

Penal Policy Dilemma: Child Drug Couriers in Indonesia's Juvenile Justice System

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the role and patterns of adolescent involvement as drug couriers in Sumbawa Barat Regency, identify the factors influencing adolescents' vulnerability within drug trafficking networks, and assess the effectiveness of law enforcement and prevention strategies implemented from the perspective of child protection and the juvenile justice system. **The method** of research used is a qualitative approach with a case study strategy thru in-depth interviews with law enforcement officers, field observations, and the study of official documents related to narcotics cases involving adolescents. **The novelty** of this research lies in its specific focus on examining the position of adolescents as drug couriers in the Sumbawa Barat Regency, which has been minimally studied in the literature on juvenile criminal law in Indonesia. **The study's results** indicate that law enforcement against juvenile drug couriers still faces various obstacles, including legal procedures that are not yet fully child-friendly, weak rehabilitative orientation, and lack of coordination between law enforcement agencies and rehabilitation institutions. **This study concludes** that there is a need to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement officers, optimize rehabilitation programs, and consistently apply preventive and restorative approaches so that the handling of drug cases involving adolescents is not only repressive but also capable of sustainably reducing the involvement of adolescents in drug trafficking.

Keywords: Criminal Law Enforcement; Juveniles; Drug Couriers; Restorative Justice

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran dan pola keterlibatan remaja sebagai kurir narkoba di Kabupaten Sumbawa Barat, mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi kerentanan remaja dalam jaringan peredaran narkoba, serta menilai efektivitas penegakan hukum dan strategi pencegahan yang diterapkan dalam perspektif perlindungan anak dan sistem peradilan pidana anak. **Metode** penelitian yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan strategi studi kasus melalui wawancara mendalam dengan aparat penegak hukum, observasi lapangan, serta studi terhadap dokumen resmi terkait perkara narkoba yang melibatkan remaja. **Kebaruan** penelitian ini terletak pada fokus kajian yang secara spesifik menelaah posisi remaja sebagai kurir narkoba di wilayah Kabupaten Sumbawa Barat, yang hingga kini masih minim dikaji dalam literatur hukum pidana anak di Indonesia. **Hasil penelitian** menunjukkan bahwa penegakan hukum terhadap remaja kurir narkoba masih menghadapi berbagai kendala, antara lain prosedur hukum yang belum sepenuhnya ramah anak, lemahnya orientasi rehabilitatif, serta kurangnya koordinasi antar lembaga penegak hukum dan lembaga rehabilitasi. **Penelitian ini menyimpulkan** bahwa

diperlukan penguatan kapasitas aparat penegak hukum, optimalisasi program rehabilitasi, serta penerapan pendekatan preventif dan restoratif secara konsisten agar penanganan perkara narkoba yang melibatkan remaja tidak hanya bersifat represif, tetapi juga mampu menekan angka keterlibatan remaja dalam peredaran narkoba secara berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: *Penegakan Hukum Pidana; Remaja; Kurir Narkoba; Restorative Justice*

1. INTRODUCTION

The circulation and abuse of narcotics in Indonesia is a serious problem that has yet to be fully resolved, as its impact extends beyond criminality to public health, social resilience, and the future of the younger generation. This problem becomes even more complex when adolescents are involved in drug trafficking networks, particularly as couriers, placing them in a vulnerable position both as perpetrators of criminal acts and as victims of exploitation by organized crime.¹ In this context, the state has a constitutional obligation to protect children and adolescents from all forms of violence, exploitation, and practices that jeopardize their future, including involvement in drug-related crimes. This phenomenon not only indicates an increase in the complexity of drug-related crimes but also underscores a shift in criminal patterns that are increasingly targeting vulnerable groups, including children and adolescents, thereby requiring a legal approach that is not merely repressive but also protection-oriented.

Adolescents are an age group that, psychologically and socially, is in the process of self-discovery, with emotional maturity and decision-making abilities that have not yet fully stabilized.² These characteristics make adolescents susceptible to the influence of their surroundings, whether through peer pressure, family economic conditions, or the enticements of certain parties who exploit this vulnerability for the purpose of drug trafficking. In practice, many adolescents are recruited as drug couriers because they are considered easier to manipulate, arouse less suspicion from law enforcement, and face relatively lighter legal consequences compared to adult offenders. This situation indicates that adolescents' involvement in drug-related crimes cannot be separated from broader structural and social issues. Within the framework of juvenile criminal law, this situation reflects that adolescents' involvement in drug-related crimes is closely linked to the concept of vulnerability of children—that is, a situation where children are in a vulnerable position, making them easily exploited by parties with greater power, whether social or economic.

From a legal perspective, adolescents, as legal persons, have a different status than adults, because the juvenile justice system emphasizes the principles of protection, guidance, and rehabilitation, rather than punishment alone.³ Law No. 11 of 2012 on the Juvenile Criminal

¹ Yusup Sukma Christi, Donny Eddy Sam Karauwan, and Alice Ance Bonggoibo, "Juridical Study of the Application of Restorative Justice Towards Minors Who Commit Criminal Offenses of Narcotics Abuse," *HERMENEUTIKA: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum* 8, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.33603/71tksq53>.

² Yuli Fitria, "Kemampuan Adaptasi Psikososial Dengan Kemunculan Perilaku Bermasalah Pada Siswa Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Riset Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (JURMIA)* 2, no. 2 (2022): 119–236, <https://doi.org/10.32665/jurmia.v2i2.510>.

