of suspects came from vocational education tracks, migrant families, or rural households—demographic categories structurally disadvantaged within China’s stratified developmental regime (Supreme People’s Procuratorate, 2023). This phenomenon is not unique to China. Cross-national research from Europe and Asia confirms that youth from socioeconomically marginalized groups—particularly those excluded from high-quality education and secure employment—are statistically overrepresented in delinquency indictments (Bayas & Grau, 2023; Ullah & Bakhsh, 2024; Solakoglu & Yuksek, 2019).

Despite such evidence, dominant criminological paradigms in China remain anchored in individualistic frames, privileging explanations such as psychological pathology (Du, 2019), family dysfunction (Yao, 2021), or adolescent impulsivity (Alduraywish, 2021). These perspectives abstract individual behavior from its institutional coordinates, thereby obscuring the role of structural precarity in generating deviance (Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2023). As Farmer (2018) has incisively argued, theories that center on moral failure or weakened social bonds often neglect how structural violence predetermines the very conditions in which moral agency must operate.

This study employs a Marxist class analysis, enriched by critical criminology and recent comparative scholarship, to reconceptualize juvenile delinquency as a manifestation of institutionalized inequality rather than individual moral failure. Building on Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of symbolic violence and Althusser’s (1971) theory of ideological state apparatuses, the analysis situates youth deviance within broader processes of class reproduction and institutional exclusion. These exclusions operate through intersecting structures—educational stratification, labor market segmentation, governance rationalities, and ideological discourse—all of which jointly function to marginalize surplus youth and reaffirm prevailing class boundaries (Wacquant, 2009; Gao, Gui, & Hu, 2024).

A critical dimension of this structural reproduction lies in the role of ideology. As labeling theory suggests, deviance is less a matter of intrinsic conduct than of social designation (Becker, 1963). In contemporary China, dominant media frames frequently construct rural, migrant, and vocational-track youth as deviant or dangerous subjects, thereby deflecting attention from systemic inequalities and reframing social exclusion as moral dysfunction (JJCS, 2025; Qingbo Big Data, 2025). As Hall (1978) has argued, moments of youth crisis often become symbolic arenas for the state to restore moral authority and manage public anxieties through the reproduction of “moral panics.”

Against this backdrop, the present study offers three key interventions. First, it proposes a structural model of youth crime that integrates class analysis, educational exclusion, and ideological legitimation. Second, it empirically maps how institutional mechanisms in China (2021–2025) both exclude and criminalize marginalized youth across schooling, labor, governance, and discourse. Third, it outlines a policy alternative grounded in redistributive justice and structural reform, moving beyond punitive control toward the institutional conditions of possibility for inclusion.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 delineates the theoretical framework; Section 3 details research design and data sources; Section 4 presents findings across

institutional fields; Section 5 explores implications for policy and social governance; and Section 6 concludes by identifying avenues for further inquiry.

2. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Construction

This section develops the theoretical architecture for reinterpreting juvenile delinquency as a structurally constituted outcome, forged within the matrix of class-based exclusion and institutional inequality. Rather than approaching youth crime through individualized behavioral paradigms, the analysis draws upon classical Marxist class theory and contemporary currents in critical criminology to uncover how the institutional domains of education, labor, and governance collectively enact and reproduce structural violence upon marginalized youth. The objective is not merely to displace dominant criminological explanations, but to situate delinquency within the broader historical and ideological conditions of capitalist modernity—particularly as these unfold in China's transitional political economy.

2.1 Marxist Class Theory and the Reproduction of Structural Inequality

At the core of this inquiry lies the Marxist understanding of class as a dynamic and relational structure, rooted in the differential command over the means of production and reproduced through institutionalized regimes of stratification and exclusion. As Marx and Engels (1846/1970) famously articulated in *The German Ideology*, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,” foregrounding the ideological dimension through which state apparatuses—including legal, educational, and labor institutions—sustain the legitimacy of dominant class interests. Class hegemony, in this view, is maintained not solely through coercive enforcement but through the normalization of inequality via institutional routines and symbolic orders.

Contemporary criminological scholarship provides ample empirical confirmation of this structural diagnosis. Bruce (2000) demonstrates that material disadvantage—when compounded by spatial segregation and racialized governance—significantly heightens youth vulnerability to criminalization. Bynner and Heinz (2021), examining the digitalized labor landscape, contend that youth from lower socioeconomic strata remain structurally misaligned with institutional expectations premised on forms of cultural capital and adaptability they have little opportunity to acquire. In both cases, what is cast as individual delinquency reflects, more precisely, the institutional scripting of exclusion within capitalist logics of productivity and compliance.

Within the contemporary Chinese context, emerging ethnographic and qualitative research has increasingly documented how youth from rural and migrant backgrounds—systematically excluded from elite educational tracks, stable labor markets, and equitable access to social welfare—experience not only material deprivation but also chronic symbolic misrecognition (Gao, Gui, & Hu, 2024). Often situated in vocational streams or relegated to the urban periphery, these young people are neither absorbed into the circuits of productive labor nor accorded full civic legitimacy. In Marxist terms, they comprise what is best understood as a relative surplus population: structurally available yet economically redundant, institutionally visible yet socially devalued.

