

REVIEW ARTICLE

Juvenile crimes and drugs: A review of structural and psychosocial determinants in the context of drug decriminalization

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Abstract

Drug-related juvenile crimes in refugee camps are a growing concern, shaped by structural vulnerabilities. This review synthesizes existing literature on drug-related juvenile crimes in refugee settings, focusing on how social disorganization, structural neglect, and psychosocial deprivation increase vulnerability among displaced children, and argues for a public health-oriented decriminalization approach to prevention and rehabilitation. Drawing upon international and regional studies published between 2017 and 2024, the paper highlights how poverty, forced migration, trauma, limited education, and exposure to drug trafficking networks contribute to youth delinquency in refugee camps. Using social disorganization, delinquent subculture, rational choice, and structural functionalism theories, the review identifies five key thematic drivers: economic marginalization, peer and gang influence, normalization of drug culture, lack of family supervision, and absence of rehabilitation services. In light of contemporary debates on drug decriminalization, the review argues that punitive approaches to drug-related juvenile offences often reinforce structural disadvantages, criminalize poverty, and hinder social reintegration. Instead, a public health-oriented decriminalization framework can mitigate these harms by shifting focus from punishment to rehabilitation, prevention, and community reintegration. The consequences of maintaining criminalization extend beyond individual harm, contributing to broader community insecurity, increased drug dependency, and undermined law and order. The paper concludes by recommending a multisectoral prevention and recovery framework that aligns with decriminalization principles, emphasizing community-based rehabilitation, psychosocial counseling, drug awareness education, and integrated child protection systems anchored in social work and public health models. Such an approach advances restorative justice and promotes long-term well-being for at-risk juveniles in fragile and displaced settings.

Keywords: Juvenile crime; Drug abuse; Drug decriminalization; Psychosocial distress; Social disorganization; Rehabilitation

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 1989, defines a child as “any human being under the age of 18 unless the age of majority is attained earlier under national legislation.” Countries that have ratified or acceded to this convention are legally bound by its provisions. The term juvenile generally refers to individuals under 18 years of age who have not yet attained adulthood, with minor exceptions based on jurisdiction. McFarlane *et al.* (2023) reported that the global population has reached eight billion, of which approximately 2.3 billion are under the age of 18. Juveniles represent the foundation of future leadership, innovation, and social progress. Turkay & Tirthali (2010) emphasized that leadership skills such as teamwork, civic engagement, determination, volunteerism, and a sense of collective responsibility are crucial for nurturing this potential.

However, the global reality is stark. Alkire *et al.* (2023), in the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, noted that out of 6.1 billion people across 110 countries, 1.1 billion live in poverty, and among them, 566 million are under the age of 18. Juveniles are disproportionately vulnerable to abuse, neglect, delinquency, and a range of socioeconomic deprivations, which are often exacerbated in contexts of displacement, statelessness, and forced migration.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), over 100 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide due to persecution, conflict, and human rights violations—an unprecedented figure in recorded history. Among the most complex and long-standing humanitarian crises is the Rohingya displacement, representing one of the world’s largest stateless populations. Piper (1993) describes the Rohingya as descendants of a diverse lineage, including Moorish, Arab, and Persian traders, as well as Moghul, Turk, Pathan, and Bengali settlers who arrived between the ninth and 15th centuries.

Children and adolescents in refugee camps face conditions of structural deprivation, overcrowded shelters, food insecurity, poor sanitation, limited education, and restricted psychosocial support (Hossain *et al.*, 2021). These multidimensional hardships create fertile ground for the rise of juvenile delinquency and substance-related crimes. In recent years, humanitarian reports and independent studies have documented a worrying trend: the infiltration of drug trafficking networks and organized criminal gangs within and around refugee settlements. These groups exploit vulnerable children, using them as couriers, lookouts,

or small-scale distributors of narcotic substances such as methamphetamine, heroin, and cannabis.

Drug abuse and trafficking have thus become deeply intertwined with juvenile crime in refugee environments. The American Bar Association (2023) and Together Free (2020) describe forced criminality as a form of exploitation where individuals, often minors, are coerced into committing crimes, including drug smuggling, production, and sale, under threats, manipulation, or false promises of financial gain. Emotional coercion, social pressure, and peer recruitment by adult offenders further blur the boundary between victim and perpetrator. Children involved in such acts are frequently misclassified as offenders rather than as victims of trafficking and exploitation.

The normalization of drug-related activities among juveniles in camps has broad social and public health implications. Besides introducing adolescents to criminal networks, it increases the risk of substance dependence, violence, and long-term psychological trauma. Juvenile involvement in drug trafficking also perpetuates the cycle of poverty, exclusion, and stigmatization, similar patterns observed in national rehabilitation studies such as Malaysia’s *i-Pulih* model, where relapse and reintegration challenges are linked to social stigma, inadequate treatment continuity, and lack of structural support.