³ Robi Maula and Yusuf Saifullah, "Perlindungan Hukum Terhadap Anak Menjadi Kurir Narkoba," *JHP 17 (Jurnal Hasil Penelitian)* 6, no. 2 (2021): 16–22.

Justice System stipulates that the handling of juvenile cases must prioritize the best interests of the child and emphasize a restorative approach.⁴ However, in the practice of law enforcement regarding narcotics offenses, adolescents acting as couriers are often still predominantly positioned as criminals, resulting in a repressive approach taking precedence over rehabilitative and preventive approaches. Various studies on juvenile criminal law indicate that a repressive approach toward children in narcotics cases frequently conflicts with the principle of the best interest of the child and the objectives of the juvenile criminal justice system-which emphasize rehabilitation and social reintegration-thereby creating tension with the humanistic principles of child protection.

This situation is also evident in West Sumbawa Regency, which in recent years has seen drug cases involving adolescents as couriers. This phenomenon raises questions regarding the extent to which law enforcement officials in the region have implemented child protection principles in criminal law enforcement, as well as whether the mechanisms applied have been able to strike a balance between the interests of legal enforcement and efforts to safeguard the future of adolescents. Therefore, this study is important for critically evaluating the effectiveness of criminal law enforcement against adolescent drug couriers in the local context of West Sumbawa Regency.

A number of previous studies have examined the issue of children involved in drug-related crimes from various perspectives. Furthermore, Feryliyan (2023) emphasizes the importance of legal protection for children serving as drug couriers based on the principles of the Juvenile Criminal Justice System; however, his analysis is primarily descriptive and normative and does not yet address the empirical dynamics of law enforcement agencies in the region.⁵ Nugroho (2025), for example, examines the provisions on criminal sanctions against children in the Narcotics Law using a normative approach, thereby providing insight into the positive legal framework governing children as perpetrators of narcotics-related crimes. However, this study has not specifically highlighted the role of children or adolescents as couriers in law enforcement practices in certain regions.⁶ Putri (2025) also examines legal protection for children in drug-related cases through a normative legal approach; however, her analysis is limited to the relationship between the Narcotics Act and the Child Protection Act, without delving deeply into the challenges of implementation in practice.⁷ Nevertheless, most of these studies still focus on normative approaches and have not yet incorporated empirical analysis of law enforcement practices on the ground. Furthermore, studies that

⁴ Wahab Aznul Hidayat, "Penerapan Diversi Dalam Sistem Peradilan Pidana Anak," *JUSTISI* 5, no. 2 (2019): 84–96, <https://doi.org/10.33506/js.v5i2.543>.

⁵ Achmad Feryliyan and Nur Aisyah Komariah, "Tinjauan Yuridis Mengenai Anak Dibawah Umur Sebagai Kurir Dalam Tindak Pidana Narkoba," *Justice Pro: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum* 4, no. 2 (2023): 18–24, <https://doi.org/10.53027/jp.v4i2.106>.

⁶ Tri Nugroho Akbar, "Penegakan Hukum Terhadap Anak Dalam Kasus Tindak Pidana Narkotika Berdasarkan UU No. 35 Tahun 2009," *Jurnal Thengkyang* 9, no. 2 (2024): 105–14.

⁷ Ni Made Dhea Anggraeni Putri et al., "Pidana Alternatif Sebagai Instrumen Perlindungan Anak Yang Berperan Sebagai Manus Ministra Dalam Kejahatan Narkotika," *Al-Zayn: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial & Hukum* 4, no. 1 (2026): 721–27, <https://doi.org/10.61104/alz.v4i1.3136>.

directly link theories of juvenile criminal law-particularly restorative approaches and child protection-with the realities of handling drug cases at the local level remain relatively limited.

Based on this state of the art, it is evident that previous studies have made significant contributions to elucidating the normative aspects and legal protection of children in drug-related cases; however, there remains a gap in research that directly links legal norms with law enforcement practices regarding adolescents serving as drug couriers in specific regions. Thus, there is a research gap in the form of an incomplete study regarding the implementation of criminal law against adolescents as drug couriers in empirical practice, including the obstacles and patterns of handling, as well as the lack of integration of normative, theoretical, and empirical approaches, which has the potential to disregard the best interests of the child.

Addressing this gap, this study offers a novel focus by specifically analyzing the enforcement of criminal law against adolescent drug couriers in West Sumbawa Regency using an empirical-juridical approach. This study not only examines applicable normative provisions but also explores the actual practices of law enforcement officials, including the roles of investigators, prosecutors, and judges, as well as the implementation barriers faced within the juvenile criminal justice system. Furthermore, this study evaluates the effectiveness of criminal sanctions imposed on adolescent drug couriers and their implications for the principles of legal certainty, justice, and child protection.

Thus, the objective of this study is to analyze the roles and patterns of adolescent involvement as drug couriers in West Sumbawa Regency, examine the factors influencing why adolescents are easily recruited into drug trafficking networks, and assess law enforcement efforts while formulating effective, humane, and just prevention strategies in accordance with child protection principles within Indonesia's juvenile criminal justice system. It is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to the development of juvenile criminal justice policies that are more responsive, humane, and contextually appropriate, particularly in the handling of drug cases involving adolescents.

2. METHOD

This study is an empirical legal research project that employs a qualitative approach and a case study methodology to analyze the enforcement of criminal law against adolescent drug couriers in West Sumbawa Regency.⁸ A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the social, psychological, and legal contexts and to capture the real-life experiences of those involved. The study is descriptive-analytical in nature, focusing on law enforcement practices, the challenges faced by law enforcement officials, and the factors influencing the involvement of adolescents as drug couriers. The approaches used include the statute approach to examine legislation related to narcotics and the juvenile criminal justice system, as well as the conceptual approach to analyze the concepts of child protection, restorative justice, and juvenile criminal responsibility. Research data were

⁸ Zuchri Abdussamad, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif* (CV. syakir Media Press, 2021).

obtained from primary, secondary, and tertiary legal sources.

Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with law enforcement officials, community leaders, and several adolescents involved in narcotics cases, while secondary data was obtained from official documents, police reports, and relevant literature. Primary legal materials include legislation, specifically the Narcotics Act and the Juvenile Criminal Justice System Act. Secondary legal materials consist of books, scientific journals, and relevant previous research findings. Tertiary legal materials include legal dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other supporting sources. Data collection techniques used semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to obtain comprehensive and valid information.⁹ The collected data was then analyzed using thematic analysis, involving coding, theme grouping, and interpretation to identify patterns and relationships among factors. The analysis was conducted qualitatively by interpreting empirical data and relating it to the applicable legal framework, thereby yielding a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between normative aspects and field practices. The analysis also considered the legal, social, and psychological contexts of adolescents, ensuring that the research conclusions could depict law enforcement practices in a holistic and realistic manner. This approach is expected to identify challenges, opportunities for improvement, and provide relevant recommendations for enhancing the legal system and adolescent rehabilitation programs in West Sumbawa Regency.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Law Enforcement Against Children Used as Drug Couriers

Based on the results of field research, it was found that adolescents aged 19–25 who act as drug couriers in West Sumbawa Regency play a fairly complex role within the drug distribution network, which is not limited to merely delivering goods but often involves serving as intermediaries between core dealers and local consumers.¹⁰ Adolescents in this age group are often exploited by drug trafficking networks because they are seen as easier to control, highly mobile, and relatively unlikely to arouse significant suspicion from law enforcement officials. Furthermore, adolescents' adaptability to their environment, their willingness to take risks, and the fact that they are subject to less social oversight than adults make them strategic targets in drug distribution activities.¹¹ In practice, the roles of adolescents as couriers vary, ranging from picking up packages at specific locations, delivering goods to distribution points, to engaging in simple communication with buyers or local dealers. This pattern of involvement generally follows a course predetermined by the network's controllers, in which couriers are given detailed instructions regarding routes, delivery times, and the quantity of goods to be transported, indicating the presence of a systematic organizational structure despite the use

⁹ Rukin, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif Edisi Revisi*, ed. Abdul Rofiq (Surabaya: Jakad Media Publishing, 2021).

¹⁰ Maidin Gultom and Holong TM Silitonga, "Perlindungan Hukum Terhadap Anak Yang Menjadi Perantara/Kurir Dalam Transaksi Narkoba," *Fiat Iustitia: Jurnal Hukum* 5, no. 2 (2025): 153–60.

¹¹ Marsella Artika Sari Dewi et al., "Analisis Yuridis Eksploitasi Pada Remaja Sebagai Kurir Pengedar Narkotika," *Jatijajar Law Review* 4, no. 2 (2025): 113–24, <https://doi.org/10.26753/jlr.v4i2.1659>.

of young individuals.¹²

The findings indicate that adolescents in this context do not fully act as principal perpetrators, but rather tend to occupy subordinate positions within organized criminal networks. However, in law enforcement practice, authorities still frequently treat adolescents as principal perpetrators without considering the power dynamics within these networks. This reflects a tendency toward a repressive approach that is not yet fully aligned with the principle of child protection within the juvenile criminal justice system.

Further analysis indicates that adolescents' involvement in these networks is not homogeneous but is influenced by their social position and environment. Adolescents from low-income families or those with limited access to formal education are more frequently recruited as couriers due to the lure of quick income.¹³ In some cases, adolescents who previously had a wide social circle within a particular community are easily recruited because drug networks exploit these friendships to facilitate recruitment and distribution. This pattern of involvement is also linked to psychological aspects of adolescent development, specifically the phase of identity exploration and the need for social recognition, which makes them more vulnerable to peer pressure and persuasion. Erikson's theory of adolescent development emphasizes that individuals at this age are in the "identity versus role confusion" phase, leading them to seek experiences that provide a sense of acceptance and appreciation, including through groups that offer quick money and a certain social status.¹⁴ These findings underscore that the role of adolescents as drug couriers cannot be narrowly understood merely as criminal activity, but must be analyzed within the social, economic, and psychological contexts that influence their behavior. Although the legal framework established by the Juvenile Criminal Justice System Act has emphasized a rehabilitative approach, practices on the ground indicate that the handling of drug cases remains dominated by a punitive orientation. This situation indicates a discrepancy between protective legal norms and implementation that remains punishment-oriented.

In addition to internal factors, the recruitment and distribution mechanisms operated by drug networks in West Sumbawa Regency reveal a well-organized and coordinated operational system. According to police officials, recruited adolescents are generally assigned to relatively safe delivery routes and provided with specific instructions to evade surveillance and utilize communication methods that are difficult to trace. Many adolescents also use

¹² M. Abi Febriansyah and Zainudin Hasan, "Upaya Perlindungan Hukum Terhadap Pelaku Anak Di Bawah Umur Yang Terlibat Sebagai Kurir Narkotika," *Jurnal Hukum, Politik Dan Ilmu Sosial* 4, no. 3 (2025): 110–14, <https://doi.org/10.55606/jhps.v3i4.4477>.

