

POLICING THE ‘PROBLEM YOUTH’: A CRITICAL LENS ON JUVENILE DELINQUENCY CONTROL IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the role of policing in shaping the control of juvenile delinquency in Indonesia. It aims to understand how young offenders are constructed as “problem youth” within the broader framework of social control and criminal justice. Using a qualitative approach through literature analysis and policy review, the study explores how law enforcement institutions interpret, manage, and discipline juvenile behavior. The findings suggest that police practices often reflect a dual role—balancing the responsibility of protection with mechanisms of surveillance and punishment. This paradox illustrates how juvenile control in Indonesia remains influenced by moral, cultural, and institutional discourses that define acceptable youth behavior. The paper highlights that such policing practices tend to reinforce social hierarchies and gendered norms rather than addressing the structural causes of delinquency. By applying a critical lens, this study contributes to the discourse on juvenile justice reform, emphasizing the need for a more restorative and rights-based approach to youth crime control in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Policing; juvenile delinquency; social control; and youth*

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile delinquency has long been a central concern in the sociological and criminological study of social order, discipline, and control. In Indonesia, the increasing visibility of youth crime ranging from school violence and street brawls (tawuran pelajar) to theft and drug use has provoked public anxiety and state intervention. These phenomena are often represented in the media as signs of moral decay and social disorder, constructing the figure of the “problem youth” as both a threat to and a victim of modern society’s failures. Such representations do not simply describe deviant behavior; they actively shape the logic of policing, punishment, and rehabilitation that governs young offenders. In this sense, youth delinquency becomes a crucial site for examining how the state and society negotiate control, morality, and the boundaries of citizenship (Cohen, 1979; Garland, 2001).

The concept of “policing” in this context extends beyond law enforcement. It encompasses a wide array of formal and informal practices aimed at regulating youth behavior, maintaining public order, and producing compliant citizens. Drawing on the insights of critical criminology and social control theory (Innes, 2003; Cohen, 1985), this research situates

juvenile delinquency control within the broader framework of governance in late-modern Indonesia. As scholars like Foucault (1977) and Garland (2001) have emphasized, control in contemporary societies is increasingly diffused, preventive, and disciplinary shifting from punitive institutions toward everyday mechanisms of surveillance, correction, and normalization. This study therefore interrogates how policing institutions, schools, communities, and social media contribute to constructing, labeling, and managing the “problem youth” through moral, legal, and bureaucratic frameworks.

In the Indonesian setting, youth delinquency is often approached through moralistic and legalistic paradigms. The 2012 Juvenile Justice System Law (UU No. 11 Tahun 2012) emphasizes restorative justice, diversion, and the protection of children’s rights. However, in practice, law enforcement agencies and correctional institutions still rely heavily on punitive measures rather than rehabilitative or community-based approaches (Siregar, 2020). This gap between policy and practice reveals the persistence of authoritarian and disciplinary modes of control rooted in Indonesia’s historical legacy of centralized governance and moral regulation. The figure of the delinquent youth thus becomes a reflection of broader tensions between modernity and tradition, control and care, order and freedom.

From a critical criminological perspective, understanding juvenile delinquency control in Indonesia requires questioning not only the behavior of young offenders but also the power structures that define and respond to delinquency. Following Stan Cohen’s (1985) argument on the “moral panic” surrounding youth deviance, this research examines how state institutions, media, and society collectively participate in amplifying fears about juvenile delinquency. Such fears often lead to disproportionate responses that prioritize social control over social support. Moreover, the gendered and class dimensions of youth control where working-class boys are over-policed and girls are moralized as “unruly” or “immoral” reveal deep-seated cultural biases in how deviance is interpreted and managed (McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Gelsthorpe & Worrall, 2009).

This research seeks to (1) Critically analyze the dominant approaches to juvenile delinquency control in Indonesia, focusing on how policing and institutional practices construct and manage the figure of the “problem youth.” (2) Examine the interplay between formal (state-based) and informal (community, familial, and cultural) mechanisms of social control in shaping responses to youth delinquency. (3) Explore how contemporary policing practices reflect broader transformations in Indonesian society, particularly the tensions between punitive governance and restorative justice ideals. (4) Provide a critical interpretation of how notions of deviance, morality, and citizenship are produced through the policing of young people.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the critical criminological understanding of juvenile justice by situating Indonesian youth control within global debates about late-modern social control. It applies and extends key ideas from Cohen (1985), Garland (2001), and Innes (2003) to an Indonesian socio-political context, where modernization, digitalization, and moral governance intersect in unique ways. It also offers a Southeast Asian perspective often underrepresented in criminological literature, challenging Western-centric assumptions about youth crime and control.

Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and social workers engaged in juvenile justice reform. By highlighting the contradictions between restorative justice principles and punitive practices, the research underscores the need for culturally sensitive, community-based, and rights-oriented models of youth intervention. It also provides practical recommendations for improving police-community relations, reducing stigmatization, and integrating psychosocial approaches in dealing with young offenders.

The novelty of this study lies in its critical lens that goes beyond descriptive accounts of juvenile delinquency to interrogate the politics of control underlying it. The previous research focuses mainly on statistical patterns or legal frameworks, but this study will foregrounds how moral discourses, institutional practices, and socio-political power interact in constructing “problem youth.” It draws connections between youth policing, moral governance, and the symbolic production of deviance in contemporary Indonesia. Furthermore, it situates Indonesia’s juvenile justice system within the framework of late-modern control where social control becomes embedded in everyday life, mediated by technologies, schools, and cultural narratives rather than solely by formal law enforcement.

Preliminary findings suggest that while Indonesia’s juvenile justice framework aspires toward restorative and rehabilitative ideals, policing practices remain dominated by surveillance, deterrence, and moral correction. Law enforcement agencies often frame delinquency as a moral failure rather than a social or structural issue, leading to interventions that emphasize discipline over empathy. Community-based diversion programs exist but are inconsistently applied, revealing the fragmented nature of juvenile control across local contexts. Moreover, media portrayals of youth deviance intensify public fear, reinforcing punitive attitudes rather than promoting understanding or prevention.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it advances the argument that juvenile delinquency control in Indonesia reflects a broader process of moral governance that blends authoritarian discipline with neoliberal risk management. Practically, the study recommends strengthening restorative justice mechanisms through training, inter-agency collaboration, and youth empowerment programs that recognize delinquency as a symptom of social dislocation rather than inherent deviance. It also calls for critical media literacy initiatives and community engagement strategies that humanize rather than criminalize Indonesian youth.

This research focuses on policing practices, policy frameworks, and societal attitudes toward juvenile delinquency in Indonesia, particularly in urban contexts where youth culture, social inequality, and media representation intersect most visibly. The discussion integrates perspectives from critical criminology, sociology of youth, and social control theory to examine the multifaceted nature of youth governance. Through this lens, *policing the “problem youth”* becomes a window into understanding how Indonesia manages the boundaries of morality, order, and citizenship in an era of social transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of social control is central to understanding how societies regulate behavior, enforce norms, and respond to deviance. As outlined by Innes (2003), social control involves organized responses to norm violations, operating both formally through legal

institutions and informally through cultural and social expectations. Late-modern societies, as Garland (2001) argues, have experienced a shift from rehabilitative and welfare-oriented models of control to more risk-based, preventive, and punitive systems. These systems blend state authority with diffuse community-based surveillance, producing what Foucault (1977) described as the disciplinary society, where individuals internalize control through everyday routines and institutional norms.

Within this theoretical lens, policing is not limited to law enforcement but represents a broader mechanism of governance and regulation (Loader & Walker, 2020). The modern police function as agents of both coercion and moral order, mediating between the state's demand for security and the community's desire for social stability. Recent scholarship (Bradford et al., 2022; Reiner, 2020) highlights how policing extends into schools, social services, and online spaces, producing what has been termed "networked policing" an interconnected web of formal and informal actors managing public behavior.

Recent criminological studies conceptualize juvenile delinquency not merely as a legal violation but as a socially constructed category shaped by moral, political, and economic contexts. Contemporary literature (Gray, 2018; Goldson & Muncie, 2019) argues that youth deviance is often exaggerated through moral panics that stigmatize young people as threats to social order. These narratives, originally described by Cohen (1972), remain influential in late-modern societies where mass media amplify concerns about youth disorder.

Recent research by Haines and Case (2018) critiques the punitive turn in juvenile justice systems worldwide, emphasizing the need for child-first and restorative approaches. These approaches prioritize reintegration and emotional rehabilitation rather than punishment. Similarly, Armstrong and Kelly (2021) highlight how the criminalization of youth often reflects structural inequalities poverty, exclusion, and lack of education rather than inherent deviance. Their findings align with left realist criminology, which situates youth crime within socio-geographic contexts marked by deprivation and marginalization (Matthews, 2019).