This surplus status, as Cernkovich (1978) insightfully observed, is not merely a

passive consequence of labor market fluctuations but an active disciplinary arrangement. By designating certain segments of youth as deviant or dangerous, state institutions sustain social hierarchies while deflecting attention from systemic contradictions. The construction of risk thus becomes a mode of governance. Wacquant (2009) further elaborates that the penal regulation of surplus populations under neoliberal regimes transforms structural precarity into individualized criminal responsibility, thereby stabilizing the conditions of accumulation through moralized control.

In this light, juvenile delinquency must be reconceptualized not as a pathological deviation from normative youth behavior, but as a symptomatic expression of deeper contradictions within class-based society—wherein surplus youth are rendered hyper-visible as security threats and simultaneously erased as political subjects. Their deviance, in turn, becomes the discursive alibi through which coercive state practices are rationalized, normalized, and reproduced.

2.2 Education as Symbolic Violence: Bourdieu's Contribution

Grounded in the Marxist critique of structural domination, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence offers a potent analytical framework for understanding how institutionalized inequality is rendered legitimate under the guise of meritocratic neutrality. In his seminal works *Distinction* and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu (1977) argues that the educational system, far from leveling the social playing field, functions as a mechanism for reproducing class hierarchies by privileging the habitus and cultural capital of the dominant class.

Under this logic, the ostensibly impartial operations of schooling obscure deeply embedded forms of exclusion. Students from working-class or migrant backgrounds are frequently disadvantaged—not due to inherent cognitive deficits, but because they lack access to the linguistic codes, behavioral dispositions, and normative expectations that are unconsciously valorized within institutional settings. Their difficulties are thus misread not as the consequence of structural inequality but as evidence of personal deficiency or lack of discipline (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This misrecognition, in which dominated groups internalize their marginalization as deserved, exemplifies symbolic violence in its most enduring form: the naturalization of inequality as merit.

In the Chinese context, these dynamics are further intensified by structural mechanisms such as the *hukou* (household registration) system and the persistent urban–rural divide in educational funding and resource allocation. Empirical research indicates that rural and migrant-background students remain consistently underrepresented in elite academic trajectories and disproportionately channeled into vocational education, despite comparable cognitive potential (Bayas & Grau, 2023). Within vocational tracks, disciplinary practices frequently prioritize behavioral regulation over intellectual cultivation, reinforcing normative expectations that these youth are suited primarily for low-status labor, bureaucratic docility, or punitive oversight. In this way, the educational system ceases to be a neutral ladder of opportunity and instead becomes a conduit for symbolic inscription of class destiny.

Sabatés, Feinstein, and Shingal's (2008) area-based study on educational inequality in the UK revealed a consistent correlation between geographic and

socioeconomic stratification in educational access and the incidence of youth delinquency. This analytical insight finds parallel expression in contemporary China, where official data continue to show disproportionately high dropout rates among juvenile offenders (SPP, 2025), and where vocational education—despite sustained policy advocacy—remains socially stigmatized and institutionally marginalized.

Rather than functioning as inclusive platforms for mobility, educational institutions increasingly serve as early sorting mechanisms that classify and differentiate youth according to culturally encoded markers of legitimacy. This dynamic echoes Solakoglu and Yuksek's (2019) findings in the Turkish context, where academic tracking at an early stage significantly shaped subsequent exposure to deviant trajectories. When disparities in cultural capital are misrecognized as cognitive deficiency, a recursive chain is set in motion: exclusion from educational opportunity produces identity degradation, psychological alienation, and eventual subjection to disciplinary apparatuses. What is typically categorized as individual deviance, therefore, is more accurately read as a symptom of deeper class-based stratification.

In this regard, schools function not merely as instructional sites, but as ideological state apparatuses in the Althusserian sense (Althusser, 1971), naturalizing and legitimizing processes of social exclusion through pedagogical routines and meritocratic discourse. As Bynner and Heinz (2021) have noted, the performative demands of elite-oriented educational cultures frequently engender disaffection, estrangement, and a profound sense of cultural illegitimacy among socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. Within this symbolic order, institutionalized misrecognition becomes a formative experience—channeling social marginalization into criminalization.

2.3 Punitive Governance and the Criminalization of Poverty

Beyond the stratifying functions of the education system, marginalized youth in contemporary China increasingly find themselves subject to a governance rationality that manages poverty and deviance not through integrative welfare mechanisms, but through regimes of surveillance, deterrence, and selective penalization. In this regard, Wacquant's (2009) conceptualization of the neoliberal penal state offers an incisive lens: as redistributive functions of the state retract, coercive apparatuses expand to absorb and regulate populations rendered redundant by capital's restructuring.

While China does not mirror the carceral scale of Western penal systems, particularly that of the United States, the logic of targeted criminalization remains salient. Migrant youth, rural adolescents, and undereducated urban newcomers are consistently overrepresented in crime-control campaigns, especially in metropolitan regions such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou (Shenzhen PSB, 2025). Empirical research by Gao, Gui, and Hu (2024) reveals that these young individuals, often situated at the interstices of hukou-based exclusion and labor market precarity, face heightened exposure to legal escalation even for low-level infractions—a pattern indicative of institutional dislocation rather than individual delinquency.

