FROM SCHOOL SAFETY TO DELINQUENCY PREVENTION AS SOCIAL AND LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY *(AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF TETOVO)*

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Abstract

School safety is one of the fundamental prerequisites for students' healthy psychosocial, educational, and social development. In the context of contemporary social changes, challenges such as deviant behaviors, peer conflicts, physical violence, cyberbullying, and social exclusion require an integrated approach to juvenile delinquency prevention. This paper addresses the link between school safety and delinquency prevention as an issue requiring shared social and legal responsibility among educational institutions, families, professional services, and the relevant child protection mechanisms.

The study draws on insights from presentations and awareness-raising activities conducted in Tetovo's elementary and secondary schools under the Municipal Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency. During these sessions, students shared their concerns, perceptions, and experiences regarding school safety, peer relationships, and problematic behaviors. At the same time, through surveys of school professional staff, the aim is to identify the challenges educational institutions face in the early detection of risky behaviors, conflict resolution, and the implementation of preventive measures. Special attention is paid to case reporting, interinstitutional cooperation, the role of, school psychologists, and school teachers, as well as the social and legal responsibilities in protecting students.

The main purpose of the paper is to highlight opportunities for early prevention of delinquency, children's rights, the strengthening of professional services, and cooperation between schools and competent institutions.

Keywords: school safety, delinquency, social factors, professional staf, legal responsibility.

1. Introduction

School is not only an institution for transmitting knowledge, but also an important environment for socialization, the formation of norms and values, identity development, and the internalization of patterns of social behavior. For this reason, any form of violence, bullying, discrimination, intimidation, and other behaviors that undermine students' well-being must be treated as issues that simultaneously affect the educational process, social relationships, and the protection of children's rights. The importance of this issue is also emphasized in international documents from the (UNESCO 2019), and in the report *"Behind the Numbers: Ending School Violence and Bullying*," which addresses violence and bullying in schools as phenomena that violate the right of children and adolescents to education, health, and well-being.

When analysing the factors that influence deliquent behaviors in youth, the family holds a central place, as it represents the primary institution of socialization and the environment in which the individual internalizes the initial models of communication, interaction, conflict resolution, and respect for social norms. In Albanian society – including Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia – domestic violence is a problem that negatively affects women and children, as well as families and communities as a whole. Albanians tend to consider domestic violence a private, family matter, even a normal part of family life (Abduli Reka & Beqiri, 2026). However, children's exposure to violence can contribute to the reproduction of aggressive patterns in their interactions with peers in the school environment.

Therefore, preventing delinquent behavior in children and cultivating positive values and attitudes begins in the family, which must provide a safe environment, supported by love, care,

and education, making children aware that violence is not an appropriate way to resolve conflicts. In this regard, the school also plays an important role in children's education by including alternative methods for conflict resolution and violence prevention in its curriculum (Shaqiri, 2020).

2. The Legal Framework for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in the Republic of North Macedonia

The prevention of juvenile delinquency is an important dimension of contemporary criminal policy. It is not limited to responding to unlawful behaviors but also includes identifying and addressing the factors that cause them. Therefore, the protection of children requires an integrated legal, social, and educational approach, with responsibility shared among the family, educational institutions, competent authorities, and the community.

Research in the Republic of North Macedonia shows that delinquent behaviors are not explained solely by individual characteristics but must be viewed in relation to family circumstances, socioeconomic conditions, and the educational environment (Ahmedi, 2025, pp. 279–282). These findings justify the need for preventive policies that address social and institutional circumstances as well as problematic behavior.

The primary legal basis for this matter is the Law on Justice for Children of 2024 (hereinafter: LDF), "Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia," No. 66 of March 20, 2024. It regulates the treatment of children at risk and in conflict with the law, assistance and protection measures, the status of children as victims and witnesses, as well as measures for the prevention of juvenile delinquency (LDF, Article 1). The purpose of the law is to protect children from crime and violence, their proper development, socialization, education, and re-education (LDF, Article 2). Thus, prevention is treated as an integral part of the juvenile justice system and not merely as an activity that precedes criminal intervention.

The fundamental principle is the best interests of the child, which under the law take precedence over other interests, both substantive and procedural (LDF, Article 3). In accordance with this, when determining measures and sanctions, preventive, protective, and educational measures always take precedence (LDF, Article 17). With respect to a child over 14 years old, the competent authorities, as a rule, do not initiate judicial proceedings in order to avoid a harmful impact on them (LDF, Article 19). This approach is of particular importance in the school environment, where problematic behaviors should first be addressed by identifying the causes and providing professional support.

