

**TOO YOUNG TO PUNISH: SOCIETAL VIEWS ON JUVENILE OFFENDERS' LIABILITIES****GONARANAO ASNAR U. DISOMANGCOP JR.***Misamis University, Ozamiz City, Philippines***JUNVIL A. INSONG, PhD, JD***Misamis University, Ozamiz City, Philippines***ABSTRACT**

Juvenile offenders' liability refers to the extent to which minors who commit offenses can be held legally accountable for their criminal behavior, primarily guided by the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR). This study examined stakeholders' perceptions of juvenile offenders' liability in the Philippines, particularly on whether the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR) should be lowered and how accountability and rehabilitation should be balanced for children in conflict with the law (CICL). It utilized a qualitative case study design conducted in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur, involving 14 participants selected through purposive sampling, including police personnel from the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD), social workers from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), and barangay officials, with data collected through a semi-structured interview guide and analyzed using Yin's six stages of case study process. The themes identified were: rehabilitation and age-appropriate accountability in juvenile justice; balancing accountability and rehabilitation in juvenile justice; balancing juvenile accountability and rehabilitation; rehabilitation-oriented system with implementation gaps; and balancing accountability with rehabilitation for young offenders. The results imply the need to maintain a child-centered justice system that prioritizes rehabilitation while addressing implementation gaps. The study recommends strengthening community-based rehabilitation programs, increasing resource allocation, and improving monitoring and inter-agency coordination. Overall, maintaining the current MACR while enhancing rehabilitation and support systems is essential to effectively address juvenile delinquency and promote the reintegration of young offenders.

*Keywords: accountability, criminal liability, juvenile justice, minimum age of criminal responsibility, rehabilitation.*

**INTRODUCTION****Rationale of the Study**

Juvenile offenders' liability refers to the extent to which minors who commit offenses can be held legally accountable for their criminal behavior, primarily guided by the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR). This principle recognizes that children differ developmentally from adults and emphasizes rehabilitation over punishment for minors in conflict with the law. Singh (2023) argued that children who are "old enough to offend but not old enough to comprehend the gravity of their acts" require corrective guidance rather than criminal prosecution. Similarly, Cavanagh (2022) noted that adolescent neurodevelopment—especially in areas of impulse control, moral reasoning, and long-term decision-making—is still ongoing, making punitive accountability ethically questionable. Understanding juvenile liability through the lens of child development underscores the importance of tailored interventions that prioritize rehabilitation over retribution.

Globally, the age of criminal responsibility and societal attitudes toward juvenile offenders vary widely. In countries with a rehabilitative orientation, such as those in Scandinavia, restorative justice, diversion programs, and psychosocial interventions are emphasized to reintegrate young offenders (Ackerman, 2024). Conversely, nations influenced by retributive legal traditions tend to adopt lower ages of criminal liability and rely heavily on custodial sanctions (Ransley, 2024). Public perception plays a significant role in shaping these approaches: societies that interpret juvenile crime through a moral lens often favor punitive measures, whereas those informed by a developmental understanding support rehabilitative strategies (Berrick, 2023). These global perspectives highlight the complex interplay between legal frameworks, societal beliefs, and child development in determining juvenile accountability.

In the Philippines, the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of 2006 (RA 9344) establishes fifteen years as the MACR, with provisions for diversion, rehabilitation, and the protection of minors. Despite these legal safeguards, debates persist over whether the MACR should be lowered, particularly amid public concern about youth involvement in crime. Between 2012 and 2018, cases of children in conflict with the law (CICL) increased from 4,095 to 14,409, then declined to 11,324 in 2018 (Juvenile Justice and Welfare Council, 2022). Boys accounted for approximately 93% of these cases, with annual averages

nearing 15,000 (ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, 2023). These statistics illustrate the tension between legal mandates and public perception, often heightened by media portrayals that sensationalize juvenile crimes (Watamura, 2023). Such public discourse influences policymakers and underscores the need to explore societal views on juvenile liability.

Cultural and moral factors further shape Filipino attitudes toward juvenile accountability. In collectivist societies that emphasize moral discipline and respect for authority, youth misbehavior is often perceived as a reflection of parental failure or social decline (Abhishek, 2024). Dao (2023) noted that implementing child-centered justice reforms in Southeast Asia faces challenges, including social stigma against CICL, inadequate diversion facilities, and poor coordination among justice, welfare, and education agencies. The media also contributes to punitive sentiment, framing young offenders as “hardened criminals” and overshadowing rehabilitation successes (Watamura, 2023). These cultural, social, and informational factors highlight the moral duality in Filipino society: while many believe children deserve second chances, they also support early accountability to deter crime (Berrick, 2023).

This study focuses on PNP Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) personnel and social workers under the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), who are directly involved in implementing juvenile justice programs. Their professional experiences provide critical insight into how societal and institutional attitudes influence the treatment of minors, particularly regarding the balance between rehabilitation and punitive approaches (Dao, 2023). Understanding the perspectives of these frontline practitioners is essential for assessing the practical challenges and moral considerations in applying juvenile justice policies in the Philippines.

Although existing literature emphasizes juvenile development, public perceptions, and international approaches to the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR), there is a limited body of localized empirical research in the Philippine context that focuses specifically on the perspectives of frontline practitioners directly involved in handling juvenile offenders, such as social workers, law enforcement personnel, and barangay officials. Moreover, studies that integrate cultural, religious, and moral frameworks in shaping societal attitudes toward juvenile offenders’ liability remain insufficiently explored.

This gap is significant because juvenile justice is not only a legal issue but also a socio-cultural and developmental concern. Current literature tends to treat these dimensions separately, with limited examination of how they interact in actual practice at the community level. As a result, there is a lack of context-specific evidence on how frontline stakeholders interpret and apply the principles of accountability and rehabilitation in real-life situations.