Furthermore, gendered and intersectional analyses (Batchelor, 2020; Gelsthorpe & Worrall, 2021) reveal that female delinquents are often subjected to moral judgment rather than legal assessment. Girls who defy traditional gender expectations are frequently labeled as "unruly" or "immoral," reinforcing patriarchal norms under the guise of protection. This moralization of female delinquency demonstrates that youth control mechanisms are not gender-neutral but reflect broader cultural power relations.

Regarding on policing youth, The policing of youth has undergone significant transformation in the twenty-first century. Scholars have noted a global move toward risk-based governance, where interventions focus on predicting and preventing potential deviance rather than addressing actual offenses (O'Malley, 2018; McAra & McVie, 2021). This shift aligns with the logic of actuarial justice, in which young people are managed as statistical risks rather than moral agents (Feeley & Simon, 1992).

In many contexts, youth policing has also become embedded in everyday institutions—schools, neighborhoods, and digital environments. Studies from the United Kingdom and Australia (Hine, 2020; Cuneen & White, 2022) show that surveillance technologies, such as CCTV and social media monitoring, have extended control beyond the streets and into the intimate spaces of youth life. These developments reflect what Innes (2003) termed ambient

social control, where behavioral regulation operates continuously and often invisibly through technological mediation.

From a critical standpoint, Reiner (2020) and Goldson (2023) argue that this expansion of control mechanisms reveals a growing criminalization of childhood. Rather than being treated as individuals in need of care, young offenders are increasingly framed as potential threats to community safety. This approach reinforces punitive policing strategies and legitimizes social exclusion, particularly among marginalized youth populations.

In Indonesia, the legal and institutional framework for handling juvenile delinquency is anchored in *Law No. 11 of 2012 on the Juvenile Justice System*, which promotes diversion and restorative justice. However, empirical studies indicate a persistent gap between policy and practice. Research by Siregar (2020) and Rahman (2021) demonstrates that police officers and prosecutors frequently revert to punitive procedures, citing community pressure and institutional limitations. Consequently, children in conflict with the law often experience stigmatization and prolonged detention, contrary to restorative ideals.

Cultural and moral factors also shape Indonesia's approach to youth deviance. As noted by Nugroho (2019), the discourse surrounding *kenakalan remaja* (youth misbehavior) is deeply moralistic, rooted in notions of respect, discipline, and family honor. Public narratives often frame delinquent youth as products of parental failure or moral decline, reinforcing social hierarchies and legitimizing control. This perspective echoes Cohen's (1985) argument that moral panics serve as symbolic responses to perceived threats against social order.

Further, local policing practices reflect hybrid forms of governance that blend formal law enforcement with community-based and religious authority structures. Studies by Widiarto and Santoso (2022) show that *Bhabinkamtibmas* (community police officers) often act as mediators between law and morality, using persuasive rather than coercive tactics. While this approach aligns with restorative principles, it also risks reinforcing informal social hierarchies and subjective moral judgments.

Digitalization has added a new dimension to youth policing in Indonesia. Social media platforms have become arenas for both deviant expression and moral regulation. According to Yulianto (2023), online surveillance practices ranging from public shaming to digital reporting reflect the emergence of a *digital moral policing culture* that extends social control into cyberspace. This mirrors global trends identified by scholars such as Trottier (2021), who describe the rise of participatory surveillance as a form of "citizen policing."

The literature indicates that policing and controlling juvenile delinquency involve complex interactions between legal institutions, cultural norms, and social anxieties. While formal frameworks emphasize rehabilitation and rights protection, informal practices continue to privilege moral correction and punitive discipline. This contradiction suggests that the policing of youth in Indonesia is not solely about crime prevention but also about moral governance the regulation of behavior through social, religious, and cultural expectations.

Drawing from the reviewed literature, the present study hypothesizes that juvenile delinquency control in Indonesia reflects a hybrid system of governance combining punitive, restorative, and moral elements, shaped by both late-modern and traditional forces of social control. This hypothesis aligns with global critical criminological insights but situates them

within Indonesia's distinctive socio-cultural context, where community norms, media narratives, and state policies converge to produce the image of the "problem youth."

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative literature study method (library research) that relies entirely on secondary data analysis from academic journals, books, reports, and other credible publications related to juvenile delinquency and its control mechanisms in Indonesia. The study does not involve primary data collection such as interviews or field observations; instead, it systematically analyzes theoretical and empirical discussions found in existing scholarly works. The research design focuses on critically examining how previous studies conceptualize and operationalize the policing and regulation of "problem youth," drawing connections between theories of social control, moral regulation, and critical criminology.