This model of governance exemplifies what Wacquant (2009) terms “the penalization of poverty”: a socio-political process wherein economic precarity is transfigured into juridical legibility and moral blameworthiness. Rather than receiving

institutional support premised on rights-based inclusion, marginalized youth are increasingly cast as latent risks, governed not as developmental citizens but as deficit-bearing subjects. Policy discourses thus shift from redistribution to containment, naturalizing a mode of governance in which the management of social difference proceeds through legal formalization and ideological disavowal.

Cross-national research has consistently affirmed the structural nature of youth criminalization. In his study of juvenile justice in Saudi Arabia, Alduraywish (2021) observed that adolescents from low-income households not only face disproportionately high arrest rates, but are also subjected to intensified legal scrutiny and harsher procedural outcomes. Schepers (2016), examining urban policing practices in European contexts, identifies a recurring pattern whereby youths in socioeconomically marginalized neighborhoods are routinely subjected to spatial profiling and intensified surveillance, often in connection with non-violent or status-based infractions. These findings point to a broader pattern: deviance, in such cases, emerges not from intrinsic behavioral pathology but from being positioned at the intersection of poverty, place, and punitive state practice.

In contemporary China, the convergence of symbolic politics and disciplinary governance is exemplified by the rise of “campaign-style” crackdowns on juvenile delinquency. Characterized by heightened media visibility, deterrence-oriented publicity, and zero-tolerance enforcement rhetoric, these campaigns serve to spectacularize governance. Yet institutional data reveal a disjuncture between the language of severity and the practice of discretion: according to the Supreme People’s Procuratorate (2025), the non-prosecution rate for juvenile cases reached 51.3%, suggesting that frontline legal actors are navigating a space marked by conflicting imperatives—punitive display on one hand, procedural restraint on the other. While legislative texts increasingly adopt the lexicon of restorative justice, the operational logic of policing in stratified urban spaces continues to be shaped by coercion, suspicion, and selective enforcement.

Beyond immediate legal outcomes, the long-term consequences of early criminal labeling are structurally disabling. Youths once processed through the justice system often encounter institutionalized stigma across key life domains—including education, employment, and housing. As Becker (1963) argued, deviance is not simply enacted but conferred: the label itself becomes the mechanism through which social recognition is filtered. In this sense, criminalization operates as a generative process, transforming youth into what Cernkovich (1978) describes as “stigmatized subjects,” whose identities are recursively constructed by the very institutions that claim to rehabilitate them.

Ultimately, punitive governance in post-reform China cannot be read merely as a reaction to rising juvenile delinquency; it must be understood as an active technology of inequality management. The state’s carceral response to surplus youth serves both as a mode of social containment and as a symbolic reaffirmation of state legitimacy in the face of accelerating structural dislocation. In this configuration, penal power becomes a substitute for inclusive redistribution, and exclusion itself is institutionalized as a modality of rule.

2.4 Ideology, Labeling, and the Reproduction of Class Hierarchies

The criminalization of youth from structurally marginalized backgrounds cannot be reduced to material exclusion alone. Ideological formations play a constitutive role in legitimizing inequality, rendering it naturalized and politically inert. Althusser's (1971) conceptual distinction between repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) remains particularly salient in the Chinese context. While RSAs such as the police and judicial organs enforce order through coercion, ISAs—including media, education, and legal discourse—produce the symbolic frameworks that render such coercion intelligible and publicly acceptable.

Within this ideological apparatus, deviant youth are not only administratively governed but discursively constituted. Dominant narratives surrounding juvenile crime often attribute its causes to moral degeneration, parenting failure, or cultural inadequacy. These interpretations obscure the structural foundations of deviance, recasting systemic inequality as a matter of individual deficiency (Yao, 2021; Abhishek & Balamurugan, 2023). As Niyozova (2023) notes, this narrative displacement is not specific to China but is emblematic of societies where youth deviance becomes a conduit for broader moral anxieties.

Labeling theory offers a critical conceptual bridge for analyzing this process. Becker (1963) argued that deviance is not inherent in the act itself, but emerges through the societal response to it. In the Chinese case, youth from rural or migrant backgrounds are disproportionately labeled as “problematic” or “delinquent” by teachers, law enforcement, and media actors—often prior to any deviant act. Once institutionalized, such labels curtail social mobility and solidify trajectories of exclusion (Farmer, 2018). Cross-national research by Cosma et al. (2022) further demonstrates that gendered and class-based stereotypes in schools and media significantly predict adolescent deviance, even when controlling for behavior, underscoring how symbolic classification reinforces structural marginalization.

The ideological construction of youth deviance is sustained and naturalized through institutionalized media discourse. Recent Chinese data indicate that over 58% of youth-related crime reporting in 2025 employed attributional tropes such as “parental neglect” or “moral failure,” with 69.7% explicitly referencing the familial background of the accused (JJCS, 2025; Fudan CGRC, 2025). These representational patterns exemplify Hall's (1978) theory of moral panic, wherein youth crime becomes a symbolic register for projecting broader anxieties about social disorder. Within this discursive framework, the delinquent youth is constructed not as a casualty of structural exclusion, but as a threat to national progress—a deviation to be corrected rather than a symptom to be understood.

