

Original Paper

Research on Practical Dilemmas and Improvement Strategies of Grassroots Social Work Services in Juvenile Crime Prevention

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Abstract

The rapid development of the internet has laid the foundation for the constant updating and iteration of information. Adolescents are in a sensitive period of physical and psychological development, making it difficult to assess them accurately; and they are susceptible to the influence of adverse environmental and cultural factors. Among these, the family environment, school environment and online environment, amongst others, can cumulatively affect adolescents' cognitive development. Consequently, the prevention of juvenile delinquency has become a critical issue in contemporary social development. Grassroots community work in this area has achieved preliminary results in preventive intervention; however, due to the significant psychological fluctuations within the adolescent population and the often covert nature of much harmful information, this poses challenges for grassroots community workers in their screening efforts. This study, grounded in the practical challenges currently faced in the prevention and intervention of juvenile delinquency, proposes targeted improvements. The recommendations aim to provide sound theoretical guidance and practical experience to support grassroots community work in advancing the prevention and intervention of juvenile delinquency.

Keywords

juvenile delinquency, grassroots social work services, challenges faced, improvement strategies

1. Research Background

With the increasingly complex and diverse online information environment, adolescents are exhibiting new characteristics such as a trend towards younger offenders and greater diversity in criminal behaviour during their formative years ^[1]. This is due to a combination of factors including weakened parental supervision, difficulties in adapting to school life, and psychological and emotional imbalances. Juvenile crime prevention has now become an integral part of grassroots social governance and the promotion of public safety in China. Given the unique nature of adolescents' physical and

psychological development, and the fact that their deviant behaviour results from the interplay of multiple factors, a comprehensive approach is required that addresses individual circumstances, family environment, school atmosphere and community management. Relying solely on punitive measures from public security and judicial authorities is unlikely to resolve the problem at its root; therefore, sustained service interventions—including preventive, supportive and developmental approaches—are required. By identifying high-risk youth groups at an early stage, targeted interventions and support can be provided. In this context, grassroots social work serves as a professional bridge connecting the government, families, communities and individual young people. Through community-based risk assessments, guidance on family relationships and the restoration and establishment of social support networks, it plays an irreplaceable role in the early prevention of juvenile crime, the rehabilitation of minors, and other related areas. In recent years, the state has successively introduced laws and regulations concerning the protection of young people and other minors, as well as the prevention of juvenile crime. These explicitly require the involvement of social work professionals in the protection of minors and crime prevention, and have gradually promoted the development of grassroots social work. However, in the process of implementation, social work's involvement in youth crime prevention continues to face multifaceted practical obstacles and constraints. Based on the findings of this study, which examines the current state of grassroots social work and the actual circumstances and challenges of youth crime prevention, targeted improvement strategies will be proposed to enhance the effectiveness of preventive interventions. This will provide sound theoretical recommendations and practical experience for the construction of a juvenile crime prevention system and the advancement of modernised grassroots governance [2].

2. The Current State of Grassroots Social Work Services in the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency

In exploring the prevention of juvenile delinquency and social work intervention, China has accumulated a wealth of case studies and achievements. In the early stages, the focus was primarily on analysing the causes of juvenile delinquency, examining the underlying motivations behind deviant behaviour from multiple perspectives—including deficiencies in family upbringing, shortcomings in school education, the community environment, and the influence of harmful online culture—whilst emphasising that prevention should take precedence over punishment [3]. With the continuous development and progress of society, current research on juvenile delinquency has gradually shifted from traditional causal analysis towards early prevention. However, there is relatively little practical research on early prevention in the context of grassroots community work. In many cases, unclear roles, information gaps and poor communication hinder the early identification of risks. Furthermore, due to limited funding for service provision, under the project-purchasing model, service cycles are relatively short, making it difficult to provide sustainable, long-term follow-up services. In terms of research on juvenile delinquency prevention, efforts began relatively early; through the involvement of grassroots