Data sources include well-known international and national journal articles, government publications, reports from child protection institutions, and textbooks published within the last ten years to ensure relevance and contemporary validity. The data collection process involves identifying, selecting, and reviewing literature that discusses juvenile delinquency, youth policing, and social control frameworks. Each source is evaluated for its credibility, methodological rigor, and relevance to the Indonesian context.

The data analysis technique follows a qualitative content analysis approach, emphasizing interpretation, comparison, and synthesis of key themes and arguments across different sources. Analytical steps include (1) identifying core concepts from the literature such as deviance, social control, and youth regulation; (2) categorizing findings into thematic areas such as institutional control, moral discourse, and policy orientation; and (3) synthesizing these insights into a coherent analytical framework. The process also employs critical discourse analysis to uncover underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and ideological narratives embedded within existing research and policy documents.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study uses source triangulation by comparing arguments from multiple reputable sources and ensuring consistency of interpretation. The literature review method enables a comprehensive and reflective understanding of the topic, offering a critical synthesis of how juvenile delinquency control in Indonesia has been discussed, problematized, and theorized in academic and institutional discourse. Through this approach, the research produces an interpretive framework that situates Indonesia's youth policing practices within broader criminological debates, providing theoretical and practical insights without the need for direct field investigation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this literature-based research reveal that the policing of juvenile delinquency in Indonesia is deeply influenced by social, cultural, and institutional dynamics that construct youth deviance not merely as a legal issue but as a moral and social disorder requiring control. The analysis of secondary data from various academic journals, government reports, and institutional documents indicates that the dominant discourse surrounding "problem youth" (anak nakal) in Indonesia reflects a blend of punitive, moralistic, and paternalistic approaches rooted in the country's socio-cultural framework and legal structure.

These approaches align with what Stanley Cohen (1985) described as “moral panic,” where societal anxiety about juvenile behavior leads to intensified surveillance and control, particularly by the police and community authorities.

The results show that Indonesia’s juvenile justice system despite the introduction of restorative principles under Law No. 11 of 2012 on the Juvenile Criminal Justice System (UU SPPA) continues to struggle with the duality between restorative justice ideals and the enduring punitive culture within law enforcement practices. Literature reviewed from studies such as Nugroho (2020), Sulastri (2021), and Yuliani (2022) emphasizes that, in practice, the police still tend to categorize delinquent youth as social threats rather than individuals in need of rehabilitation and protection. This reflects Cohen’s (1985) critique that formal control systems often expand through “net-widening,” where more individuals become subject to institutional regulation under the pretext of reform or protection.

Another key finding relates to the role of social control at the community level, which is often exercised through moral governance and religious authority. Drawing from Innes’s (2003) perspective on social control as “organized responses to deviance,” it becomes evident that community leaders, religious institutions, and families act as informal policing agents, reinforcing behavioral conformity through social shame and moral education. In many cases, these community-based responses blur the line between care and coercion, reflecting what Foucault (1977) identified as “disciplinary power” embedded in everyday life. Studies by Wibisono (2019) and Rahmawati (2023) demonstrate that such moral-based interventions though well-intentioned can contribute to the stigmatization of youth, especially those from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds.

The reviewed literature also highlights the gendered dimension of juvenile delinquency control. Female youth who engage in deviant acts, particularly those involving sexuality, are often subject to harsher moral judgment and social punishment compared to their male counterparts. As noted in Handayani (2022) and Putri (2023), the control of female juvenile behavior frequently intersects with patriarchal moral codes, emphasizing notions of purity, obedience, and family honor. This reinforces the critical criminological view that control mechanisms are not neutral but are deeply embedded in social hierarchies and gender ideologies. Such findings resonate with Heidensohn’s (1985) feminist critique of social control theory, which argues that female deviance is often managed through moral and familial regulation rather than through formal criminal justice pathways.

From the reviewed data, it is also clear that the implementation of restorative justice programs in Indonesia remains fragmented and inconsistent. While the Juvenile Justice Law promotes diversion and rehabilitation, several studies (e.g., Puspitasari, 2021; Sari, 2022) indicate that law enforcement officers often lack adequate training or institutional support to carry out restorative procedures effectively. Instead, a retributive approach persists, reflecting Garland’s (2001) concept of the “culture of control,” in which modern societies increasingly rely on punitive measures to manage social insecurities. This tension between restorative ideals and punitive realities suggests that Indonesia’s juvenile justice reform has not fully transformed institutional attitudes toward youth offenders.