This ideological coding is further reproduced in legal and educational practice. Mazumdar (2022) observes that institutional interventions are predominantly framed as moral rehabilitation rather than distributive redress. Schools and juvenile courts emphasize behavioral discipline while neglecting the socio-economic contexts from which such behaviors arise. As Ward (2014) contends, the persistent individualization of youth crime within global justice systems has systematically obscured its class-inflected character.

Taken together, these processes constitute what Bourdieu (1977) terms “misrecognition”—a condition wherein relations of domination are internalized as legitimate by both the dominant and the dominated. The cultural scripting of delinquency thereby performs a double function: it legitimizes coercive governance while reaffirming faith in meritocratic order. In doing so, it renders structural reform both ideologically unnecessary and politically unintelligible.

2.5 Toward a Structural Framework

Building on the preceding theoretical exposition, this study proposes a structural analytic framework for interpreting juvenile delinquency in contemporary China through the interrelation of class location, institutional exclusion, and ideological formation. Central to this model is the understanding that class position serves as the primary axis of exclusion, conditioning differential access to resources, institutional pathways, and legal protection. For working-class, rural, and migrant youth, disadvantage emerges not as personal failure but as a structurally inscribed condition rooted in their socio-economic positioning.

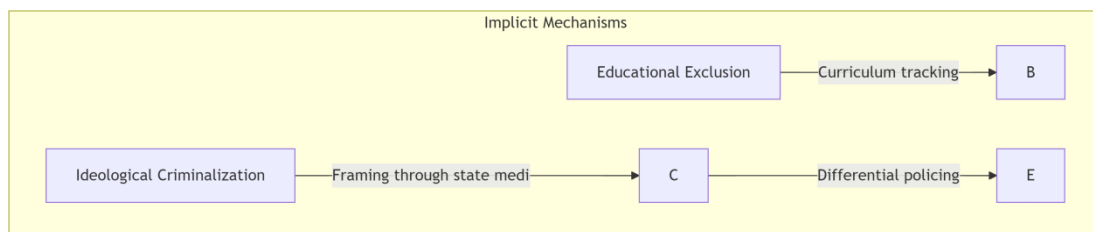


Fig. 1. Cyclical Reproduction System of Structural Delinquency

Illustrating the interdependent mechanisms converting socioeconomic exclusion into youth delinquency. Arrows denote primary causal pathways (solid) and secondary reinforcement effects (dashed). Color coding: Teal = Educational processes, Orange = Labor market dynamics, Red = Governance systems, Purple = Ideological constructs, Blue = Behavioral outcomes.

These exclusions are operationalized through three institutional domains: education, labor, and governance. Each operates not merely as a distributive mechanism, but as an instrument of structural violence—where educational institutions normalize hierarchies of cultural capital, labor markets relegate surplus youth to precariousness, and governance apparatuses enact selective coercion. These institutions function synergistically to transmute class-based disparities into lived outcomes, simultaneously constraining mobility and reproducing disciplinary control.

Superimposed upon material inequality is the ideological apparatus, encompassing media discourse, legal codes, and normative moral schemas. These structures do not merely reflect social conditions but actively construct them—reframing youth deviance as a matter of personal deficiency or familial dysfunction, thereby obscuring its structural determinants. Through mechanisms of labeling, moralization, and narrative reductionism, ideology naturalizes exclusion and legitimizes repression, reproducing class-based inequality under the veneer of neutrality and public interest.

Within this conceptual schema, juvenile delinquency emerges not as an individual aberration, but as the embodied symptom of deeper structural antagonisms. It crystallizes the dissonance between aspirational discourses of social mobility and the actual contraction of access to opportunity; between institutional norms of discipline

and the stigmatization of those rendered unable to conform; and between juridical rationalities that pathologize marginality and penal systems that convert deprivation into deviance. This framework thus displaces moralistic and psychological explanations, advancing a materialist account of delinquency as a socially patterned, institutionally sanctioned, and ideologically reproduced outcome embedded within capitalist formations.

3.Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-interpretive methodology grounded in critical social theory and political economy. Departing from individual-level data collection and behavioral risk modeling, the analysis centers institutional arrangements, class structures, and ideological formations as core explanatory domains. The objective is not to derive causal regularities in a positivist sense, but to uncover the structural and symbolic mechanisms through which youth deviance is produced, managed, and rendered intelligible in the context of contemporary Chinese society.

3.1 Research Orientation: Critical Criminology and Structural Hermeneutics

Situated within the tradition of critical criminology, this study understands crime not as a discrete act of moral or behavioral deviation, but as a phenomenon socially and historically constituted. Drawing on Marxist insights, it conceptualizes delinquency as the symptomatic outcome of class inequality, institutional exclusion, and symbolic domination—frequently enacted through the very systems nominally tasked with prevention, including education, labor markets, and juvenile justice apparatuses.

Methodologically, the research adopts a structural hermeneutic approach that integrates institutional diagnostics with critical discourse analysis. Informed by the theoretical contributions of Loïc Wacquant, Pierre Bourdieu, and Stuart Hall, this framework treats data not as neutral evidence but as socially embedded texts—artifacts inscribed within fields of power, ideology, and contestation. Crime is thus interpreted as a discursive site wherein structural inequalities are simultaneously legitimized and concealed through policy design, bureaucratic language, and media representation. Rather than locating deviance within individual pathology, this interpretive model foregrounds the institutional reproduction of marginality as the central analytic concern.

