

# *The Issue of Crime Committed by Juveniles in Rural Areas*

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**Abstract:** The problem of juvenile delinquency has gained much attention nationwide. In the domestic research field, however, there does not seem to be a comprehensive and robust exploration of juvenile delinquency in rural areas. This research examines the current situation of rural minor delinquency and explains the causes of the much higher delinquency rate than urban minor criminality in terms of both reality factors and psychological factors. The loose family connections and failed basic education may lead rural minors to detach from a stable psychological state and thus be more easily lured by the superior material life of criminal gangs and start committing criminal acts. Ultimately, the study proposes three suggestions: reshaping family intimacy; founding the psychological defense; and reducing recidivism. These suggestions may not substantially reduce the crime rate of rural minors, but at least should be the direction of improvement that ought to be pursued today. This study seeks to draw the attention of Chinese judicial and academic field to the crime of rural minors and gradually improve the current situation.

**Keywords:** rural juvenile crime, criminal psychology, juvenile delinquency, data analysis

## 1. Introduction

China's children today have not only undergone and witnessed the realization of national prosperity; they are also a new force capable of shouldering the mission of national rejuvenation. However, the number of crimes committed by minors is increasing, and there is a trend toward violence and gangs as the age of criminal offenders decreases. The prevention of juvenile delinquency is a matter allows of urgency.

According to data in the White Paper on the Procuratorial Work of Minors released by The Supreme People's Procuratorate of the People's Republic of China in June 2022, the procuratorial authorities accepted 55,379 juvenile criminal suspects for investigation and arrest and 73,998 juvenile criminal suspects for investigation and prosecution in 2021. At the same time, there is an increasing number of crimes committed by minors aged between 14 and 16, and the number of juveniles suspected of telecommunication network crimes has increased significantly.

Across the world, juvenile delinquency is becoming a challenging issue that needs to be addressed. Compared to adults, juveniles are still in the developmental stage of their worldview, and they need more standardized guidance, more timely education, and the prevention of juvenile tendencies to reoffend. Scholars and judicial staff are seeking for ways to improve the situation.

However, there is an extremely special group within the group of minors, which is the minors in rural areas. In the field of research in China nowadays, no official statistics have ever been developed about the current state of crime among rural minors. Based on personal experiences of volunteer teaching in the countryside, relevant papers by several scholars, and the news over the past two decades, it is clear that rural minors occupy a fairly high percentage of the minor delinquency population.

Compared to minors living in urban areas, the living environment and psychological state of rural minors show significant differences. Due to the limited economic conditions of their families, some children grow up living with their grandparents, whose parents work in the city and get very little chance for them to build close relationships. Moreover, the people raising them happen to be elderly people who may suffer from illnesses and blocked minds, making it difficult to give minors the emotional support they need. In addition, the education of rural youth is also an important factor. Even though rural schools are very widespread nowadays, factors such as senior teachers and the supremacy of grades still make it difficult for rural minors to receive the equal level of education as urban ones. Quality instruction, socio-emotional education, psychological counseling are scarcer in the countryside. As a result, rural minors could develop unhealthy psychology and commit crimes such as burglary, provocation, and robbery.

At present, both domestic and international academics have the issues faced the rural minors. Existing literature engages with psychological analyses of rural adolescents, discussions on rural education, and concerns oriented to post-crime education for minors. However, scholars have not yet provided a comprehensive view of the causes and systematic prevention of crime by rural minors. Therefore, research in this area would contribute tremendously to social stability and save the lives of countless rural youth.

For the above reasons, this research explores the current situation of crime among rural minors from 2000 to 2020 and analyzes the causes of their crime and make some recommendations that may be helpful. The research analyzes representative cases and data, combined with existing literature, in order to obtain a general understanding of the phenomenon of rural juvenile delinquency. Furthermore, through theoretical analysis and argumentation of the phenomenon, the paper also makes suggestions to address the existing problems. It seeks to draw the attention of academic and practical fields to the crime of rural minors and make improvements to the current situation, which enables young people to reap a better life and sense the warmth given by society.

## **2. The Problem of Rural Juvenile Delinquency**

As mentioned above, with the attention and management of the government, the situation of juvenile crime still increases rather than decreases. What is more important is that the number of crimes committed by rural minors, which has continued to grow with a more rapid frequency, far exceeds the rise in the total number of crimes committed by minors.