Addressing this gap is essential, as effective juvenile justice policies require alignment between scientific understanding of adolescent development, societal norms, and law enforcement practices. Without such localized and practice-based insights, reforms risk being misaligned with community values and developmental realities, potentially undermining the rehabilitative objectives of Republic Act No. 9344.

This study explored the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the criminal liability of minors in the Philippines, particularly in relation to children in conflict with the law (CICL) and the implementation of the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR). It investigated stakeholders’ views on the lowering of the MACR, the moral, psychological, and legal implications of holding minors criminally liable, and the factors shaping their positions. The study also examined how stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of the current juvenile justice system and how they propose balancing accountability and rehabilitation for young offenders.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was anchored on multiple theoretical lenses, including Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977), Strain Theory by Robert King Merton (1938), Labeling Theory by Howard Saul Becker (1963), the Developmental/Life-Course Theory by Terrie Eleanor Moffitt (1993), and Social Representations Theory (SRT) by Serge Moscovici (2008).

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), explains that individuals acquire new behaviors through observation, imitation, and vicarious reinforcement. It emphasizes that learning occurs not only through direct experience but also by observing others and the consequences of their actions. The theory highlights cognitive processes such as attention, retention, and motivation, demonstrating that behavior is shaped by both environmental and mental factors (Bandura, 1977).

Empirical studies have applied Social Learning Theory in explaining juvenile delinquency, showing that exposure to deviant peers, family members, and community environments increases the likelihood of antisocial behavior. Research indicates that individuals who are frequently exposed to criminal models are more likely to adopt similar behaviors, while positive role models can promote

prosocial conduct. Furthermore, studies suggest that public understanding of environmental influences on behavior is associated with greater support for rehabilitative approaches rather than punitive measures (Aazami et al., 2023).

This study adopts Social Learning Theory to explain how stakeholders may perceive juvenile offenders as products of their social environment, influencing their views on accountability and their preference for rehabilitation over punishment.

#### **Strain Theory**

Strain Theory, developed by Robert King Merton (1938) and later expanded by Robert Agnew (1992), posits that deviant behavior arises when individuals are unable to achieve socially valued goals through legitimate means. This gap between goals and means creates strain or pressure, which may lead individuals to engage in delinquent acts as a coping mechanism.

Studies applying Strain Theory have shown that socio-economic disadvantage, family instability, and limited access to opportunities significantly increase the likelihood of juvenile delinquency. Research further demonstrates that individuals experiencing higher levels of strain are more prone to frustration and deviance. At the same time, those with adequate support systems are less likely to engage in criminal behavior. These findings also influence public perception, with some viewing juvenile offenders as victims of structural conditions rather than moral failure (Morano et al., 2021).

In this study, Strain Theory helps explain why stakeholders may attribute juvenile offending to socio-economic and environmental conditions, thereby supporting rehabilitative and preventive interventions.

#### **Labeling Theory**

Labeling Theory, introduced by Howard Saul Becker (1963), argues that deviance is not inherent in an act but is socially constructed through societal reactions. Once individuals are labeled as “delinquent” or “criminal,” they may internalize this identity, leading to secondary deviance and continued offending.

Research utilizing Labeling Theory has demonstrated that early contact with the justice system and negative societal labeling can contribute to stigma, marginalization, and increased recidivism among youth. Studies also highlight the role of media and public discourse in reinforcing negative stereotypes about juvenile offenders, which can influence societal support for punitive policies (Watumura et al., 2023).

In this study, Labeling Theory is used to examine how societal perceptions and narratives shape stakeholders’ views on juvenile offenders’ liability, particularly regarding stigma and rehabilitation.

#### **Developmental and Life-Course Theory**

Developmental and Life-Course Theory, proposed by Terrie Eleanor Moffitt (1993), distinguishes between adolescence-limited offenders and life-course-persistent offenders. Adolescence-limited offending is temporary and influenced by peer dynamics, while life-course-persistent offending reflects stable and long-term antisocial behavior.

Empirical studies grounded in this theory emphasize that adolescents have underdeveloped cognitive and moral capacities, particularly in impulse control, risk assessment, and long-term decision-making. Research supports that most juvenile offending is temporary and declines with maturity, reinforcing the importance of rehabilitation and age-appropriate interventions (Cavanagh, 2022).

In this study, this theory provides a framework for understanding stakeholders’ recognition of developmental limitations among juvenile offenders, supporting age-appropriate accountability and rehabilitation.

#### **Social Representations Theory**

Social Representations Theory (SRT), developed by Serge Moscovici (2008), posits that knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes are socially constructed and shared within communities. These representations are shaped by cultural norms, social interactions, and media, influencing how individuals interpret social issues.

Studies applying SRT demonstrate that shared beliefs, media narratives, and cultural values influence societal perceptions of crime and juvenile offending. Public attitudes toward children in conflict with the law are often shaped by collective representations that either emphasize protection and rehabilitation or punishment and control (Berrick, 2023).

Within this study, Social Representations Theory is used to analyze how stakeholders form their perceptions of juvenile offenders’ liability, particularly how cultural, social, and media influences shape their views on accountability and rehabilitation.

The use of multiple theoretical perspectives in this study reflects the multidimensional nature of juvenile offenders’ liability. No single theory sufficiently explains the complexity of juvenile offending and societal responses to it. Social Learning Theory explains behavioral acquisition; Strain Theory accounts for socio-economic pressures; Labeling Theory highlights the impact of societal reactions;

Developmental and Life-Course Theory emphasizes age-related cognitive limitations; and Social Representations Theory explains how public perceptions are formed. Taken together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how stakeholders perceive juvenile offenders' liability, particularly in balancing accountability and rehabilitation.