social work in intervening in deviant behaviour among young people, a relatively mature institutional framework has been established. For example, countries in Europe and the United States generally adopt an intervention philosophy that avoids stigmatisation and labelling, whilst community-based grassroots prevention models are also well-established, emphasising the integration of schools, medical institutions, social organisations and families through the community as a platform to construct a multi-tiered risk prevention system. However, with the continuous advancement of the protection of minors and crime prevention in China, grassroots social work has been formally incorporated into the routine working framework for the prevention of juvenile crime and the social protection of minors, becoming a crucial component of grassroots social governance in terms of pre-emptive prevention, individual case support, correction of deviant behaviour, and the restoration of social support [4]. Currently, a nationwide operational model has largely taken shape whereby the government procures services from organisations to implement grassroots-level judicial coordination. Grassroots social workers are fully engaged in the screening of youth at risk and manage key young people through Party-building initiatives, intervening through various means such as family education guidance, psychological counselling and community legal awareness campaigns. Therefore, judging from the overall progress of the work, social work in the field of juvenile crime prevention in China has developed a framework characterised by distinct front-end and back-end segments, with uneven emphasis across different stages. At the judicial rehabilitation level, localities have generally established coordination mechanisms between the judiciary and social workers, enabling close collaboration with procuratorial and judicial departments to provide supporting services for cases involving minors. Workflows are relatively standardised, and job responsibilities are fairly clearly defined. However, at the front-end community prevention level, overall development remains in its initial stages. The majority of grassroots youth prevention work still centres on administrative screening, legal awareness campaigns and mass education; professional, proactive social work intervention requires improvement. The comprehensive implementation of routine, refined and personalised prevention measures for high-risk groups—such as pupils exhibiting deviant behaviour, left-behind youths, youths without guardianship and those with internet addiction—is not yet fully established. In practice, due to uneven resource allocation, urban areas currently outperform townships, with significant regional disparities in resource distribution. Social work stations in urban districts and neighbourhoods have relatively concentrated resources, with a wide range of service programmes, enabling them to sustain and deliver a variety of professional services, such as individual counselling and group activities for young people. However, at the grassroots level in townships and rural areas, social work services continue to suffer from a weak service foundation, insufficient service programmes and a lack of diversity in service content. Although multi-departmental coordination frameworks have been established in various regions to facilitate joint interventions for high-risk young people, implementation at the grassroots level remains largely confined to policy documents; day-to-day operations across departments remain relatively independent, and information sharing

remains inadequate. Overall, youth social work practitioners at the grassroots level in China exhibit several characteristics, including a project-based, short-term and supplementary nature. The vast majority of youth prevention services rely on short-term government procurement contracts, which have limited duration and lack funding stability. Consequently, much of the work carried out for young people remains in the form of phased services, making it difficult to address the characteristics of youth development—namely, its long duration and the high degree of behavioural recurrence. The coverage of long-term, continuous and systematic services remains low.

3. Practical Challenges Faced by Grassroots Social Work Services in the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency

3.1 Insufficient Investment in Preventive Resources

In the practice of grassroots social work for the prevention of juvenile crime, the structure of resource allocation determines the effectiveness of the work. There is a persistent shortage of front-line preventive resources. Currently, the allocation of financial resources relating to minors is heavily skewed towards post-offence interventions, such as correctional measures for minors, risk screening for at-risk young people in the community, and support for families in managing deviant behaviour^[5]. Specialised funding for preventive work—such as early intervention—accounts for a low proportion of the total. As youth social work services are highly dependent on government-purchased service projects, the funding supply for these projects is characterised by its temporary and phased nature. Once a project cycle ends, it becomes difficult to continue case-by-case follow-up with young people, nor is it possible to provide sustainable guidance and management to their families. This is objectively incompatible with the long-term nature of youth risk development and the recurrent nature of their behaviour. Most sub-district and township social workers lack dedicated service spaces specifically for youth case counselling and group activities; psychological assessment tools and professional service resources are also insufficient, limiting the development of professional service infrastructure. At the same time, grassroots social workers generally face the pressure of having to fulfil multiple roles, with a significant portion of their working hours taken up by administrative tasks such as data reporting and performance assessments, preventing them from devoting more time and energy to home visits, risk assessments and professional interventions.