3.2 Data Sources and Materials

To excavate the structural mechanisms underlying juvenile delinquency, this study draws on a diverse set of officially published and publicly accessible materials from 2021 to 2025, categorized into four analytic domains that correspond to the institutional framework delineated in Chapter 4.

(1) Judicial and Criminal Statistics

This domain integrates national and regional datasets, including:

- a. The 2023 and 2025 White Papers on Juvenile Prosecution (Supreme People's Procuratorate), detailing arrest rates, offense types, and sentencing patterns;
- b. The 2025 Guangzhou Juvenile Justice Annual Report, documenting educational trajectories of prosecuted youth;
- c. The 2025 Beijing High Court Judicial Analytics report, highlighting employment profiles of youth in organized crime;

d. Recidivism metrics from the China Judicial Big Data Institute, enabling longitudinal tracking of repeat offenders.

These sources facilitate both macro-trend mapping and micro-level risk diagnostics.

(2) Policy and Governance Documents

This domain examines how the state discursively and institutionally constructs delinquency, drawing on:

- a. The 2020 revision of the Law on the Protection of Minors;
- b. The 2021 Opinions on Strengthening Comprehensive Governance of Juvenile Crime;
- c. Municipal directives from Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Beijing related to “campaign-style” crackdowns;
- d. The 2025 Ministry of Education bulletins on rural-urban education and vocational training reform.

These texts undergo thematic coding to reveal shifts in penal rationalities, target populations, and governance discourse.

(3) Labor and Employment Reports

To assess structural exclusion in labor markets, this domain draws on:

- a. The 2025 youth unemployment report (National Bureau of Statistics);
- b. The 2025 MOHRSS report on new employment forms, examining informal work among vocational graduates;
- c. 2023–2025 data from China Youth Development Journal on crime patterns among platform workers.

These documents contextualize youth delinquency within economic precarity and employment segmentation.

(4) Media Discourse and Public Sentiment

To analyze symbolic criminalization, this study incorporates:

- a. Framing analyses from the 2025 Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies;
- b. Fudan University’s monitoring data on class and family framing in crime news;
- c. Qingbo Big Data’s 2025 Public Opinion Report on the stigmatization of youth labeled as “problematic.”

Discourse analysis identifies ideological motifs, causal attribution patterns, and media-induced moral panic across narratives.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

This study adopts a multi-method qualitative strategy, integrating documentary analysis, critical discourse examination, and cross-sectoral triangulation. The analytical process comprises:

- a. Thematic coding of legal and policy texts to extract recurring governance logics and institutionalized mechanisms of exclusion;
- b. Discourse analysis of media narratives to uncover ideological framing, symbolic marginalization, and representational asymmetries;
- c. Comparative triangulation across education, labor, governance, and media fields to reconstruct the institutional architecture underlying youth criminalization.

This approach transcends the limits of descriptive criminology, enabling a structurally grounded account of how inequality is reproduced across intersecting institutional and symbolic domains.

3.4 Research Limitations

The study’s primary limitation lies in its non-ethnographic design, which excludes direct interviews or participant observation with affected youth. This constrains access to experiential narratives and subjective agency. Nonetheless, the research offsets this limitation through its depth of institutional analysis and synthesis of diverse empirical materials. The integration of legal, labor, educational, and discursive data offers a coherent foundation for structural interpretation. Future research may expand this framework through ethnographic or participatory methods to examine how young people internalize, resist, or reinterpret the processes of structural criminalization.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section analyzes the empirical configurations of juvenile delinquency within the shifting architecture of China’s institutional order. Departing from behavioralist framings, the discussion reinterprets delinquency as a symptomatic expression of structurally entrenched inequality. The analysis is organized around four interlocking mechanisms—educational exclusion, labor market dispossession, punitive governance, and ideological criminalization—each functioning not only as a site of empirical visibility but as an institutional apparatus through which structural violence is routinized and reproduced in relation to marginalized youth.

Table 1. Multi-Dimensional Indicators of Structural Youth Exclusion and Criminalization in China, 2025

Mechanism	Indicator	Data (2025)	Source
Education	Vocational students in crime statistics	39.20%	SPP White Paper
Labor Market	Youth unemployment (age 16–24)	18.70%	NBS
	Flexible employment rate among voc. school grads	53.40%	MoHRSS
Governance	Migrant youth in policing campaigns (Shenzhen)	71.80%	Shenzhen PSB
	Non-prosecution rate in juvenile cases	51.30%	SPP Press Conference
Ideology	Use of attributional labels in media crime reports	58.90%	JJCS (2025)
	“Problem youth” term online spread	980 million views	Qingbo Big Data (2025)