From a criminological-legal perspective, the concept of *a child at risk* is fundamental. Article 21 of the LDF defines a child as a person aged 5 to 18 who is a victim of violence or educational and social neglect, who is not enrolled in the education system, who uses drugs or alcohol, or for whom the exercise of the educational function by parents is impeded. This same article also includes in the categories of children at risk the child who supports or participates in acts of radicalization and violent extremism, which is significant for school safety. The law clearly distinguishes between a child at risk and a child in conflict with the law. In this sense, not every absence from class, peer conflict, or breach of school discipline is a criminal offense, but their recurrence may indicate the need for professional assessment and support.

The school is one of the primary settings for socialization and, because of its daily contact with students, can more quickly notice changes in behavior, violence, and adjustment difficulties. The law provides it with a basis for cooperation with other institutions. In situations of risk, the school notifies the Social Welfare Center, and the Center, the school, and the MPB are obliged to inform each other about the child's behavior and the circumstances that constitute a risk situation (LDF, Article 26(1) and (4)). The Center initiates a confidential procedure to

determine the circumstances of the case (LDF, Article 27) and prepares an individual plan (LDF, Article 29) if it assesses that the risk situation affects the child's development (LDF, Article 24). When parents fail to implement the individual plan of a child at risk over the age of 14, the Center informs the juvenile court judge, who decides on the enforcement of measures (LDF, Article 31(1)). This mechanism aims to ensure that the response is not limited to observing the behavior, but includes assessing the underlying causes and providing support for the child and family.

Findings from empirical research show that the existence of the legal framework has not yet led to a significant decline in juvenile delinquency. Despite the adoption of the Law on Juvenile Justice and institutional efforts toward preventive and restorative approaches, the number of children reported and sentenced has not decreased significantly during the 2022–2024 period (Ahmedi, 2025, pp. 273, 284). This reflects a gap between the normative framework and practical implementation, which is linked to limited financial and human capacities, fragmented coordination, and the absence of e nd integrated data-sharing systems (Ahmedi, 2025, pp. 283-284). Data from the State Statistical Office also highlight factors directly related to the school and family environment. In 2024, 76 of the 300 convicted children were not attending school, compared to 87 in 2022 (State Statistical Office, 2025; Ahmedi, 2025, p. 279). The majority (235) lived with their parents (State Statistical Office, 2025; Ahmedi, 2025, p. 280), which indicates that the quality of family relationships is more important than the formal structure of the family (Ahmedi, 2025, pp. 280-281). At the same time, an increasing influence of a dysfunctional school environment is observed, where bullying, the lack of psychosocial staff, and the presence of outsiders create conditions for conflict (Ahmedi, 2025, p. 283). These findings justify examining legal prevention mechanisms at the school and community levels.

The law also provides special protection for child victims and witnesses. Child victims enjoy the same rights as adult victims and additional rights (LDF, Article 7(1)). They enjoy enhanced protection and support from all institutions, with the aim of reducing negative consequences and encouraging them to seek protection (LDF, Article 7(2)). The child also has the right to be informed about his rights and to express his opinion in the procedures in which he participates (LDF, Article 5). At school, these guarantees carry weight in cases of violence, threats, and bullying. Fear of retaliation and lack of trust in school staff, expressed by the students of Tetova (see "Results," Students' Perspective, theme B), together with shame, as highlighted in the literature (deLara, 2012), can lead to non-reporting. Therefore, effective protection also requires conditions that enable children to express concerns and seek help safely.

For the same reason, school safety is a broader concept than the physical protection of facilities. Access control and space surveillance can prevent incidents, but they do not address the less visible forms of violence, such as bullying, psychological threats, and social exclusion. A safe environment requires relationships of trust between students and staff, access to psychological and pedagogical support, and clear reporting procedures. The findings of this research confirm the importance of these elements: students' express distrust of staff and fear of reporting, highlight the lack of professional personnel relative to the number of students, and demonstrate a deficit of information about their rights and legal consequences (see "Results," Students' Perspective, themes B and C).