¹³ Muhammad Taufan Yantika, "Penerapan Hukum Pada Tahap Penyidikan Terhadap Anak Sebagai Kurir Dalam Tindak Pidana Penyalahgunaan Narkotika (Studi Pada Direktorat Reserse Narkoba Polda Sumatera Barat)," *UNES Journal of Swara Justisia* 6, no. 2 (2022): 156–68, <https://doi.org/10.31933/ujsj.v6i2>.

¹⁴ Adlia Maulida, Hery Wibowo, and Binahayati Rusyidi, "Rancang Bangun Model Pengembangan Kegiatan Pendampingan Sosial Pada Remaja Generasi Z Dalam Mengatasi Krisis Identitas," *Share: Social Work Journal* 13, no. 1 (2023): 92–101, <https://doi.org/10.45814/share.v13i1.46633>.

aliases or specific disguise techniques to minimize the risk of arrest, indicating that the network employs adaptive operational patterns by exploiting loopholes in the surveillance system. This situation reflects that adolescents are positioned as the frontline in the distribution process because they are considered to have high mobility and a relatively lower legal risk; thus, their age and social circumstances are exploited to enhance distribution efficiency while simultaneously reducing the potential for the network to be uncovered by law enforcement.¹⁵

Within the context of the juvenile criminal justice system, case resolution should prioritize diversion mechanisms as a form of resolution outside the formal judicial process. However, in drug-related cases, the application of diversion often faces obstacles due to the severe criminal penalties stipulated in the Narcotics Act. As a result, law enforcement officials tend to proceed with the case through the judicial process, thereby limiting the scope for applying restorative approaches.

The patterns of adolescent involvement also reflect a combination of voluntary behavior and external pressure. Some adolescents consciously choose to become couriers due to economic necessity or social pressure, while others are recruited through coercion, threats, or psychological manipulation by the network.¹⁶ Field research shows that adolescents recruited voluntarily are typically motivated to earn extra income quickly, whereas those recruited involuntarily are more prone to stress, fear, and dependence on the controlling group. This combination of internal and external factors indicates that law enforcement cannot focus solely on punishing individual couriers but must also address the conditions that drive their involvement. These conditions indicate that the failure to implement diversion is not solely due to legal factors, but also to a law enforcement paradigm that still treats children as objects of punishment. In fact, given their role as couriers, adolescents should more appropriately be positioned as victims of exploitation by drug networks, so a rehabilitative approach should be prioritized. Social Criminology theory indicates that economic pressure, low social status, and weak family supervision can be the primary factors driving adolescents to follow the criminal patterns offered by drug networks.

Furthermore, distribution patterns involving adolescents also demonstrate adaptation to the local context. West Sumbawa Regency, with its semi-urban geography and relatively vast territory, allows drug networks to station adolescents at strategic points near centers of social activity and transportation. Field observations reveal that distribution routes are structured in such a way that young couriers can move quickly, minimize interaction with law enforcement, and leverage informal communication networks within the community. This highlights the level of professionalism within drug networks that exploit weaknesses in the local surveillance

¹⁵ Asnidar Kuba, Salmi, and Hisma Kahman, "Peran Kepolisian Dalam Penanganan Kasus Tindak Pidana Peredaran Narkotika Jenis Sabu Di Kabupaten Luwu (Studi Kasus Polres Luwu)," *Jurnal Tana Mana* 6, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.33648/jtm.v6i2.1264>.

¹⁶ Syahfa Rizi Rasta Buana, Famelinda Carera, and Fabiola Nurul Oktavianingrum, "Analisis Kebijakan Kriminal Terhadap Anak Sebagai Kurir Narkotika Dalam Perspektif Hukum Pidana," *Jurnal Fakta Hukum* 3, no. 1 (2024): 11–18, <https://doi.org/10.58819/jfh.v3i1.125>.

system, while simultaneously reinforcing the vulnerability of adolescents as the primary “link” in drug distribution. These findings underscore the need for a law enforcement approach that is not only repressive but also adaptive to network strategies to protect adolescents from exploitation. An analysis of court rulings in narcotics cases involving children indicates that judges still tend to impose prison sentences rather than alternative sanctions such as rehabilitation. Judges’ considerations generally focus on the elements of criminal proof and the penalties stipulated in the Narcotics Act, while aspects of child protection and the child’s role as a victim of exploitation have not yet fully become primary considerations.

From a social perspective, adolescents’ involvement as drug couriers is often accompanied by significant psychological risks, including emotional strain, stress, and the potential for addiction. Adolescents involved in drug trafficking networks tend to experience an internal conflict between the desire to earn money and the fear of legal consequences or personal safety risks.¹⁷ Field observations and interviews indicate that some adolescents develop risky coping strategies, such as hiding from others or cutting off communication with their families, which in turn can worsen their psychological condition. This phenomenon suggests that analyses of adolescent involvement must take into account mental health dimensions-not merely criminal behavior-so that law enforcement can be carried out with a humane, rehabilitation-based approach. This indicates a tendency toward legal formalism in court rulings, where judges prioritize legal certainty over substantive justice for children. Consequently, the criminal justice system’s objectives to protect and rehabilitate children have not been fully achieved.

The patterns of adolescent involvement as drug couriers in West Sumbawa Regency exhibit multifactorial characteristics. The roles they play, recruitment mechanisms, and the networks’ ability to adapt to local conditions reveal complex relationships between individual, social, economic, and structural factors. This analytical perspective underscores that the effectiveness of law enforcement cannot be separated from a comprehensive understanding of adolescent behavior, the dynamics of drug trafficking networks, and the interactions between the two. Therefore, legal interventions should not be solely focused on criminal punishment but should also be directed toward protecting adolescents from exploitation by criminal networks and redirecting them toward more constructive rehabilitation and educational processes. Consequently, a reorientation of law enforcement policy is needed-one that does not focus solely on the imposition of criminal sanctions but also prioritizes restorative approaches, the optimization of diversion, and the strengthening of the role of rehabilitation institutions to ensure the substantive protection of children’s rights.