Examining the relevant official statistics in 2018, it suggests that in all cases of juvenile delinquency, left-behind families are the most influential adverse family factors on minors. In the sixth national population census data, the percentage of the rural population is 69.71%, while the percentage of juvenile offenders in rural areas is 82.06 compared to 17.94% in urban areas [1].

In addition to these, the Shandong Provincial High People's Court calculates that among the more than 1,000 cases of infringement of minors' rights in the past two years in the province, victims living in rural areas and towns accounted for the vast majority, about for 65.9%, and the average age of victims was 9.7 years old. Among them, 67.7% of the cases are crimes of sexual abuse of minors, most of them are committed by acquaintances, 79.1% of the minor victims are acquainted with the perpetrators, and 23.5% of the cases occurred in the neighborhood [2].

It is obvious that rural areas are the most affected by the juvenile crime, both for the victims and the perpetrators. All these situations show that the prevention of juvenile delinquency in rural areas has become more serious and needs more emphasis.

Through the analysis of existing studies by scholars, there are several characteristics of crimes committed by rural minors.

### **2.1. General Basic Conditions**

According to the statistics of China Justice Big Data Service Platform, 95% of the defendants in juvenile crime cases are male, 85.47% of the defendants' education degree is in junior high school or elementary school, their age is mainly between 16 and 17 years old, and the most involved charge is burglary. These four factors above, gender, age, education, and offense, are statistically very similar across the entire range of young offenders.

In localized areas of China, the results were similar. According to Liu Zhouzhou's research, males accounted for 93.3% of the total number of crimes committed by rural minors in Lin'an City, Zhejiang Province between 2014 and 2016 [3]. These minors had an educational standard mainly of junior high school, mostly 17-year-olds.

### **2.2. The Issue of Idle Teenagers**

Both official state data and private regional surveys show that the majority of rural minors who commit crimes are not in school or at work. They are often unemployed. The idle minors are a special group that can easily lose their way and needs extra attention from society since they are not under the supervision of family or school.

According to Liu Lei's research data, a county in the middle-eastern region of Henan has a total population of 650,000, of which the rural population accounts for more than 500,000 people. Among them, the number of minor crimes in rural areas was 95 cases and 239 persons, accounting for 75% of all minor criminal cases perpetrators. From the perspective of the identity of minors at the time of the crime, rural social loafers have been the main body of juvenile crime, with social loafers accounting for about 54% of the crime [4].

### **2.3. Rural Minors Commit Crimes Prominently**

Over the last two decades, China's urbanization rate has been around 60%. But what is frightening is that the number of crimes committed by rural minors in different parts of the country can usually reach 80% of the total number of crimes committed by all minors.

In a district of Chongqing, rural juvenile delinquency cases accounted for 78% of juvenile delinquency cases in 2007, 71.7% in 2008, 80.5% in 2009, and 90% from January to June 2010 [5]. Juvenile delinquency cases are dominated by rural delinquency cases, and the trend is ascending year by year. In Fujian Province, from 2006 to May 2008, 81% of the juvenile offenders in custody were from rural areas. In the case files of 160 juvenile delinquency cases heard by Changle County People's Court in Shandong Province from 2002 to 2004, cases involving rural areas accounted for 58.1% of the total number of juvenile delinquency cases, and the rate of increase was 6.5% per year. Tianning District Court in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, from 2005 to 2007, a total of 224 cases of 329 people were heard in the juvenile court, and cases of juvenile delinquency in rural areas accounted for 43%, 51% and 67% of juvenile criminal cases in that year respectively, with a high crime rate.

Compared to the overall ratio of rural to urban population, this is significantly disproportionate. The prominence of the crime problem of rural minors has become an essential feature of juvenile delinquency nationwide.

### 3. Analysis of Criminal Behavior

As a result of the above summary of the basic situation of crimes committed by rural minors, there are two major trends are well worth discussing. First, the number of crimes committed by rural minors is much higher than the number of crimes committed by urban minors. What are all the special formative factors in this? Second, increasing numbers of cases show that rural minors are getting involved in a series of new crimes, such as cybercrimes and drug crimes. These have caused serious consequences. What are the possible explanations for this phenomenon? The following part of the analysis elaborates on the above two points.

#### 3.1. Exorbitant Crime Rate

According to the sociological theory, man is the product of his own interaction with others. Rural minors are likewise a social group, and their criminal behavior and all areas of social life are among the factors that produce their behavior, including his interrelationship with family, community, social organizations, and society. Therefore, the following analysis decomposes and explains the reasons for the high crime rate of rural minors in terms of both objective reality and psychological factors.

