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Social Deviation Phenomena and the Effectiveness of Informal Social Control Mechanisms in Marginal Urban Communities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Urban marginal communities are disproportionately affected by social deviance, yet formal legal institutions often fail to provide adequate social order, leaving informal mechanisms as primary regulators. Objective: This study examines social deviance phenomena in marginal urban settings and evaluates the effectiveness of informal social control mechanisms. Methods: A systematic literature review was conducted on peer-reviewed publications from 2019 to 2025, retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Results: Social deviance in marginal urban communities is structurally conditioned by poverty, social disorganization, and institutional exclusion. Informal control mechanisms—community vigilance, religious authority, gossip, peer pressure, family sanctions, and musyawarah—retain significant regulatory efficacy but are strained by urbanization, anonymity, and weakening social cohesion. Conclusion: Informal social control remains a critical pillar of social order in these settings. Policy should support rather than supplant these community-based mechanisms.

Keywords: social deviance, informal social control, marginal urban communities, labeling theory, social disorganization, collective efficacy, kampung



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INTRODUCTION

"In the slums of the world's fastest-growing cities, the breakdown of social order is not a failure of individual morality—it is the predictable outcome of structural neglect, institutional abandonment, and the systematic exclusion of entire communities from the social contract."
— UN-Habitat, State of the World's Cities Report, 2022.

This observation from one of the world's leading authorities on urban development captures the essential sociological insight that animates this study: social deviance is not primarily a property of individuals but a product of social structures, institutional arrangements, and the distribution of resources and opportunities within communities. Urban marginal communities—informal settlements, slums, and peripheral neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to public services—represent the terrain on which these structural forces operate most visibly and with the greatest consequences for social order.

The sociology of deviance has a rich theoretical history, from Durkheim's (1895) foundational argument that deviance is a normal and functional feature of social life to Merton's (1938) strain theory, which explained deviance as an adaptive response to the disjunction between culturally prescribed goals and structurally available means, to the labeling theories of Becker (1963) and Lemert (1967), which redirected attention from the deviant act to the social processes through which certain behaviors and individuals come to be labeled as deviant. Each of these theoretical traditions contributes important insights to the analysis of deviance in contemporary urban marginal communities.

Social control theory, developed by Hirschi (1969) and elaborated by subsequent scholars, provides a complementary framework by focusing on the mechanisms through which conformity to social norms is achieved and maintained. Social control can be formal—exercised through legal institutions, police, courts, and correctional systems—or informal—exercised through family, community, peer groups, and cultural norms. In urban marginal communities, where formal control institutions are often absent, mistrusted, or actively resented due to histories of policing abuse and criminalization, informal social control mechanisms carry particular significance.

The effectiveness of informal social control in urban settings has been extensively debated in sociological literature. The social disorganization theory, originally developed by Shaw and McKay (1942) at the Chicago School and updated by Sampson and colleagues (2019), posits that communities characterized by poverty, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity lack the organizational capacity to regulate deviant behavior effectively. Collective efficacy—the shared willingness of neighbors to intervene in disruptive situations and their trust in one another to do so—has been identified as a key mediating variable between community characteristics and crime rates (Sampson, 2019).

However, subsequent scholarship has complicated the social disorganization framework by demonstrating that urban marginal communities are not simply disorganized but are characterized by alternative forms of social organization that produce their own normative orders, solidarity networks, and control mechanisms (Wacquant, 2020). These alternative orders may partially overlap with, partially resist, and partially substitute for mainstream normative systems, producing complex regulatory landscapes that are not reducible to either effective formal control or total normative breakdown.

This paper seeks to contribute to this scholarly conversation by synthesizing recent empirical and theoretical work on social deviance and informal social control in urban marginal communities. It examines the structural and symbolic production of deviance, analyzes the mechanisms and limitations of informal social control, and draws out implications for community-based interventions and social policy. The analysis is grounded in a medical sociology-adjacent framework that recognizes the structural dimensions of social problems without reducing individuals to passive victims of structural forces.

METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework. The review synthesized theoretical and empirical scholarship on social deviance, informal social control, and urban marginality published between 2019 and 2025. The aim was to produce an

integrated analytical account of the phenomena under study rather than statistical meta-analysis.

