

Stigma After Labelling: Educational and Social Reintegration of Juvenile Delinquents in Malaysia

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Abstract: Stigma towards juvenile delinquents is a social issue with the potential to influence processes of rehabilitation and reintegration after an adolescent has been identified or labelled through involvement in delinquent behaviour. Although previous studies in Malaysia have extensively discussed factors contributing to delinquency, the education of juvenile offenders, and rehabilitation processes, limited attention has been given to how post-labelling stigma affects educational and social reintegration. This conceptual paper analyses the forms and mechanisms of stigma, explains how stigma operates across individual, family, school, community, and institutional levels, and examines its implications for educational and social reintegration. Drawing on a narrative literature review and thematic synthesis, the paper integrates stigma and labelling perspectives, the social ecological approach, and the restorative justice paradigm. The synthesis indicates that stigma may operate through labelling, stereotyping, social separation, status loss, and discrimination, potentially creating barriers to school re-entry, social acceptance, psychosocial well-being, and access to social opportunities. Direct evidence in the Malaysian context, however, remains limited. The principal contribution of this paper is an integrative framework that conceptualises post-labelling stigma as a social mechanism that may influence educational and social reintegration and provides a basis for empirical research and intervention development in Malaysia.

Keywords: stigma, juvenile delinquents, labelling, educational reintegration, social reintegration, restorative justice

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Issue

Public stigma refers to processes of negative labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination directed towards individuals or groups perceived to deviate from social norms. In the classical literature, Goffman emphasised how stigma becomes attached to an individual's identity and changes the way that person is evaluated and treated by society. In the Malaysian context, research on stigma towards former prisoners and individuals with mental health problems suggests that stigma functions as a “social barrier” that constrains reintegration, community participation, and access to economic opportunities.

Delinquent behaviour is commonly defined as antisocial misconduct among adolescents or juveniles that violates social norms and/or the law, encompassing physical, verbal, sexual, and antisocial dimensions (Nordin & Selamat, 2018). Within juvenile rehabilitation institutions, research indicates that commonly observed forms of delinquency include drug abuse, theft, fighting, and sexual misconduct, with wide-ranging implications for education, family relationships, and future socioeconomic prospects (Azizan et al., 2022; Abd Majid, 2025).

When stigma and delinquency intersect, adolescents face not only the direct consequences of misconduct but also the burden of negative labelling, which may undermine opportunities for rehabilitation and social reintegration. Stigma may also extend to families and surrounding communities through what is known as courtesy stigma, making it considerably more difficult for adolescents to return to school, enter the labour market, or participate in the community (Jasni et al., 2019).

1.2 Current Educational Issues and Research Gap

Within the context of education and juvenile justice in Malaysia, adolescent delinquent behaviour has been widely discussed in relation to contributing factors, forms of misconduct, family and peer influences, schooling experiences, and rehabilitation processes. Previous studies indicate that adolescents involved in delinquent behaviour often experience disrupted educational trajectories, including school dropout, suspension,

social isolation, and difficulty returning to formal education. This suggests that the challenges faced by juvenile delinquents do not end with the misconduct itself but also encompass experiences that arise after they become known or labelled as problematic adolescents.

Although the causes and patterns of delinquent behaviour have received attention in previous research, stigma arising after the labelling process has yet to be comprehensively explored, particularly in relation to the educational and social reintegration of adolescents in Malaysia. Adolescents labelled as “naughty children”, “juvenile offenders”, or “problematic” may encounter stereotyping, rejection, social separation, and discrimination from various parties, including schools, peers, communities, and institutions. Such social reactions may affect their opportunities to return to school, continue their education, build positive social relationships, and meaningfully re-engage with the community.

In addition, part of the local literature on stigma and social reintegration has focused predominantly on adult former prisoners, while stigma among young people has more often been discussed in the context of mental health. Although these studies provide important insights into mechanisms of labelling, discrimination, social exclusion, and difficulties in reintegration, findings from these populations cannot be assumed to directly represent the experiences of juvenile delinquents. Adolescents are at a different stage of identity development, education, and socialisation from adults and therefore require more specific examination of how stigma shapes their educational and social trajectories.

Accordingly, a gap remains in the literature concerning the availability of a framework that systematically links labelling and stigma processes with the educational and social reintegration experiences of juvenile delinquents in the Malaysian context. The relationships between labelling, stereotyping, social separation, and discrimination, on the one hand, and educational disengagement, psychosocial well-being, community acceptance, social opportunities, and the risk of repeated offending, on the other, are still frequently discussed in isolation. The absence of an approach that integrates these dimensions limits understanding of how stigma may function as a social mechanism that obstructs adolescent rehabilitation and reintegration.

To address this gap, this conceptual paper integrates stigma and labelling perspectives, the social ecological approach, and the restorative justice paradigm to develop a conceptual framework explaining how post-labelling stigma may influence the educational and social reintegration of juvenile delinquents. This integration allows stigma to be analysed not merely as a negative perception of an individual but as a process operating across multiple social levels, including the individual, family, school, community, and institutional structures. Through this framework, the paper seeks to explain the mechanisms linking stigma to barriers to rehabilitation while identifying areas for educational and community interventions that can support more inclusive and rehabilitation-oriented adolescent reintegration.