#### 3.2. Realistic Factors

The problem of juvenile delinquency in rural areas is a concentrated manifestation of the concretization of social problems. Its causes involve various aspects and are the result of the mutual reaction of several social factors and the personal factors of the criminal subject. Criminological theory suggests that a person's behavior is closely related to his or her personal growth (physical and psychological) and the environment in which he or she lives. And the special thing is that the rural society has the characteristics of "acquaintance society", which is based on the ties of blood, geographical factors, and traditional ritual and legal relations, and is "local in nature" [6].

In this environment, the family is the most basic unit in the village network. However, due to socio-economic development, the process of urbanization has caused a massive labor force to leave the countryside and move to the cities to work. The elderly and children in the family stay in the countryside, constituting the so-called "left-behind families" and "hollow villages". This sort of change in social structure constitutes the disintegration of the family at a micro level. According to Travis Hirschi's social bonding theory, social connections are essential factors that influence and constrain the types of human behavior, behavioral characteristics, and consist of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief [7]. Attachment is an element that allows people to grow up with emotions and dependence on others, and resulting social bond and unity. To some extent, therefore, this emotional connection is a firewall against juvenile delinquency.

However, in the countryside, children are separated from their parents for long periods of time and are unable to communicate deeply with their grandparents in a meaningful way, making their connection with their families gradually weaken and making it difficult for them to discipline their behavior. What's more, some parents will choose to compensate their children in financial terms, not knowing that this will easily make minors develop more bad habits and even produce emotional apathy, capriciousness, selfishness and rebelliousness as mental disorders.

The family provides emotional support and is also a major educational ground. The weak sense of attachment in rural families makes it difficult for parental education to be accepted by children. Most rural parents also do not have high education and do not know how to guide their children in such areas as morals and ideals. According to the statistics of a county in Henan Province, the number of rural delinquent minors with peasant status in the county in the past five years totaled 124, accounting for 74.3% of the total number. The number of rural delinquent minors with student status was 43,

accounting for 25.7% of the total number [8]. The words “high school dropout” and “junior high school dropout” are often used in judicial documents for rural minors in the county.

School is another educational venue that plays an important role in the delinquent behavior of rural minors. As rural areas have objective economic and geographic disadvantages, they also have a weaker educational base in the countryside, with infrastructure and financial investment that cannot be compared to urban areas. The lack of educational resources naturally leads to a bias in educational priorities in rural schools, such as teachers concentrating on the top students and pursuing test-based education, thus neglecting students who are underachievers or mentally unhealthy. However, the consequences of this are serious. Children do not see the value of learning at school and even only get negative feedback from their peers and teachers. They gradually disengage from school, drop out, truant, and are more likely to breed criminal behavior during their time of idleness.

Thus, these children, separated from home and school, enter a society that seems to be free of constraints. Today’s rural society is facing a huge transition, lacking adults who can create economic value, and unable to find its own niche after urbanization. This turbulent social structure exacerbates the inequality of social status and educational resources, and rural minors witness their marginalized status quo in conflict with their inner desire for wealth and social status. The vulnerable rural minors, who are also deprived of support and assistance from their families and schools, naturally join the small groups of their peers. As confessed by a theft minor suspect in the study, “my family is very poor, but the rich children in the village wear well, eat well, sometimes I want too, but my family can no longer afford my tuition already. Then I dropped out of school with few classmates, and later went to the county to steal, spent the stolen money make me feel better in the heart” [9].

### 3.3. Psychological Factors

Psychological factors, which can be both deeply rooted in and caused by reality. As discussed previously, the conflicts between rural minors and their families, schools and society make them step by step on the path of crime. This is caused by the fact that their inner longings and needs cannot be satisfied in reality, and under the prolonged repression, they choose to commit crimes to make up for their dissatisfaction. Therefore, this part of the investigation will focus on the analysis of the factors that psychologically determine the behavior of rural minors after they have been exposed to a realistic factor.

First, there is the effect of gangs on the psychology of minors. In the investigation, it was found that the peer group is the main reference for rural minors, and their words and actions can have a huge impact on each other. Since minors are excluded from society and adults, they are considered to be “children”. Therefore, peer recognition and evaluation are more important to minors. At the same time, their attachment to the families is too weak, and they turn to the group for the pursuit of a sense of belonging and identity. In groups, rural minors are paranoid about integration and recognition, and “righteousness” has become their common honor, but they have also abandoned the pursuit of individuality and the concept of right and wrong.