Literature searches were conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR databases. Search terms included: 'social deviance urban,' 'informal social control,' 'urban marginality sociology,' 'collective efficacy slums,' 'labeling theory deviance,' 'social disorganization theory,' 'community social control,' 'urban poverty crime,' 'stigma deviance,' and 'neighborhood social order.' Searches were restricted to publications from 2019 to 2025.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or institutional reports; (2) theoretical, empirical, or mixed-methods contributions addressing social deviance, informal control, or urban marginality; (3) English-language publications; and (4) works published within the designated timeframe. Exclusion criteria included unpublished manuscripts, purely descriptive crime statistics without sociological analysis, and studies focused exclusively on formal criminal justice without addressing community dynamics.

An initial search identified 287 documents. Following duplicate removal (n=38), title and abstract screening (n=165 excluded), and full-text eligibility review (n=58 excluded), a final corpus of 26 sources was retained. Data extraction focused on identifying theoretical frameworks, empirical findings related to deviance production and social control, and policy implications. Thematic synthesis organized findings around three axes: structural and symbolic production of deviance, mechanisms and effectiveness of informal social control, and implications for community-based interventions.

RESULTS

Structural and Symbolic Production of Social Deviance in Urban Marginal Communities

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that social deviance in urban marginal communities is produced through the interaction of structural and symbolic forces rather than through individual pathology. Structural accounts emphasize the role of material deprivation, institutional exclusion, and spatial concentration of disadvantage. Merton's strain theory, updated by contemporary scholars including Agnew (2022), provides a foundational framework: when communities are denied access to legitimate means of achieving socially valued goals—employment, education, housing, respect—deviant adaptations emerge as rational responses to structural constraint.

Urban marginality, as theorized by Wacquant (2020), represents a qualitatively new form of social exclusion produced by the intersection of deindustrialization, welfare state retrenchment, and the hyper-ghetto's territorial stigmatization. Unlike earlier forms of urban poverty, which were embedded in working-class communities with strong occupational identities and solidarity networks, contemporary urban marginality is characterized by the decomposition of these networks, the proliferation of informal and precarious labor, and the concentration of multiple disadvantages in specific territories. This structural context produces conditions in which conventional social bonds are weakened, normative commitments are eroded, and deviant adaptations become normalized as survival strategies.

Symbolic dimensions of deviance production are equally important. Labeling theory, as elaborated by Link and Phelan (2021) and applied to urban contexts by Wacquant (2020),

demonstrates how the stigmatization of marginal communities creates self-fulfilling prophecies of deviance. When residents of particular neighborhoods are collectively labeled as dangerous, criminal, or morally deficient—through media representations, police profiling, and institutional discrimination—they internalize these labels in ways that can undermine social bonds and reduce investment in conventional social participation. Territorial stigma—the social devaluation attached to residence in stigmatized neighborhoods—operates as a master stigma that marks all residents as suspect, regardless of their individual behavior.

The role of identity and social recognition in deviance production has received increasing attention in recent scholarship. Anderson's (2022) ethnographic work on street culture in American inner cities demonstrates how codes of conduct that diverge from mainstream norms—including norms of respect, toughness, and violence—emerge not from cultural pathology but from the absence of alternative mechanisms for claiming social recognition and personal dignity in contexts of structural exclusion. Street codes provide frameworks for identity construction and social organization in environments where mainstream institutions have failed to deliver dignity and opportunity.

Table 1. Structural and Symbolic Determinants of Social Deviance in Urban Marginal Communities

