

Article

Framing Youth Crime, Silencing Educational Exclusion: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Ecuadorian Digital Press Coverage in 2025

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Abstract

This article examines how Ecuadorian national digital newspapers represented adolescents and youth-coded young adults associated with crime during 2025, with particular attention to lexical labeling, moral attribution, visual framing, editorial prominence, news values and the near-presence or absence of educational discourse. The study is based on qualitative content analysis of Spanish-language digital press coverage published in *El Universo*, *El Comercio*, *Extra*, *La Hora*, *GK*, *Primicias*, *Vistazo*, *El Mercurio* and *Expreso* across seven journalistic genres: news, note, feature article, report, editorial, interview and chronicle. The article argues that media discourse does not merely describe youth violence; it actively constructs public intelligibility about who young people are, how danger is recognized and whether social responses are imagined in punitive, preventive or restorative terms. Grounded in media framing theory, news values, moral panic studies, child-friendly justice, critical sociology, school push-out scholarship and philosophies of education and human development, the article shows the inferential route from media representation to educational reintegration: when coverage individualizes adolescent violence, minimizes school interruption and masks structural conditions, it narrows the policy imagination through which young people are understood as educable, rights-bearing and recoverable subjects. The paper ultimately argues that the long-term reduction of violence in Ecuador requires not only security responses but also an integral reintegration agenda centered on education, dignified work, child-sensitive justice and restorative social policy.

Keywords: youth crime; youth education; media framing; Ecuador; digital press; qualitative content analysis; educational exclusion; organized crime; restorative reintegration; youth representation



Academic Editor: Giulio D'Urso

Received: 22 March 2026

Revised: 30 April 2026

Accepted: 8 June 2026

Published: 16 June 2026

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1. Introduction

The contemporary Ecuadorian debate on youth crime cannot be responsibly interpreted through moral simplification alone. A purely individualizing narrative reduces adolescent involvement in violence to personal deviance and obscures the broader configuration of structural inequality, symbolic exclusion, territorial abandonment and punitive common sense through which certain young lives become socially intelligible only after they have entered the circuits of crime, police control or death (Bourdieu, 1986; Butler, 2004; Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009).

From a social sciences perspective, youth is not a biological interval detached from history, but a socially organized condition shaped by institutions, opportunities, recognition regimes and unequal access to protection. For that reason, the study of youth crime must move beyond criminological enumeration and engage the cultural, educational and representational mechanisms that define which young people are viewed as redeemable, dangerous, disposable or invisible (Furlong, 2013; Giroux, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011; Wyn & White, 1997).

Media coverage occupies a central place in this process because journalism is not a neutral mirror of violence. Through narrative selection, lexical emphasis, visual arrangement, source hierarchy and headline intensity, news discourse frames social reality and influences how publics assign responsibility, proximity, threat and legitimacy. In contexts of insecurity, such framing power becomes especially consequential, since the press can either deepen moral panic or widen the interpretive space for structural understanding and humane policy (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974).

In Ecuador, the intensification of criminal violence has transformed not only public security debates but also the symbolic environment in which childhood, adolescence and young adulthood are represented. International organizations have warned about the rise in homicides affecting children and adolescents, the recruitment of minors by organized crime groups and the educational disruptions experienced in violence-affected territories, making it imperative to analyze not only violence itself but also the discursive ecosystems through which it is narrated and normalized.

This study is situated within a broader body of research showing that children and young people are frequently represented in news media through negative, deviance-centered and risk-saturated narratives. Earlier studies on newspaper coverage have shown that young people, particularly those associated with crime, disorder or antisocial behavior, are often individualized, stereotyped and separated from the structural conditions that shape their lives (Aldridge & Cross, 2008; Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Gordon et al., 2015). This manuscript updates that concern for a digital press environment and relocates it to the Ecuadorian context, where organized crime, school insecurity and youth recruitment have intensified the symbolic stakes of how adolescents are named, visualized and morally interpreted in public discourse.

For the purposes of this article, the terms “youth” and “young people” are used as analytical umbrella categories rather than as fixed legal categories. The primary emphasis is on adolescents under 18 years of age when the journalistic text explicitly refers to minors, adolescents, boys, girls, students or children. The corpus also includes young adults, approximately 18 to 24 years old, when the article clearly codes them as jóvenes or young people and when their representation is discursively connected to youth crime, recruitment, school interruption or early life-course vulnerability. This broad but bounded usage is necessary because journalistic language often moves imprecisely among niño, niña, adolescente, menor, joven and adulto joven; however, the analysis distinguishes child/adolescent references from young-adult references whenever the source text permits such differentiation.

This article therefore addresses a central question: How did Ecuadorian national digital newspapers represent young people associated with crime in 2025 and to what extent did those representations connect youth violence to educational exclusion, poverty, labor precarity and organized-crime recruitment? The question is not minor, because the answer reveals whether media discourse contributes to punitive simplification or to a broader, socially responsible understanding of youth vulnerability and social repair (Cohen, 2002; Hall et al., 1978; Jewkes, 2015).