1.3 Objectives of the Conceptual Paper

Based on the identified gap, this conceptual paper is guided by the following objectives:

1. To describe the forms and mechanisms of public stigma towards juvenile delinquents in the Malaysian context, particularly through processes of labelling, stereotyping, social separation, and discrimination.
2. To analyse how stigma towards juvenile delinquents operates across multiple social levels, including the individual, family, school, community, and institutions.
3. To explain the implications of stigma for the educational and social reintegration of juvenile delinquents, particularly in terms of educational disengagement, psychosocial well-being, social acceptance, social mobility, and the risk of recidivism.
4. To develop a conceptual framework integrating stigma and labelling perspectives, the social ecological approach, and the restorative justice paradigm, while proposing education- and community-based intervention strategies to reduce stigma and support adolescent rehabilitation and reintegration.

1.4 Research Questions

In line with these objectives, the conceptual paper is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the main forms and mechanisms of public stigma towards juvenile delinquents in the Malaysian context?
2. How does stigma towards juvenile delinquents operate across multiple social levels, including the individual, family, school, community, and institutions?
3. What are the implications of stigma for the educational and social reintegration of juvenile delinquents, particularly in terms of educational disengagement, psychosocial well-being, social acceptance, social mobility, and the risk of recidivism?
4. How can stigma and labelling perspectives, the social ecological approach, and the restorative justice paradigm be integrated into a conceptual framework to explain mechanisms of stigma and support educational and community interventions for adolescent rehabilitation and reintegration?

2. Methodology of the Conceptual Paper

2.1 Conceptual Paper Design

This paper adopts a conceptual paper design based on a narrative literature review. This approach is appropriate when the purpose of the paper is not to generate new primary data but to synthesise knowledge, identify conceptual gaps, and establish relationships among concepts (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019; Jaakkola, 2020).

Specifically, this design is used to gather and synthesise studies on stigma, labelling, adolescent delinquency, education, juvenile rehabilitation, and social reintegration; analyse the relationship between post-labelling stigma and reintegration experiences; develop an integrative conceptual framework; and propose educational and community interventions based on gaps in the literature.

Using a literature review as a methodology enables researchers to integrate findings from studies with different disciplinary backgrounds, concepts, and approaches, thereby developing a more comprehensive understanding of a complex issue (Snyder, 2019). In the context of this paper, the literature on juvenile delinquents, stigma, and juvenile rehabilitation is distributed across several fields, including sociology, criminology, education, psychology, and social policy. A conceptual and narrative approach therefore enables evidence from these disciplines to be analysed in an integrated manner to explain how stigma operates following labelling and how it may influence the educational and social reintegration of adolescents.

A robust conceptual paper does more than summarise previous studies; it must reorganise relationships among concepts, clarify mechanisms that have not been adequately explained, and generate a synthesis or framework that adds value to the existing literature (Jaakkola, 2020). Consistent with this approach, this paper integrates stigma and labelling perspectives, the social ecological approach, and the restorative justice paradigm to construct a framework explaining the relationships among labelling processes, experiences of stigma, barriers to reintegration, and educational and social outcomes among juvenile delinquents.

Although the primary focus of this paper is the Malaysian context, regional and international literature is also selectively referenced to support conceptual explanations, enable comparison, and strengthen the argument. A narrative review allows flexible use of different types of evidence and sources; however, the selection and interpretation of the literature must be transparent and based on its relevance to the issues under discussion (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019). Accordingly, evidence from different contexts or populations is not treated as directly representative of the experiences of juvenile delinquents in Malaysia, but rather as conceptual support interpreted cautiously in light of contextual relevance.

2.2 Literature Review Procedures

The literature review was conducted narratively, thematically, and in stages to identify, evaluate, and synthesise sources related to stigma towards juvenile delinquents, educational and social reintegration, and juvenile rehabilitation. A narrative approach is appropriate for literature spanning multiple disciplines, although the processes of searching, appraisal, and synthesis must still be described transparently (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

The search focused on juvenile delinquents, stigma and labelling, educational and social reintegration, juvenile rehabilitation, educational disengagement, psychosocial well-being, and recidivism. Related terms in Malay and English were also used, including juvenile delinquency, juvenile offenders, child offenders, labelling, social stigma, social exclusion, educational reintegration, social reintegration, juvenile rehabilitation, and recidivism.

In addition to journal articles, relevant non-journal sources were considered, including government agency reports, policy documents, reports from non-governmental organisations, and publications by international bodies concerning children's rights, juvenile justice, education, and rehabilitation. The use of different forms of sources is consistent with the nature of narrative reviews, which may integrate empirical and conceptual evidence as well as policy documents when these sources are relevant to the question under examination (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green et al., 2006). Classical sources, particularly foundational works on stigma and labelling, were also retained because they provide the theoretical basis for constructing the conceptual framework despite having been published before the main search period.

Exclusion criteria included studies focusing solely on adult crime without a clear connection to adolescents, studies that were highly technical and unrelated to stigma, education, rehabilitation, or reintegration, and opinion-based writings unsupported by empirical evidence or a strong theoretical foundation. However, sources involving adult populations or other fields, such as mental health stigma, could be used on a limited basis as conceptual support when the stigma mechanisms discussed had theoretical relevance to the context of juvenile delinquency. Such sources were not treated as direct evidence of the experiences of juvenile delinquents in Malaysia but were used to support explanations of conceptually relevant mechanisms.

Sources identified through the initial search were subsequently screened on the basis of their titles, abstracts, and relevance to the focus of the paper. Sources considered relevant were then read in full to examine study objectives, design and methodology, definitions of key concepts, findings, implications, and proposed interventions. This process is consistent with the principle that a high-quality literature review should involve not only the identification of sources but also an assessment of their relevance, quality, and contribution to the question being examined (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019).

