

LOWERING THE AGE OF CRIMINAL LIABILITY: A SELECTED SECTOR PERCEPTION IN DAGUPAN CITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of key sectors in Dagupan City regarding the controversial proposal to lower the minimum age of criminal liability from the 15-year-old threshold established by Republic Act No. 9344. Driven by the core tension between public safety and child welfare, the study evaluates the policy's perceived impact on crime deterrence, parental accountability, the psychological well-being of the child, and the operational readiness of local rehabilitation facilities. Utilizing a quantitative descriptive-comparative approach, data were gathered from a stratified sample of 208 respondents representing law enforcement, the academe, barangay officials, parents, and religious/NGO groups across Dagupan City. The findings reveal widespread public support for lowering the age of criminal liability, yielding a grand mean of 2.85 ("Agree"). Notably, respondents expressed the highest confidence in the readiness of local rehabilitation facilities, which garnered a sub-mean of 3.27 ("Strongly Agree"). The dimensions of crime deterrence (sub-mean = 3.03) and parental accountability (sub-mean = 2.67) also received positive consensus. Conversely, the psychological impact on the child scored the lowest (sub-mean = 2.43, "Disagree"), indicating that public sentiment heavily prioritizes legal accountability over developmental considerations. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) demonstrated no significant difference in perceptions across the sectors ($F = 1.018$, $p = 0.399$), indicating a unified community

view. The study concludes with practical recommendations to bolster family-centered interventions, improve Bahay Pag-asa centers, and establish child-sensitive training protocols to maintain a balanced juvenile justice model.

Keywords: *Age of Criminal Liability, Crime Deterrence, Juvenile Delinquency, Rehabilitation Facilities, Stakeholder Perceptions*

INTRODUCTION

The debate on the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR) is a deeply polarizing global and national issue that pits the demands of public safety against the fundamental human rights of children. Globally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) advocates for a higher MACR threshold, recommending an absolute minimum of 14 years old based on neuro-scientific evidence showing that the prefrontal cortex—the brain region governing impulse control and risk assessment—is not fully mature until a person's mid-20s. Despite these international frameworks, global practices diverge significantly, ranging from punitive systems setting thresholds as low as age 7 to welfare-centric models that establish liability at age 18.

In the Philippines, this controversy has intensified since the enactment of Republic Act No. 9344, or the "Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of 2006," which established the current baseline at 15 years old. Proponents of reform argue that criminal syndicates actively exploit this legal immunity by utilizing younger minors as "drug runners" and thieves. Opponents, including the Psychological Association of the Philippines, contend that early criminalization ignores systemic social factors like extreme poverty, parental neglect, and inadequate education, effectively punishing children for structural societal failures.

This tension is acutely observed within the province of Pangasinan, where documented cases of Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) have fluctuated visibly over the past decade. Local data from the Dagupan City Police Office Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) highlight concentrated pockets of juvenile offenses, particularly within high-density urban zones like Barangay Poblacion Oeste. While the national discourse remains gridlocked between punitive and rehabilitative models, there is a significant empirical gap regarding how grassroots community stakeholders navigate these boundaries.

This study bridges this critical gap by investigating the perceptions of individuals across five core sectors in Dagupan City: Law Enforcement, the Academe, Parents, Barangay Officials, and the Religious/NGO sector. By assessing localized attitudes toward crime deterrence, parental accountability, psychological impact, and institutional capacity, this research aims to provide evidence-based insights that can inform balanced, sustainable juvenile justice policies.