3.2 Lack of Comprehensive Professional Talent

The shortage of multi-skilled professionals and the lack of workforce stability are also key factors contributing to the current poor effectiveness of grassroots social work interventions in the prevention of youth crime. The prevention of youth crime integrates multiple knowledge systems, including the psychology of adolescent development, family and social work, crisis intervention, the Law on the Protection of Minors, risk assessment and management, and other knowledge systems. It requires practitioners to possess the comprehensive ability to identify diverse risks—such as negative peer influences, family dysfunction, loss of social support networks, and psychological crises—whilst also

being able to provide personalised guidance based on the actual circumstances of young people. However, in current grassroots practice, the professional backgrounds of frontline social workers are rather diverse; with some practitioners having received no formal, sustained training in social work or psychology. Pre-service training largely consists of short, intensive, generalist courses, lacking specialised training in juvenile justice social work, family restoration and crisis intervention. Currently, grassroots social workers still face numerous difficulties in addressing youth crime prevention. The focus is on prevention of juvenile crime, but most grassroots organizations lack foresight. Due to issues with information shelter hardware and equipment, it is impossible to immediately identify the true psychological and spiritual needs of adolescents during daily observation and visits. As a result, prevention often remains at the basic level of routine home visits and routine check-ups. At the same time, juvenile crime prevention is not only a psychological issue but requires grassroots workers to actively collaborate with families, communities, schools, and relevant departments to conduct comprehensive and sustainable observation. However, due to limited initial intervention funds and uneven distribution of resources between urban and rural areas, many grassroots workers often feel helpless when facing complex cases and serious crime prevention issues, further intensifying the advancement and implementation of juvenile crime prevention. The reasons are closely related to the environment in which grassroots workers live. First, the environment is relatively weak and lacks professional intervention and guidance. Many grassroots workers not only undertake guidance for juvenile crime prevention but also handle other routine workflows at the grassroots level. As a result, they cannot apply their time and experience to the professional level of juvenile crime prevention, lack study and review of external cases, and cannot actively apply theoretical knowledge learned in junior high school to practice, resulting in a disconnect between theory and practice. The effectiveness of juvenile crime prevention is greatly diminished. Second, the environment in which grassroots workers live cannot provide sufficient and diverse growth in terms of promotion, salary, or welfare cannot be provided in a short time. Over time, under the negative influence of juvenile crime prevention, this leads to a mentality of slackness in the workplace. Furthermore, when extreme cases or complex intervention situations arise, local grassroots organizations cannot provide timely professional commercial support, further damaging the slack mentality among practitioners.

3.3 Poor Inter-departmental Communication

The prevention of juvenile delinquency is a systemic governance matter requiring multi-stakeholder collaboration; however, at the grassroots level, poor communication between departments, information barriers and fragmentation prevent the formation of a closed-loop system for early-stage risk intervention. Departments such as civil affairs, public security, the procuratorate and educational institutions, as well as community organisations, carry out work relating to minors independently based on their respective statutory duties, and a unified and standardised information-sharing system has yet to be established. Due to factors such as the protection of minors' personal data, data management, regulatory compliance and the avoidance of accountability, information and data regarding young

people's disciplinary records remain isolated across departments. Grassroots social workers, as the primary agents responsible for front-line risk screening, are unable to obtain comprehensive key information about young people's upbringing environments. Consequently, they struggle to carry out precise risk identification and assessment. When conducting case-specific interventions, the need to liaise with different functional departments often leads to information duplication, repetitive feedback across various platforms, cumbersome response times and gaps in coordination. Furthermore, as departments lack a clear understanding of the professional role of social work in the prevention of youth crime, their willingness to engage in collaborative intervention is low. The absence of regular meetings and communication leads to delays in the overall flow of information and insufficient coordination, meaning that many cases of early deviant behaviour among young people do not receive timely joint intervention.

