

Grisly murder case evokes debate on juveniles in the justice system

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Chinese authorities' decision earlier this month to prosecute three minors in a grisly murder case ended weeks of nervous speculation amid a public shocked by their crime.

The Supreme People's Procuratorate's decision means that three students aged between 12 and 14 years old will stand trial for the allegedly premeditated homicide of a classmate and the burial of his body in an abandoned vegetable shed.

The three defendants stand accused of beating a 13-year-old surnamed Wang to death in Hebei Province. The deceased's father called for the death penalty, though that is not legally permitted for people under 18.

The brutality of the case left a question hanging: Would the perpetrators escape punishment because of their ages?

According to the Criminal Law that came into force in 2021, a person between the ages of 12 and 14 years can be held criminally liable for murder or for cruel acts that result in death or serious injury, subject to the approval of the Supreme People's Procuratorate.

This case is not the only one involving juvenile offenders to go to court recently. Last month, the supreme procuratorate approved the prosecution of a 13-year-old from Gansu Province who allegedly murdered an 8-year-old girl in 2022.

These crimes point to the rising seriousness of juvenile crime. According to a white paper issued by the Supreme People's Procuratorate, more than 78,460 juveniles were prosecuted in 2022, a 43-percent rise from 2020.

The prevailing view once was that juvenile offenders should be given a second chance with more lenient sentences because they are not mature enough to take responsibility for their actions. But that concept has been eroded in recent years by an increase in vicious crimes by the young.

In 2020, an amendment of Criminal Law lowered the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years from the original 14. Netizens generally applauded the change.



— Hellorf

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"They are criminals, and now they can't hide behind their ages" was a commonly seen comment on social media. Some online posts even called for juveniles to be treated the same as adults in criminal cases.

In fact, how to treat juvenile offenders is often debated around the world. Gallup's annual crime survey last December found Americans evenly divided on whether to treat juvenile offenders as adults or in the more lenient remit of juvenile courts.

This whole debate has focused attention on the prevention of juvenile crime. Is the rise in violent youth behavior rooted in broken family life and in the education system?

The recent cases in Gansu and Hebei provinces involved "left-behind" children — those raised in rural areas by



The vegetable shed where a 13-year-old's body was discovered. The boy surnamed Wang in Hebei Province was allegedly murdered last month by three of his classmates. — IC

family members while parents migrate to big cities to work. In Hebei, Wang was living with his grandparents while his father worked in a coastal city.

The plight of the estimated 67 million "left-behind" children in the countryside has been the subject of discussion for years, amid studies of the detrimental effects on their lives.

Of course, parents should be responsible for their children's development and activities, but the nucleus of family

life is disrupted when parents are gone for long periods of time. Then, too, schools need to be sensitive to student mental health, providing counseling when problems are identified.

The government, for its part, needs to increase efforts to create positive social environments for minors, with attention on schooling, mental health care and youth employment. Giving children opportunities to thrive is a step toward setting them on the right path in life.