



Non-Penal Interventions for the Protection of Working Children and Adolescents: A Case Study of the Shoq-e Zendegi Complex in Mashhad

Hamidreza Daneshnari¹ Fatemeh Fazeli²

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1. Introduction

Protecting children and adolescents, as one of society's most valuable assets, is a fundamental responsibility of legal and social institutions. One of the most serious threats to their well-being is their involvement in exploitative labor, including drug distribution, waste collection, street vending, and other informal occupations. This study adopts the concept of **economic exploitation** to describe child labor and examines non-penal mechanisms designed to protect children and adolescents exposed to such risks. Drawing upon the developmental crime prevention approach, the research emphasizes the importance of early identification of vulnerable children and the implementation of supportive interventions to reduce risk factors and strengthen resilience against future delinquency. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

(1) How are working children protected against the risks associated with economic exploitation? (2) Can non-penal interventions effectively reduce child labor without relying on criminal justice responses?

¹. (Corresponding author) Assistant Professor, Department of Criminal Law and Criminology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan, Iran. daneshnari@um.ac.ir

². PhD student in Criminal Law and Criminology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan, Iran. fazeli.fa@mail.um.ac.ir

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2. Literature Review

Previous international and domestic studies have examined child labor from sociological, economic, and legal perspectives. Zsögön (2021) analyzed competing discourses surrounding child labor in the Global South and highlighted the influence of cultural and economic factors. Cho et al. (2019) investigated strategies for combating child labor within global supply chains, while Ibrahim et al. (2019) systematically reviewed the adverse health consequences of child labor. In Iran, studies by Ovnagh et al. (2023), Abbasi et al. (2021), and Salehi (2023) primarily focused on the sociological dimensions of child labor and legal protection mechanisms. However, limited research has explored integrated non-penal interventions through empirical analysis of judicial case files. This study addresses this gap by examining the practical experience of the Shoq-e Zendegi Complex in Mashhad.

3. Research Method

This qualitative study employed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to analyze ten judicial case files concerning the economic exploitation of children and adolescents registered at Branch Five of the Mashhad Prosecutor's Office (Shoq-e Zendegi Complex). The selected cases were reviewed to identify the principal forms of non-penal interventions implemented for the protection and rehabilitation of working children.

4. Research Findings

The thematic analysis identified four major categories of non-penal interventions:

- 1. Psychological Support:** personality assessment, clinical evaluation, intelligence testing, individual counseling, psychotherapy, and life-skills workshops focusing on assertiveness, self-esteem, and emotional resilience.

2. Economic Support: financial assistance through welfare organizations, educational and sports subsidies, home-based employment opportunities for mothers, and employment services for children's guardians provided by labor and social welfare agencies.

3. Medical Support: diagnosis and treatment of physical illnesses, addiction rehabilitation where necessary, and access to healthcare services.

4. Educational and Cultural Support: compulsory school enrollment, vocational training tailored to children's interests and abilities, and educational programs designed to enhance social skills and awareness of social risks.

These interventions collectively addressed the psychological, economic, health-related, and educational needs of vulnerable children and contributed to their social reintegration.

5. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that non-penal interventions provide an effective and sustainable framework for protecting working children and adolescents. The integrated model implemented by the Shoq-e Zendegi Complex in Mashhad combines psychological, economic, medical, and educational support to address the root causes of child labor rather than relying solely on punitive criminal justice measures. The analysis further suggests that these comprehensive protective strategies have significantly contributed to reducing the number of working children in Mashhad and may serve as a practical model for child protection policies in other jurisdictions.

6. Keywords

Child Labor, Economic Exploitation, Non-Penal Protection, Child Protection, Developmental Crime Prevention, Shoq-e Zendegi Complex, Iran