The literature was then analysed thematically through repeated reading, identification of patterns of meaning, and classification of content into themes aligned with the objectives of the paper. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within a dataset or textual corpus and is appropriate when researchers seek to organise content into conceptually meaningful themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this paper, the main themes identified included:

The thematic analysis yielded four main themes: (i) forms and mechanisms of stigma; (ii) the social levels at which stigma operates; (iii) implications for educational and social reintegration; and (iv) rehabilitation and reintegration interventions. These themes were subsequently used to construct the conceptual framework and organise the literature synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Jaakkola, 2020).

2.3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this paper combines three complementary foundations: stigma and labelling perspectives, the social ecological approach, and the restorative justice paradigm. These three foundations are used to explain how stigma develops following labelling, how stigma operates across multiple social levels, and how its effects on the educational and social reintegration of juvenile delinquents may be addressed through rehabilitative approaches.

(a) Stigma and Labelling Perspectives

Stigma and labelling perspectives provide the primary foundation for explaining how social reactions to delinquent behaviour can shape adolescents' identities and social experiences. Adolescents who have previously engaged in misconduct may be associated with negative labels such as "naughty child", "juvenile offender", or "problem child". Such labels do not merely reflect public perceptions; they may develop into processes of stereotyping, social separation, status loss, and discrimination.

In the context of juvenile delinquency, labelling and stigma may occur through multiple channels, including everyday interactions with family members, teachers, peers, communities, and authorities; media representations that foreground an adolescent's identity through past offences or behaviour; and institutional practices or procedures within education, welfare, and juvenile justice systems.

When negative labels are repeatedly applied, adolescents may face expectations of rejection, social exclusion, and difficulty regaining acceptance within educational and community settings. Under certain circumstances, stigma may also be internalised, affecting self-esteem, self-identity, and expectations for the future. This perspective is therefore used to explain how post-labelling stigma may become a social mechanism that obstructs adolescents' re-engagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

(b) Social Ecological Approach

The social ecological approach is used to extend the analysis of stigma from the individual level to multiple interacting layers of the social environment. Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework, adolescents' experiences are not formed in isolation but are influenced by relationships between the individual and the family, school, community, institutions, and broader social structures.

This approach holds that adolescents' experiences are not formed in isolation but are influenced by relationships between the individual and the family, school, community, institutions, and broader social structures.

Within this framework, experiences of stigma are analysed across four levels: the microsystem, encompassing family, peers, teachers, and school; the mesosystem, linking home, school, and agencies; the exosystem, including social services, media, and educational or employment opportunities; and the macrosystem, encompassing cultural norms, social policies, laws, and discourses surrounding misconduct, punishment, and rehabilitation.

This approach allows stigma to be understood not merely as an individual's negative attitude but as a phenomenon that can be produced and sustained through interactions among multiple social systems. For example, school-based labelling, community rejection, negative media representations, and a lack of pathways back into education may operate cumulatively to make reintegration more difficult. The social ecological approach therefore also provides a basis for developing multilevel interventions involving schools, families, communities, and institutions.

(c) Restorative Justice Paradigm

The restorative justice paradigm is used as a rehabilitative foundation for examining how stigma and social exclusion may be reduced after adolescents become involved in delinquent behaviour. Unlike approaches that focus solely on punishment, restorative justice emphasises responsibility, the restoration of relationships, the repair of harm, and the reintegration of individuals into the community.

In the context of this paper, restorative justice emphasises restoring relationships among adolescents, victims, families, and communities; meaningful accountability for the consequences of misconduct; and sustained support to help adolescents return positively to education and community life.

From this perspective, stigma is viewed as an important barrier to rehabilitation because persistent labelling and rejection may restrict adolescents' opportunities to rebuild a positive social identity. The restorative approach is therefore used as a basis for proposing interventions that emphasise reacceptance, educational support, family involvement, social guidance, and community participation.

Integration of the Conceptual Framework

Overall, the three foundations serve distinct yet complementary functions. Stigma and labelling perspectives explain how negative identities and discrimination develop after an adolescent is labelled as delinquent. The social ecological approach explains how stigma operates and is reinforced across multiple social levels. The restorative justice paradigm, in turn, provides a rehabilitative foundation for explaining how the effects of stigma may be reduced through processes of acceptance, support, and reintegration.

Based on this integration, the paper conceptualises stigma as an intervening social mechanism linking the labelling process with experiences of rejection, exclusion, and institutional barriers. This mechanism may subsequently influence adolescents' educational and social reintegration, including opportunities to return to school, psychosocial well-being, community acceptance, social mobility, and the risk of recidivism. At the same time, interventions grounded in education, family, community, and restorative justice are viewed as supportive mechanisms with the potential to reduce the effects of stigma and strengthen adolescents' rehabilitation and reintegration.

2.4 Limitations of the Conceptual Paper

As a conceptual paper based on a narrative literature review, this paper has several limitations that must be acknowledged to ensure that the scope and interpretation of the arguments presented are accurately understood. Conceptual articles rely on the integration of existing theories, concepts, and evidence to develop new explanations rather than on the collection of primary data (Jaakkola, 2020).

First, the absence of primary data. This paper does not involve data collection through interviews, questionnaires, observations, or other field methods. The proposed framework is therefore not intended to directly represent the full range of experiences of juvenile delinquents in Malaysia. The relationships among labelling, stigma, and educational and social reintegration described here constitute a conceptual synthesis of previous literature and have not been empirically tested in this paper. Accordingly, these relationships should not be interpreted as established causal relationships.