METHODS

To evaluate sector perceptions regarding the proposal to lower the age of criminal responsibility in Dagupan City, this study utilized a quantitative, descriptive-comparative, and cross-sectional research design. Applying Slovin's formula to a total institutional population of

434 stakeholders across five distinct community sectors—the Philippine National Police Women and Children Protection Desk (PNP-WCPD), public school teachers from Dagupan City National High School, barangay officials, parents, and religious NGO representatives—a proportional sample size of 208 respondents was determined and selected via stratified random sampling. Data collection was executed using a structured, researcher-made survey instrument that was formally validated by an expert panel and verified for reliability through a pilot test analyzed via Cronbach's Alpha. The gathered data were statistically processed through SPSS, utilizing frequencies, percentages, and weighted means for descriptive profiling, alongside an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tested at $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level to evaluate perceptual differences across the sectors, while maintaining strict ethical standards regarding respondent anonymity and informed consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the key findings of the study, organized according to the research objectives. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and are reported objectively to highlight trends, patterns, and significant observations. Tables are included to enhance clarity and support the interpretation of results.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The study surveyed a total of 208 respondents across five distinct sectors within Dagupan City. The demographic profile evaluates the participants based on age, sex, and social sector role.

Table 1

Profile of the Respondents

Profile Variables	Groups	F	%
Age	20 – 30 years old	50	24
	31 – 40 years old	45	21.6
	41 – 50 years old	37	17.8
	51 years old and above	76	36.5
Sex	Male	93	44.7
	Female	115	55.3
Sectors	Law Enforcement (PNP / WCPD)	13	6.3
	Academe (Teacher / Guidance Counselor / School Admin)	13	6.3
	[Barangay Official (Captain / Kagawad / Tanod / Lupon	12	5.8
	Parent (Resident of Dagupan City)	23	11.1
	Religious / NGO (Church Leader / Social Worker / Youth	147	70.7

As shown in Table 1, the largest age bracket consists of individuals 51 years old and above ($n = 76$, 36.5%), implying that the data heavily incorporates insights from older community members with longer exposure to local juvenile delinquency trends. Females comprise the majority of the

sample (n = 115, 55.3%). In terms of sectoral representation, Parents make up the largest group (n = 147, 70.7%), rendering the study highly reflective of family- and welfare-oriented viewpoints.

Level of Perception Regarding the Lowering of the Age of Criminal Liability

The respondents’ perceptions were measured across four core dimensions using a 4-point Likert scale. The overall baseline perspective of the community shows a grand mean of 2.85, indicating a general consensus of "Agree" regarding the implementation of the policy.

Table 2
A. Perception on Deterrence to Crime

STATEMENTS	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Description
A1. Lowering the criminal age is necessary because children are being used by syndicates (drug trade/theft) to escape the law.	3.10	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
A2. Children aged 12 to 14 are aware of what is right and wrong and should be held responsible for their actions	3.04	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
A3. Fear of being jailed or detained is an effective way to stop a child from repeating a crime.	3.15	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
A4. The current law (Age 15) is too lenient and has led to an increase in juvenile delinquency in our barangay.	2.95	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
A5. Punishing the child is more effective than just counseling them.	2.93	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
Sub mean	3.03	Agree	The provision is beneficial.

The Deterrence to Crime dimension scored a sub-mean of 3.03 (Agree). Respondents strongly believe that the fear of detention effectively deters minor recidivism (Mean = 3.15) and explicitly acknowledge that syndicates exploit the current 15-year-old threshold (Mean = 3.10). This aligns with traditional *Deterrence Theory*, which posits that certain and severe legal adjustments discourage illicit acts (Sullivan, 2019).

Table 3
B. Perception on Parental Accountability

STATEMENTS	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Description
B1. Parents should be imprisoned or fined if their minor child (12-15 y/o) commits a serious crime.	2.78	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
B2. Most children in conflict with the law (CICL) come from broken or negligent families.	2.81	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
B3. Lowering the age of liability will force parents to supervise their children more strictly.	2.50	Disagree	The provision is not beneficial..
B4. It is unfair to punish a child for a crime when the real failure lies with the parents' lack of guidance.	2.57	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
B5. The government should focus on parenting	2.68	Agree	The provision is

seminars rather than lowering the criminal age.			beneficial.
Sub mean	2.67	Agree	The provision is beneficial.