Responsibility for prevention is not limited to schools and the justice authorities. The law provides for municipal councils for the prevention of juvenile delinquency, which are appointed by th , on the proposal of the mayor (LDF, Article 181(1)-(2)). Their members are representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, social welfare centers, the parents' council in primary and secondary schools, the secondary school students' union, the Bar Association, of associations, as well as the public prosecutor

and the juvenile judge (LDF, Article 181(3)). The inclusion of parents and students in the composition is important because it gives a direct voice to those affected by the issue.
Municipal councils monitor the situation, take initiatives to improve it, and develop programs to involve the local community in prevention. Annual programs are funded by the municipal budget and other resources, and the councils report on their work at least once a year to the municipal council and to the State Council (LDF, Article 182). The obligation for annual reporting creates a legal basis for evaluating results, an element that, along with the continuity of activities and coordination, is necessary for prevention to have a real impact in practice.
In this context, the experience of the Municipal Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in Tetovo offers an opportunity to examine the link between the legal framework and local practice. Awareness-raising activities in secondary schools, which are one of the data sources for this research, have served not only to inform students but also to highlight concerns about safety, peer relationships, and fear of reporting (see "Results," Students' perspectives, themes A and B).
In conclusion, preventing delinquency in the school environment is a shared legal and social responsibility. The law establishes the principles and mechanisms, while their implementation requires sustained cooperation among the school, the family, social service centers, the police, and local mechanisms. Precisely the relationship between the legal framework, institutional responsibility, and students' experiences is the central dimension of the research on safety in Tetova's high schools.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach, as it analyses students' direct interpretations through observation, discussion, and comparison of responses. This research approach allowed us to examine school safety from two complementary perspectives: students' perceptions and experiences, as well as the professional assessments of school personnel regarding the identification, handling, and prevention of risky behaviors. The study was based on two primary sources of data:
Identifying the concerns expressed by students and the issues they consider important for school safety:

- Surveying professional staff (through open-ended questionnaires), including psychologists, educators, and school principals, who will provide us with data on their perceptions, experiences, and institutional practices regarding school safety and delinquency prevention.

The auxiliary methods that will precede this research are direct observation, interviews, analysis, and comparison.
The research sample are: high school students in direct discussion**,** as well as the managerial, professional, and administrative staff with direct knowledge of school security management, namely:

- *Students aged 16–18 years in all secondary schools in the city of Tetovo.*
- *School Principals n=3*
- *Psychological & Pedagogical Staff - n=8*
- *Administrative Staff - n=2*
- *Teaching staff - n=1*

The study was conducted during the 2025–2026 period in five secondary schools in the city of Tetovo. Since the research questionnaire was preceded by open-ended questions, data collection was conducted using categorical measures, while the qualitative responses were processed through *Thematic Content Analysis* (Naeem et al 2023), by coding elements into key categories. The categorical responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

It should be emphasized that the authors of this paper are members of the Municipal Council for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in Tetovo and have been directly involved in visits to high schools, lectures with students, and the conduct of the survey with school staff (KKPDF, 2024). This gives the paper direct access to the data, but also implies that the authors were participants in the data collection process. To ct the potential impact of this position, the data are presented according to themes that emerged from the meetings and respondents' answers, without being interpreted as an evaluation of the Council's work.

4. Results

4.1 Students' Perspective: Data from the Municipal Council's Delinquency Prevention Awareness Meetings and Focus Groups

Data collected during awareness sessions with the city's high school students highlighted the adolescents' own perceptions of safety, the school environment, and relationships with staff. Content analysis of these meetings revealed several key themes:

A. Climate of insecurity and threats in the school environment:

- Students in most schools reported that they do not feel safe while on school grounds.
- The presence of unauthorized individuals (youth who are not school students) is reported entering school grounds for deviant purposes, including harassing girls and distributing or manipulating narcotic substances.
- Students request the presence of certified physical security staff to manage and prevent direct conflicts on school premises.

B. Institutional barriers, distrust, and fear of reporting:

- Students express fear of reporting cases of violence or breaches of norms due to possible consequences/retaliation from the perpetrators.
- A significant level of distrust toward school staff was identified, which prevents students from openly discussing their problems and concerns.
- Students note that the professional staff (psychologists/educators) are overburdened with administrative work, leaving them with insufficient time for individual or ongoing work with students with behavioral issues.
- The lack of professional staff relative to the total number of students makes it difficult to provide the necessary psychosocial support.

C. Psychological violence and lack of legal awareness:

- Psychological and emotional violence was identified as the most impactful and prevalent form in school environments.
- Students exhibit an information deficit regarding the causes of violence, their rights, and the legal consequences that result from committing delinquent acts.