In this context, drug decriminalization emerges as a critical policy lens for rethinking how juvenile drug offences are conceptualized and managed. Instead of treating youth drug involvement purely as criminal behavior, decriminalization reframes it as a public health and social welfare concern, emphasizing prevention, rehabilitation, and harm reduction over punitive control. This approach aligns with the principles of the UNCRC, which calls for the protection, recovery, and reintegration of children in conflict with the law. By shifting from criminalization to decriminalization, governments can reduce incarceration rates, prevent the reinforcement of social marginalization, and provide community-based alternatives that address structural and psychosocial determinants of drug use.

Given these interrelated risks, this review synthesizes evidence on the causes and consequences of juvenile involvement in drug-related crimes in refugee camps. It also examines how systemic neglect, weak enforcement, and limited access to preventive and rehabilitative services contribute to the escalation of such crimes. Finally, the review proposes an integrated framework grounded in social work, public health, and decriminalization principles to support prevention, rehabilitation, and policy coordination for protecting juveniles from drug exploitation and associated criminality.

1.1. Literature review

This review engages with relevant literature and draws on theories addressing the refugee crisis, with particular focus on juveniles and their exposure to drug-related risks. Hopkins *et al.* (1994) reported that Southeast Asian refugee juveniles often face severe mental health issues, academic failures, limited awareness of their migration history, lack of parental guidance, involvement in intra-community conflicts, and an absence of victim-offender rehabilitation programs. These conditions create a fertile environment for delinquent behavior, including substance abuse, as adolescents seek coping mechanisms for trauma, displacement, and social exclusion. Drug use among displaced juveniles, often beginning with inhalants and over-the-counter medications, is reported as both a symptom of distress and a pathway to deeper criminal involvement when manipulated by organized networks. Within this context, punitive drug policies tend to exacerbate vulnerability by criminalizing youth who require psychosocial care rather than incarceration. A shift toward drug decriminalization would instead allow for early intervention, rehabilitation, and social support consistent with human rights and child protection principles.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC, 2018) outlined 10 significant challenges faced by refugee juveniles: (i) Difficulty obtaining legal recognition; (ii) lack of access to quality education, learning, and skills-building opportunities; (iii) cultural clashes; (iv) limited employment prospects; (v) gender-based discrimination and violence; (vi) inadequate psychosocial support; (vii) restricted freedom of movement and insufficient safety and security; (viii) vulnerability of unaccompanied minors; (ix) exclusion from decision-making processes; and (x) limited knowledge about refugee rights and services. Each of these vulnerabilities is closely intertwined with the escalating trend of drug trafficking and consumption in refugee settings. Limited education and employment prospects, for instance, push adolescents toward illicit economies such as drug peddling, while the lack of psychosocial support leaves them vulnerable to substance dependence as a form of escapism. The decriminalization of drug use provides an alternative framework to address these root causes by treating substance abuse as a public health issue and by integrating social services within refugee governance systems.

Mallick (2020) highlighted growing concerns about the long-term existence of refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, noting that their prolonged presence poses severe challenges to governance and social order. BBC News (2023) reported that drug smuggling and human trafficking gangs have

turned life in Cox's Bazar into a nightmare for nearly one million Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar in 2017. By mid-July 2023, 48 deaths had been recorded due to gang violence, surpassing the total fatalities reported in 2022. The report underscored the deteriorating security and the growing entanglement between organized crime and the narcotics trade. Armed groups, including the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, and the Munna Gang, have been accused of abducting individuals for ransom, enforcing forced marriages, and recruiting children into drug trafficking and other illegal activities (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Such networks exploit the poverty and despair within camps, using juveniles as couriers, lookouts, and low-level distributors of narcotics, offering small monetary incentives in return. A decriminalization approach could help distinguish between traffickers and exploited juveniles, ensuring that the latter receive protection, counseling, and reintegration rather than punishment.

Sivan *et al.* (1999) observed that despite rising adolescent gang activity among Southeast Asian immigrants, there remains a paucity of research on gang recruitment and substance-related crimes among adolescent refugees. Adolescent refugees from Bosnia, Guatemala, and Haiti are particularly at risk of being targeted by criminal organizations involved in drug trading and cross-border smuggling. Prevention and intervention programs aimed at ensuring their reintegration and well-being remain severely limited, allowing the cycle of drug-fueled violence and juvenile delinquency to persist. Similarly, Ivert & Magnusson (2020) found that unaccompanied refugee minors across Europe are often exposed to high-risk environments that increase their susceptibility to substance abuse and criminal involvement. Many such children go unacknowledged in international policy frameworks; their untreated mental health issues, combined with chronic displacement and lack of supervision, heighten their risk of drug dependence and coercion into trafficking networks. Decriminalization policies could serve as an enabling mechanism to bridge these service gaps by directing resources toward psychosocial treatment, harm reduction, and community rehabilitation, rather than penalization.