Second, the narrative nature of the literature review. This review adopts a narrative and thematic approach rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. Such an approach permits the integration of literature from different fields and research traditions; however, the selection and interpretation of sources also involve researcher judgement. Literature reviews that do not employ fully systematic procedures are at risk of incompleteness and source-selection bias; transparency in the processes of searching, selecting, and synthesising literature is therefore important for enhancing the credibility of the analysis (Snyder, 2019).

Third, the limited evidence specifically concerning juvenile delinquents in Malaysia. Based on the corpus of literature identified in this review, studies that directly connect post-labelling stigma with the educational and social reintegration of juvenile delinquents in Malaysia remain limited. Consequently, part of the analysis also draws on studies of related populations, such as young offenders, former prisoners, and stigma literature from other fields, as conceptual support. Findings from these populations are not treated as direct evidence of the experiences of juvenile delinquents but are used cautiously to help explain theoretically relevant mechanisms of labelling, exclusion, and discrimination.

Fourth, limitations relating to source access and language. Some internal agency reports, administrative data, unpublished studies, and grey literature may not be fully accessible. This review also relies primarily on sources in Malay and English. Relevant studies in other languages or sources not indexed in major databases may therefore be absent from this synthesis.

Despite these limitations, the paper offers a conceptual contribution through the integration of stigma and labelling perspectives, the social ecological approach, and the restorative justice paradigm. The framework developed can be tested in future empirical studies, particularly longitudinal and multi-informant designs

examining stigma, education, social acceptance, psychosocial well-being, and the risk of recidivism in the Malaysian context.

3.

3.1 Forms and Mechanisms of Stigma towards Juvenile Delinquents

The literature review indicates that stigma towards juvenile delinquents is not produced through a single process but develops through a sequence of social reactions after an adolescent is identified, labelled, or associated with behaviour considered deviant. In Link and Phelan's (2001) framework, stigma occurs when labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur within a context of power relations. This framework is important for understanding the experiences of juvenile delinquents because labels applied following involvement in misconduct may affect not only how society perceives them but also their opportunities to be accepted back into education, family life, and the community (Link & Phelan, 2001).

(a) Labelling and the Formation of Stereotypes

Labelling is an initial mechanism in the stigma process. When adolescents become known through categories such as "juvenile offender", "naughty child", or "problematic adolescent", their social identities may be interpreted on the basis of past offences or behaviour rather than their overall identity and capacity for change. Goffman (1963) explains that stigma can cause a particular attribute to become dominant in how an individual is evaluated by society, such that other dimensions of social identity receive less attention.

Within Link and Phelan's (2001) framework, social labels become more problematic when they are linked to negative stereotypes. In the context of juvenile delinquency, stereotypes such as being untrustworthy, dangerous, or incapable of change may widen the social distance between adolescents and society. Stigma should therefore not be understood merely as the use of negative terms, but as a social process that can shape societal expectations regarding an adolescent's behaviour and future.

Evidence from the Malaysian context also indicates that negative public perceptions can constitute a barrier to juvenile resocialisation. In their study of juvenile resocialisation processes in Malaysian rehabilitation institutions, Abu Bakar et al. (2020) identified negative public perceptions as one factor that may disrupt resocialisation, alongside individual, family, and institutional factors. This finding provides local support for the importance of social acceptance in rehabilitation, although the study did not specifically test the full stigma mechanism described in Link and Phelan's framework.

(b) Social Separation and Status Loss

Once labelling and stereotyping have developed, stigma may progress into social separation between labelled individuals and groups regarded as "normal". Link and Phelan (2001) describe this separation as the construction of social categories of "us" and "them", which may subsequently lead to status loss and reduced social opportunities.

For juvenile delinquents, such separation may occur when a history of misconduct or involvement with the justice system becomes the basis for social rejection or exclusion from particular opportunities. This is especially significant during adolescence because schools, peers, families, and communities are central contexts for identity formation and social relationships. Loss of acceptance within these contexts may therefore disrupt the process of returning to conventional social life.

The longitudinal study by Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera (2006) of urban adolescents found that formal labelling through juvenile justice intervention was associated with increased involvement in deviant peer networks, which in turn was associated with subsequent increases in delinquency. This finding supports the mechanism proposed by labelling theory: formal social reactions may alter an adolescent's social networks and indirectly strengthen attachment to deviant groups (Bernburg et al., 2006). However, the finding must be interpreted within the context of the original study and cannot automatically be assumed to represent all juvenile delinquents in Malaysia.

(c) Discrimination and Institutional Barriers

Stigma may also operate through discrimination and institutional barriers. Link and Phelan (2001) emphasise that stigma has implications for life chances when labelled individuals experience status loss or unequal treatment in domains such as education, employment, health, and social participation. In the context of juvenile delinquency, this mechanism is important because reintegration requires renewed access to conventional institutions such as schools, skills training, and the community.

A Malaysian study by Mohd Azam et al. (2021) on academic and vocational training for child offenders undergoing a multisystemic therapy-based rehabilitation order found that the study participants had dropped out of school and did not receive adequate academic education or vocational training during the community-based

rehabilitation process. The study did not directly examine stigma, but it demonstrates that access to education is an important issue in the rehabilitation and reintegration of young offenders in Malaysia. When considered alongside the stigma literature, limited access to educational institutions can therefore be viewed as an important area for examining how institutional barriers shape reintegration.