The phenomenon of teenagers serving as drug couriers in West Sumbawa Regency reflects the network’s adaptation to local conditions and community culture. Field observations

¹⁷ I Gede Darmawan Ardika, I Nyoman Sujana, and I Made Minggu Widyantara, “Penegakan Hukum Terhadap Penyalahgunaan Tindak Pidana Narkotika,” *Jurnal Konstruksi Hukum* 1, no. 2 (2020): 286–90, <https://doi.org/10.22225/jkh.1.2.2569.286-290>.

indicate that young couriers often take advantage of the vast geographical terrain and the lack of routine law enforcement patrols, allowing for efficient drug distribution. The network provides informal training on delivery strategies, communication, and risk management for couriers, which ultimately enhances the effectiveness of their distribution operations. The role of adolescents is not merely physical but also strategic in reducing the likelihood of detection by authorities. This indicates that drug networks demonstrate a high level of professionalism in exploiting weaknesses in the local system.¹⁸ In addition, the network exploits adolescents' emotional loyalty to their group, making it difficult for them to break free from their role as couriers. This psychological aspect is further reinforced by fear of threats or intimidation from the network's leaders. This pattern underscores that legal interventions must account for the complexity of adolescents' roles and motivations, ensuring that approaches are not merely punitive but also rehabilitative. Without a holistic approach, law enforcement strategies are only temporary and fail to address structural issues.

The involvement of teenagers as couriers is also linked to modern communication technologies, including social media and instant messaging apps. Teenagers use digital devices to coordinate deliveries, change locations, and communicate with dealers and recipients, enabling distribution to take place quickly and making it harder for law enforcement to detect.¹⁹ This analysis highlights the need for law enforcement agencies to develop digital policing capabilities to monitor the activities of criminal networks. Additionally, digital literacy among adolescents is a critical factor, as a lack of understanding about digital footprints makes them more vulnerable to exploitation. Prevention and rehabilitation strategies need to incorporate digital education as part of their guidance programs. The role of families and schools in fostering digital literacy is crucial to ensure that adolescents can resist the enticements of criminal networks through digital platforms. With this approach, the risk of adolescent involvement in drug trafficking can be more effectively mitigated.

Adolescents' involvement as couriers also affects their social relationships within the community. Some adolescents involved report social isolation due to negative stigma from peers and neighbors, while others experience the normalization of criminal behavior because their peers are also involved. This situation gives rise to complex social dynamics, in which adolescents tend to align their behavior with their group's norms.²⁰ Adolescents' involvement as couriers also affects their social relationships within the community. Some adolescents involved report social isolation due to negative stigma from peers and neighbors, while others experience the normalization of criminal behavior because their peers are also involved. This

¹⁸ Musran and Hamdan Azhar Siregar, "Criminal Law Policy in Efforts to Combat Narcotics Crimes by Minors," *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI-Journal)* 4, no. 4 (2021): 7775–84, <https://doi.org/10.33258/birci.v4i4.2696.7775>.

¹⁹ Roiyah Ulfa Siregar and Mairul, "Analisis Putusan Hakim Terhadap Tindak Pidana Narkotika Yang Dilakukan Anak Dibawah Umur (Studi Kasus Putusan No 1/PID.SUS-ANAK/2025/PN LBS)," *Court Review: Jurnal Penelitian Hukum* 5, no. 05 (2025): 252–59, <https://doi.org/10.69957/cr.v5i05.2439>.

²⁰ Samsul Arifin, "Pertanggungjawaban Pidana Terhadap Anak Sebagai Kurir Narkotika," *Justitia Jurnal Hukum* 1, no. 6 (2021): 136–42, <https://doi.org/10.30651/justitia.v6i1.8225>.

situation gives rise to complex social dynamics, in which adolescents tend to align their behavior with their group's norms.²¹

The involvement of adolescents in drug trafficking highlights the urgent need for a multi-layered prevention system. Interventions should not focus solely on law enforcement agencies but must also include legal education programs, family strengthening, and the provision of realistic economic alternatives. For example, skills training, entrepreneurship activities, and the formation of productive social groups can reduce adolescents' reliance on quick income from drugs. These efforts must be consistent and sustained to have a long-term impact. This analysis confirms that the pattern of adolescent involvement as couriers is a multifactorial issue requiring cross-sectoral collaboration. Without a holistic approach, law enforcement efforts will lose their effectiveness, and adolescent involvement will continue to recur.

3.2 Factors That Make Teenagers Vulnerable to Being Recruited as Drug Couriers

Field analysis results indicate that adolescents' involvement in drug trafficking networks in West Sumbawa Regency is influenced by a combination of economic, social, and psychological factors, as well as a weak oversight system. Economic factors play a dominant role, as many adolescents come from families with limited financial means and have little access to formal education or employment opportunities. These limitations drive adolescents to seek quick ways to earn income, making them more likely to accept offers to become drug couriers. In such situations, relatively small monetary rewards, such as Rp100,000 to Rp200,000 per delivery, are considered sufficiently attractive because they are perceived as a temporary solution to meet personal needs or help support the family's economy.

These circumstances indicate that adolescents involved as drug couriers cannot be viewed solely as criminals, but also as victims of exploitation by drug networks that take advantage of their economic and social vulnerabilities. A number of studies show that children are deliberately recruited as couriers because they are considered more easily influenced, face lighter legal consequences, and are subject to a legal system that offers greater protection compared to adult offenders.