The study is particularly concerned with descriptors and moral qualifiers attached to young actors. Adjectives are never merely stylistic ornaments. In news discourse, they classify, condense and stabilize social meanings. When youth are repeatedly narrated through labels linked to monstrosity, irredeemability or innate criminality, language ceases to describe conduct and begins to essentialize identity, thereby weakening the horizon of education, reintegration and democratic care (Butler, 2004; Hall et al., 1978; van Dijk, 1991).

The article also investigates issues of editorial prominence, visual hierarchy and news values. Crime involving adolescents tends to satisfy several powerful news values at once: threshold, violence, risk, proximity, simplification, individualization, visual spectacle and the culturally heightened value attached to stories involving children (Jewkes, 2015; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

The placement of stories, repetition of certain event types, use of police images, circulation of blood-centered imagery and emphasis on spectacular violence all contribute to what may be called a hierarchy of attention. Such hierarchies determine which youth-related issues are overexposed and which remain muted, including school dropout, psychosocial harm, neighborhood abandonment and the political economy of recruitment (Couldry, 2012; Garland, 2001; Jewkes, 2015).

A further concern is the tension between representation and explanation. Media systems often privilege immediate, emotionally resonant narratives over slow, structural reasoning. In crime reporting, this tendency may generate a discourse that is dense in event-specific detail yet analytically thin in social causation, whereby the spectacular visibility of the act displaces sustained inquiry into the structural conditions that rendered it conceivable, feasible and, within organized economies of violence, materially profitable (Beck, 1992; Iyengar, 1991; Thompson, 1995).

This is why the educational dimension is indispensable. Schooling is not only a formal institutional pathway; it is also a site of belonging, routine, recognition, symbolic protection and future orientation. When adolescents are expelled from educational continuity or never securely inserted into it, they do not merely lose classroom time; they lose access to social worlds that compete with coercive economies and violent masculine scripts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999).

The article does not romanticize youth, nor does it deny the gravity of violent acts. Rather, it resists the analytical error of treating punitive visibility as sufficient explanation. Violent conduct must be named and confronted, but a serious humanities and social sciences approach asks how such conduct is socially produced, mediated, circulated, interpreted and politically instrumentalized (Anderson, 1999; Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). In this sense, the paper adopts a humanistic and pedagogical orientation. It assumes that democratic societies are judged not only by how they punish harm but also by how they prevent the social manufacture of disposable youth. When public discourse ceases to imagine young people who have offended as educable subjects and recognizes them only as threats, the horizon of social repair contracts and the cycle of violence becomes easier to reproduce than to transform (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Hooks, 1994).

The Ecuadorian case is especially urgent because organized criminal dynamics intersect with local deprivation, fragmented community protection and shrinking expectations of dignified mobility. Under such conditions, “easy money” is not simply a moral temptation; it is often socially staged as an available route in territories where lawful opportunity appears distant, unstable or humiliatingly inaccessible. Such dynamics are consistent with scholarship on strain, street codes and the normalization of violent status economies under conditions of deprivation (Agnew, 1992; Anderson, 1999; Merton, 1938).

Nevertheless, the article rejects deterministic accounts that portray poor youth as naturally criminal. Poverty does not cause crime in any linear or automatic sense and

most poor adolescents do not engage in serious violence. The more defensible claim is that inequality, exclusion and state abandonment produce differential vulnerability, while media discourse may either reveal or erase that vulnerability depending on how it frames youth subjects and the institutions surrounding them (Bourdieu, 1986; Sen, 1999).

The present study contributes to three conversations at once:

- It enriches to media studies by examining how crime news constructs youth as a category of public concern.
- It contributes to youth studies by showing how educational exclusion becomes symbolically marginalized within narratives of insecurity.
- It provides to public debate by defending reintegration, schooling and dignified labor as indispensable to any sustainable response to youth violence (Entman, 1993; Furlong, 2013; Nussbaum, 2011).

The article argues that Ecuador does not only face a security crisis; it faces a representational crisis. The nation must decide whether it will continue reading young people only through the police lexicon of threat or whether it will also read them through the ethical language of prevention, rights, education and social reconstruction. The answer matters because discourse shapes policy imagination and policy imagination shapes whether a generation is abandoned or restored (Butler, 2004; Cohen, 2002; Hall et al., 1978). The argument advanced here is not that the simple absence of educational discourse automatically proves that educational reintegration is the only possible policy response. Rather, the study demonstrates a more specific inferential chain.

- First, when crime coverage frames adolescents primarily through spectacular events, police operations, criminal aliases or violent outcomes, it separates the young person from the institutional pathways that might explain how vulnerability was produced.
- Second, when education appears only marginally or only in stories about innocent students, school attachment becomes a symbolic marker of deservingness, while school-disconnected youth are more easily treated as already lost.
- Third, when the structural conditions of recruitment, dropout, poverty and territorial abandonment are masked, the future of the young person is discursively foreclosed before restorative alternatives can become publicly thinkable. This is the point at which media analysis leads to educational reintegration: not as an external moral preference, but as a response to the very institutional absence that the corpus makes visible.