In the broader context, stigma associated with a criminal record has also been linked to difficulties in regaining social acceptance and economic opportunities among adult former offenders. Although this evidence cannot be directly transferred to adolescents, it suggests that a history of labelling may have implications for social opportunities after an individual leaves the justice system. Adolescent-specific research is therefore required to determine the extent to which similar mechanisms operate within their educational and social environments.

(d) Formal Labelling, Changes in Social Networks, and the Risk of Recurrent Delinquency

One important mechanism discussed in labelling theory is the possibility that social responses to misconduct may produce unintended consequences. Bernburg et al. (2006) provide longitudinal evidence that formal juvenile justice intervention may be associated with increased involvement in deviant peer groups, which is subsequently associated with further delinquency. This finding does not imply that labelling necessarily causes recidivism in all circumstances; rather, it indicates a plausible social pathway linking formal reactions, changes in social networks, and subsequent behaviour.

Evidence from adult populations also reveals a broadly similar pattern. Chiricos et al. (2007), for example, found that individuals who received the formal label of a conviction had a higher probability of recidivism than individuals whose cases did not result in a formal conviction label within the context of their study. Although the study population and context differ from those of juvenile delinquents in Malaysia, the finding reinforces the importance of examining the social consequences of formal labelling rather than focusing solely on the original behaviour that prompted justice-system intervention.

Overall, the literature synthesis suggests that stigma towards juvenile delinquents can be understood as a staged process moving from labelling to stereotyping, social separation, status loss, and discrimination. These processes may operate through interpersonal relationships, social networks, and institutional practices and may affect adolescents' opportunities to be accepted back into education and the community. In Malaysia, direct evidence concerning this full mechanism remains limited; however, studies on juvenile resocialisation and educational access indicate that public acceptance and access to education are important elements of rehabilitation. The need to understand stigma as a mechanism influencing educational and social reintegration therefore provides the basis for the analysis in the following section.

3.2 Stigma across Social Levels

Stigma towards juvenile delinquents does not operate solely at the individual level but is produced and sustained through interactions among individuals, families, schools, communities, and institutions. This is consistent with Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualisation, which emphasises that stigma involves labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination within a context of power relations. When combined with a social ecological approach, stigma can be understood as a layered and mutually reinforcing process.

(a) Individual and Interpersonal Levels

At the individual level, being negatively labelled may influence how adolescents anticipate acceptance or rejection by others. Labels associated with identities such as "offender", "problematic", or "at risk" may shape social expectations of adolescents and influence their interactions with teachers, peers, and community members. Link and Phelan (2001) show that stigma becomes significant when labels are linked to negative stereotypes and subsequently produce separation and status loss.

The mental health stigma literature also indicates that social stereotypes may be internalised by individuals, thereby influencing self-evaluation and willingness to seek help (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). However, because this evidence comes from mental health populations, the mechanism is used here as conceptual support rather than as direct evidence concerning juvenile delinquents. Studies specifically involving adolescents engaged with the justice system are still needed to determine the extent to which stigma internalisation occurs within this population.

(b) Family Level

The effects of stigma may also extend to family members through the phenomenon known as courtesy stigma, whereby a person experiences stigma because of a close relationship with someone who has been stigmatised (Goffman, 1963). Research on families of incarcerated individuals indicates that family stigma may

be multidimensional and cumulative, including social stereotyping, marginalisation, and assumptions that the family shares responsibility for the behaviour of the individual involved with the justice system (Kotova, 2020).

Although much of this evidence concerns families of incarcerated adults, it provides a conceptual basis for examining the possibility that families of juvenile delinquents may experience similar social pressures. This is especially important in adolescence because families are a primary source of emotional support, supervision, and reintegration. If families themselves experience stigma and exclusion, their capacity to support adolescents' rehabilitation may become more constrained.

(c) School Level

Schools constitute one of the most critical settings in the reintegration of adolescents who have been involved with the justice system. The systematic review by Kubek et al. (2020) shows that adolescents returning to school after justice-system involvement face multiple school-level barriers, including stigma, increased surveillance, attitudes and biases among school personnel, and weak coordination between institutions. These barriers may make educational re-engagement more difficult even when adolescents wish to return to learning.

In the Malaysian context, Mohd Azam et al. (2021) found that all child offenders involved in their study had dropped out of school and did not receive adequate academic education or vocational training during the community-based rehabilitation programme. The study did not directly measure stigma; nevertheless, the findings indicate that re-access to education is an important issue in the rehabilitation and reintegration of young offenders in Malaysia.

Schools may therefore function either as settings that reinforce stigma or as protective institutions that provide second chances. The difference depends on how schools manage re-entry, discipline, learning support, and relationships between adolescents and school personnel.

(d) Community and Institutional Levels

At the community and institutional levels, stigma may translate into more structural forms of exclusion when social labels influence access to education, training, employment opportunities, and community participation. Link and Phelan (2001) emphasise that stigma has implications for the distribution of life chances when status loss and discrimination occur within conditions of power imbalance.

Research on the reintegration of former prisoners in Malaysia indicates that stigma, inadequate family and community support, and difficulty obtaining employment are among the challenges encountered during reintegration (Ahmad & Tharshini, 2024). Although this population differs from juvenile delinquents, the findings suggest that social acceptance and access to conventional institutions are important elements of reintegration. Evidence from adult populations is therefore used only in a limited way in this paper to help identify mechanisms that should be specifically tested in adolescent contexts.