### Conceptual Framework

This part of the study presents the concepts derived from the identified themes: rehabilitation and age-appropriate accountability in juvenile justice; balancing accountability and Child Protection; balancing juvenile accountability and rehabilitation; a rehabilitation-oriented system with implementation gaps; and balancing accountability with rehabilitation for young offenders. These themes emerged from participants' interview responses and reflect the perspectives of key stakeholders on juvenile criminal liability and the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR).

*Rehabilitation and Age-Appropriate Accountability in Juvenile Justice.* This concept emphasizes that children in conflict with the law should be held accountable in a manner appropriate to their developmental stage. Stakeholders highlighted that accountability must be corrective and educational rather than punitive, ensuring that minors understand the consequences of their actions while prioritizing rehabilitation. This aligns with child-centered justice principles, which recognize that minors possess evolving cognitive and moral capacities and therefore require guidance, intervention, and support rather than harsh punishment (Cavanagh, 2022; Steinberg, 2022).

*Balancing Accountability and Child Protection.* This concept underscores the need to integrate accountability with rehabilitation within the justice system. Participants emphasized that accountability should not be equated with punishment but rather serve as a tool for teaching responsibility. Rehabilitation remains the primary objective, with interventions such as counseling, family involvement, and skills development programs supporting behavioral change and reintegration (Mowen & Brent, 2022; Suzuki & Wood, 2021).

*Balancing Juvenile Accountability and Rehabilitation.* This concept highlights stakeholders' perspectives on maintaining the current minimum age of criminal responsibility while addressing concerns related to youth offending. It reflects the view that lowering the age may not effectively address the root causes of delinquency and may instead expose children to stigma and criminal environments. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of strengthening preventive measures, social support systems, and monitoring mechanisms rather than imposing stricter legal sanctions (Goldson & Muncie, 2022; Morano et al., 2021).

*Rehabilitation-Oriented System with Implementation Gaps.* This concept describes the current juvenile justice system as fundamentally protective and rehabilitation-focused, particularly through diversion programs and inter-agency coordination. However, stakeholders identified significant implementation gaps, including limited resources, insufficient manpower, inadequate training at the barangay level, and weak monitoring and follow-up mechanisms. These gaps affect the consistency and effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts and contribute to repeated offending (Mallet, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

*Balancing Accountability with Rehabilitation for Young Offenders.* This concept highlights the need for a holistic, balanced approach to dealing with juvenile offenders. Stakeholders emphasized that accountability should be age-appropriate and non-punitive, while rehabilitation should remain the central goal. Effective strategies include counseling, education, skills training, community-based programs, and continuous monitoring. Family and community involvement were also identified as essential components in ensuring successful reintegration and preventing recidivism (Day et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022).

### Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explore and analyze the perceptions and beliefs of stakeholders regarding the criminal liability of minors, particularly in relation to children in conflict with the law (CICL) and the implementation of the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR) in the Philippines. Understanding these societal views was essential for evaluating the alignment between public perception, child development principles, and legal frameworks. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research problems:

1. What are the insights of key stakeholders regarding the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility?
2. How do stakeholders perceive the moral, psychological, and legal implications of holding juvenile offenders criminally liable?
3. What factors influence stakeholders' positions on whether the age of criminal liability should be lowered or maintained?
4. How do stakeholders evaluate the effectiveness of the current juvenile justice system?

5. How do stakeholders propose balancing accountability and rehabilitation in dealing with young offenders?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Design

This study used a case study design under a qualitative research approach. This design is appropriate because it aims to answer “how” and “why” questions concerning the community’s insights on the proposal to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility. A case study allows for an in-depth exploration of the community’s perceptions, experiences, and reasoning, providing rich and detailed information within the real-life context of the issue.

A case study is particularly useful for examining a contemporary social issue in its natural setting (Yin, 2009). It provides a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons, attitudes, and motivations that shape how communities perceive juvenile offenders and the issue of criminal liability. This approach is not only descriptive but also exploratory, helping uncover community-level values and cultural dynamics that may influence public opinion and policy on juvenile justice.

### Setting

This study was conducted in one of the cities in the province of Lanao del Sur, in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The city is a highly appropriate and meaningful setting for investigating community perceptions of juvenile delinquency, liability, and rehabilitation. The city’s unique social realities provide fertile ground for a qualitative, case study research design to explore how and why communities understand and respond to youth offending and to proposals such as lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

Socio-economic disruption, displacement, poverty, and weakened community structures following the siege may have increased vulnerabilities among youth, making juvenile delinquency and youth offending potential issues of concern. The presence of displaced families, broken social networks, and disrupted institutions creates a unique context in which community perceptions of juvenile responsibility, liability, and rehabilitation may differ from those in more stable areas.

As a predominantly Muslim city with a strong Islamic identity (Maranao ethnicity), community values, norms, and religious teachings likely play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward youth behavior, crime, accountability, rehabilitation, and justice. Exploring juvenile liability in this context allowed the study to examine how cultural and religious backgrounds influence community perceptions, offering insights that are culturally grounded and context specific.

### Participants

The participants in this study were fifteen (15) key informants with direct experience and professional involvement in handling cases of juvenile delinquency and youth offending. The primary participants were seven (7) social workers from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), complemented by five (5) personnel from the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) and two (2) barangay officials. The DSWD social workers served as the main participants due to their direct involvement in child welfare services, psychosocial assessments, and rehabilitation programs for juvenile offenders. The WCPD personnel provided legal and enforcement perspectives on handling children in conflict with the law (CICL). At the same time, barangay officials contributed insights on community-based interventions and local governance to address youth offending.

### Sampling Method

This study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method in which participants are deliberately selected based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research, particularly when the objective is to obtain in-depth, expert-informed insights on specialized topics such as juvenile delinquency (Etikan et al., 2016). The actual number of participants was determined through data saturation, which is reached when additional interviews or literature reviews no longer generate new information, themes, or insights (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Applying data saturation ensured that the data gathered was rich, credible, and sufficiently comprehensive to support a thorough and meaningful analysis.