Orr & Ajzenstadt (2020) analyzed the discursive process of criminalization of African asylum seekers in Israel, demonstrating how marginalized social groups are constructed as criminal threats and subsequently subjected to heightened surveillance. The same logic applies to displaced juveniles who become entangled in drug-related offences not as primary perpetrators, but as visible symbols of social disorder. Criminalization of adolescent asylum seekers is facilitated by their portrayal

as “infiltrators” beyond state control. This rhetoric connects border violations with drug-related criminality and violence, emphasizing their perceived potential for deviance while ignoring structural neglect and trauma. Lane (2018) further argued that the causes, consequences, and effective responses to juvenile crime, particularly when linked to drugs and forced criminality, remain overlooked by the broader research community. The principles of drug decriminalization challenge this punitive paradigm by recognizing that many juvenile offenders are, in fact, victims of structural violence, coercion, and systemic neglect.

In summary, the reviewed literature reveals that drug-related juvenile crimes in refugee contexts stem from a convergence of structural, psychosocial, and economic determinants. Persistent marginalization, peer influence, and the normalization of narcotics within informal economies perpetuate cycles of delinquency. The absence of sustainable rehabilitation frameworks and psychosocial interventions exacerbates these challenges. Incorporating drug decriminalization into juvenile protection strategies would align legal systems with human rights norms, reduce incarceration, and promote a coordinated, multisectoral approach integrating social work, public health, and community-based recovery to mitigate the drug-crime nexus among refugee juveniles.

1.2. Conceptual framework

This review draws on four key theoretical perspectives: Social disorganization, delinquent subculture, rational choice, and structural functionalism. These frameworks collectively explain the structural and psychosocial underpinnings of juvenile crimes and provide a foundation for re-evaluating punitive drug policies through the lens of drug decriminalization.

The social disorganization theory, introduced by Shaw & McKay (1942), posits that environmental factors, particularly residential location, are stronger predictors of criminal behavior than individual traits. According to this theory, deteriorating physical environments, poverty, and high levels of ethnic heterogeneity contribute significantly to criminal activity, especially among youth. The breakdown of community-based control mechanisms, coupled with rapid migration into fragile contexts and the normalization of deviant values, facilitates juvenile delinquency. Within the context of drug-related offenses, social disorganization is further intensified in refugee settings where weak institutional oversight and a lack of social capital enable the spread of drug trafficking networks. The theory supports the argument that decriminalization policies, by shifting emphasis from punishment to community rehabilitation, can help restore social cohesion and strengthen informal social controls.

The delinquent subculture theory, proposed by Cohen (1955), suggests that juvenile gangs arise as a collective response to shared frustrations and socio-economic marginalization. These subcultures are non-utilitarian, negativistic, and often malicious in nature, offering limited material benefit to members. Instead, they provide emotional solidarity and a means to assert identity and resistance. Economic injustice is a key driver of youth gang formation and perpetuation. In refugee contexts, adolescents often internalize deviant subcultural norms as adaptive responses to exclusion and despair. Drug decriminalization, when paired with targeted psychosocial interventions, can disrupt this cycle by reducing stigmatization and reintegrating youth into constructive community roles. Rather than reinforcing criminal identities through incarceration, decriminalization offers opportunities for rehabilitation, education, and social reintegration.

The rational choice theory, initially articulated by Moffitt, (1993) and later adapted for use in criminology, posits that individuals make rational decisions by weighing the potential benefits and consequences of their actions. In the context of juvenile crime, however, this theory is somewhat limited, as children often lack the cognitive maturity to fully assess risks and rewards. Their decisions are heavily influenced by environmental pressures, peer influence, and adult manipulation. Nevertheless, the theory remains relevant in understanding how punitive systems often fail to deter juvenile offenders who perceive minimal alternatives for survival or belonging. The decriminalization approach acknowledges this limitation by prioritizing prevention and harm reduction over deterrence. Removing harsh penalties for minor drug offenses redirects focus toward creating rational incentives for youth participation in education, skill-building, and social rehabilitation.

Structural functionalism, as formulated by Parsons (1951), views society as a system composed of interrelated elements, such as customs, norms, institutions, and traditions, that function together to maintain order. Structural functionalists in the field of criminal justice argue that law enforcement and judicial institutions serve to uphold social cohesion by delineating acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Browning, 2015). However, in settings where punitive drug laws disproportionately affect marginalized juveniles, the system may lose its integrative function and instead perpetuate exclusion. Through the lens of drug decriminalization, structural functionalism supports the restoration of institutional balance where health, education, and social welfare systems function alongside justice mechanisms to rehabilitate rather than penalize young offenders.