Overall, analysis across social levels indicates that stigma is not confined to individual perceptions. Rather, it may extend from interpersonal interactions to school practices, family relationships, community acceptance, and institutional structures. This pattern supports the need to understand the reintegration of juvenile delinquents through an ecological approach that engages multiple systems simultaneously.

3.3 Implications of Stigma for Educational and Social Reintegration

The literature synthesis indicates that the implications of stigma for juvenile delinquents are most appropriately analysed in terms of its capacity to influence the reintegration process. Based on the available evidence, five main domains are identified: educational reintegration, psychosocial well-being, social acceptance, social mobility, and the risk of recurrent delinquent behaviour.

(a) Educational Reintegration

Educational reintegration is a major challenge for adolescents who have been involved with the justice system. Kubek et al. (2020) identify stigma, attitudes among school personnel, increased surveillance, and weak inter-institutional coordination as barriers that may disrupt school re-entry.

These findings indicate that formal access to a school does not necessarily guarantee reintegration if adolescents continue to be viewed primarily through the identity of their past offences.

Malaysian evidence further underscores the importance of this issue. Mohd Azam et al. (2021) report that the child offenders in their study had dropped out of school and did not receive adequate academic support or vocational training during community-based rehabilitation. In contrast, international evidence indicates that intensive interventions for justice-involved adolescents may produce more positive educational outcomes. Cuellar and Dave (2016), for example, found that certain forms of intensive mental health intervention were associated with lower dropout rates and increased completion of secondary education.

This synthesis indicates that education is not merely an outcome of rehabilitation; it may also function as a protective mechanism within the reintegration process.

(b) Psychosocial Well-Being

Stigma may influence psychosocial well-being through negative stereotyping, anticipated rejection, and social exclusion. Within the stigma literature, internalisation of stereotypes may affect how individuals evaluate themselves and reduce their willingness to seek help or pursue particular social opportunities (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Link & Phelan, 2001).

However, direct evidence linking stigma to the psychosocial well-being of juvenile delinquents in Malaysia remains limited. This paper therefore does not treat relationships between stigma and depression, anxiety, or specific psychological problems as established for this population. Instead, the stigma literature provides a conceptual basis for proposing that self-esteem, a sense of acceptance, future expectations, and willingness to seek support should be empirically examined in studies of juvenile delinquents.

(c) Social Acceptance and Family Support

Social reintegration requires adolescents to re-establish relationships with family members, peers, schools, and conventional communities. When negative labels continue to dominate an individual's social identity, opportunities to rebuild these relationships may become more difficult. Bernburg et al. (2006) found that formal juvenile justice intervention was associated with greater involvement in deviant peer networks, which in turn was associated with subsequent delinquency.

These findings highlight the importance of social networks following involvement with the justice system. If conventional institutions and communities fail to provide spaces of acceptance, alternative networks that affirm deviant identities may become more attractive. Social acceptance is therefore not merely a moral issue or a matter of public perception; it may constitute an important component of the reintegration trajectory.

(d) Social Mobility and Life Opportunities

Link and Phelan (2001) emphasise that stigma may influence life chances through status loss and discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, health, and social participation. In adolescence, these implications must be understood developmentally because educational disruption at an early stage may subsequently affect access to training, qualifications, and employment opportunities.

Research on former prisoners in Malaysia indicates that low educational attainment, limited skills, stigma, and difficulties obtaining employment are among the challenges in the reintegration process (Ahmad & Tharshini, 2024). Although these findings cannot be directly generalised to adolescents, they reinforce the need to view education, skills training, and social acceptance as interconnected components in the development of social mobility following justice-system involvement.

(e) Risk of Recurrent Delinquency

The relationship between stigma and recurrent delinquency must be described cautiously. The evidence does not support the claim that stigma automatically causes recidivism. However, there is evidence that formal labelling may produce changes in social networks that increase the risk of subsequent delinquent behaviour. Bernburg et al. (2006) found that involvement in deviant peer groups constituted one mechanism linking juvenile justice intervention with subsequent delinquency.

These findings indicate that stigma and labelling should be understood as part of a broader network of social mechanisms rather than as a single cause of recidivism. Access to education, family relationships, community acceptance, peer networks, and social opportunities also shape post-rehabilitation trajectories.

3.4 Summary of the Literature Synthesis

Based on the literature synthesis, stigma towards juvenile delinquents can be summarised through four main components.

Component	Main Synthesis
Stigma mechanisms	Labelling, stereotyping, social separation, status loss, and discrimination
Social levels	Individual, family, school, community, and institutions
Implications for reintegration	Barriers to returning to education, psychosocial distress, weak social acceptance, limited social opportunities, and the risk of re-engagement with deviant networks
Protective/rehabilitative mechanisms	Educational support, family involvement, community acceptance, inter-institutional coordination, and restorative justice approaches

Table 1: Summary of the literature synthesis on stigma and the reintegration of juvenile delinquents

This synthesis indicates that the central issue is not merely whether an adolescent has previously engaged in delinquent behaviour, but how social reactions following labelling shape opportunities to return to conventional institutions and social relationships. Stigma should therefore be analysed as a mechanism that may influence reintegration trajectories rather than merely as a negative public perception.

4. Discussion: Stigma and the Reintegration of Juvenile Delinquents

4.1 Stigma as a Barrier to Educational Reintegration

The literature synthesis indicates that education is one of the principal domains in which stigma and reintegration intersect. Following involvement with the justice system, adolescents must not only deal with the consequences of misconduct or a period of rehabilitation but must also regain access to and acceptance within the education system. The review by Kubek et al. (2020) indicates that stigma, attitudes among school personnel, and heightened surveillance can hinder school re-entry. In the Malaysian context, Mohd Azam et al. (2021) likewise demonstrate weaknesses in access to education and vocational training among child offenders undergoing community-based rehabilitation.