### Instrument

The primary data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide. The researcher developed this instrument to gather narrative and perceptual data on community insights regarding the lowering of the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

The interview guide consisted of two parts: Part I: Demographic profile of respondents (age, sex, educational attainment, occupation, role in the community). Part II: Core questions exploring perceptions about youth crime, causes of delinquency, attitudes toward lowering the age of criminal liability, moral and cultural beliefs, and proposed community interventions.

To ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness, the questions were translated into Maranao and Filipino and back-translated into English. Experts in criminology, social sciences, and qualitative research validated the instrument to establish its content validity. A pilot test was conducted among a small group of non-participant residents to refine the wording and structure of the questions. All interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent) and supported by field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

### **Ethical Consideration**

In this qualitative study, specific ethical measures were carefully observed, particularly during participant selection and interview conduct. The researcher strictly followed the ethical protocols and guidelines set by the university. Before data collection began, the research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Misamis University Research Ethics Committee (MUREC). This process included submitting all required documents, including the Ethical Review Assessment Form, the Informed Consent Form, and the Technical Review of the Research Proposal. To ensure proper coordination and respect for community processes, the researcher sought formal permission from the barangay captains of the selected barangays in Marawi City, where the study will be carried out.

Respondent participation was purely voluntary. Before any interview was conducted, participants were fully informed about the objectives of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants. They signed an informed consent form as proof of their voluntary participation, and they were reminded that they may decline or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. Signing the consent form will not waive any of their legal rights or claims.

To protect confidentiality and anonymity, participants' real names were not revealed during the interview process or in any part of the research output. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym or code for proper documentation. All audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms were kept in a secure and locked storage, both physical and digital, accessible only to the researcher. Personal identifiers and other sensitive information were strictly safeguarded and permanently destroyed upon completion of the study.

The researcher prioritized the safety, dignity, and privacy of all participants throughout the research process. Care was taken to ensure that no psychological or emotional harm resulted from the interviews, and cultural and religious values were always respected, given the Islamic context of Lanao del Sur. The study fully complied with the provisions of Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012, to ensure proper handling, protection, and disposal of personal data.

### **Data Analysis**

The study employed Yin's (2009) six-stage case study analytic process to systematically analyze data from the interviews. This structured approach guided the analysis of the participants' narratives through the stages of Planning, Designing, Preparing, Collecting, Analyzing, and Sharing. The focus is on answering the guiding "how" and "why" questions of the research, which are central to case study methodology.

In the *Planning stage*, the researcher finalized the research objectives, identified the rationale for using a case study approach, and defined the data-gathering and analysis strategies. With the guidance of the research adviser, purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the inclusion criteria, ensuring that the collected data were relevant and aligned with the study's purpose. Considerations such as sample size, accessibility, and timeframe will be carefully evaluated during this stage.

The *Designing stage* involved determining the most appropriate and efficient procedures for conducting the study. The interview guide and data collection plan were refined to maintain a logical connection between the research questions, the data-gathering process, and the data analysis. This stage also includes defining the unit of analysis, formulating the propositions, and developing procedures to uphold the quality and trustworthiness of the study (Baskarada, 2014; Yin, 2009).

During the *Preparing stage*, the researcher secured all necessary permissions from the Dean of the Graduate School, the Ethics Review Board, and barangay officials in Marawi City. This stage ensured that all ethical and administrative requirements were met prior to conducting the interviews.

The *Collecting stage* involved conducting face-to-face interviews using the validated semi-structured interview guide. The researcher began each session by explaining the study's purpose to participants to ensure comfort and trust. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to express their thoughts freely, while a recording device and field notes documented responses and non-verbal

cues. A case study database and chain of evidence were maintained throughout this process, in accordance with Yin's (2009) methodological rigor.

In the *Analyzing stage*, the researcher reviewed, coded, and categorized the interview transcripts through a thematic analysis approach. The data is read and re-read to identify recurring patterns, similarities, and differences in participant responses. Sentences and ideas with similar meanings were clustered, and emergent themes were developed. The researcher ensured that interpretations are clearly distinguished from factual data, applying analytical procedures and theoretical assertions to produce well-grounded findings.

Finally, in the *Sharing stage*, the analysis results were consolidated and presented in a clear, meaningful manner. The researcher shared and discussed the findings with relevant audiences, including faculty advisers and, if appropriate, selected participants for validation. Visual representations such as tables and figures may be included to support the presentation of themes and insights. The goal of this stage was to ensure clarity, accuracy, and transparency in communicating the study's results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study explores the perspectives of selected stakeholders on juvenile accountability and rehabilitation, with particular focus on the effectiveness of the current juvenile justice system and the implications of lowering the age of criminal responsibility. It employed a qualitative case study approach to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' views, experiences, and insights regarding juvenile offending, accountability, and intervention mechanisms. The participants in this study were fifteen (15) key informants with direct experience in handling cases involving children in conflict with the law (CICL). The primary participants were seven (7) social workers, all of whom were female, reflecting the gender composition of professionals engaged in child welfare and rehabilitation services. In addition, five (5) police officers assigned to the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD), all female, participated in the study, providing perspectives on law enforcement and legal intervention. Complementing these were two (2) barangay officials, both male, who contributed community-based insights on juvenile offending and local intervention mechanisms.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants were assigned code names based on their institutional affiliation: SW for social workers, PO for police officers, and BO for barangay officials, followed by corresponding numerical identifiers (e.g., SW1, PO1, BO1). These codes were used throughout the discussion to systematically present and analyze their responses. From the participants' responses, reflections, and experiences, several predominant themes emerged that capture the central issues surrounding juvenile justice. These themes include: (1) Rehabilitation and Age-Appropriate Accountability in Juvenile Justice; (2) Balancing Accountability and Child Protection; (3) Balancing Juvenile Accountability and Rehabilitation; (4) Rehabilitation-Oriented System with Implementation Gaps; and (5) Balancing Accountability with Rehabilitation for Young Offenders. These themes reflect the collective insights of the participants, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a child-centered justice system that integrates accountability with rehabilitation, while also addressing implementation, monitoring, and community-based intervention gaps.