In a survey with a total sample of 966 individuals, 48.7% of rural minors claimed that there was no specific leader in the crime and that they all acted together. 53.6% of the offenders confessed that the reason for committing the crime was because they were usually good with those fellowship, sharing the blessings and difficulties [10].

Second, after they are integrated into the group, rural minors begin to seek satisfaction in crime. Nowadays, rural minors have the same access to a vast amount of information through the Internet. Modern society’s hedonism, altruism, selfishness and vanity likewise influence their values. But the low level of life in reality creates a strong contrast with the online world, and this conflict is exacerbated by their vanity, comparison and other negative psychological factors. Under such stimulation,

minors are prone to psychological imbalance and emotional outbursts, thus committing violent property-taking-type crimes.

### 3.4. New Types of Crime Emerge

In 2019, 2020 and 2021, the procuratorial agencies prosecuted 2,130, 2,932 and 3,555 minors suspected of using telecommunication networks to commit crimes, up 37.65% and 21.25% year-on-year, respectively. Among them, minors suspected of helping information network criminal activities rose significantly, prosecuting 130 people in 2020 and 911 people in 2021, up 6 times year-on-year [11].

According to the questionnaire survey conducted by “Protection of Rights and Interests of Rural Left-behind Children”, 11.1% of the left-behind minor offenders said they were influenced by the Internet, and 15.2% of the left-behind minors said that online game addiction led to criminal behavior. Another survey data results show that 65.3% of the group of left-behind minor offenders said that there were Internet cafes near their schools before they committed crimes, and as many as 95.3% of this group of left-behind minor offenders said they had been to Internet cafes. And the percentage of them committing crimes in public places such as Internet cafes, bars and KTV reached 34.2%, which is the second most concentrated place for crimes other than street crimes [12].

In the 21st century, the benefits of the information society are spreading across the globe, while its negative effects are affecting cities and villages on equal footing. Data show that the Internet penetration rate of minors in China has reached 93.1%, and the rate of left-behind children is 77.7%, while left-behind children have low Internet usage skills, obvious preference for mobile games, and are more likely to encounter illegal violations [13].

In other words, rural minors are both victims of cybercrime and at the meantime are participating in cybercrime at a very rapid rate and acquiring a lot of harmful information from the Internet, such as violent crimes and sexual crimes.

First of all, due to the lack of social supervision and protection measures in the network, negative and unhealthy information in the network can be spread in the front of the minors, promoting violence and hegemonic elements, luring rural minors to wallow in it, forming stereotypical thinking and absorbing imitation, and eventually creating role confusion and even developing into anti-social behaviors such as fighting and brawling and intentional injury [14].

Next, for their own reasons, rural minors resist cultural activities in reality, because of their psychological reasons of boredom and rebellion, then turn to the online world for pleasure. Yet addiction to the Internet further leads to a lack of realistic satisfaction, distancing them from mentors and friends, not pursuing a healthy physique, and even creating economic hardships that exacerbate their internal conflicts.

In the process, they may also be exposed to irregular Internet pornography sites, violent and bloody game images, and crime-inducing unknown chats. All of these elements have the potential to induce rural minors to commit criminal acts. They already lack self-control and healthy emotions, yet they are disillusioned with crime and do not have common sense of the law, and once their emotions get out of control, there will be incalculable consequences.

## 4. Suggestions

### 4.1. Reshaping Family Intimacy

The first thing to improve on the disproportionately high crime rate among rural minors is family relationships, which are the foundation for minors' growth. The family may seem like a tiny part compared to society, but it is also easier to change because of this and can have a deeper impact on minors.

First, parents in rural areas need to take the importance of communication seriously. In modern society, no matter how remote the distance is, it is no longer possible to completely separate parents and children from each other. Even parents who are working outside the home are fully capable of communicating with their children left at home using video calls, phone calls and messages. Parents should realize that communication in the family is more important than financial support. Giving children enough security and creating close family relationships can equip minors with a healthy sense of belonging and thus consciously discipline their behavior.

Second, parents must also take the initiative to learn advanced education methods. They should be loving, open and tolerant, and encourage their children to recognize the value of learning. Nowadays, a large proportion of parents in rural areas still believe in “filial son under the stick”, and they are always adopting violent ways to educate and punish their children, not knowing that such behavior also inadvertently influences their children’s behavior and increases the possibility of them committing violence.