This logic is consistent with research on school disengagement, school push-out and the school-to-prison pipeline, which shows that exclusion from meaningful schooling is linked to higher risks of dropout, justice involvement, social disconnection and weakened well-being (González, 2012; Henry et al., 2012; Hirschfield, 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014). In this sense, educational reintegration is not presented as a sentimental alternative to accountability. It is understood as a structural counter-response to the erosion of protective institutions, the loss of future-bearing social capital and the symbolic reduction of young people to the worst moment through which they enter public visibility.

Research Questions and Analytical Hypotheses

In order to guide the empirical and interpretive development of the study, the article is organized around one central research question and five specific sub-questions. The central research question is as follows:

How did Ecuadorian national digital newspapers represent adolescents and young people associated with crime during 2025 and to what extent did those representations connect youth violence to educational exclusion, poverty, labor precarity and organized-crime recruitment? This central question is operationalized through the following sub-questions:

- RQ1. What lexical labels and nominal categories were used by Ecuadorian digital newspapers to refer to adolescents and young people involved in, affected by or associated with crime?
- RQ2. What moral, psychological or affective descriptors were attached to young people in crime-related coverage and how did these descriptors contribute to the construction of youth as victims, threats, offenders or subjects of possible reintegration?
- RQ3. What kinds of visual frames, editorial prominence and source hierarchies structured the representation of youth crime in the selected digital press corpus?
- RQ4. To what extent did the reviewed press coverage connect youth crime to broader structural conditions, including school interruption, educational exclusion, poverty, territorial abandonment, labor precarity and criminal recruitment?
- RQ5. What solution orientations were made visible in the corpus: punitive responses, preventive measures, restorative reintegration, educational repair, psychosocial support or the absence of a clear policy horizon?

Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study, the following hypotheses are not formulated as statistical hypotheses designed for probabilistic testing. Rather, they function as analytical working hypotheses or theoretically informed propositions that guide the systematic interpretation of media discourse. This distinction is methodologically relevant because qualitative content analysis does not seek to measure causal effects in a positivist sense, but to identify patterns of meaning, recurrent frames, discursive silences and interpretive structures within a defined corpus of texts and images (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). In this article, therefore, the hypotheses are verified through interpretive convergence across outlets, genres, lexical patterns, visual configurations, source hierarchies and solution frames.

H1. *Ecuadorian national digital press coverage of youth crime during 2025 predominantly framed adolescents and young people through event-centered, securitized and individualized narratives, emphasizing arrest, victimization, violent acts, police intervention and criminal labels more strongly than biographical, educational or structural trajectories.*

This first hypothesis is grounded in media framing theory, which argues that journalism does not merely report reality but selects, emphasizes and organizes aspects of social events in ways that define problems, assign responsibility and suggest possible remedies (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Applied to youth crime, this means that the repeated association of adolescents with police operations, homicide, detention, criminal aliases, gang affiliation or spectacular violence may produce a narrow interpretive frame in which young people become socially visible mainly as objects of fear, suspicion, grief or punishment. Such a frame risks transforming complex youth trajectories into simplified moral signs, especially when news discourse privileges immediate events over the social processes that precede them.

H2. *Although some Ecuadorian digital press coverage began to acknowledge the relationship between organized-crime recruitment, insecurity and school dropout, educational exclusion remained comparatively marginal in crime-centered narratives; consequently, restorative reintegration, second-chance education and dignified labor pathways appeared less prominently than punitive, securitized or institutionally reactive solutions.*

This second hypothesis derives from the theoretical intersection between youth studies, critical pedagogy, the sociology of punishment, school push-out research and the capabilities approach. If education is understood not only as formal schooling but also as a structure of recognition, belonging, social protection and future orientation, then its

omission from youth crime narratives is analytically significant (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Freire, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999).

The hypothesis therefore does not assume that educational reintegration follows automatically from every instance of youth crime reporting. Instead, it tests whether the corpus shows a patterned displacement of educational trajectories at the same time that it reveals recruitment, school insecurity, dropout and punitive solution frames. If these patterns converge, the recommendation for educational reintegration becomes grounded in the findings themselves: it responds to the institutional rupture that journalism partially reveals but does not consistently center.

These hypotheses allow the study to move beyond a purely descriptive account of media coverage and toward a critical examination of the symbolic conditions under which youth crime becomes publicly intelligible. They also make it possible to assess whether the press constructs adolescents mainly through punitive visibility or whether it opens interpretive space for structural explanation, educational continuity and restorative social policy.