4. Improvement Strategies

4.1 Establishing a Comprehensive Prevention System

In light of the shortage of multi-skilled personnel at the grassroots level, a comprehensive talent development system should be established, covering areas such as talent recruitment, training, supervision and guidance. Firstly, the integration of education and industry should be strengthened by collaborating with universities offering relevant degree programmes to provide practical training opportunities for students in these fields. Furthermore, in response to community intervention needs, relevant professionals should be recruited to consolidate the professional foundation of the workforce. For current staff, a regularised training system should be implemented, focusing on modules such as the identification of deviant behaviour in young people, family relationships, psychological crises, legal provisions for the protection of minors, and management protocols. This will enable staff to gain a deeper theoretical understanding of the practical application of social work, applied psychology and law in their work, whilst also facilitating the exchange of resources with relevant practitioners at a practical level and providing insight into case studies of juvenile crime prevention in various contexts. To address the situation faced by grassroots workers, it is necessary to fundamentally improve work processes and mechanisms to safeguard their rights and personal growth. First, provide a good learning environment for grassroots workers, allowing them to share the latest juvenile crime prevention tools and cases online to facilitate learning. The approach is to invite renowned local youth crime prevention experts and relevant departments to give keynote speeches and conduct offline Q&A, thereby providing offline handling services and providing strong support. Third, strengthen welfare and treatment for grassroots workers. Promotion and personal growth opportunities can provide them with good material development, and rewards can also be added to ensure they have more goals and a sense of mission in their work.

4.2 Strengthening the Quality of the Service Workforce

In light of the shortage of multi-skilled personnel at the grassroots level, a comprehensive talent

development system should be established, covering talent recruitment, training, supervision and guidance. Firstly, the integration of academia and industry should be strengthened by collaborating with universities offering relevant degree programmes to provide practical training opportunities for students in these fields.

Juvenile delinquency prevention is a long-term effort involving communities, families, schools, and other stakeholders. It requires basic intervention and guidance from the community, as well as serving as a bridge between multiple parties and regularly organizing themed activities on youth crime prevention. Through these activities, multiple parties can be coordinated, ensuring that schools, families, and communities have a clearer understanding of youth psychological issues and actual needs. At the same time, on-site activities and case explanations can further break down information barriers, ensuring that content on youth crime prevention is transparent and open. Hosting on-site events can effectively promote communication among youth, encouraging them to raise personal concerns and communicate effectively with relevant experts. Therefore, grassroots workers and communities should build communication bridges through information resource sharing platforms. Whether online or offline, this ensures that youth crime prevention under community responsibility is truly integrated into youth life and learning, thereby obtaining the most fundamental and authentic data to lay the foundation for subsequent reviews. Moreover, to further improve the overall quality of guidance, on-the-job practitioners should receive multi-level, multi-frequency training and assessments, promoting the enhancement of their professional abilities both professionally and broadly. Communities can regularly recruit volunteers for related majors, helping grassroots workers share some of the burden. At the same time, school-enterprise cooperation can be carried out by cooperating with universities offering related majors to attract high-quality talent, providing a solid talent foundation for grassroots juvenile crime prevention.

4.3 Improving the Collaborative Governance Mechanism

The government takes the lead in promoting cooperation and management among community schools, families, and related departments. To achieve the common goal of preventing juvenile delinquency, improving workflows and strengthening management can fundamentally enhance grassroots community practitioners' awareness and understanding of juvenile crime prevention, as well as their sense of mission and responsibility. Lack of strong guidance and management during adolescence: When faced with complex fragmented information, young people cannot directly distinguish the authenticity of information. As a result, when they are mentally immature, they are easily influenced and disturbed by the external environment, leading to extreme behavior and criminal activities. Therefore, grassroots workers need to strengthen guidance and management for adolescents to identify external information during this period. On one hand, they can organize related themed activities in the community to encourage regular participation and Q&A, thereby testing their ability to discern information. On the other hand, through the output of such content, the district can further improve parents' and schools' awareness of adolescents' ability to identify harmful information. On this basis,