Last, while guiding children with love and responsibility, it is also important to recognize the importance of education. Only when the education level of one generation improves, the children of the next generation will be as far away from backward family education as possible, thus making the family education of the whole society evolve generation by generation and become better and better.

## 4.2. Founding the Psychological Defense

As discussed above, the mental health of minors is also one of the important influencing factors of delinquency, and even unhealthy psychology can make delinquency intensify and detach from the original motive of delinquency.

However, there are too many psychological defenses that are difficult to implement in the present context of rural areas. For instance, establishing a mental health record system and setting up professional mental health counseling teams in schools [15]. These methods are equally difficult to achieve in today’s urban schools, where most every school is staffed by an outside psychologist, not to mention having a counseling team in rural areas.

Therefore, diversified psychological interventions may be a solution. In other words, through the joint efforts of family, school and society, we can create a richer and healthier reality for the growth of minors. For example, the village council conducts specific traditional cultural activities during holidays and calls on minors to help organize and participate in them, so that they can feel the connection between people in the village community and realize their contribution and value. From these fulfilling social activities, minors can find their sense of belonging and thus identify with more hard-working, practical peers and not go down the path of crime.

In addition to enriching the real world of minors, it is equally important to build a brick wall in their theoretical minds. That is the platitude, legal education. Most of the current proposals and practices regarding legal education focus on social propaganda and educational activities, however, from the students’ point of view, such promotional activities do not seem to achieve the desired effect.

In a questionnaire survey with a total sample of 576, of which there were 562 minors, 73.4% believed that the lack of legal knowledge had the greatest impact on crime among rural minors, and their knowledge of the law was so lacking that only 54% on average could answer the relevant legal questions correctly [16].

When students receive a single, long, lecture-type legal education lesson, they will unconsciously develop a rebellious mentality and have difficulty concentrating seriously on the legal knowledge, making the effect of law publicity minimal. Therefore, the recommendation made in this research is to incorporate legal education into the daily teaching system so that the law is implicitly penetrated into every student’s mind, realizing that the law is the bottom line of morality, which will be punished if violated and cannot be violated under any circumstances. When legal education is as usual as

Chinese and mathematics in students' lives, the effect of the law education will be maximized and truly rooted into minor's hearts.

### 4.3. Reducing Recidivism

The proportion of recidivism after crime among minors in China is relatively high, and a survey of 2752 samples nationwide found that 27.2% of them had committed crimes when they were teenagers [17]. Committing a crime while underage already has a very detrimental effect on their life development, and if not corrected in time, it will only lead them down the wrong path.

In practice, community corrections in townships are difficult to implement after rural minors commit crimes, and government departments pass the buck among themselves. The minors who are arrested and imprisoned in correctional facilities are punished with labor processing and work production, while ignoring the real focus of correctional facilities, which should be education and rehabilitation. After rural minor offenders return to society after completion of their sentences, the survival eco-system will become deteriorated. They basically lose the opportunity of school education, and when they become adults, they can only enter the society to work or farm, or continue to associate with delinquent teenagers, and the chance of going astray increases. Moreover, their families or villagers or neighbors will unconsciously isolate them relationally and make them think of self-abandonment [18]. Even when they leave their hometowns, it is not easy for them to obtain ideal jobs. Most of them are poorly paid and treated because of their deficient knowledge and skills, and thus are highly susceptible to reoffending under the guidance of a wrong outlook on life and the world.

In conclusion, the prevention of recidivism among rural minors requires the cooperation and joint development of family, school, society and judicial institutions. At the social level, we should strictly control the environment around schools, crack down on illegal Internet cafes, bars and entertainment venues, and tighten restrictions on unhealthy reading materials, illegal publications and pirated video products. At the meantime, the police force at the grassroots level should be increased, and once the underage criminal gangs are found, they should first be seriously educated and dealt with to snuff out the more serious results in advance. Cyberspace is also a key management area, and a grading system should be established as soon as possible for minors, so that the information they have access to matches their cognitive level and cultivates the habit of healthy and moderate Internet access.

## 5. Conclusion

This study points out that the problem of rural juvenile delinquency deserves more attention from society. The psychological states and realities exhibited by minor offenders are unique and require more scientific and consistent research with a view to improving this situation in the future. The main point of crime prevention for rural minors is to address their psychological deficiencies, including but not limited to family alienation, school aversion, money supremacy, and Internet addiction. Rural teenagers, who live at the grassroots level of the country, amount to a large base and represent the future development of the countryside and the stability of the country, and necessarily worth emphasizing.

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