These theories have been supported and applied in various studies. For example, Nielsen *et al.* (2005) utilized the social disorganization theory to examine patterns of criminality in selected refugee zones in the United States. A. Islam (2021) employed the delinquent subculture theory to understand refugee-related crimes in Estonia. Gul (2009) demonstrated the cross-disciplinary application of the rational choice theory among criminologists, sociologists, and psychologists. Phillimore (2021) drew on elements of structural functionalism to analyze the well-being of refugees affected by social disorder.

The incorporation of these theoretical perspectives in the present study is well-aligned with existing scholarly literature and provides a strong conceptual foundation for understanding how drug decriminalization can serve as a structural reform mechanism to address the root causes of juvenile crime.

1.3. Study objectives

This review examines the major factors that contribute to juvenile involvement in drug-related and forced criminal activities within refugee camps, with particular attention to how structural deprivation, psychosocial distress, and weak governance systems shape these behaviors.

It also assesses the broader social, psychological, and security consequences of juvenile participation in drug-related offences across refugee settlements, highlighting the interplay between organized crime, drug dependency, and community instability.

Finally, this review proposes evidence-based policy recommendations that promote a shift from punitive control to restorative and public health approaches through drug decriminalization, community-based rehabilitation, psychosocial support, and regional cooperation.

2. Data and method

2.1. Study design

The study design outlines a systematic process aimed at developing a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between juvenile delinquency, forced criminality, and drug-related involvement in refugee camps. Emphasizing the review-based approach, this study consolidated and interpreted previous research to identify recurring patterns, theoretical perspectives, and intervention gaps related to drug-fueled juvenile crime among displaced populations. It also critically explored how drug decriminalization frameworks can reshape existing responses to juvenile drug offences from punitive control toward public health, social protection, and rehabilitation.

Creswell (2014) conceptualized research design as a staged and iterative process that guides data collection, analysis, and the establishment of reliability and validity in pursuit of research objectives. In line with this, the present research adopted a narrative review approach, which synthesizes academic, policy, and grey literature rather than collecting primary field data. The review aims to uncover thematic connections between structural deprivation, psychosocial distress, and the proliferation of drug-related activities among juveniles in refugee settings. In addition, it analyses how criminalization versus decriminalization policies influence the treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of juveniles involved in drug-related crimes.

The theoretical foundation of this review is informed by social disorganization, delinquent subculture, rational choice, and structural functionalism, each of which provides a lens for interpreting how environmental instability, socioeconomic hardship, and weak social control mechanisms drive youth involvement in crime and substance use. These theoretical perspectives also guide the discussion on how decriminalization policies may strengthen community-based rehabilitation, restore informal social controls, and reduce the stigmatization associated with drug use among displaced juveniles.

To ensure a comprehensive and balanced synthesis, peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and policy papers published between 2017 and 2024 were systematically reviewed. The selection emphasized studies focusing on drug trafficking, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, forced criminality, and drug policy reform, particularly those examining the transition from punitive to decriminalized frameworks. Major databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar, were consulted, along with publications from UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the International Organization for Migration (2016), and Human Rights Watch.

This systematic and interpretive design allowed for a multidimensional understanding of juvenile crime in refugee contexts while evaluating the potential of drug decriminalization as a transformative policy pathway for reducing vulnerability, promoting rehabilitation, and strengthening social reintegration among at-risk juveniles.

2.2. Literature selection and inclusion criteria

Following Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic synthesis framework, this review incorporated both empirical and conceptual studies to capture the multidimensional nature of juvenile drug-related crimes in refugee contexts. The inclusion criteria were guided by five key parameters.

The first was topical relevance, focusing on studies addressing juvenile delinquency, forced criminality, or drug-related issues within refugee or displaced populations. The review covered publications from 2017 to 2024, reflecting the post-migration escalation of organized crime and narcotics trade in refugee settlements (BBC News, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). The types of sources included were peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from non-governmental organizations, government policy documents, and assessments from international agencies, to ensure a comprehensive understanding across various sectors. The language criterion restricted the review to English-language publications to maintain analytical consistency.

The final parameter, theoretical contribution, emphasized works offering insight into criminological, psychological, or social work approaches to rehabilitation, prevention, and the evolving discourse on drug decriminalization as an alternative to punitive control. Studies focusing solely on adult criminality, non-refugee contexts, or unrelated health issues were excluded. Employing a narrative synthesis approach enabled a deeper interpretation of cross-cutting themes, integrating macro-level policy debates, such as the shift toward decriminalization, with micro-level psychosocial dynamics that shape juvenile vulnerability and resilience within refugee environments.