### Rehabilitation and Age-Appropriate Accountability in Juvenile Justice

Stakeholders emphasized that juvenile accountability must be developmentally appropriate and primarily rehabilitative rather than punitive.

*"Instead of lowering the age, it is better to strengthen intervention and monitoring programs; the child must understand that there are consequences, but rehabilitation should remain the priority." (SW1)*

*"Lowering the age may increase the number of minors entering the formal justice system, which could lead to stigma and early exposure to criminal environments; instead, we should improve preventive systems and strengthen community-based support." (PO2)*

*"Lowering the age may expose children to criminal environments early and increase stigma. It may discourage rehabilitation and instead create long-term labeling." (BO1)*

These findings demonstrate a shared preference among stakeholders for a rehabilitative and developmentally appropriate approach to juvenile justice. This perspective is strongly supported by Developmental and Life-Course Theory, which posits that juveniles exhibit incomplete cognitive development, particularly in areas related to impulse control, risk assessment, and moral reasoning (Moffitt, 1993; Steinberg, 2009). Neuroscientific research further substantiates that the prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functioning, continues to mature into early adulthood, thereby limiting

juveniles' capacity for fully rational decision-making (Casey et al., 2016). Consequently, age-appropriate accountability mechanisms are necessary to ensure that responses to juvenile offending are proportionate and constructive rather than purely punitive (Cavanagh, 2022).

Moreover, empirical studies consistently demonstrate that rehabilitative interventions yield more favorable long-term outcomes compared to punitive approaches. Programs focusing on cognitive-behavioral therapy, restorative justice, and family-based interventions have been shown to significantly reduce recidivism among youth offenders (Day et al., 2022; Lipsey, 2009; Howell et al., 2019). In contrast, punitive measures such as detention and incarceration often fail to address underlying behavioral issues and may exacerbate delinquency by exposing juveniles to criminogenic environments (Mulvey, 2011).

Furthermore, participants' concerns about stigma and early exposure to the formal justice system reinforce Labeling Theory's principles, which hold that formal criminal labeling can lead to the internalization of deviant identities and perpetuate a cycle of offending (Becker, 1963). Contemporary studies support this assertion, indicating that early involvement in the justice system is associated with adverse developmental outcomes, including reduced educational attainment, weakened social bonds, and an increased likelihood of recidivism (Mallet, 2021; Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006; Ackerman et al., 2024). The stigmatizing effects of formal processing may therefore undermine rehabilitation and hinder successful reintegration into society.

In addition, the emphasis on strengthening preventive and community-based interventions aligns with Social Learning Theory, which posits that behavior is acquired and modified through interaction with social environments (Bandura, 1977). Positive reinforcement, prosocial role modeling, and structured support systems play a critical role in shaping behavior. Empirical evidence highlights that community-based diversion programs, mentoring initiatives, and family-centered interventions are effective in reducing delinquency and promoting prosocial development (Mowen & Brent, 2022; Farrington, Gaffney, & Ttofi, 2017). These approaches not only prevent deeper system involvement but also address the root causes of offending, such as family dysfunction, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities.

Additionally, international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) advocate for the use of detention only as a measure of last resort and emphasize rehabilitation and reintegration as primary objectives of juvenile justice systems (United Nations, 1989). Comparative studies across jurisdictions reveal that systems that prioritize diversion and restorative justice practices achieve better youth outcomes than those that rely heavily on punitive sanctions (Hazel, 2008; Dünkel, 2014).

The findings imply that policies lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility may be ineffective and potentially harmful, as they risk exposing children to stigmatization and criminogenic environments that undermine rehabilitation. Instead, the results support a shift toward strengthening developmentally appropriate, community-based, and preventive interventions that address the root causes of juvenile delinquency. This highlights the need for policymakers and justice practitioners to prioritize diversion programs, family-centered approaches, and rehabilitative services over punitive measures, and to ensure that accountability mechanisms align with children's cognitive and social development. Ultimately, adopting a child-centered and rehabilitation-oriented framework can enhance long-term behavioral change, reduce recidivism, and promote the successful reintegration of juvenile offenders into society.

### **Balancing Accountability and Child Protection**

This theme underscores that stakeholders view accountability and child protection as complementary principles, emphasizing that juvenile offenders must be held responsible for their actions in a manner that safeguards their developmental needs and promotes rehabilitation.

*"There must be accountability, but it should not be purely punitive; the child must understand that there are consequences, but rehabilitation should remain the priority." (SW2)*

*"Lowering the age may increase the number of minors entering the formal justice system, which could lead to stigma and early exposure to criminal environments; rehabilitation and preventive support should remain the focus." (PO2)*

*"Children must face consequences, but these should be corrective rather than punitive." (BO2)*

These findings demonstrate that stakeholders consistently advocate for a balanced approach that integrates accountability with child protection, rather than treating them as opposing concepts. This perspective is strongly supported by Developmental and Life-Course Theory, which holds that juveniles possess incomplete cognitive and emotional maturity, particularly in areas such as impulse control,

foresight, and moral reasoning (Moffitt, 1993; Steinberg, 2022). Neuroscientific evidence further confirms that adolescent brain development, especially in the prefrontal cortex, continues, thereby necessitating accountability mechanisms that are instructive and rehabilitative rather than punitive (Casey et al., 2016; Scott & Steinberg, 2008). Consequently, age-appropriate accountability ensures that children understand consequences while still being guided toward behavioral reform.