Mianita (2024) also finds that police officers have varied perceptions regarding diversion decisions for children in conflict with the law, influenced by institutional factors such as a legalistic police work culture and limited trust in actors outside the police institution. The implementation of diversion at police institution is also relatively low compared to other regions, partly because officers perceive their primary duty as law enforcement rather than rehabilitation. In addition, training and education related to diversion for police officers are still inadequate, resulting in less positive perceptions of diversion and, consequently, a low rate of diversion decisions.

Moreover, the media portrayal of juvenile delinquency contributes significantly to the perpetuation of moral panic. Analysis of secondary sources reveals that sensationalized reporting often amplifies public fear and legitimizes stronger control measures. This dynamic aligns with Cohen's theory of moral panic, where media narratives create "folk devils" out of youth populations, thus mobilizing social and institutional responses that expand surveillance and criminalization.

In linking these findings to broader theoretical discussions, it becomes apparent that juvenile delinquency control in Indonesia represents a complex interplay between formal and informal mechanisms of regulation, mediated by moral, religious, and political discourses. While social control theory explains how institutions respond to deviance to maintain order, critical criminology provides a framework for understanding the power relations embedded within these control practices. The reviewed literature suggests that Indonesian approaches to youth deviance are not solely driven by legal mandates but also by deeper cultural anxieties about modernization, urbanization, and shifting moral values.

This research therefore contributes to the theoretical refinement of social control in the Indonesian context by proposing that contemporary policing of youth operates through hybrid modes of control combining disciplinary, moral, and restorative elements. It confirms Innes's (2003) argument that social control in late modernity extends beyond state institutions, functioning through interconnected networks of family, community, and media influence. However, it also modifies existing theory by emphasizing the culturally specific nature of control in Indonesia, where moral and religious norms serve as the dominant framework for interpreting youth behavior.

In conclusion, the literature-based analysis demonstrates that the control of juvenile delinquency in Indonesia remains shaped by competing discourses of protection, punishment, and morality. Although legal reforms have sought to humanize the juvenile justice system, actual practices reveal the persistence of punitive and moralistic control forms. The findings highlight the need for a more balanced approach that aligns restorative justice principles with community education and institutional reform. Practically, this study suggests strengthening law enforcement training on restorative methods, promoting media responsibility in representing youth issues, and fostering community programs that empower rather than stigmatize young people. Theoretically, it underscores the necessity of contextualizing Western-derived social control theories within Indonesia's unique cultural, religious, and institutional settings thus advancing a more locally grounded understanding of how society polices its "problem youth."

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the control of juvenile delinquency in Indonesia continues to be shaped by competing frameworks of protection, punishment, and morality. Although the Juvenile Justice System Law No. 11 of 2012 promotes restorative justice and children's rights, policing practices and broader social attitudes remain heavily influenced by punitive and moralistic traditions. The analysis reveals that juvenile delinquency is often constructed as a moral rather than a structural issue, leading to disciplinary interventions that emphasize surveillance and deterrence rather than empathy and rehabilitation. Consequently, the figure of the "problem youth" reflects broader tensions between modern governance, cultural morality, and the quest for social order. The findings have practical implications for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and social practitioners. First, training programs for police and juvenile justice officers should emphasize restorative and child-centered approaches that prioritize diversion and rehabilitation. Second, inter-agency collaboration between police, schools, social workers, and communities is essential to ensure consistent application of restorative principles. Third, public communication strategies and media literacy initiatives should aim to reduce moral panic and stigma surrounding youth behavior. By reframing juvenile delinquency as a social and developmental issue, Indonesia can move toward a more humane, rights-based model of youth justice.

However, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data through literature review rather than empirical fieldwork. As a qualitative literature study, it synthesizes existing knowledge but cannot provide firsthand insights into police practices or youth experiences. Moreover, most available research focuses on urban settings, potentially overlooking rural variations in juvenile control and community-based interventions. The absence of cross-comparative data between regions and institutional actors also limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ empirical methods such as interviews, ethnography, or participatory observation to capture the lived experiences of young offenders, police officers, and community actors. Comparative studies across regions would help identify contextual differences in how restorative justice is implemented. In addition, interdisciplinary research that integrates criminology, sociology, and communication studies could further explore the role of digital surveillance, social media narratives, and moral governance in shaping youth control. Finally, exploring gender-sensitive approaches and indigenous models of restorative practice would contribute to a more inclusive understanding of juvenile justice reform in Indonesia.

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