A total of 112 documents were initially identified. After screening titles and abstracts, 68 sources met the inclusion criteria. These consisted of 41 peer-reviewed journal articles, 17 reports from non-governmental organizations or humanitarian agencies, and 10 government or policy documents. Of these, 29 sources specifically addressed refugee camps or displaced youth, while 14 publications discussed drug policies, harm reduction, or decriminalization. Making these categories explicit strengthens methodological transparency and addresses concerns regarding the “black box” nature of the review.

2.3. Data collection and management

Instead of conducting field interviews, data for this review were collected through a systematic literature retrieval and content extraction process. Using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses-informed screening procedures to enhance transparency, articles were screened through title and abstract review, followed by full-text evaluation. Each selected document was coded according to recurring themes such as drivers of juvenile drug use, organized criminal exploitation, psychosocial stressors, rehabilitation models, and policy frameworks. Particular attention was given to literature discussing the

implications of drug criminalization and decriminalization on juvenile treatment, rehabilitation, and reintegration within refugee settings.

The review emphasized identifying common push-and-pull factors such as poverty, social exclusion, peer influence, and exposure to narcotic networks that contribute to juvenile involvement in drug peddling and consumption. Sources from Human Rights Watch (2023), the NRC (2018), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) were cross-referenced to triangulate data reliability and strengthen interpretive validity.

In accordance with best practices in qualitative synthesis (Azman *et al.*, 2019; Creswell, 2014; Hung *et al.*, 2023; Yusof *et al.*, 2022; Azman *et al.*, 2020; Singh *et al.*, 2019; Rashid *et al.*, 2023), data were managed using ATLAS.ti software (version 25) to code textual content, identify patterns, and consolidate thematic findings. Codes were refined iteratively to highlight emerging interconnections between drug-related vulnerabilities, the structural conditions of refugee camps, and evolving policy discourses surrounding drug decriminalization as a framework for reducing harm and promoting rehabilitation among at-risk juveniles.

A total of 112 records were identified, 81 remained after duplicates were removed, 68 were screened in full text, and 54 were included in the final synthesis. Each source was coded using a structured template capturing location, population focus, type of drug risk, theoretical relevance, and policy implications.

2.4. Reliability and validity

Cypress (2017), Rashid *et al.*, (2020), and Singh *et al.*, (2023) emphasized the importance of ensuring process-oriented reliability and validity in qualitative and review-based studies. To maintain methodological rigor, the present review adhered to several key validation steps. Cross-source triangulation was employed to verify consistency across multiple data sources, including academic studies, government reports, and publications from non-governmental organizations. Peer-reviewed bias minimization was ensured by prioritizing literature published in indexed journals to strengthen scholarly credibility. Transparency and traceability were maintained through detailed documentation of inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring auditability and replicability of the review process. Conceptual coherence was upheld by ensuring that all findings and interpretations aligned with the theoretical lenses applied and with the broader analytical framework of drug decriminalization, which situates juvenile drug involvement within a rehabilitative and public health paradigm rather than a punitive one.

Internal consistency was further strengthened through inter-textual comparison (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2019). For example, recurring references to juvenile participation in methamphetamine distribution (BBC News, 2023) were cross-checked with reports on organized recruitment of youth by militant groups and narcotics syndicates (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Ivert & Magnusson, 2020). This triangulated approach enhanced reliability while enabling a nuanced understanding of how structural deprivation, coercion, and punitive legal responses interact, reinforcing the relevance of drug decriminalization as a framework for reforming juvenile justice and protection in refugee settings.

2.5. Data analysis

Kerrigan (2014) described qualitative analysis as a deliberate and systematic process of interpreting text through categorization and the identification of recurring patterns. Guided by this approach, all sources included in this review were carefully read and coded using thematic analysis, which involved iterative reading, the extraction of key phrases, and the synthesis of insights under broader analytical categories. The analysis was organized around five core themes: (i) Socioeconomic and structural drivers of drug involvement; (ii) psychosocial and cultural enablers of juvenile delinquency; (iii) drug trafficking as a mechanism of forced criminality; (iv) the impact of these issues on community safety, health, and rehabilitation; and (v) preventive, policy, and decriminalization frameworks relevant to drug control and youth empowerment.

Each theme was validated through multi-source convergence, ensuring that findings reflected both empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives. The analysis highlighted how punitive approaches to drug control often intensify structural vulnerability, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and criminalization among refugee juveniles. Conversely, the integration of drug decriminalization within policy discourse emerged as a transformative framework repositioning drug use and juvenile involvement in narcotic networks as symptoms of systemic neglect rather than individual moral failure. This interpretive lens aligns with the social justice and harm reduction principles central to public health and social work paradigms, advocating for rehabilitation, community reintegration, and preventive intervention over punishment.

Each document was coded through a three-stage process: (i) Open coding of key concepts, (ii) axial coding linking structural, psychosocial, and policy dimensions, and (iii) selective coding to consolidate the five overarching themes. This explicit process clarifies how patterns were

derived and removes ambiguity regarding how the review informed the proposed framework.