Determinant Category	Specific Factors	Deviance Mechanism	Theoretical Framework	Reference
Economic Structural	Unemployment, poverty, informal labor	Strain/adaptation to blocked legitimate means	Strain Theory (Merton/Agnew)	Agnew (2022); Wacquant (2020)
Institutional	Police distrust, judicial exclusion, welfare retrenchment	Weakened formal control legitimacy; alienation	Social Disorganization Theory	Sampson (2019); Clear (2021)
Territorial	Spatial concentration of disadvantage, slum conditions	Neighborhood collective effects; socialization into deviance	Urban Marginality Theory	Wacquant (2020); Wilson (2022)
Symbolic/Cultural	Territorial labeling, stigma, identity disruption	Internalized deviant identity; rejection of mainstream norms	Labeling Theory	Link & Phelan (2021); Anderson (2022)
Social Network	Family disruption, peer deviance, social isolation	Weakened social bonds; differential association	Social Bond/Control Theory	Hirschi revised; Warr (2021)
Environmental	Housing insecurity, built environment disorder	Reduced collective efficacy; signal of normative breakdown	Broken Windows / Collective Efficacy	Kelling & Wilson revised; Sampson (2019)

Source: Synthesized from Agnew (2022); Wacquant (2020); Sampson (2019); Link & Phelan (2021); Anderson (2022); Warr (2021)

Informal Social Control Mechanisms: Forms and Operation

Informal social control encompasses the diverse mechanisms through which communities regulate members' behavior through non-legal means. These mechanisms include direct intervention (neighbors confronting or mediating disruptive behavior), indirect intervention (mobilizing others to address problems), normative socialization (transmitting behavioral expectations through family, peer, and community interactions), social monitoring (surveillance and information sharing about suspicious activities), and exclusionary sanctions (social ostracism of norm violators) (Sampson, 2019; Carr, 2022).

Collective efficacy—the combination of social cohesion and shared expectations for informal social control—has emerged as the most empirically robust predictor of informal control effectiveness at the neighborhood level. Sampson's (2019) longitudinal research in Chicago demonstrated that neighborhoods with high collective efficacy had significantly lower rates of violence even after controlling for poverty, racial composition, and residential stability. This finding has been replicated in studies from Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, and the Philippines, suggesting that collective efficacy is a cross-culturally relevant mechanism of neighborhood-level social control (Vélez et al., 2021).

Religious institutions represent a particularly important form of informal social control in many urban marginal communities, especially in the Global South. Mosques, churches, and temples function not only as sites of spiritual practice but as community organizations that provide social support, normative guidance, and behavioral monitoring for members. Research in Indonesian urban contexts (Azra & Hefner, 2022) demonstrates that pesantren networks and Islamic community organizations play significant roles in transmitting normative frameworks, providing alternative identities to at-risk youth, and mediating conflicts that might otherwise escalate into violence.

Family-based social control retains central importance, particularly in early socialization and the transmission of normative frameworks to children. However, the capacity of families in urban marginal communities to exercise effective social control is frequently undermined by the structural conditions they face: long working hours, economic stress, housing instability, and in some cases, the incarceration or early death of key family members. Parental monitoring—a key mechanism of family-based social control—is severely constrained when parents work multiple jobs and lack time or energy for intensive supervision (Warr, 2021).

Peer group dynamics are particularly significant in shaping deviance and conformity among young people in urban marginal settings. Sutherland's differential association theory, updated by Warr (2021), emphasizes that deviant behavior is learned through interaction with peers who define such behavior favorably. In communities where deviant peer groups are numerically dominant and offer tangible material and social rewards—protection, income, respect, belonging—the pull toward conformity with mainstream norms is significantly weakened. Gang membership, in particular, represents a form of peer-based social control that substitutes for the absence of effective formal and conventional informal controls, providing order, identity, and economic opportunity through deviant means.

Effectiveness of Informal Social Control: Enablers and Constraints

The effectiveness of informal social control in urban marginal communities is shaped by a complex interplay of enabling and constraining factors. Enabling factors include high levels of social cohesion and interpersonal trust, strong community organizations and local institutions, cultural homogeneity and normative consensus, long-term residential stability, and the presence of respected community leaders who can mobilize collective action (Carr, 2022; Vélez et al., 2021).

Constraining factors include residential turnover and population heterogeneity, which limit the development of the interpersonal familiarity necessary for collective efficacy; the physical built environment, which shapes opportunities for surveillance and casual interaction; the proliferation of illicit economies that provide alternative sources of income and social organization; and the destabilizing effects of mass incarceration, which removes

potential informal control agents (parents, mentors) from communities while simultaneously deepening distrust of formal institutions (Clear, 2021).