Empirical studies further affirm that punitive approaches alone are insufficient and often counterproductive, as they fail to address the underlying developmental, social, and psychological drivers of juvenile delinquency (Malvaso et al., 2021; Mulvey, 2011). In contrast, balanced approaches that combine accountability with therapeutic and rehabilitative interventions such as restorative justice, cognitive-behavioral programs, and structured supervision have been shown to produce more sustainable reductions in recidivism (Lipsey, 2009; Howell et al., 2019).

Furthermore, stakeholders' concerns about early exposure to the formal justice system align with Labeling Theory, which posits that early criminal labeling can stigmatize youth and reinforce deviant identities (Becker, 1963). Contemporary research supports this, indicating that formal system involvement at a young age is associated with long-term adverse outcomes, including diminished educational attainment, weakened social bonds, and increased likelihood of reoffending (O'Brien & Fitzgerald, 2023; Bernburg et al., 2006; Mallet, 2021). This underscores the importance of ensuring that accountability measures do not inadvertently harm the child's psychosocial development or impede reintegration.

Moreover, the emphasis on corrective and community-based approaches aligns with both Social Learning Theory and Strain Theory, which highlight that delinquent behavior is shaped by environmental influences, social interactions, and structural pressures (Bandura, 1977; Merton, 1938). Youth exposed to adverse environments such as poverty, family instability, or lack of opportunities may resort to deviance as a coping mechanism. However, these behaviors can be redirected through positive reinforcement, mentorship, and supportive social structures. Empirical evidence demonstrates that interventions integrating accountability with family involvement, community engagement, and continuous monitoring significantly reduce delinquency and promote prosocial behavior (Mowen & Brent, 2022; Day et al., 2022; Baglivio & Wolff, 2021; Farrington et al., 2017).

Additionally, international standards, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), emphasize that juvenile justice systems must uphold the best interests of the child, ensuring that accountability measures are consistent with dignity and worth, and with the goal of reintegration (United Nations, 1989). Jurisdictions that adopt balanced approaches—combining accountability with protection—demonstrate more favorable long-term outcomes than systems that rely heavily on punitive sanctions (Dünkel, 2014; Hazel, 2008).

The findings imply that effective juvenile justice policies must move beyond the false dichotomy between accountability and child protection by institutionalizing approaches that integrate both principles. Rather than lowering the age of criminal responsibility, policymakers and practitioners should strengthen diversion programs, restorative justice mechanisms, and community-based interventions that hold children accountable in constructive and developmentally appropriate ways. This suggests the need for a justice framework that prioritizes corrective over punitive measures, minimizes early exposure to formal legal processes, and ensures that accountability contributes to rehabilitation rather than stigmatization. Ultimately, balancing accountability with child protection can lead to more sustainable behavioral change, lower recidivism rates, and improved reintegration outcomes for juvenile offenders.

### **Balancing Juvenile Accountability and Rehabilitation**

This theme highlights that stakeholders support maintaining the current minimum age of criminal responsibility while ensuring that accountability is applied in a manner that promotes rehabilitation and protects the developmental needs of juvenile offenders.

*“Personally, I believe the current age requirement is appropriate. The spirit of the law is to protect children. Instead of lowering the age, it is better to strengthen intervention and monitoring programs.” (SW1)*

*“In my view, the current minimum age should remain. Lowering it may not address the root causes of youth offending.” (PO2)*

*“Lowering the age may expose children to criminal environments early and increase stigma. It may discourage rehabilitation and instead create long-term labeling.” (BO1)*

These findings indicate that stakeholders generally favor a child-centered justice approach that prioritizes rehabilitation while maintaining accountability, particularly by addressing the root causes of juvenile offending rather than relying on punitive measures. This perspective is supported by Developmental and Life-Course Theory, which posits that children and adolescents possess evolving cognitive, emotional, and moral capacities, making them less culpable than adults and more amenable to reform (Moffitt, 1993; Steinberg, 2022). Neuroscientific studies further demonstrate that brain regions associated with decision-making, impulse control, and risk assessment, particularly the prefrontal cortex, are not fully developed during adolescence, thereby necessitating age-appropriate and rehabilitative responses to offending behavior (Casey et al., 2016; Scott & Steinberg, 2008). These insights reinforce the argument that premature exposure to criminal liability may undermine, rather than enhance, accountability.

Empirical evidence consistently supports that rehabilitation-focused systems and diversion programs are more effective than punitive approaches in reducing recidivism and promoting long-term behavioral change among juvenile offenders (Goldson & Muncie, 2022; Lipsey, 2009; Howell et al., 2019). Programs that incorporate restorative justice, cognitive-behavioral interventions, and family-based support address the underlying causes of delinquency, such as trauma, peer influence, and socio-economic disadvantage, rather than merely sanctioning the behavior (Day et al., 2022; Mulvey, 2011). In contrast, punitive approaches, particularly incarceration, have been shown to increase the likelihood of reoffending by exposing youth to criminogenic environments and disrupting prosocial development.

Furthermore, the concern about the negative consequences of lowering the age of criminal responsibility aligns with Labeling Theory, which posits that early criminalization can lead to stigma, social exclusion, and the reinforcement of deviant identities (Becker, 1963). Contemporary research affirms that early involvement in the formal justice system is associated with adverse developmental outcomes, including reduced educational opportunities, weakened social bonds, and increased likelihood of persistent offending (The Sentencing Project, 2023; Bernburg et al., 2006; Mallet, 2021). This underscores the importance of avoiding premature formal intervention that may hinder the child's long-term reintegration and psychosocial development.