recent visits to families and campuses to understand adolescents' daily behaviors and needs can provide a more comprehensive and clear understanding of the environmental problems and real needs they face. Secondly, collaboration among multiple departments can further weaken information barriers and prevent dangerous situations such as information leakage among teenagers. At the same time, regular cooperation meetings can further facilitate information sharing and communication among problematic youth who need intervention, ensuring a healthy and sustainable information chain from early observation and intervention to follow-up visits, thereby improving corresponding guidance and intervention work and enhancing the efficiency and quality of cooperation among departments.

They are easily misled by harmful online content, vulgar culture and false information; unable to judge whether information poses a risk, they are prone to making impulsive mistakes. Therefore, grassroots social work services should collaborate with schools, communities, the judiciary and other relevant departments in the prevention of youth crime, incorporating education on risk identification into a routine preventive service system. At the same time, it is essential to uphold the core principle of prioritising young people's development and to update public education in line with contemporary societal developments, moving away from traditional, one-dimensional, didactic educational models. By delivering targeted empowerment education in scenarios with which young people frequently encounter in their daily lives, and providing categorised risk awareness training on issues such as cyberbullying and online fraud, young people can be helped to clearly identify the hidden risks present in their daily lives and online environments, and to understand the boundaries between undesirable behaviour and illegal acts, and dispel adolescents' misconceptions and a 'lucky escape' mentality regarding various risky behaviours. On this basis, grassroots social workers can utilise a variety of formats—such as community activities, school presentations, case studies and themed lessons—combined with typical local cases and examples of deviant behaviour, to explain the progression of risky behaviour. This guides young people to develop a clear mindset for risk early warning and learn to avoid unhealthy social circles. In addition, grassroots community workers can conduct targeted training for training for young people in areas such as emotional management and conflict resolution. When faced with interpersonal conflicts or life setbacks, this helps prevent them from resorting to extreme measures to resolve problems. Consequently, through regular education and training, young people can effectively master basic coping strategies and emotional regulation, enabling them to identify risks rationally and respond scientifically. Through comprehensive and routine risk identification, the overall capabilities of young people in self-protection and self-discipline can be substantially strengthened.

5. Conclusion

Juvenile crime prevention has always been a top priority in promoting socialist development in China. Young people are the future pillars of the nation and are closely related to the quality and standard of socialist construction in China. Therefore, whether at home or in schools, the implementation of these

tasks is a key focus, continuously promoting innovation and implementation, striving to reduce juvenile crime rates, effectively improve their ability to distinguish between authenticity and falsehood, and provide a favorable social environment for their growth. As an important part of community work, grassroots workers play an invaluable role in juvenile crime prevention. Through early observation and guidance, rational and personalized interventions provide good support for the healthy growth and development of adolescents. However, as the internet's fast, fragmented, and explosive information becomes a major factor affecting adolescents' cognition, and during their undeveloped physical and mental development stages, they are easily influenced by external environments. Therefore, effective identification and management of interconnected information is also a top priority in juvenile crime prevention. Staff need to understand the physical and mental development patterns of adolescents while continuously learning, analyzing current cases related to juvenile crime prevention. This allows them to integrate practical experience with theoretical knowledge and further apply the above content to juvenile crime prevention. Although grassroots staff currently face many difficulties in juvenile crime prevention, actively introducing talent for on-the-job training and assessment can fundamentally improve the quality and professional capabilities of grassroots staff. At the same time, practitioners further strengthen information exchange and case sharing related to juvenile crime prevention at home, campus, and government departments, ensuring youth safety while also integrating various forces to further improve the overall workflow, thereby building a safeguard for juvenile crime prevention.

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