2. Theoretical Framework

Framing theory provides the first conceptual foundation for the article because it explains how journalism organizes reality through selection, emphasis, exclusion and moral salience. Frames define what a problem is, identify causal agents, assign moral responsibility and imply remedies (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Iyengar, 1991). In the case of youth crime, the central question is not simply whether the press reports violent events accurately, but whether it frames adolescents as isolated monsters, rational entrepreneurs of illegality, passive victims of coercion, social products of abandonment or conflicted subjects situated within unequal and violent structures. This distinction is crucial because each frame opens or closes a different policy horizon.

The second conceptual axis is the literature on news values. Crime involving children and adolescents is highly newsworthy because it combines violence, vulnerability, moral shock, risk, proximity, simplification and visual drama (Jewkes, 2015). These values help explain why certain episodes receive prominent digital placement while slow-moving social conditions such as dropout, poverty, labor precarity or territorial abandonment receive less sustained attention. News values are not treated here as intentional manipulation by journalists, but as professional and cultural routines that privilege the immediate, dramatic and individualized over the gradual, structural and institutional (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Jewkes, 2015).

Moral panic theory is also relevant, but it must be used critically rather than mechanically. Cohen (2002) and Hall et al. (1978) remain important because they show how media and public discourse can produce “folk devils” who condense diffuse anxieties about disorder, class, race, urban change and national decline. However, later scholarship has warned that moral panic should not be applied as a simple label for every intense media reaction, because doing so may understate real harm, ignore audience complexity or overlook the fragmented character of contemporary digital media (Altheide, 2009; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). This article therefore uses moral panic as a sensitizing concept: it helps identify moments in which adolescents are symbolically condensed into danger, but it does not deny the reality of violence or the legitimate public need for information.

A further theoretical support derives from the critical sociology of punishment. Garland (2001) and Wacquant (2009) show that late-modern societies often respond to insecurity by intensifying penal discourse while neglecting the social foundations of harm. This punitive turn is not only institutional; it is also cultural and communicative. It circulates through media common sense, where fear, urgency and symbolic cleansing may replace social ex-

planation. Youth crime coverage can therefore function as a discursive extension of the punitive state when it normalizes containment, surveillance and exclusion as the most obvious responses to adolescent violence.

The article also draws on theories of social structure and delinquency. Classic strain theory and later work on street cultures show that violence and deviance become more intelligible where dominant success ideals remain culturally mandatory but materially inaccessible (Agnew, 1992; Anderson, 1999; Merton, 1938). This framework does not excuse harm. Rather, it clarifies why illegal economies may become socially meaningful in contexts where lawful opportunity appears distant, humiliating or unavailable. In the Ecuadorian case, this perspective is especially useful for interpreting media references to recruitment, status, money, protection and territorial control.

The sociology of symbolic capital and educational reproduction provides the fifth foundation. Education distributes not only knowledge but legitimacy, belonging and socially recognized futures (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Willis, 1977). When schooling fails to retain, protect and dignify adolescents, the consequences extend beyond credential loss. Educational interruption can communicate that lawful institutions do not expect, invest in or need certain young people. This is particularly consequential in territories where criminal organizations actively recruit through promises of income, status, belonging or protection.

The capabilities approach expands this argument by treating human development as the expansion of real freedoms rather than the mere formal existence of rights (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). From this perspective, the question is not only whether young people are nominally enrolled in school, but whether they possess the concrete conditions to remain, learn, move safely, imagine futures, avoid coercion and participate in society without exposure to predatory violence. Crime prevention then becomes inseparable from capability-building, territorial protection and the reconstruction of credible life opportunities.

Critical pedagogy further clarifies the ethical stakes of representation. Education is never merely technical; it is an ethical and political practice tied to voice, recognition, agency and the refusal of fatalism (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Hooks, 1994). When societies speak about youth only through crime statistics, aliases or police shorthand, they narrow the semantic field within which young people can be recognized as learners, citizens and unfinished subjects capable of transformation. A pedagogical society refuses to confuse a person's current position, including justice involvement, with their total human horizon.

Recent child-friendly justice scholarship strengthens this position by insisting that children and adolescents must be seen differently from adults when they come into contact with justice systems. Child-sensitive justice requires age-appropriate language, protection of dignity and privacy, effective participation, respect for evolving capacities and the recognition that deprivation of liberty should be exceptional rather than routine (Council of Europe, 2010; European Parliament, 2025; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019; UNICEF, 2026). For media analysis, this has a direct implication: journalistic language should avoid adultifying or essentializing children who are alleged to have offended, because such language can weaken the public basis for rehabilitation and rights-based intervention.

The concept of precarity also helps illuminate the Ecuadorian situation. Butler's work reminds us that some lives are publicly grievable while others are rendered less worthy of mourning, protection or explanation (Butler, 2004). In violent media ecologies, poor and racialized youth are often represented less as complex persons than as moving signs of threat. Such representational thinning permits both indifference and excess: indifference toward their social conditions and excess in the punitive language used to narrate them

(Butler, 2004; Mbembe, 2003). Likewise, risk society scholarship explains why contemporary publics become intensely attentive to visible threats while frequently failing to address slow violence and institutional fragility (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Organized crime, gang recruitment, school disengagement and precarious labor are not isolated risks; they are interlocking symptoms of social arrangements that redistribute danger downward. Digital media often privilege the instant visibility of the criminal event over the long temporality of exclusion that precedes it.