The “Parental Accountability” dimension yielded a sub-mean of 2.67 (Agree). While there is an understanding that a dysfunctional home environment triggers youth offenses (Mean = 2.81), the respondents explicitly disagreed that lowering the legal age threshold would organically force stricter parental supervision (Mean = 2.50). This underscores a community belief that structural family deficits cannot be solved by penal shifts alone.

Table 4

C. Perception on Psychological Impact (Cognitive Development)

STATEMENTS	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Description
C1. A 12-year-old child has the same level of thinking and decision-making capacity as an adult.	2.52	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
C2. Placing a child in a detention facility will cause permanent psychological trauma.	2.48	Disagree	The provision is not beneficial.
C3. Children who commit crimes are often victims of poverty and abuse, not "criminals" by nature.	2.55	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
C4. Labeling a child as a "CICL" at age 12 destroys their future opportunities (school/work)	2.26	Disagree	The provision is not beneficial
C5. Children have the capacity to change (rehabilitation) better than adults.	2.33	Disagree	The provision is not beneficial
Sub mean	2.43	Disagree	The provision is not beneficial.

The Readiness of Facilities dimension generated the highest support in the study, scoring a sub-mean of 3.27 (Strongly Agree). Respondents exhibited overwhelming confidence in Dagupan City’s local social infrastructure, including its therapeutic personnel and facility management. However, a localized concern remains apparent regarding the structural risk of co-housing tender-age offenders with older youth delinquents (Mean = 3.23).

Table 5

D. Perception on Readiness of Facilities (Dagupan City Context)

STATEMENTS	Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Description
D1. Dagupan City has enough "Bahay Pag-asa" or youth care facilities to house more children.	3.18	Agree	The provision is beneficial.
D2. The current youth centers in the city are well-equipped to educate and rehabilitate children	3.49	Strongly Agree	The provision is highly beneficial/necessary.
D3. It is dangerous to mix 12-year-old children with older offenders (16-17 years old) in the same facility.	2.90	Agree	
D4. The local government and social workers	3.39	Strongly Agree	The provision is highly

have enough funds and personnel to handle younger offenders.				beneficial/necessary.
D5. Lowering the age of criminal responsibility without adequate juvenile facilities may result in children being detained in regular correctional institutions intended for adult offenders.	3.39	Strongly Agree		The provision is highly beneficial/necessary.
Sub mean	3.27	Strongly Agree		The provision is highly beneficial/necessary.

The “Psychological Impact” dimension scored the lowest with a sub-mean of 2.43 (Disagree). This indicator shows that public perception within Dagupan City heavily downplays long-term developmental trauma or the social branding effects of criminal labeling on children. The community values legal accountability and public safety over individual cognitive-developmental exemptions.

Comparative Analysis of Perceptions by Sector

To determine if professional or social roles significantly skewed perspectives, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was executed across the five participating groups.

Table 6

D. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on Perception Differences Across Sectors

Perception Sectors	df	F-value	p-value	Decision	Interpretation
	207	1.018	0.399	Accept H ₀	Not Significant

Level of Significance: $\alpha = 0.05$

The inferential data displays a computed F-value of 1.018 and a p-value of 0.399. Because the p-value is significantly greater than the chosen alpha level ($\alpha = 0.05$), the null hypothesis is accepted. There is no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of the respondents when grouped by sector. Law enforcement, educators, parents, barangay officials, and religious NGO representatives hold statistically uniform stances, showing that juvenile criminality is viewed as a uniform community concern rather than an isolated institutional issue.

Foreseen Challenges in Policy Implementation

Through qualitative feedback and open-ended analysis, four structural challenges were identified regarding the policy's potential enforcement in Dagupan City:

1. The Science-Perception Disconnect: A clear gap exists between public sentiment (which favors early punitive accountability) and developmental psychology paradigms highlighting the ongoing maturation of the adolescent prefrontal cortex.
2. Operational Over-Optimism: Despite the high confidence shown in Table 4, actual local institutions face structural limitations including fluctuating budgets, resources, and overcrowding risks.