D. Code of Conduct and School Uniforms:

- Concern was raised about a portion of students not adhering to the dress code. Students emphasized the need to reinforce the regulation requiring the mandatory use of school uniforms in all school areas (not just during class), as a measure to promote equality and make it easier to identify outsiders.

4.2 Employees' Perceptions of School Safety Challenges

The analysis of respondents' answers shows that safety in Tetova's high schools is perceived as a complex issue, which is not limited to the physical protection of the school building, but also includes relationships among students, the presence of outsiders, and institutional capacities for preventing incidents.

Principals and teachers view cooperation as ideal, while *students feel unsafe and are reluctant to report violence for fear of retaliation and distrust*.

Based on Hirschi's (1969) social control theory perspective, weak ties between students and school institutions can weaken trust, a sense of belonging, and willingness to seek help (Hirschi, 1969) In this context, emotional violence and hidden insecurity, expressed through fear of reporting, may go unidentified when students hesitate to approach school staff (deLara, 2012) . deLara's study highlights that shame, a sense of powerlessness, and concern about adult reactions can influence the failure to report bullying. Next, let us analyze the respondents' answers:

A. In response to the question ***"List some problems/challenges related to the security issues your school faces***," the answers were as follows:

- Lack of physical security;
- Persistent lack of police patrols;
- Gambling venues and sports betting shops are too close to the school;
- Peer violence outside the school grounds in the surrounding cafes and betting shops, the sale of alcoholic beverages by nearby vendors;
- Risk of harassment from individuals who frequent gambling establishments;
- A security guard at the school entrance would have helped;
- Physical security from the police is lacking (lack of a security detail);
- A priority issue and challenge is the lack of physical security for the school and students – we have repeatedly requested that the municipality provide a security guard;
- The gas station poses a high risk because it is very close to the school;
- The school's location in a peripheral area of the city poses a risk and creates problematic security situations for students and staff – this fact makes it easier to distribute narcotics and other negative phenomena;
- The interior of the building, the entrance, and the stairwells are also a major problem in the event of an evacuation during any natural disaster;
- Lack of insurance from insurance companies;
- The school does not have a cafeteria or snack bar to provide students with food during breaks, and for this reason they are forced to leave the school grounds, which puts them in an unsafe situation.
- Fights, insults, slurs, beatings, smoking on school grounds, skipping classes;
- Students are REQUIRED to wear uniforms, and security personnel can identify school students from those who are not—the outsiders who come from outside;
- Large number of students, the majority of students are female, the school's geographical location between the University of Tiranë and the "Mosha Pijade" school;
- The school is not fenced (boundaries are not defined);
- There are problems among peers among the students, who need professional help;
- Cafeteria facilities around the school;
- Bullying, drugs, conflicts among students, the need to ensure a safe environment for everyone;
- At our school, we have an employee responsible for the entrance gate to the courtyard who keeps track, to some extent, of who enters and leaves the school.

B. In response to the question ***"Propose some measures/solutions that the Municipality should undertake to improve the situation regarding the strengthening of security at your school***," the following answers were given:

- Our school is a public school, and authority lies with the central government, not the municipality;
- Physical security must be ensured;

- Police checks of individuals who "hang around" the school and distribute narcotic substances;
- There should be checks in the premises across from the school because they are also frequented by students;
- Vehicles used by students for transportation—vans and buses—should be inspected;
- To have a police vehicle and personnel from the start of the first school shift until the end of the second shift;
- There should be a cafeteria and a security guard on duty in the morning, even though our school only has security in the afternoon;
- Renovation of the building to modern standards and its relocation; Hiring a company to maintain order in the schoolyard and protect students from external third parties;
- To enable the municipality to provide a cafeteria inside the school building so that students do not go outside – security will then be higher.
- Provide funding for physical security guards at the school in two shifts;
- Ensure that the school building and its equipment comply with safety standards; Security personnel at the school entrance; Bus patrol; Installation of signage to regulate traffic around the school; installation of a first aid kit; expansion of the psychological-pedagogical service;
- To provide security at the school entrance that will not allow students from other schools to enter; cooperation with the police;
- A security officer; Removal of gambling devices; The market inspectorate to control shops that sell alcoholic beverages and cigarettes to students,
- The professional services in our school are not complete. We need to hire the entire necessary team in accordance with the number of students and staff;

C. In response to the question "***How functional is the school–parent–student collaboration*** in your school?" all responses indicated that this triangle functions excellently and at an appropriate level.