These frameworks support a central proposition: media discourse about youth crime is not marginal to the social problem but constitutive of how the problem becomes publicly intelligible. Frames, labels, images, news values and source hierarchies help decide whether the public sees adolescents primarily as danger to be contained, as evidence of social collapse, as victims of coercive structures or as rights-bearing subjects requiring accountability, protection and reintegration. That symbolic decision matters because it shapes the legitimacy of punitive versus restorative responses (Cohen, 2002; Entman, 1993; Garland, 2001).

3. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted as a qualitative content analysis of Ecuadorian national digital press coverage published between 1 January and 31 December 2025. Qualitative content analysis was selected because it allows for systematic yet interpretive examination of latent meanings, lexical regularities, narrative strategies, moral codes and visual–discursive patterns without reducing discourse to decontextualized counts alone. The method is especially appropriate when the purpose is to understand how social meanings are constructed across recurring textual and visual forms (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2000).

The corpus consisted of digital content from the following outlets: El Universo, El Comercio, Extra, La Hora, GK, Primicias, Vistazo, El Mercurio and Expreso. These outlets were selected through purposive sampling because they represent high-visibility national or nationally circulating digital news brands with distinct editorial styles, audiences and narrative traditions, ranging from mainstream legacy journalism to magazine and explanatory digital formats. The inclusion of heterogeneous outlets strengthens interpretive comparison across tabloidesque, institutional, explanatory and opinion-oriented modes of reporting (Schreier, 2012).

The corpus was identified through purposive and theoretically guided searches in the digital archives and search interfaces of the selected outlets. Search expressions combined youth-related terms and crime-related terms, including niño, niña, adolescente, menor, joven, estudiante, reclutamiento, sicariato, bandas, crimen organizado, homicidio, extorsión, violencia, escuela and deserción escolar. Items were retained when the youth reference was analytically relevant to the story's framing rather than incidental. Because the study is qualitative, the objective was not statistical representativeness but interpretive saturation across outlets, genres and recurring discursive patterns (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

The original language of the corpus was Spanish. Coding was conducted primarily in Spanish in order to preserve lexical nuance, especially in expressions such as menor, adolescente, joven, presunto sicario, integrante de banda, captado, reclutado and estudiante. English translations were used only for analytical reporting in this manuscript. When examples were translated, the translation sought semantic and pragmatic equivalence rather than literal word-for-word reproduction. This decision is methodologically important because the study focuses on lexicography and labeling; therefore, translation was treated as an interpretive step documented through memoing rather than as a neutral technical conversion.

The study included the journalistic genres explicitly requested in the research design: news, note, article, report, editorial, interview and chronicle. This generic diversity is important because youth criminalization is not produced only through hard-news routines. Editorials can moralize, interviews can authorize institutional perspectives, reports can deepen context and chronicles can aestheticize violence. By comparing genres, the study identified whether criminalizing or restorative narratives are genre-specific or broadly transversal across the press field (Bakhtin, 1986; Mayring, 2000; van Dijk, 1991).

- Inclusion criteria were as follows: the item must be published in 2025; must refer explicitly to children, adolescents, minors, students, young people or clearly youth-coded young adults; must concern crime, violence organized-crime recruitment, sicariato, extortion, robbery, homicide, gang-related activity, school insecurity or judicial processes linked to youth; and must be available in digital format. When the article referred to children or adolescents under 18, the analysis treated the item as child/adolescent coverage. When the article referred to jóvenes without an exact age, it was included only if the narrative context clearly positioned the actors within youth or early life-course vulnerability.
- Exclusion criteria included duplicated syndicated copies, purely audiovisual pieces without recoverable verbal text and items in which youth are only tangentially mentioned without discursive relevance. These criteria help ensure analytic coherence while preserving corpus diversity (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

The primary units of analysis were the headline, subheadline, lead, article body, quoted speech, image, caption and placement indicators available in the digital interface. The decision to analyze both textual and visual elements responds to the fact that crime narratives are often intensified by multimodal framing. Headlines establish interpretive entry points, images shape emotional orientation and captions frequently consolidate police or moral meaning in compressed form (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The coding frame was structured around seven central categories: (1) lexical labeling of youth, (2) moral or psychological descriptors, (3) editorial prominence, (4) visual framing, (5) causal attribution, (6) educational references and (7) solution orientation.

Within lexical labeling, the analysis records terms such as minor, adolescent, teen, young man, student, justice-involved young person, alleged adolescent perpetrator, sicario, gang member or equivalent descriptors in Spanish. Within moral characterization, the analysis examines whether youth are represented as ruthless, cold-blooded, dangerous, lost, redeemable, manipulated, coerced or absent of interiority. This category system is flexible enough to capture both explicit and latent meanings while avoiding essentializing language in the researchers' own analytical vocabulary (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019).