From stigma and labelling perspectives, this suggests that reintegration problems do not reside solely within the individual but also in how institutions respond to adolescents' identities after labelling. When a history of misconduct becomes the dominant identity, adolescents may lose opportunities to be evaluated on the basis of their current development, change, and potential.

From a restorative justice perspective, educational reintegration needs to move from a logic of punishment towards a logic of accountability and reacceptance. This does not mean disregarding misconduct; rather, it means ensuring that accountability for wrongdoing does not become prolonged social exclusion. Schools can thereby function as spaces for rebuilding identity and social relationships rather than as extensions of punishment.

4.2 Stigma and Psychosocial Well-Being

The effects of stigma on psychosocial well-being need to be understood through the interaction between social evaluation and self-identity. Link and Phelan (2001) show that labelling becomes stigma when it is linked to stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. When such experiences recur, adolescents may come to anticipate rejection in social and institutional relationships.

The mental health stigma literature indicates that internalised stereotypes may affect self-esteem and willingness to seek help (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). However, because this literature is not specific to juvenile delinquents, it is not used in this paper as evidence that the same psychological mechanisms necessarily occur in this population. Instead, it provides a theoretical basis for empirical research to assess whether experiences of labelling among juvenile delinquents influence their sense of belonging, future expectations, self-identity, and willingness to seek support.

4.3 Stigma, Social Networks, and the Risk of Recurrent Delinquency

One important contribution of labelling theory is its explanation that social reactions to misconduct may generate unintended consequences. Bernburg et al. (2006) provide longitudinal evidence that formal juvenile justice intervention is associated with subsequent involvement in deviant peer networks and, through this mechanism, with increased subsequent delinquency.

This finding is important because it indicates that the relationship between labelling and subsequent behaviour does not necessarily operate solely through changes in internal identity. It may also occur through changes in opportunity structures and social networks. Adolescents who lose acceptance from schools or conventional groups may find their range of available social networks increasingly restricted.

Within the framework of this paper, recidivism is not regarded as a direct outcome of stigma. Rather, stigma is conceptualised as one social mechanism that may disrupt reintegration by limiting access to education, prosocial relationships, and community acceptance. When these protective factors are weak, the risk of returning to deviant networks or behaviours may increase.

The restorative justice paradigm offers an alternative pathway by emphasising accountability alongside reacceptance. In juvenile restorative justice models, the involvement of families, victims, and communities is important not only for holding adolescents accountable but also for creating opportunities for reintegration after responsibility for the offence has been addressed.

4.4 Family, Community, and Rebuilding Social Acceptance

Families play an important role in reintegration because they constitute the social system closest to adolescents. However, stigma does not necessarily stop with the labelled individual. The concept of courtesy stigma explains how individuals who have close relationships with a stigmatised person may themselves be

subject to negative social evaluation (Goffman, 1963). Kotova (2020) shows that families of incarcerated individuals may experience cumulative stigma shaped by stereotyping, marginalisation, and the broader social context.

This evidence derives primarily from families of incarcerated adults and therefore cannot be assumed to directly represent families of juvenile delinquents. Nevertheless, it raises an important issue for the juvenile context: if families are also stigmatised or blamed, adolescents' primary support systems may come under strain precisely when they are most needed during rehabilitation.

The social ecological approach indicates that a family's capacity to support an adolescent is influenced by its relationships with schools, welfare agencies, the justice system, and the community. The restorative justice paradigm, meanwhile, emphasises repairing harm, accountability, and community participation. In the context of juvenile delinquency, these two perspectives indicate that rehabilitation requires not only adolescents' willingness to change but also families, schools, and communities that provide genuine opportunities for reacceptance.

Overall, this discussion supports the conceptual framework in which the labelling process may develop into experiences of stigma that subsequently generate social rejection, exclusion, and institutional barriers. These conditions may adversely affect the educational and social reintegration of juvenile delinquents. The social ecological perspective indicates that these mechanisms do not operate at a single level but across multiple layers of the environment involving individuals, families, schools, communities, and institutions. At the same time, the restorative justice paradigm provides a foundation for developing responses that balance accountability for misconduct with opportunities for reacceptance and rehabilitation. The relationships proposed in this framework are derived from a conceptual synthesis of the existing literature and still require empirical testing in the context of juvenile delinquents in Malaysia.

5. Implications and Recommendations for Implementation

Based on the literature synthesis and the conceptual framework developed, efforts to address stigma towards juvenile delinquents are insufficient if they focus only on changing individual behaviour. Interventions must also address the social and institutional environments that shape adolescents' reacceptance following labelling. Accordingly, implementation recommendations are proposed at three main levels: school, family and community, and policy and structure. These recommendations are based on the principle that rehabilitation should balance accountability for misconduct with genuine opportunities for educational and social reintegration.

5.1 School-Level Interventions

(a) Reintegration and School Re-entry Protocols

Schools are key institutions in the reintegration process following involvement with the justice system or rehabilitation programmes. The review by Kubek et al. (2020) indicates that school re-entry may be obstructed by stigma, surveillance, biases among school personnel, weak inter-agency communication, and inadequate transition support. Schools are therefore encouraged to establish reintegration protocols encompassing needs assessment, transition planning, coordination with families and rehabilitation agencies, and monitoring of educational progress.