3. Results

The reviewed studies collectively emphasize that refugee adolescents, especially those residing in protracted camp settings, are highly vulnerable to delinquent behavior, including substance use and drug trafficking. Across Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, and African contexts, researchers consistently highlight the convergence of deprivation, trauma, and exposure to organized criminal networks as primary catalysts of juvenile crime (BBC News, 2023; Hopkins *et al.*, 1994; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Ivert & Magnusson, 2020; NRC, 2018). These vulnerabilities are amplified by poor living conditions, limited access to education, psychosocial instability, and weak law enforcement capacity in camps.

The synthesis reveals that drug-related criminality has become an increasingly central feature of juvenile delinquency in refugee populations. Adolescents are exploited as couriers and small-scale dealers of narcotics, most commonly methamphetamine (Yaba), heroin, and cannabis, driven by economic need, peer pressure, and coercion from adult-led syndicates (BBC News, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). In contexts where punitive laws dominate, such adolescents are often treated as offenders rather than victims of structural exploitation. The literature, therefore, reinforces the need to reconsider current criminalization practices and move toward drug decriminalization frameworks that emphasize rehabilitation, protection, and harm reduction over punishment.

3.1. Structural and socio-economic drivers of juvenile drug involvement

Refugee adolescents, particularly those living in long-term camp settings, are highly susceptible to drug-related delinquency due to overlapping structural and economic vulnerabilities. Widespread deprivation, poverty, and the lack of basic needs such as food, shelter, and education compel many to seek alternative livelihoods through drug trafficking and smuggling (BBC News, 2023; Hopkins *et al.*, 1994; NRC, 2018). Limited humanitarian aid from agencies such as the World Food Programme and UNHCR often fails to meet the growing needs of displaced populations, while the absence of vocational training and livelihood opportunities reinforces dependency and frustration. Under a drug decriminalization framework, such behaviors are better interpreted as socioeconomic survival responses, calling for livelihood interventions and skill development programs rather than punitive sanctions.

3.2. Psychosocial distress, peer influence, and the pathways to addiction

Psychosocial distress is another major catalyst for juvenile drug involvement. Exposure to war, displacement, and family separation can contribute to trauma, anxiety, and depression and, in the absence of counseling, may increase the likelihood of drug use as a coping mechanism (Hopkins *et al.*, 1994; Ivert & Magnusson, 2020). Social isolation, peer influence, and the lure of monetary gain or revenge further pull juveniles into drug networks (Ali *et al.*, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Punitive incarceration tends to deepen this cycle, while decriminalization-oriented approaches emphasize trauma-informed care and diversion to rehabilitation. Low participation in civic and moral education (NRC, 2018), combined with idleness resulting from limited recreational opportunities (Oke *et al.*, 2024), fosters environments where substance use becomes both entertainment and an escape.

3.3. Organized exploitation and cross-border drug networks

The infiltration of organized criminal and militant groups into refugee camps intensifies the crisis. Adolescents are frequently recruited into drug trafficking, extortion, and smuggling operations, often under coercion or threat (BBC News, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Camps located near porous borders, such as those in Cox's Bazar, face heightened exposure to cross-border narcotics flows (Oke *et al.*, 2023). Within punitive systems, these adolescents are criminalized despite being victims of manipulation. In contrast, decriminalization frameworks recognize them as exploited individuals who require protection, psychosocial rehabilitation, and social reintegration. This perspective realigns policy responses with humanitarian and child protection principles by distinguishing between traffickers and trafficked victims.

3.4. Consequences and policy implications in the context of decriminalization

The consequences of juvenile drug-related crime are far-reaching. Drug proliferation destabilizes camp governance, erodes law and order, and fuels violence (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Families experience fear, trauma, and social stigma (Ivert & Magnusson, 2020; Oke *et al.*, 2022), while substance misuse leads to health crises such as sexually transmitted diseases, overdoses, and untreated mental illness (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022). Furthermore, juvenile participation in the narcotics trade undermines regional peace and security by facilitating transnational smuggling networks. Orr & Ajzenstadt (2020) argue that criminalization reflects systemic failure to protect vulnerable youth. By contrast,

drug decriminalization aligns with human rights and child welfare mandates by reframing juvenile offenders as victims of structural neglect rather than moral deviance. It encourages community-based rehabilitation, preventive education, and restorative justice as key pathways toward reducing harm, promoting recovery, and rebuilding resilience among displaced youth.

4. Discussion

This discussion interprets the reviewed evidence on refugee juveniles' involvement in forced criminality and organized crimes, with a specific focus on drug exposure, use, and trafficking. It connects these patterns to broader policy, socioeconomic, cultural, environmental, legal, and political contexts, while also aligning the analysis with four theoretical lenses: social disorganization, delinquent subculture, rational choice, and structural functionalism. The section concludes by considering how a drug decriminalization framework could address structural vulnerabilities, support rehabilitation, and enhance regional security and juvenile well-being.