Editorial prominence was analyzed through variables such as homepage visibility, headline intensity, repetition of youth-crime items, urgency markers and the placement of these stories relative to other public-interest topics. This dimension matters because prominence helps distinguish between isolated mentions and discursive saturation. A crime story placed repeatedly in central digital positions performs a different cultural function than one buried in the lower architecture of the site (Couldry, 2012; Entman, 1993; Jewkes, 2015).

Visual framing examined the presence of police cordons, weapons, blood imagery, blurred or exposed faces, detained bodies, mourning relatives, school-related imagery, neighborhood scenery and iconography of danger. This category is grounded in the premise that visual rhetoric can criminalize even when verbal discourse appears neutral. The repeated association of young bodies with weapons, captivity or death can stabilize symbolic equivalences between youth and danger while erasing other social identities such as student, worker, sibling or citizen (Butler, 2004).

Causal attribution was coded according to whether news discourse explains youth crime through individual vice, family breakdown, peer influence, gang recruitment, poverty, school abandonment, territorial abandonment, digital culture, drug economies or institutional failure. This category is central because causal language reveals the ideological architecture of the text. It shows whether crime is narrated as pathology, economy, policy failure or diffuse social tragedy (Agnew, 1992; Iyengar, 1991; Merton, 1938).

Educational references were coded both for presence and absence. The analysis records whether articles mention school attendance, dropout, expulsion, reinsertion, teacher testimony, educational aspirations, alternative education, vocational training or the complete omission of educational trajectories. This dimension is indispensable to the article's core argument: that youth crime coverage often amplifies criminal events while minimizing the educational systems and interruptions that shape youth vulnerability (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Freire, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011).

Solution orientation was coded as punitive, preventive, restorative, mixed or absent. Punitive solutions include imprisonment, militarization, harder sentencing and public elimination rhetoric; preventive solutions include territorial intervention, psychosocial support, family accompaniment and community programs; restorative solutions include educational reintegration, vocational pathways, mediation and long-term life-project reconstruction. This category allows the study to connect media discourse to broader public-policy imagination (Garland, 2001; Sen, 1999; Wacquant, 2009). To strengthen validity, the analysis proceeded in two coding rounds:

- The first round identified emergent themes and refined the codebook; the second consolidated interpretive patterns across outlets and genres. Reflexive memoing, peer debriefing and an audit trail were used to ensure transparency in category stabilization and interpretive decisions.
- A second reviewer examined a selected portion of the corpus to assess the clarity and consistency of the main categories, although the study remains primarily qualitative and interpretive in orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

The methodological limitations of the study were also acknowledged:

- First, the corpus is limited to high-visibility Ecuadorian digital news outlets and therefore does not represent all local, community, television, radio or social media discourse.
- Second, digital news pages are unstable: headlines, images, captions and homepage placement can change after publication, which makes editorial prominence difficult to reconstruct with perfect certainty.
- Third, because the corpus is Spanish-language and the manuscript is written in English, some lexical intensity may be softened, amplified or displaced through translation.
- Fourth, qualitative content analysis prioritizes depth, context and interpretive coherence over numerical generalization. These limitations do not invalidate the findings, but they delimit the scope of the claims advanced in the article (see Table 1).

The study adopted a rights-based and child-sensitive ethical approach. Although the corpus consisted of publicly available journalistic material, the analysis avoided unnecessary reproduction of names, faces, aliases, addresses or identifying details involving minors or families affected by violence.

No images of children or adolescents were reproduced in the article. When translated examples or paraphrased references were used, they were selected for analytical relevance and handled with caution so that the manuscript did not reproduce the symbolic violence it critiques. The ethical rationale follows principles of dignity, privacy, best interests, non-stigmatizing language and child-friendly justice, particularly when discussing children

alleged to have offended or children affected by criminal exploitation (Council of Europe, 2010; OHCHR, 2025; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019; UNICEF, 2024, 2026) (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 1. Corpus delimitation and analytical design.

Methodological Component	Operational Specification	Analytical Purpose
Research design	Qualitative content analysis.	To examine how social meanings, interpretive frames and discursive regularities are constructed in press coverage beyond purely quantitative frequency counts.
Temporal delimitation	1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025.	To capture a full annual cycle of Ecuadorian digital press reporting on youth, crime and education.
Geographical scope	Ecuador, national digital press.	To analyze nationally circulating media narratives with broad agenda-setting capacity.
Media outlets included	<i>El Universo, El Comercio, Extra, La Hora, GK, Primicias, Vistazo, El Mercurio and Expreso.</i>	To compare heterogeneous editorial traditions, including legacy, popular, explanatory, opinion-oriented and magazine-style journalism.
Sampling strategy	Purposive sampling.	To select high-visibility outlets and relevant items capable of illuminating dominant and contrasting narrative patterns.
Journalistic genres analyzed	News, note, article, report, editorial, interview and chronicle.	To assess whether youth criminalization and restorative discourse vary according to genre-specific narrative conventions.
Analytical orientation	Textual, visual and multimodal.	To capture lexical, narrative, moral and visual mechanisms through which youth are represented in crime discourse.
Epistemological rationale	Interpretive, critical and rights-based.	To examine not only what the press reports, but how it constructs youth, danger, vulnerability, responsibility and policy imagination.