(b) Developing the Competence of Teachers and School Personnel

Teachers and other school personnel shape reintegration experiences through everyday interactions. Professional development should include an understanding of stigma, non-judgemental communication, rehabilitation-oriented behaviour management, and restorative justice principles. The aim is not to remove accountability for misconduct but to ensure that a history of misconduct is not continually used as a basis for exclusion, excessive surveillance, or restriction of educational opportunities.

(c) Strengthening School Engagement and Educational Continuity

Educational continuity and renewed engagement in school life should be prioritised. Wilson and Lipsey (2024) identify school engagement as one of the mechanisms of change associated with reductions in delinquency. In the Malaysian context, Mohd Azam et al. (2021) identify gaps in academic support and vocational training within community-based rehabilitation. Formal, alternative, or vocational educational pathways should therefore form part of rehabilitation.

5.2 Family- and Community-Level Interventions

(a) Strengthening Family Functioning and Support

Families should be actively involved because they are the support system closest to adolescents. Wilson and Lipsey (2024) identify improved family functioning as a mechanism associated with reductions in delinquency. Interventions may focus on communication, emotional support, conflict resolution, and appropriate supervision, while also helping families address negative social judgements or courtesy stigma when these occur.

(b) Building Communities that Support Reintegration

Communities should provide opportunities for prosocial participation through skills development, community service, non-formal education, and social support without publicly labelling adolescents. The meta-analysis by Wilson et al. (2017) indicates that juvenile restorative justice programmes may offer benefits compared with traditional court processing, although effect sizes were smaller in studies employing more rigorous methodological designs.

(c) Developing Social Narratives that Reduce Stigma

Social narratives that permanently equate adolescents with their past offences may sustain stereotypes and social separation. Communication campaigns may emphasise adolescent development, accountability, and second chances; however, this recommendation should be regarded as a conceptual implication requiring empirical evaluation in the Malaysian context.

5.3 Policy- and Structural-Level Interventions

(a) Strengthening the Restorative Justice Approach

At the policy level, restorative justice may be strengthened as a complement to formal approaches by giving attention to repairing harm, accountability, and family and community involvement. Meta-analytic evidence indicates potential benefits, while also cautioning that effectiveness depends on programme design and implementation quality (Wilson et al., 2017).

(b) Aligning Education Policy with Juvenile Rehabilitation

Education and juvenile rehabilitation policies need to be aligned to reduce the gap between the completion of rehabilitation interventions and the process of returning to education. Transition plans may include controlled transfer of academic records, assessment of learning needs, appropriate placement, transition counselling, and monitoring, while safeguarding confidentiality so that information sharing does not result in renewed labelling.

(c) Longitudinal Research and Intervention Evaluation

The local evidence gap calls for longitudinal and multi-informant studies that assess changes in experiences of stigma and reintegration outcomes over time. Intervention evaluations should also measure school engagement, social acceptance, psychosocial well-being, and recurrence of delinquent behaviour.

(d) Integrated and Ethical Monitoring of Reintegration

Integrated monitoring across education, welfare, and rehabilitation services may help identify gaps in support; however, such systems must be developed according to principles of data minimisation, confidentiality, children's rights, and prevention of renewed labelling. Data should serve to support educational continuity and rehabilitation rather than permanently reinforce adolescents' identities as offenders.

Overall, the proposed implementation recommendations emphasise that reducing stigma and strengthening reintegration require a multilevel response. At the school level, priority is given to re-entry processes, school engagement, and educational continuity. At the family and community levels, emphasis is placed on strengthening family functioning, social acceptance, and community participation. At the structural level, policies should support inter-institutional coordination, restorative justice principles, and ethical monitoring. Taken together, these recommendations are consistent with the conceptual framework, which views stigma as a social process that may disrupt reintegration, while ecological support and restorative approaches provide opportunities to rebuild relationships, educational opportunities, and adolescents' social acceptance.

6. Conclusion

Stigma towards juvenile delinquents should be understood not merely as a negative public perception but as a social process that may operate through labelling, stereotyping, social separation, status loss, and discrimination. The literature synthesis in this paper indicates that these processes may influence adolescents' educational and social reintegration through barriers to school re-entry, anticipated rejection, exclusion from prosocial social networks, and restricted access to educational and social opportunities. However, these

relationships must be interpreted cautiously because empirical evidence directly linking stigma with the reintegration experiences of juvenile delinquents in the Malaysian context remains limited.

The principal contribution of this conceptual paper lies in the development of an integrative framework combining stigma and labelling perspectives, the social ecological approach, and the restorative justice paradigm. Through this integration, stigma is conceptualised as a social mechanism linking the labelling process with experiences of rejection, exclusion, and institutional barriers, which may in turn influence educational and social reintegration. The social ecological approach extends the analysis by showing that experiences of stigma do not occur solely at the individual level but are also shaped by families, schools, communities, and institutions. The restorative justice paradigm, meanwhile, provides a basis for developing responses that balance accountability for misconduct with opportunities for reacceptance and rehabilitation.

Overall, this paper emphasises that the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents is insufficient if it is based solely on behavioural control or punishment. Reintegration also requires changes within the social and institutional environments that receive adolescents back into society. The proposed conceptual framework provides a foundation for future empirical research to test how post-labelling stigma influences educational experiences, social acceptance, psychosocial well-being, and the risk of recurrent delinquent behaviour in the Malaysian context.

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