4.1 Educational Inequality and Class Reproduction

Table 2. Educational Inequality and Juvenile Delinquency

Indicator	Baseline Data	2025 Data	Change	Source	Policy Context
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Rural compulsory education enrollment	58.2%(2022)	52.10%	↓6.1%	MOE Statistical Bulletin	Urbanization acceleration
Rural student ratio in "Double First-Class" universities	6.7%(2022)	8.30%	↑1.6%	Peking University Education Finance Institute	Special enrollment expansion
Dropout rate among juvenile suspects (Guangzhou)	72.3%(2021)	68.90%	↓3.4%	Procuratorate White Paper	Compulsory education reinforcement
Vocational school students involved in cases	41.5%(2022)	39.20%	↓2.3%	Supreme Procuratorate White Paper	Vocational education reform

Education has long been framed as the primary avenue of social mobility. Yet in contemporary China, access to high-quality schooling remains structurally contingent upon class position, geographic origin, and household registration status. Despite expanded state investment and targeted rural aid, inequality remains deeply embedded—especially during the transition from compulsory to higher education.

The 2025 National Education Statistical Bulletin reports that rural students constituted 52.1% of the compulsory education population, down 6.1 percentage points from 2022, reflecting continued urbanization and rural outmigration (Ministry of Education, 2025). While the proportion of rural students entering Double First-Class universities rose modestly to 8.3%, this 1.6-point increase—attributed to targeted recruitment initiatives—has not meaningfully disrupted entrenched educational hierarchies (PKU Education Finance Research Center, 2025).

Educational disparities map closely onto juvenile justice outcomes. The 2025 Guangzhou Juvenile Judicial Protection Report notes that 68.9% of prosecuted minors had not completed the nine-year compulsory cycle—slightly better than in 2021 but still disturbingly high (Guangzhou Procuratorate, 2025). Meanwhile, vocational-track students comprised 39.2% of youth criminal cases, suggesting that recent legal education reforms have not mitigated risk concentration in these institutions (Supreme People’s Procuratorate, 2025).

This stratified access yields clear criminogenic effects. Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence offers an instructive lens: while education appears meritocratic, its norms are calibrated to the cultural capital of middle and upper classes. Working-class and rural youth often confront curricular alienation, behavioral misrecognition, and linguistic marginality. Their “failure” is not innate, but institutional. Over time, this misrecognition fosters disidentification, oppositional identities, and in some cases, delinquency as a form of symbolic resistance.

Rather than serving as a safeguard, the education system often functions as a sorting mechanism—marking certain students for downward mobility and institutional exclusion. In this sense, it operates less as a site of inclusion than as an engine of class reproduction, legitimizing unequal life chances under the rhetoric of meritocratic

evaluation.

4.2 Labor Market Marginalization and Structural Exclusion

Table 3. Structural Exclusion in Labor Market

Indicator	Baseline Data	2025 Data	Trend	Source	Economic Context
Youth unemployment rate (16-24)	21.3%(2023)	18.70%	Declining	NBS	V-shaped recovery
Flexible employment among vocational graduates	48.7%(2022)	53.40%	Rising	MOHRSS Report	Gig economy expansion
Unemployed youth in organized crime cases	33%(2022)	37.50%	Worsening	Beijing High Court	Employment polarization
Crime growth among platform workers	+19%(20-23)	+12%(23-25)	Slowing	Academic Journal	Algorithm regulation

Structural inequalities embedded in the education system become further entrenched as marginalized youth transition into the labor market. Despite nominal signs of macroeconomic recovery in 2025, labor outcomes for young people remain precarious. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that the unemployment rate among individuals aged 16 to 24 has marginally declined to 18.7%, yet continues to signal systemic exclusion—particularly for non-college-educated, rural, and vocational-track youth (NBS, 2025).

This exclusion is exacerbated by the evolving nature of employment itself. According to the Ministry of Human Resources’ 2025 report on emerging labor patterns, 53.4% of vocational graduates now enter flexible or platform-based work—a 4.7% increase over 2022. This trend reflects both the absorption and saturation of the gig economy. For many, participation in such sectors is not a matter of individual preference but institutional compulsion, marked by employment precarity, lack of protection, and absence of mobility channels.

Under such structural constraints, criminal engagement emerges not merely as deviant behavior but as a socially stigmatized response to systemic dislocation. Judicial statistics from the Beijing High People’s Court (2025) reveal that 37.5% of first-time youth offenders involved in gang-related activities were unemployed at the time of arrest—4.5 percentage points higher than in 2022. These data affirm the linkage between economic marginality and delinquency risk.

This relationship is further corroborated by findings from the China Youth Development Journal, which records a 12% increase in criminal involvement among platform workers between 2023 and 2025. Although growth has tapered due to algorithmic intervention and regulatory tightening, the data underscore the volatility of informal labor as a safety net for vulnerable youth populations.

From a Marxist standpoint, such marginalization is not incidental but structurally functional to capitalist accumulation. Youth from disadvantaged backgrounds form a relative surplus population—perpetually mobilizable yet economically dispensable. Their exclusion serves to stabilize wages, discipline labor, and legitimate coercive

governance. These dynamics resonate with Beck’s “risk society,” wherein precarity is institutionalized as a normalized condition for youth at the periphery of economic citizenship.

Beyond material dispossession, this trajectory generates psychosocial effects. Deprived of meaningful labor and denied recognition within productive life, many youth internalize alienation, resentment, and disaffection. In such contexts, criminal activity becomes a mode of existential assertion—whether as resistance, reclamation of agency, or survival strategy—within a social order that renders them both invisible and expendable.