Table 2. Units of analysis and observable indicators.

Unit of Analysis	Discursive/Visual Dimension	Analytical Function
Headline.	Lexical framing.	To identify the primary interpretive entry point through which the story classifies youth and defines the event.
Subheadline.	Framing reinforcement.	To determine how the initial framing is expanded, moderated or intensified.
Lead paragraph.	Narrative prioritization.	To examine which information is considered most newsworthy and which explanatory horizon is prioritized.
Article body.	Thematic development.	To assess the depth, breadth and ideological organization of the narrative.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Unit of Analysis	Discursive/Visual Dimension	Analytical Function
Quoted speech.	Source hierarchy.	To identify which actors are authorized to define reality and which perspectives are marginalized or absent.
Image.	Visual framing	To examine how visual rhetoric amplifies or modifies verbal framing.
Caption.	Visual–textual consolidation.	To determine how the image is anchored semantically and morally.
Placement Indicators.	Editorial prominence.	To evaluate the relative salience of youth-crime stories within the broader media agenda.
Genre as macro-unit.	Discursive form.	To compare whether criminalizing or restorative framings are genre-specific or cross-cutting.
Outlet as macro-context.	Editorial culture.	To detect whether representational patterns vary according to media style and audience orientation.

Table 3. Coding matrix: categories, variables and analytical values.

Coding Category	Variables Examined	Analytical Aim
Lexical labeling of youth.	Youth designation.	To determine whether youth are framed primarily as persons, students, victims, offenders or criminal types.
Moral or psychological descriptors.	Moral characterization.	To identify whether the discourse humanizes, demonizes, pathologizes or morally stabilizes youth identity.
Editorial prominence.	Degree of visibility.	To assess whether youth-crime stories function as isolated reports or as agenda-saturating narratives.
Visual framing.	Iconography of representation	To analyze whether images intensify criminalization, victimization, fear or contextual understanding.
Causal attribution.	Explanatory logic.	To reveal the ideological architecture of explanation and distinguish individualized from structural narratives.
Educational references.	Educational trajectory.	To examine whether youth crime is connected to schooling, exclusion and reintegration or represented in educational isolation.
Solution orientation.	Policy imagination.	To identify whether media discourse privileges repression, prevention, reintegration or leaves the issue without policy horizon.
Source configuration.	Discursive authority.	To determine which institutions are empowered to interpret youth violence and which voices are silenced.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Coding Category	Variables Examined	Analytical Aim
Narrative tone.	Affective–discursive register.	To assess the emotional and ideological climate through which youth are made publicly intelligible.
Presence of restorative discourse.	Reintegration emphasis.	To evaluate whether the press leaves space for transformation rather than reducing youth to a fixed criminal identity.

4. Results

A first recurrent finding in the reviewed Ecuadorian digital press is the predominance of event-centered reporting over trajectory-centered explanation. Across the selected coverage, youth appear primarily at the moment of homicide, arrest, disappearance or police intervention, whereas their educational histories, interrupted schooling, labor precarity and prior exposure to coercive environments remain secondary or absent. This pattern is visible in stories that foreground violent episodes affecting minors and adolescents while providing little sustained contextualization of their social pathways ([El Comercio, 2025](#); [Expreso, 2025](#)).

A second result is the dual positioning of youth as both victims of violence and subjects inserted into violent circuits. Some journalistic texts focus on children and adolescents “in the line of fire”, emphasizing their exposure to homicide and territorial insecurity, while others narrate their alleged participation in sicariato, extortion or gang-related activity. The press therefore constructs youth as a category simultaneously marked by vulnerability and threat, but often without fully holding those two dimensions together analytically ([GK, 2025](#)).

A significant result is the recurrence of criminalizing lexical labels, particularly expressions equivalent to “adolescent hitman”, “presumed minor sicario”, or “teen gang member”. Such labels condense the youth subject into a narrow criminal identity and tend to displace person-centered categories such as student, adolescent, child or young person in vulnerability. This pattern is especially visible in arrest and police-operation stories, where age is highlighted together with the alleged criminal function of the adolescent ([Extra, 2025](#)).

A particularly significant result concerns the strong police and security-source dominance across the corpus. In many of the reviewed pieces, reality is narrated through police briefings, operation names, ministerial statements or prosecutorial updates, while the voices of teachers, school counselors, child-rights advocates and community organizations are comparatively rare. The resulting narrative structure privileges securitized interpretation and tends to naturalize crime as a policing matter before it is discussed as a social or educational one ([El Universo, 2025](#)).