In addition to economic factors, social pressures and peer groups play a significant role in the recruitment of adolescents. Adolescents who lack recognition or attention from their families often seek out alternative social groups that can provide a sense of belonging. In this context, drug networks offer a seemingly welcoming community and provide a social identity, thereby capitalizing on adolescents' psychological need for recognition and a sense of belonging.²² Social criminology theory explains that young individuals with a strong need for affiliation tend to be influenced by their reference groups, making them more susceptible to manipulation into engaging in illegal activities. Field observations also indicate that

²¹ Wakhidatul Mubarakah and Anis Widyawati, "Teori Diferential Association Edwin Sutherland Dalam Tindak Pidana Pencurian Ringan," *Jurnal Hukum Dan Kewarganegaraan* 11, no. 7 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.8734/CAUSA.v1i2.365>.

²² M. Faiz et al., "Penegakan Hukum Tindak Pidana Penyalahgunaan Narkotika Oleh Anak Di Kota Bandar Lampung," *Jurnal Review Pendidikan Dan Pengajaran (JPPP)* 7, no. 2 (2024): 5166–74, <https://doi.org/10.31004/jrpp.v7i2.27686>.

recruitment often occurs through social networks, where a teenager already involved recruits their friends, creating a domino effect in the distribution of young couriers. This recruitment pattern indicates the existence of exploitative relationships that position adolescents as tools within criminal networks, rather than as primary actors. From the perspective of juvenile criminal law, this situation should shift the approach from punishment toward protection, as children's involvement is largely influenced by manipulation and environmental pressure.

Psychological factors also play a critical role in adolescents' involvement as couriers. Between the ages of 19 and 25, individuals are in a phase of identity formation and the pursuit of independence, as described by Erikson in his theory of psychosocial development. Adolescents in this phase tend to make impulsive decisions and give little consideration to long-term consequences, including legal and health risks. The findings of this study indicate that adolescents recruited as couriers often downplay the risks, view this work as merely temporary, and focus on quick profits. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of legal and health literacy, where adolescents do not fully understand that their involvement can result in lengthy prison sentences and physical and mental health issues caused by narcotics. In this context, a fundamental question arises regarding whether adolescents serving as drug couriers should be subject to criminal punishment or whether a rehabilitative approach is more appropriate. Considering their role and position within the network, repressive criminalization risks overlooking the fact that they are victims of exploitation; thus, a rehabilitative and supportive approach is more relevant to ensure a secure future for these young people.

Weak social supervision, both at the family and community levels, contributes to the ease with which adolescents are recruited. Many parents are busy working or lack the ability to detect deviant behavior in their children, resulting in suboptimal supervision. A weak social environment, including declining communication among residents and a lack of active community forums, creates opportunities for drug networks to access adolescents. This is supported by the findings of Dewi et al. (2020), which indicate that adolescents from environments with low social supervision face a higher risk of involvement in drug-related crimes because criminal networks exploit these gaps for recruitment and distribution. As a country that has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Indonesia has an obligation to prioritize the principle of the best interests of the child in every legal process. This implies that the handling of children involved in criminal offenses, including as drug couriers, must emphasize protection, guidance, and rehabilitation over punishment.

Structural factors, such as disparities in welfare between regions, also influence adolescent involvement. West Sumbawa Regency, despite experiencing economic growth in the industrial and mining sectors, still has areas with a significant proportion of the population living in lower-middle-income conditions. Adolescents from these areas have limited access to quality education and employment opportunities, making them more vulnerable to offers to become drug couriers. The fact that children are often exploited precisely because the legal system provides special protections highlights the abuse of child protection principles by drug

networks. This situation requires law enforcement officials to be more careful in distinguishing between the primary perpetrators and victims of exploitation, so that children are not criminalized. These findings confirm that local structural and contextual factors play a significant role in facilitating the recruitment of adolescents; therefore, prevention strategies must take local conditions into account and provide realistic alternatives for adolescents, such as job training or skills development programs.

Peer pressure and a culture of risk are also factors that cannot be ignored. Adolescents tend to mimic the behavior of their peers, and if their social environment views involvement with drugs as "normal" or even prestigious, their likelihood of being recruited increases. Interview data indicate that adolescents with peers involved in drug distribution often feel compelled to participate in order to maintain their social status or avoid group rejection. These findings align with Bandura's social learning theory, which posits that individual behavior is learned through observation and imitation of models in one's environment, including criminal behavior.²³

In addition, psychological manipulation by drug networks is also a key factor that facilitates the recruitment of adolescents. Network leaders often use strategies involving persuasion, threats, and rewards to convince adolescents to become couriers. Adolescents with unmet economic, psychological, and social needs are easy targets.²⁴ This study found that this manipulation often occurs gradually, with adolescents starting in minor roles and eventually taking on greater responsibilities, making it difficult for them to leave the network without significant risk.

From a legal and social perspective, this combination of economic, psychological, social, and structural factors underscores that the recruitment of adolescents as drug couriers is not solely driven by criminal intent, but rather results from the complex interplay of various mutually reinforcing factors. This indicates that law enforcement efforts focused solely on repressive measures against young couriers are insufficient, as they fail to address the root causes of their involvement. Effective intervention must integrate legal, rehabilitation, educational, and social supervision approaches to break the cycle of adolescent recruitment. An approach that emphasizes only punishment is not only ineffective but also has the potential to reinforce the cycle of adolescent involvement in drug networks. Therefore, a rehabilitative approach integrated with social protection and economic empowerment is more appropriate for addressing children serving as drug couriers.