4.3 Punitive Governance and Selective Enforcement

Table 4. Punitive Governance Trends

Indicator	Baseline Data	2025 Data	Judicial Shift	Source	Reform Direction
Migrant youth in crackdown cases (Guangzhou→Shenzhen)	65.2%(2021)	71.80%	Concentration	Police Report	Hukou reform lag
Non-prosecution rate for juveniles	46.8%(2022)	51.30%	Protection strengthened	SPP Data	Restorative justice
Recidivism among labeled youth	38.6%(hist.)	35.20%	Improving	Judicial Big Data	Support system building

While the institutional architecture of education and labor markets systematically excludes marginalized youth from legitimate pathways of social integration, the governance apparatus has often responded not with compensatory inclusion but with punitive regulation. In numerous Chinese cities, local authorities persist in campaign-style crackdowns on juvenile delinquency, privileging deterrence and “order maintenance” over preventive or rehabilitative strategies. This securitized orientation disproportionately affects youth from migrant and low-income families, thereby compounding their structural vulnerability.

Recent data from the Shenzhen Public Security Bureau reveal that 71.8% of juveniles apprehended during the 2025 special anti-crime campaigns were children of migrant workers, underscoring the persistence of punitive path-dependence within China’s urban policing regimes (Shenzhen PSB, 2025). Notably, many of these youth were arrested for minor infractions, indicating that enforcement practices are less driven by offense severity than by the spatialized and class-based logic of selective surveillance.

Yet signals of moderation have begun to emerge. According to a 2025 press release from the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, the national non-prosecution rate for juvenile cases reached 51.3%, a 4.5 percentage point increase over 2022 levels (SPP, 2025). This shift reflects the slow institutionalization of restorative justice principles within prosecutorial practice. Nevertheless, the coercive logic of frontline policing remains dominant, particularly in impoverished districts where discretionary power is exercised with reduced oversight and greater severity.

More troubling is the reproduction of criminal identity through repeated justice system exposure. A longitudinal study conducted by the China Judicial Big Data Research Institute found that the three-year recidivism rate among youth with prior convictions stood at 35.2% in 2025—only a modest decline from previous cycles (CJDRI, 2025). These figures indicate that carceral contact and social labeling continue to shape delinquency trajectories, eroding the possibility of reintegration.

Wacquant’s (2009) notion of the “penalization of poverty” offers critical interpretive leverage. In the absence of a robust social welfare infrastructure, punitive institutions increasingly serve as default mechanisms for governing surplus populations. In China’s urban governance logic, deviant youth are not merely punished; they are administratively managed through exclusion. This exclusion is spatial (the securitization of urban peripheries), procedural (low thresholds for detention and conviction), and symbolic (stigmatization through official discourse).

Moreover, procedural outcomes reveal systemic class bias. While affluent youth are frequently diverted into reconciliatory mechanisms or granted suspended sentences, their poorer counterparts face full criminal processing. This bifurcated penal logic not only reproduces social inequality but also deepens mistrust in the legitimacy of state institutions among vulnerable populations.

The cumulative effect is the consolidation of a carceral governance paradigm wherein the juvenile justice system ceases to function as a protective institution and instead becomes a disciplinary apparatus for managing the social consequences of structural exclusion. Within such a regime, restorative ambition is eclipsed by regulatory control, and juvenile delinquency is transformed from a site of social vulnerability into an instrument of population discipline.

4.4 Ideological Criminalization and the Reproduction of Stigma

Table 5. Discursive Construction

Indicator	Baseline Data	2025 Data	Media Evolution	Source	Social Context
Labeling in crime reports	61.5%(2021)	58.90%	Gradual decline	Communication Research	Media self-regulation
Family background disclosure	76.4%(hist.)	69.70%	Significant drop	Fudan University Monitor	Privacy legislation
"Problem youth" online mentions	12M(2022)	9.8M	Decreasing	Qingbo Big Data	Content governance

Beyond the material dimensions of institutional exclusion and punitive governance lies a more insidious mechanism: the ideological construction of juvenile delinquency through public discourse, legal codification, and media representation. While education and policing systems enact structural exclusion, ideology legitimizes this process by reframing systemic violence as individual deficiency—coded as moral failure, behavioral deviance, or dysfunctional family background.

Althusser’s (1971) theory of ideological state apparatuses offers a conceptual lens

through which to analyze this dynamic. Unlike repressive state apparatuses that function through coercion, ideological apparatuses—schools, media, legal institutions—operate through consent, producing narratives that appear neutral yet serve to reproduce dominant class interests and obscure the structural roots of inequality. These institutions do not merely reflect social values; they actively participate in the symbolic production of deviance.

In contemporary China, such ideological formations remain embedded in dominant media frames. A 2025 content analysis in the *Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies* reported that 58.9% of youth crime coverage invoked attributional tropes such as “poor upbringing,” “moral deterioration,” or “parental failure”—only a slight decline of 2.6% since 2021 (JJCS, 2025). Likewise, data from Fudan University’s Communication and Governance Research Center revealed that 69.7% of crime reports mentioned the offender’s family background—down 6.7% from 2021, yet still reinforcing a moral-individualist logic of interpretation (Fudan CGRC, 2025). These patterns underscore how ideological apparatuses continue to displace structural critique in favor of individualized blame, thereby reinforcing class-coded narratives of deviance.