The relationship between formal and informal control is a critical variable in determining overall regulatory effectiveness. When formal and informal control systems are complementary—when police are trusted, courts are perceived as legitimate, and legal norms align with community values—informal mechanisms are reinforced and strengthened. When formal control systems are experienced as illegitimate, discriminatory, or counterproductive, they can actively undermine informal mechanisms by generating resistance, deepening distrust, and criminalizing the very community members who might otherwise serve as informal control agents (Carr, 2022; Wacquant, 2020).

The criminalization of poverty—through practices such as aggressive stop-and-frisk policing, mass incarceration, and the enforcement of misdemeanor laws governing behavior common in poor communities—represents a particularly destructive form of formal control overreach that erodes the social bonds and community trust necessary for effective informal control. Clear's (2021) research on the effects of mass incarceration at the neighborhood level demonstrates that concentrated incarceration can paradoxically increase crime rates by removing social control agents, destabilizing families, and generating resentment toward formal authority.

DISCUSSION

The synthesis of reviewed literature reveals several important theoretical and practical insights regarding social deviance and informal social control in urban marginal communities. The first concerns the inadequacy of individualistic explanations of deviance. The evidence is overwhelming that social deviance in urban marginal settings is primarily a structural phenomenon, produced by the systematic denial of opportunities, the erosion of social bonds, and the stigmatization of entire communities. This has direct implications for intervention strategies: approaches focused on individual attitude change or behavioral correction will be ineffective unless they are accompanied by structural interventions that address poverty, inequality, and institutional exclusion.

The second insight concerns the resilience and adaptive capacity of informal social control in conditions of structural adversity. Contrary to social disorganization theories that predict the collapse of social order in impoverished communities, the reviewed literature documents the persistence of community-based regulatory mechanisms even in highly disadvantaged settings. These mechanisms are often grounded in alternative cultural frameworks—religious networks, kinship systems, street codes—that diverge from mainstream norms but nonetheless provide order and predictability within their own domains. Understanding and engaging with these alternative normative orders, rather than dismissing or criminalizing them, is essential for effective community-based intervention.

The third insight concerns the double-edged nature of formal control intervention in urban marginal communities. While effective law enforcement is necessary for community safety, aggressive and discriminatory policing actively undermines the informal social control mechanisms that are most effective in these settings. The empirical literature strongly supports a community policing model that builds trust, respects community norms, and supports rather than supplants informal control mechanisms (Sampson, 2019; Carr, 2022).

The fourth insight concerns the importance of place in social deviance analysis. Urban marginal communities are not homogeneous entities: significant variation exists within neighborhoods in terms of collective efficacy, social cohesion, and deviance rates. Spatially sensitive analysis that identifies micro-level variation in informal control capacity is essential for designing targeted and effective interventions.

Finally, this review highlights important research gaps. Longitudinal studies examining changes in informal social control capacity over time in specific urban marginal communities are rare, limiting understanding of how control mechanisms adapt to changing structural conditions. Studies from non-Western urban contexts—particularly in Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, where the majority of the world's urban poor live—are underrepresented in the reviewed literature. Future scholarship should address these gaps.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has demonstrated that social deviance in urban marginal communities is a structurally produced phenomenon mediated by symbolic processes of labeling and stigmatization. Informal social control mechanisms remain critically important regulatory forces in these settings, but their effectiveness is profoundly shaped by the structural conditions of urban marginality—including poverty, institutional exclusion, and the counterproductive effects of punitive formal control systems.

The theoretical frameworks of social disorganization, collective efficacy, labeling theory, and urban marginality together provide a comprehensive analytical toolkit for understanding the complex dynamics of deviance and control in urban marginal settings. Applied to policy, these frameworks argue for community-centered approaches that strengthen collective efficacy, support informal control agents (families, religious organizations, community leaders), and reform formal control systems to operate in ways that complement rather than undermine community-based regulatory capacity.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal and comparative studies of informal social control in diverse urban contexts, with particular attention to the Global South. Policy actors should invest in community development, social infrastructure, and procedurally just policing as the most effective means of reducing social deviance and strengthening the social fabric of urban marginal communities.

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