Moreover, the emphasis on strengthening intervention, monitoring, and community-based programs aligns with both Social Learning Theory and Strain Theory, which highlight that juvenile behavior is shaped by environmental, social, and structural factors (Bandura, 1977; Merton, 1938). Children exposed to adverse conditions such as poverty, family instability, or limited access to education are more vulnerable to delinquent behavior. However, these risks can be mitigated through structured support systems and positive socialization. Empirical findings demonstrate that continuous supervision, mentoring, and community-based rehabilitation programs significantly reduce recidivism and promote prosocial behavior among youth offenders (Wilson et al., 2022; Mowen & Brent, 2022; Farrington et al., 2017).

Additionally, international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasize that states must establish a minimum age of criminal responsibility that reflects children's developmental capacities and must prioritize rehabilitation and reintegration over punishment (United Nations, 1989). Comparative studies indicate that jurisdictions with higher minimum age thresholds and robust diversion systems achieve better youth outcomes than those that adopt punitive, age-based approaches (Dünkel, 2014; Hazel, 2008).

The findings imply that maintaining the current minimum age of criminal responsibility is both developmentally appropriate and consistent with evidence-based juvenile justice practices, provided that accountability mechanisms are strengthened through rehabilitative and community-based interventions. Rather than lowering the age, policymakers should focus on enhancing diversion programs, early intervention strategies, and continuous monitoring systems that address the root causes of juvenile offending. This suggests a shift toward a more preventive and restorative justice framework that holds children accountable in ways that promote learning, behavioral reform, and social reintegration while minimizing exposure to harmful and stigmatizing formal justice processes. Ultimately, reinforcing rehabilitation alongside accountability can lead to more effective crime prevention and improved long-term outcomes for juvenile offenders.

### **Rehabilitation-Oriented System with Implementation Gaps**

This theme highlights that, while the juvenile justice system is structurally designed to promote rehabilitation and child protection, its effectiveness is constrained by implementation gaps, particularly in monitoring, resources, and local capacity.

*"The law itself is clear and protective, and there is coordination between police, CSWD, and barangays. However, gaps include limited facilities, resource constraints, and the need for stronger monitoring of diversion compliance." (SW1)*

*“The system is effective in providing opportunities for rehabilitation, especially for first-time offenders. However, the lack of consistent follow-up shows that intervention is not always enough to prevent repeated offenses.” (PO3)*

*“The system is clear and protective. However, barangays need more training and resources to properly implement diversion and monitoring.” (BO1)*

These findings demonstrate that although the juvenile justice framework is conceptually sound and grounded in rehabilitation, its actual effectiveness is undermined by structural and operational limitations. This aligns with Strain Theory, which posits that institutional constraints, such as inadequate funding, limited facilities, and insufficient manpower, can impede systems' ability to achieve their intended goals (Merton, 1938). In the context of juvenile justice, these constraints weaken the delivery of diversion and rehabilitation programs, thereby limiting their impact. Empirical studies support this observation, indicating that even well-established juvenile justice systems encounter persistent challenges related to resource allocation, workforce capacity, and uneven service delivery, all of which affect program effectiveness and youth outcomes (UNICEF, 2021; Goldson & Muncie, 2022).

Furthermore, the lack of consistent follow-up and monitoring mechanisms aligns with the principles of Social Learning Theory, which emphasize that behavioral change is a gradual process requiring continuous reinforcement, supervision, and structured support (Bandura, 1977). Without sustained engagement, the gains achieved through initial interventions may not be maintained, increasing the likelihood of relapse into delinquent behavior. Research confirms that ongoing monitoring, mentoring, and aftercare programs are critical components in reducing recidivism and ensuring long-term behavioral change among juvenile offenders (Wilson et al., 2022; Mowen & Brent, 2022). The absence of these mechanisms suggests a gap between policy design and actual practice.

Additionally, the challenges identified at the barangay level highlight the critical role of local implementation in achieving the objectives of juvenile justice. This is consistent with Developmental and Life-Course Theory, which stresses that juveniles require continuous, structured, and context-specific support systems to facilitate positive behavioral development (Moffitt, 1993; Steinberg, 2022). At the same time, Social Representations Theory explains that the effectiveness of policies depends on how they are understood, internalized, and implemented within communities (Moscovici, 2008). If local actors lack adequate training, resources, or clarity in implementation, even well-designed policies may fail to produce desired outcomes. Empirical evidence further underscores that strong local capacity, inter-agency coordination, and community-based support systems are essential determinants of successful rehabilitation and reintegration (Mallet, 2021; Howell et al., 2019).

Moreover, comparative studies reveal that jurisdictions with robust monitoring systems, adequate funding, and well-trained personnel achieve significantly better outcomes in juvenile rehabilitation compared to those with fragmented implementation structures (Dünkel, 2014; Hazel, 2008). This suggests that the effectiveness of a rehabilitation-oriented system is not solely dependent on legal frameworks but also on the strength of its institutional and operational mechanisms.

The findings imply that the effectiveness of a rehabilitation-oriented juvenile justice system depends not only on sound legal frameworks but also on the strength of its implementation mechanisms at the local level. While existing laws and policies are aligned with child protection and rehabilitation principles, gaps in resources, monitoring, and capacity significantly limit their impact. This suggests that policymakers and practitioners should prioritize investments in infrastructure, personnel training, and inter-agency coordination, particularly at the barangay level, to ensure consistent and effective program delivery. Strengthening follow-up and monitoring systems is also essential to sustain behavioral change and prevent recidivism. Ultimately, addressing these implementation gaps can enhance the overall effectiveness of the juvenile justice system and ensure that its rehabilitative goals are fully achieved.

#### **Balancing Accountability with Rehabilitation for Young Offenders**

This theme emphasizes that accountability in juvenile justice must be implemented as a corrective, developmentally appropriate process that promotes responsibility while safeguarding children's rights and welfare.