Across the literature, refugee juveniles are consistently shown to navigate long-standing poverty, disrupted education, and social exclusion (Hopkins *et al.*, 1994). These conditions, often intensified in congested camps with limited access to essential services, are directly linked to elevated risks of substance use and coercion into narcotics markets. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index highlights that material deprivation and constrained opportunities act as push factors into informal, high-risk economies, including drug couriership, small-scale distribution, and other forms of "forced criminality" (American Bar Association, 2023; NRC, 2018; Together Free, 2020). From a policy standpoint, this underscores the limitations of punitive responses and supports the adoption of drug decriminalization measures that reframe drug involvement as a socioeconomic and public health issue requiring structural intervention, rather than punishment.

The social disorganization theory provides a powerful lens to explain why drug-related crimes are concentrated in refugee environments where formal and informal control mechanisms are weakened. Community disruption, overcrowding, and rapid in-migration correlate with higher juvenile exposure to narcotic networks and lower collective efficacy to prevent recruitment. Evidence from displacement contexts demonstrates that poverty, fragile institutions, and political volatility amplify these risks (Doğan, 2024; Hossain *et al.*, 2021). Reports of drug smuggling, gang violence, and trafficking in and around camps (BBC News, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023) illustrate how systemic disorganization facilitates narcotics

supply chains that actively target adolescents. By contrast, decriminalization policies that promote harm reduction and community-based rehabilitation can strengthen social cohesion and empower local structures to disrupt recruitment networks through inclusion rather than exclusion.

The delinquent subculture theory further illuminates how youth subcultures emerge as collective responses to blocked opportunities. Refugee adolescents facing unemployment, scarce education, and limited recreation often form peer bonds around shared frustration, using drugs as a means of coping and belonging (I. Islam & Naing, 2023; NRC, 2018). While these subcultural dynamics are evident, the literature also shows that juveniles are frequently exploited by adult traffickers and militant groups, indicating manipulation more than voluntary deviance (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Hence, drug decriminalization frameworks can be seen as complementary to subcultural insights, as they shift the response from stigmatization to rehabilitation, emphasizing psychosocial support, mentorship, and skill development to redirect peer solidarity toward pro-social goals.

The explanatory power of the rational choice theory appears limited in this setting. Although small financial gains from drug couriership may seem “rational” under extreme scarcity, the literature reveals that many juveniles act under manipulation, coercion, or misinformation (Abdul Rahman *et al.*, 2022; Hopkins *et al.*, 1994; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Emotional trauma and untreated mental health conditions further constrain their capacity for reasoned decision-making (Ivert & Magnusson, 2020). The decriminalization paradigm responds to this by recognizing the bounded agency of juveniles, acknowledging that rational decision-making is compromised by survival pressures and psychosocial stressors, and prioritizing diversion programs, psychosocial counseling, and community-based treatment over incarceration.

From a structural functionalist perspective, persistent breakdowns in formal institutions, such as education, child protection, and justice systems, alongside weakened informal norms, like community guardianship, erode the social equilibrium necessary for youth safety. In many host states, legal and moral panics construct displaced adolescents as “criminal others” or “infiltrators” (Orr & Ajzenstadt, 2020), legitimizing punitive interventions that reinforce cycles of marginalization. Conversely, drug decriminalization restores the integrative role of institutions by aligning justice, health, and welfare systems around restorative and rehabilitative functions. It

ensures that juveniles apprehended in drug contexts are treated as victims of exploitation, entitled to recovery and reintegration (American Bar Association, 2023; Khuda, 2019).

The literature also exposes under-recognized harms associated with the drug economy, such as sexual exploitation, coercion, forced marriages, and intra-group violence, all of which are intensified by substance dependency and trafficking disputes (BBC News, 2023; Hossain *et al.*, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2023). These dynamics fuel fear, erode social trust, and spread insecurity beyond camps, threatening broader peace and stability. Lane (2018) observes that scholarship still under examines the intersections between drugs, displacement, and juvenile crime, leaving significant policy gaps in prevention and rehabilitation.

Emerging debates around local integration and rights-based decriminalization point toward sustainable solutions. Expanding refugees’ access to education, legal documentation, and safe employment can mitigate drug-driven recruitment by creating legitimate opportunities (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2021). Simultaneously, decriminalization policies offer a pragmatic middle ground, reducing the harms of incarceration, destigmatizing drug use, and investing in community-based recovery models that align with UNCRC principles. As the evidence suggests, effective reform requires a balanced approach that couples rights-based inclusion and harm reduction with robust child protection, anti-trafficking enforcement, and socioeconomic investment.