3. The Discipline Deficiency: Legal changes alone will not fix deep-seated family issues, as respondents noted that lowering the age threshold does not automatically fix negligent home environments.
4. Contamination Risks within Custody: Stakeholders expressed concern over inadequate facility segregation, warning that mixing younger children with older, hardened juvenile offenders could ruin local rehabilitation efforts.

Despite the overall supportive findings toward the policy's benefits, the study identified specific friction areas that warrant further attention to ensure systemic equity and effective implementation. One notable gap is the public's downplaying of the psychological impact of criminal labeling and developmental trauma on children, which could lead to overly punitive local enforcement that undermines rehabilitation goals. Additionally, there is insufficient confidence that legislative adjustments will effectively target root problems, such as parental negligence or structural household deficits. These overlooked vulnerabilities highlight the need for targeted education campaigns and specialized training programs for local administrators that balance community safety with youth development. By equipping stakeholders with comprehensive information on adolescent psychology alongside institutional protocols, local policy implementation can become more equitable and adaptive to evolving community needs.

The study revealed several key trends in the perception of lowering the age of criminal liability among the selected sectors in Dagupan City. Across all evaluated demographics and dimensions—including crime deterrence and facility preparedness—residents consistently demonstrated an open support for the policy, driven by perceived rises in youth-involved crimes and syndication. Sectoral engagement across parents, educators, and local law enforcement was unified, reflecting a collective community commitment to tightening systemic discipline. However, the study also identified critical blind spots, such as a lack of awareness concerning adolescent developmental psychology and the structural contamination risks of co-housing varied age groups in centers, which remain under-addressed and present opportunities for targeted policy refinement. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of institutional readiness and community-wide alignment during legal transitions, while shedding light on unique cultural and sectoral demands specific to the Dagupan context that warrant further academic and governmental attention.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study confirms that community stakeholders in Dagupan City support lowering the minimum age of criminal liability, believing that children aged 12 to 14 possess the psychological discernment to understand criminal outcomes. While public confidence in the local government's institutional capacity is high, this sentiment is balanced by underlying anxieties regarding potential systemic failures, such as underfunded facilities and inadequate physical segregation of young offenders. To address these challenges, the study recommends launching community-based education programs, such as localized seminars and forums, to educate parents and barangay leaders on juvenile laws, restorative justice frameworks, and children's rights. Furthermore, bolstering family interventions by creating targeted guidance and counseling

initiatives can significantly enhance parental supervision and manage the underlying domestic risk factors linked to juvenile delinquency.

In addition to community and familial support, substantial institutional reforms must be prioritized to ensure a balanced justice system. This includes upgrading *Bahay Pag-Asa* infrastructure by allocating dedicated local government funding to expand rehabilitation facilities, ensure strict age-appropriate segmentation, and increase professional staff complements. Simultaneously, local governments should institutionalize specialized, child-sensitive training for law enforcement, judicial workers, and educators that focuses heavily on child psychology and restorative practices. Finally, expanding empirical research through longitudinal tracking studies will prove vital to monitoring the specific psychological impacts and recidivism outcomes of early legal criminalization on long-term youth development.

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DECLARATION ON THE USE OF AI TOOLS

The researchers hereby declare that the completion of this research was supported by the use of artificial intelligence tools, specifically Grammarly. Grammarly was utilized to enhance the clarity, coherence, and grammatical accuracy of the written content throughout the manuscript. Its assistance was limited to language refinement and did not influence the originality, analysis, or intellectual contributions of the study.

All AI-assisted edits were carefully reviewed and approved to ensure alignment with the research objectives and academic standards. The use of Grammarly was conducted ethically and in accordance with institutional guidelines, serving solely as a supplementary aid to improve the quality of presentation.

This declaration is made in the spirit of transparency and academic integrity.

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