The final paragraph of this subsection emphasizes that understanding the factors that make adolescents vulnerable to recruitment is key to designing more effective prevention

²³ Mei Nita Bela Sari Hutaeruk and Rosdiana, "Pengaruh Pergaulan Teman Sebaya Terhadap Tingkat Kenakalan Remaja Di Kelurahan Hutabaringan Kota Sibolga," *Khatulistiwa: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Sosial Humaniora* 5, no. 3 (2025): 60–78, <https://doi.org/10.55606/khatulistiwa.v5i3.6542>.

²⁴ Ade Irawan, Alwan Hadiyanto, and Ciptono Ciptono, "Kebijakan Kriminal Anak Dalam Kasus Narkotika: Perspektif Restorative Justice," *Jurnal Usm Law Review* 8, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.26623/julr.v8i2.11961>.

strategies. Legal and social interventions must take into account adolescents' economic, psychological, and environmental circumstances, as well as facilitate positive alternatives such as education, skills training, and community-based productive activities. With this holistic approach, not only can the risk of adolescents becoming involved in drug networks be reduced, but their well-being and psychosocial development can also be safeguarded. Thus, the handling of children as drug couriers must be placed within a child protection framework, where rehabilitation, diversion, and social reintegration are prioritized over criminal punishment, to ensure the comprehensive fulfillment of children's rights.

Psychological and emotional factors among adolescents play a significant role in facilitating their recruitment as drug couriers. Field observations indicate that adolescents who suffer from low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, or a history of academic failure are more easily swayed by the promise of social recognition from criminal networks. Drug networks exploit these psychological vulnerabilities by offering a sense of belonging, social status, and temporary financial gain. This phenomenon underscores the importance of psychological interventions, such as counseling, mentoring programs, and character-building initiatives, to strengthen adolescents' emotional resilience. Without psychological support, adolescents tend to become easy targets for criminal networks and find it difficult to break free from their roles as couriers.

Limited access to formal education is also a key determinant. Adolescents who have dropped out of school or have a low level of education tend to have limited understanding of legal and social risks, making them more susceptible to manipulative information from criminal networks. The findings of this study indicate that alternative education and skills training can reduce such vulnerability. By providing opportunities for learning and self-development, adolescents can gain access to legal and safe alternative sources of income. This demonstrates that education is not merely a right, but also a crucial preventive tool in reducing juvenile delinquency.

Social environmental factors, including peer pressure, also influence adolescent involvement. Friends who are already involved in drug distribution have a significant influence on adolescents' decisions to participate. Observations show that adolescents in peer groups with deviant behavior are more likely to become couriers. Prevention strategies should emphasize the formation of positive peer groups, mentoring, and productive social activities. Group-based interventions can leverage peer dynamics to encourage positive behavior and reduce the risk of involvement in criminal activity.

Structural and economic factors remain the primary determinants, interacting with psychological and social factors. Economic disparities, limited job opportunities, and a lack of youth empowerment programs make it easier for drug networks to recruit young couriers.²⁵

²⁵ Paulus H. Sinaga, "Kebijakan Penanggulangan Kejahatan Dengan Sarana Penal Dan Non Penal Terhadap Tindak Pidana Narkoba Anak Sebagai Pelaku Di Wilayah Hukum Polrestabes Medan," *Journal of Education, Humaniora and Social Sciences (JEHSS)* 5, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.34007/jehss.v5i4.1741>.

This study confirms that the recruitment of adolescents is not merely an individual issue, but a systemic problem that requires cross-sectoral intervention. An integrated approach encompassing economic, educational, social, and legal dimensions constitutes a more effective and sustainable preventive strategy.

3.3 Law Enforcement Efforts and Effective, Humane, and Fair Prevention Strategies

Legal proceedings against adolescents acting as drug couriers in West Sumbawa Regency must be conducted through an effective, humane, and fair approach, focusing not only on enforcement but also prioritizing rehabilitation and prevention. In practice, law enforcement agencies have taken various law enforcement measures, such as arresting couriers and local dealers, seizing evidence, and conducting investigations in accordance with criminal law provisions. However, this approach tends to be short-term and does not address the root of the problem, as drug trafficking networks are still able to recruit other adolescents as replacements after previous couriers are arrested. This situation indicates that law enforcement focused solely on arresting couriers has not been sufficiently effective in completely breaking the drug distribution chain.²⁶

To create a more equitable strategy, legal efforts must combine formal legal approaches with youth rehabilitation programs. Field research has found that most adolescents involved as couriers are still in the phase of identity formation and character development; therefore, an approach that emphasizes psychosocial recovery and legal education can help reduce the risk of recidivism. Rehabilitation programs involving psychological support, family counseling, and community-based productive activities have been shown to increase adolescents' awareness of the risks of criminal behavior and provide legal alternatives for earning an income. This approach aligns with the principles of restorative justice, where adolescents are not merely punished but are also given the opportunity to correct their behavior and contribute positively back to society.

In addition, coordination among law enforcement agencies, local governments, educational institutions, and the community plays a crucial role in creating a comprehensive prevention system. Research data indicates that weak collaboration is often one of the causes of failure in strategies to address adolescent involvement in drug trafficking. For example, the lack of legal education programs in schools and communities leaves adolescents unaware of the legal consequences of their actions. Therefore, integration between repressive and educational efforts is necessary, including legal counseling, character building, and skills training that can expand economic opportunities for adolescents so they have healthier and legal alternatives to becoming couriers.