The discussion affirms that juvenile drug-related crime in refugee settings is not merely a product of individual deviance but a manifestation of structural deprivation, psychosocial distress, and institutional failure. Integrating drug decriminalization within regional and national strategies offers a transformative pathway, one that humanizes policy responses, strengthens social systems, and enhances both individual recovery and collective security across South and Southeast Asia. The contribution of this review lies in synthesizing three previously disconnected strands of scholarship: forced criminality among refugee juveniles, structural and psychosocial determinants of drug-related behavior, and the emerging discourse on drug decriminalization. While each strand has been studied independently, this review integrates them within a unified analytical framework that highlights how displacement-specific vulnerabilities interact with drug markets and punitive policy environments. This integrated perspective is not present in prior literature and forms the basis for a broader research agenda on drug harm reduction in displacement settings.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that juvenile drug involvement in refugee settings is a systemic outcome rooted in social disorganization, exploitation, and service deficits rather than an aggregate of individual moral failings. Addressing this complex issue requires multi-level coordination that integrates the principles of drug decriminalization within prevention, protection, and rehabilitation frameworks. At the preventive level, psychosocial support, drug awareness and life skills education, safe recreation, and family-strengthening initiatives are essential to reduce vulnerability and promote resilience (Hopkins *et al.*, 1994; Ivert & Magnusson, 2020; NRC, 2018).

Within the justice system, child-sensitive legal mechanisms, including access to legal aid, diversion programs, and treatment-based alternatives, should replace punitive sentencing for drug-involved juveniles, while anti-trafficking laws must be enforced rigorously against adult exploiters (American Bar Association, 2023; Khuda, 2019; Orr & Ajzenstadt, 2020). On the supply side, coordinated action is needed to disrupt drug and trafficking networks operating in and around refugee camps, with a focus on border management and prevention of youth recruitment (BBC News, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Over the long term, sustainable solutions depend on expanding education, vocational training, and governance reforms that are consistent with inclusion and safe mobility frameworks, thereby reducing the structural opportunity for juvenile drug recruitment (Hossain *et al.*, 2021; London School of Economics and Political Science, 2021). By shifting from punitive control to rehabilitative, rights-based, and decriminalized approaches, refugee governance systems can more effectively protect juveniles, rebuild community resilience, and address the intertwined challenges of addiction, exploitation, and insecurity.

Existing literature, including the 14 articles related specifically to drug issues, shows no evidence of any fully implemented or successful drug decriminalization model within refugee camps. While studies consistently document widespread deprivation, coercion, organized criminal activity, and psychosocial distress among refugee juveniles, none describe a structured decriminalization framework being applied in these settings.

The argument for a decriminalization-oriented approach in this paper is therefore not based on claims of existing success within camps. Instead, it arises from three central insights identified in the review: (i) Punitive drug policies frequently exacerbate harm by criminalizing juveniles who are acting under exploitation, fear, or trauma; (ii) public health and harm reduction models

have shown effectiveness in other fragile contexts, and their principles are relevant to the vulnerabilities observed in refugee environments; and (iii) the review highlights a clear gap in current interventions, which remain largely punitive and do not address the structural drivers of juvenile involvement in drug networks.

Accordingly, the support for a decriminalization-oriented framework in this manuscript is forward-looking and conceptual. It reflects a rights-based, child protection perspective that responds to the mismatch between punitive approaches and the complex vulnerabilities documented in the literature. The intention is to propose a policy direction that prioritizes rehabilitation, protection, and diversion rather than punishment, without implying that effective decriminalization programs currently operate in refugee camps.

5. Conclusion

The reviewed literature positions social disorganization as the primary explanatory framework for understanding juvenile drug involvement in refugee settings, with delinquent subculture and constrained rational choice theories offering complementary insights, and structural functionalism clarifying how institutional deficits perpetuate the drug-crime nexus. Social disorganization accounts for the collapse of community structures, poverty, and weak social control that allows drug networks to thrive among displaced populations. The delinquent subculture theory explains how marginalized youth develop coping identities and group norms that normalize drug use and trafficking, while the rational choice theory reveals the constrained agency of juveniles making survival-based decisions in coercive environments. Structural functionalism underscores how the erosion of education, justice, and health institutions sustains systemic vulnerability. Collectively, these perspectives reinforce that juvenile drug involvement is not a result of individual moral failure but a structural consequence of displacement, deprivation, and policy neglect. Addressing this crisis requires an integrated strategy grounded in drug decriminalization, one that prioritizes protection and rehabilitation, strengthens community and institutional guardianship, and disrupts narcotics markets that prey on displaced youth. By reframing drug use as a public health and social welfare concern rather than a criminal act, decriminalization offers a pathway to rebuild trust, promote inclusion, and restore social order within refugee communities.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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