D. In response to the question ***"List the deviant/delinquent behaviors to which students at your school are exposed***," the most common responses from the majority of respondents were: bullying—various forms of violence; drug distribution and use; and gambling.

5. Conclusions

The research results show that safety in Tetovo's high schools faces multiple challenges, which are mainly related to the lack of physical security, risks in the school's surrounding environment, conflicts between students, bullying, and concerns about drug use and gambling. Respondents emphasize the need to strengthen institutional oversight, complete professional services, and increase cooperation among schools, families, the police, and relevant institutions.

From the students' perspective, the findings highlight a sense of insecurity in school environments, the presence of unauthorized individuals, fear of retaliation when reporting, and distrust of school staff. Students also note that professional staff are overburdened and insufficient in number relative to the student population, that psychological violence is the most prevalent form, and that they lack information about their rights and legal consequences. Although the school-parent-student collaboration is viewed positively by staff, this assessment contrasts with the students' distrust. This indicates that the two groups' perceptions do not align and that the mere existence of mechanisms does not automatically guarantee students' trust,

which is a prerequisite for reporting cases. The results highlight the need for more structured preventive measures and improvements in infrastructural and organizational conditions.
From a legal perspective, the Law on Justice for Children (2024) provides for the priority of preventive measures, the protection of child victims and witnesses, cooperation between schools and the Social Work Center, and municipal councils for the prevention of delinquency. The findings of this research indicate that the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on practical implementation: on students' ability to report safely, on the provision of professional services, and on sustained interinstitutional cooperation. This aligns with the finding that law enforcement is constrained by limited capacities and fragmented coordination (Ahmedi, 2025, pp. 283–284).
In conclusion, the research finds that preventing deviant and delinquent behaviors requires an integrated approach that combines physical security with education, psychological and pedagogical support, informing students about their rights, and shared institutional responsibility. Given the limited number of respondents and the fact th at the students' data come from awareness sessions and focus groups, these findings reflect the perceptions of students and school staff and form the basis for further research and the development of preventive policies.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations stem from the research findings and the analysis of the legal framework. Some of them align with the Municipal Council's Proposal for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (KKPDF) addressed to the Mayor of the Municipality of Tetovo, approved on June 14, 2024, following visits to six secondary schools in the city (KKPDF, 2024). It proposes: (1) the hiring of competent personnel to oversee security in all high schools, (2) the completion of professional teams (psychologist, pedagogue) based on the number of students, (3) increasing cooperation with the SPB-Tetovo and (4) an initiative to relocate gambling venues near schools. The following recommendations support these proposals and supplement them with measures related to trust, reporting, and inter-institutional cooperation.

6.1 For school safety and professional services:

1. Prioritize implementing the KKPDF proposal for professional security oversight in high schools, in cooperation with central government authorities, since the schools are state-owned and some respondents emphasized that the municipality alone does not hold the competencies.
2. Complete the psychological-pedagogical teams based on student numbers and reduce the administrative burden on this cadre, which students perceive as an obstacle to individual work with them.

6.2 Regarding trust and reporting

1. Establish secure and confidential channels for reporting violence and clear, well-known procedures for students. This addresses fears of retaliation and distrust of staff, as well as the guarantees provided by the LDF for child victims (LDF, Article 7).
2. To develop ongoing informational activities on students' rights, the causes of violence, and the legal consequences of delinquent behavior (LDF, Article 5), within the annual programs of the Municipal Council.
3. Include students and parents in the design and evaluation of preventive measures through the students' union and parent councils, which the law provides as members of the municipal council (LDF, Article 181(3)).

6.3 For inter-institutional cooperation:

1. To strengthen communication between the school, the Center for Social Work, and the SPB in the notification and handling of children at risk (LDF, Article 26).
2. A common platform for sharing data among institutions should be established, and interdisciplinary training should be organized for educators, psychologists, social workers, and justice professionals (Ahmedi, 2025, p. 285).
3. The effectiveness of preventive measures shall be evaluated annually as part of the Municipal Council's annual report, using measurable indicators (LDF, Article 182).

6.4 For further research:

1. Future research should include a broader sample, including students through quantitative surveys and parents, to test the contrast between students' and staff's perceptions of school–parent–student collaboration.

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