*“The justice system must ensure accountability but in a developmentally appropriate manner, focusing on counseling, family sessions, skills training, and reintegration while prioritizing the child's rights.” (SW2)*

*“The justice system should ensure that children are held accountable, but in a way that is appropriate for their age, while rehabilitation remains the main focus.” (PO3)*

*“Children must face consequences, but these should be corrective rather than punitive. Rehabilitation and guidance are more effective long-term.”(BO2)*

These findings demonstrate that stakeholders consistently support a balanced and child-centered approach in which accountability serves as a mechanism for behavioral correction rather than punishment. This perspective is grounded in Developmental and Life-Course Theory, which explains that juveniles possess evolving cognitive, emotional, and moral capacities, making them less culpable and more responsive to intervention than adults (Moffitt, 1993; Steinberg, 2022). Neuroscientific research further supports this view, showing that the adolescent brain, particularly areas responsible for impulse control and decision-making, continues to develop into early adulthood, thereby necessitating accountability mechanisms that are instructive, proportionate, and rehabilitative (Casey et al., 2016; Scott & Steinberg, 2008).

Empirical studies further confirm that punitive approaches may increase recidivism due to exposure to criminogenic environments and the disruption of positive developmental pathways, whereas rehabilitative strategies are more effective in promoting sustained behavioral change (Malvaso et al., 2021; Mulvey, 2011; Lipsey, 2009). Interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, restorative justice practices, and family-centered programs address underlying risk factors and support the development of prosocial skills, thereby enhancing long-term reintegration outcomes (Day et al., 2022; Howell et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the emphasis on structured, guided accountability aligns with Social Learning Theory, which posits that behavior is shaped by reinforcement, modeling, and environmental influences rather than punishment alone (Bandura, 1977). Within this framework, accountability becomes a learning process wherein children understand the consequences of their actions through guided interventions, mentorship, and positive reinforcement. Supporting evidence shows that accountability embedded within rehabilitative programs significantly reduces delinquency and promotes prosocial behavior among youth offenders (Mowen & Brent, 2022; Farrington et al., 2017).

Additionally, the preference for corrective and non-punitive accountability reflects the principles of Labeling Theory, which warns that stigmatizing children through formal criminal labels may reinforce deviant identities and hinder successful reintegration (Becker, 1963). Contemporary research affirms that minimizing formal processing and avoiding stigmatization lead to better developmental outcomes, including improved educational attainment and reduced likelihood of reoffending (O'Brien & Fitzgerald, 2023; Suzuki & Wood, 2021; Bernburg et al., 2006). Restorative justice approaches, in particular, have been shown to promote accountability while preserving dignity and social bonds.

Moreover, international standards, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), emphasize that juvenile justice systems must ensure that children are treated with dignity and worth, with rehabilitation and reintegration as primary objectives (United Nations, 1989). Comparative research indicates that systems adopting balanced approaches—integrating accountability with rehabilitation—achieve more positive long-term outcomes than those relying predominantly on punitive sanctions (Dünkel, 2014; Hazel, 2008).

The findings imply that juvenile justice systems must operationalize accountability as a rehabilitative and developmentally appropriate process rather than a punitive response. This calls for strengthening programs that integrate counseling, family engagement, skills training, and restorative practices to ensure that children understand the consequences of their actions while being guided toward positive behavioral change. Policymakers and practitioners should prioritize non-custodial and community-based interventions that reinforce accountability without exposing children to stigmatization or harmful environments. Ultimately, embedding accountability within a rehabilitative framework can enhance long-term outcomes, reduce recidivism, and ensure that the rights and developmental needs of young offenders are effectively protected.

## Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the following are the conclusions:

1. The majority of stakeholders do not support lowering the age of criminal responsibility, as the current threshold already reflects the protective and rehabilitative intent of the juvenile justice system. Lowering is viewed as potentially harmful due to risks of stigma, early criminalization, and negative developmental impacts.

2. Stakeholders perceive juvenile criminal liability as developmental and corrective rather than punitive. Accountability is viewed as a means of moral guidance, applied in a manner that respects the child's rights, dignity, and evolving capacities.

3. Social, environmental, and perceptual factors influence stakeholder perspectives. Family conditions, peer influence, and community context shape juvenile behavior, while media and public perception influence policy views.

4. The juvenile justice system is generally seen as effective in its rehabilitation-oriented approach, particularly through diversion and inter-agency coordination. However, implementation gaps such as limited resources, manpower, training, and inconsistent application reduce its effectiveness.

5. An effective juvenile justice system requires a balanced approach, where accountability is age-appropriate, and rehabilitation remains the priority. Strengthened monitoring, continuous follow-up, and active family and community involvement are essential to prevent recidivism and support reintegration.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following are the recommendations:

1. Policymakers or the legislature should maintain the current minimum age of criminal responsibility and strengthen preventive programs by expanding diversion, early intervention, and school-based guidance to address the root causes of juvenile offending.

2. Juvenile Justice System (Courts, DSWD, Law Enforcement) should implement developmentally appropriate accountability by integrating restorative justice, counseling, and educational interventions instead of punitive measures.

3. Government Agencies, the academe, and the media should conduct sustained public awareness campaigns through seminars, research dissemination, and media engagement to promote evidence-based understanding of juvenile justice.

4. National Government and Local Government Units (LGUs) should improve implementation capacity by allocating resources, increasing trained personnel, and standardizing protocols for diversion and rehabilitation programs.

5. LGUs, Families, and Community Stakeholders should establish structured monitoring systems through regular follow-ups, mentoring, counseling, and educational or livelihood support to ensure reintegration and prevent recidivism.

6. This study may be used as a reference for future researchers in exploring issues related to juvenile criminal liability, particularly on accountability, rehabilitation, and the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

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