Family factors are also a crucial component of prevention strategies. Interview results indicate that adolescents with close family supervision and emotional support are more likely

²⁶ Arya Nurridad, Sahban, and Hasnan Hasbi, "Efektivitas Penegakan Hukum Oleh Kepolisian Terhadap Pelaku Tindak Pidana Narkotika," *Legal Dialogica* 1, no. 1 (2025): 1–15.

to refuse offers to become couriers, while those who receive less attention are more vulnerable to recruitment. Therefore, family empowerment programs—including parenting training, understanding the risks of drugs, and improving communication between parents and adolescents—need to be integrated into prevention policies. These efforts align with the multilevel prevention approach in criminological literature, where prevention is conducted not only at the individual level but also within the family and community environments.

Humanistic law enforcement efforts also include the protection of adolescents' rights during legal proceedings. This study found that although police officers adhere to legal procedures, limited legal assistance and adolescents' lack of understanding of their rights often pose obstacles. The implementation of adequate legal assistance, including access to advocates, the involvement of child protection agencies, and simple explanations of legal rights, can help adolescents understand the legal process, reduce fear, and support their reintegration into society after rehabilitation.

Community-based preventive strategies are also a key factor in reducing adolescent involvement in crime. Field observations indicate that villages or neighborhoods with active community forums, consistent youth activities, and routine environmental monitoring have lower rates of adolescent involvement compared to areas without strong community systems. This underscores that the community's role in building social control, providing positive outlets for adolescents, and detecting suspicious activities early on is vital to complement law enforcement efforts.

Furthermore, legal education and drug literacy among adolescents must be enhanced. Research data indicates that the majority of adolescents still have limited understanding of the legal, health, and social risks associated with drug trafficking. Interactive and context-specific educational programs—such as workshops, social campaigns, and case simulations—can raise adolescents' awareness, enabling them to make safer and more responsible decisions. This approach not only reduces criminal risks but also builds adolescents' capacity to become agents of positive change within their social environments.

From a policy perspective, this study emphasizes the importance of integrating law enforcement with evidence-based rehabilitation programs. Effective strategies must balance repressive actions against major drug dealers with protection and rehabilitation for adolescent couriers. This includes risk mapping, continuous monitoring, and strengthening the capacity of law enforcement to identify adolescents requiring more intensive intervention. This study indicates that without such integration, law enforcement efforts risk becoming ineffective and unjust, as they merely target young couriers without disrupting the larger criminal networks.

The final paragraph of this subsection emphasizes that humane, effective, and just law enforcement efforts must be multidimensional. A combination of legal action, rehabilitation, education, family strengthening, and community participation can create a system that not only reduces the rate of adolescent involvement in drug networks but also promotes their healthy psychosocial development. This strategy constitutes a holistic approach that integrates

legal, social, and psychological aspects, thereby providing a comprehensive response to the issues identified in Subsections I and II, while also establishing a policy foundation for law enforcement agencies, local governments, and the public in addressing adolescent drug couriers in a just manner.

A legal and humanistic prevention strategy must distinguish between adolescent couriers and network controllers. Research indicates that enforcement that fails to differentiate roles can lead to injustice, where adolescents who are victims of exploitation are treated the same as primary dealers. A proportional approach, grounded in restorative justice, can help adolescents understand legal consequences while simultaneously correcting their behavior. These efforts emphasize the need for a balance between legal justice and the interests of adolescent rehabilitation.

Adolescent rehabilitation must incorporate skills training, psychosocial support, and legal literacy. Interview results indicate that adolescents who participate in such rehabilitation programs exhibit lower recidivism rates and better social integration skills. These programs can be coordinated with local governments, schools, and community organizations to ensure sustainability. Through a structured approach, adolescents can discover safe and productive alternative pathways, reducing their reliance on criminal networks.

Strengthening the family as a social unit is also crucial. Research shows that families that actively communicate, supervise, and support adolescent development can reduce children's involvement in drug networks. Parenting training programs, family counseling, and public awareness campaigns can strengthen the family's role in prevention. A strong family serves as the first line of defense against juvenile criminal behavior. Community-based prevention must be integrated with technology and continuous monitoring. Community forums, positive youth activities, and the use of technology for early detection of suspicious activities can help reduce the risk of adolescent involvement. This holistic approach ensures that law enforcement efforts are not merely repressive but also preventive and rehabilitative, thereby creating a system that is humane, just, and sustainable. Collaboration among law enforcement, the government, families, and the community is the key to the success of this strategy.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the involvement of adolescents as drug couriers in West Sumbawa Regency is influenced by economic, social, and psychological factors, as well as a lack of supervision, which places them in a vulnerable position within drug trafficking networks. The findings indicate that adolescents generally occupy a subordinate position and are more appropriately viewed as victims of exploitation rather than primary perpetrators; however, law enforcement practices remain largely repressive, treating them as criminal offenders. This situation highlights a discrepancy between the principles of child protection within the juvenile criminal justice system and their implementation on the ground, particularly regarding the suboptimal application of diversion and rehabilitative approaches. Furthermore, an approach focused on punishment has proven ineffective in breaking the drug trafficking chain because

it does not address the root causes of the problem. Therefore, a reorientation of law enforcement policy is needed that positions children as subjects who must be protected through the optimization of diversion, the strengthening of psychosocially-based rehabilitation programs, and the enhancement of law enforcement officials' capacity to apply child-protection-based approaches. These efforts must be supported by cross-sectoral policies that involve families, communities, and the government in providing educational and economic alternatives for adolescents, ensuring that interventions are not merely repressive but also sustainable and equitable.

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