This interpretive framing resonates strongly with labeling theory, as articulated by Howard Becker (1963), who posited that deviance is not intrinsic to an act but is constituted through authoritative acts of classification. In the Chinese context, youth from vocational schools, rural peripheries, and migrant households are often pre-encoded as “problematic” prior to any behavioral transgression, thereby entering social institutions under the weight of anticipatory stigma. This discursive inscription shapes their experience across multiple domains—educational exclusion, neighborhood surveillance, and judicial prejudice—effectively producing deviance through institutional recognition.

Stuart Hall’s (1978) theorization of moral panic further elucidates the ideological function of youth deviance as a politically expedient category. In moments of intensified structural contradiction—marked by rising precarity, educational bottlenecks, or blocked mobility—deviance is deployed symbolically to reassert normative order. Even when crime rates remain static or decline, targeted amplification of spectacular cases constructs a crisis imaginary. According to the 2025 Qingbo Big Data Youth Opinion Report, online engagement with the label “problem youth” still accumulated over 980 million views—a decline of 18.3% from previous years, yet indicative of its enduring cultural salience.

This process of ideological criminalization is not confined to media discourses; it permeates policy rhetoric, pedagogical interactions, and community supervision practices. Youth marked as deviant are cast as subjects in need of “correction” or “reform,” yet the material infrastructures necessary for genuine reintegration—equal educational access, dignified labor opportunities, and symbolic recognition—are structurally foreclosed. What emerges is a performative discourse of care that masks the ongoing deployment of symbolic violence.

In effect, ideological discourse does not merely narrate deviance; it erases the very structures that produce it. Systemic failures are retranslated into moral fault, and

structurally excluded youth are rendered not as claimants of justice but as objects of discipline. Such inversion legitimizes punitive governance, displaces demands for redistribution, and naturalizes a regime in which inequality is depoliticized and dissent domesticated.

5. Conclusion

This study reinterprets juvenile delinquency in contemporary China as a structurally constituted phenomenon, rooted not in individual pathology or familial breakdown but in the institutional reproduction of class-based exclusion. Through the integration of Marxist class analysis and critical criminological theory, it demonstrates how education, labor markets, governance, and ideological apparatuses intersect to marginalize specific youth cohorts and legitimize their criminalization under the guise of legal neutrality.

Empirically, the analysis draws on recent national and municipal data (2025) to illustrate how rural, migrant, and vocational-track youth remain disproportionately excluded from quality education, stable employment, and equitable legal processes. Despite modest reforms in educational access and prosecutorial discretion, systemic vulnerabilities persist. The fact that nearly 69% of prosecuted juveniles in Guangzhou lacked compulsory education, and over 37% of those charged with gang-related offenses were unemployed at the time of arrest, reflects a broader structural incapacity to ensure inclusive developmental trajectories.

Theoretically, the study addresses two critical gaps in existing criminological literature. First, it challenges the predominance of psychological and moralist frameworks by foregrounding material inequality and class location as central to the production of youth deviance. Second, it examines the ideological mechanisms through which structural conditions are depoliticized, rendering social exclusion intelligible only through individualized blame. Drawing on Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses, Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, and Wacquant's critique of carceral rationality, the paper advances an integrated analytic framework that conceptualizes crime both as a manifestation of structural dislocation and as a disciplinary technique for managing surplus populations.

From a policy standpoint, the findings call for a fundamental reorientation in juvenile justice strategy—one that transcends punitive deterrence and post hoc rehabilitation. Effective intervention must target structural transformation across three interrelated domains:

(1) Educational access and institutional inclusion: Policies must expand substantive access to quality secondary and tertiary education for rural and migrant youth, dismantle hukou-based exclusionary mechanisms, and reconceptualize vocational education as a legitimate path for social advancement rather than a stigmatized track of residual sorting.

(2) Labor market integration and security: Youth-centered labor reforms should reduce precarity through protections for platform-based workers, targeted training initiatives, and transition support for low-income graduates. Economic stability must be reframed not as an outcome of desistance, but as its prerequisite.

(3) Governance rationality and discursive accountability: Policing practices must be democratized, particularly in migrant districts, through institutional checks on discretionary enforcement. At the same time, media frameworks must shift toward narrative pluralism and ethical reporting that resists the symbolic criminalization of disadvantaged youth.

Beyond immediate policy implications, this study highlights the necessity for criminological research to adopt a relational and structural lens—one attentive to how institutions, ideologies, and power relations co-produce criminalized identities. Methodologically, future inquiry may benefit from ethnographic research, participatory youth studies, and discourse analysis to capture the lived experience and agency of youth at the margins.

In this context, juvenile crime cannot be reduced to juridical pathology. It must be understood as a diagnostic site of broader social contradictions—a reflection of deepening inequality beneath the rhetoric of mobility. Addressing youth crime thus entails not only behavioral correction but the restructuring of life chances. This is not simply a matter of crime control, but of social justice.

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