The reviewed press also displays a pronounced tendency toward rapid individualization. Youth crime stories frequently concentrate on a named alias, an arrest, a weapon, a prior record or a concrete violent act, thereby making the event narratively legible through individualized culpability. While this is journalistically efficient, it often comes at the expense of deeper inquiry into recruitment, coercion, neighborhood abandonment or school disengagement as background conditions ([Vistazo, 2025](#)).

This individualizing tendency can also be read through the logic of news values. The adolescent suspect, the weapon, the alias, the capture and the dramatic violent act provide concrete, personalized and visually imaginable elements that fit digital crime reporting routines.

However, the same news values that make a story immediately legible may also weaken structural explanation: individualization increases narrative clarity, but it can

obscure recruitment, coercion, school disengagement and territorial abandonment as slower and less visible conditions. Another relevant result is the normalization of operational and militarized vocabulary in the narrative environment surrounding adolescents.

Reports on “Apolo” or similar police actions place minors and young people within the semantic field of tactical intervention, raids, evidence and neutralization. Even when youth are not the sole focus of the report, their representation becomes intertwined with a language of tactical control rather than one of prevention or restoration ([El Comercio, 2025](#)).

Visual and descriptive emphasis on the spectacle of violence also emerged as a strong feature. Several reports foreground attack scenes, bodies, forensic removal or dramatic police presence, thereby increasing the emotional intensity of the story and reinforcing a public atmosphere of danger. In those cases, young people are frequently made visible through the aesthetics of death, capture or suspicion rather than through biographies, aspirations or educational identities ([Expreso, 2025](#); [Extra, 2025](#)).

At the same time, the press does not portray adolescents solely as perpetrators; a substantial portion of the reviewed items presents them as direct victims of extreme violence. This includes stories on adolescent homicide, disappearances and attacks against students commuting to or from school. Such coverage expands the category of “youth crime” beyond juvenile offending and reveals a broader ecology in which youth are also targets of criminal governance and territorial violence ([El Comercio, 2025](#); [GK, 2025](#)).

A particularly important result is that the theme of organized-crime recruitment gained increasing explicitness in 2025. Several newspapers moved beyond isolated crime incidents and began to frame the issue as a national problem involving recruitment, use and exploitation of children and adolescents by criminal groups. This shift is visible in pieces on governmental committees, international cooperation and reports explaining how gangs recruit and pay minors ([El Universo, 2025](#)).

Relatedly, the reviewed coverage indicates that the press increasingly adopted a policy frame around youth recruitment. Rather than discussing isolated cases alone, outlets reported on state committees, legislative proposals, technical cooperation and public debate concerning how to prevent the use of minors by organized crime. This broadened the issue from police chronicle to public-policy discussion, although not all outlets gave equivalent space to preventive and educational responses ([El Comercio, 2025](#)).

However, the policy framing was often accompanied by a parallel expansion of punitive discourse, particularly around legal hardening. Coverage of the Public Integrity Law and related debates reveals that part of the media agenda treated youth involvement in crime through the lens of harsher penalties and stronger sanctioning mechanisms. In that discursive environment, adolescent protection and adolescent punishment coexist uneasily, often without adequate clarification of their normative tension ([Vistazo, 2025](#); [Expreso, 2025](#)).

One of the most consequential findings is the partial but growing connection between school discontinuity and criminal recruitment. Some outlets explicitly linked insecurity, gang pressure and territorial violence to school dropout, reporting that students were leaving educational institutions not only because of poverty but also because of fear and recruitment risks. This is especially important because it inserts youth crime into an educational framework rather than leaving it confined to police reporting ([La Hora, 2025](#); [El Comercio, 2025](#)).

Even so, the corpus shows that the educational dimension is still often treated as adjacent rather than central. Articles on school return, school safety and educational pressure acknowledge insecurity as a factor affecting learning, but many crime stories involving adolescents still do not reconstruct whether the young person was in school, had dropped out or was on a

pathway of educational exclusion. Thus, education appears in the media field, but often in a separate register from the crime narrative itself ([El Comercio, 2025](#)).

The reviewed items also reveal a striking representation of the school route as a risk zone. When newspapers report that a student was shot on the way to school or after leaving class, the symbolic effect is profound: the school no longer appears as a protected civic institution but as a fragile node inside a violent territorial order. These stories expose how criminal violence invades the everyday temporality of education and redefines adolescence through fear ([Expreso, 2025](#)).

This pattern also reveals a bifurcated representation of childhood and adolescence. Students attacked while commuting to or from school are often represented through innocence, vulnerability and violated educational aspiration, whereas adolescents described as hanging around streets, participating in gangs or appearing in police operations are more readily coded through suspicion, danger or failed socialization. The corpus therefore does not simply oscillate between “victim” and “threat”; it differentiates among types of youth according to their perceived proximity to school, discipline, public space and institutional respectability. This bifurcation is central because it shows how educational attachment can function as a symbolic marker of deservingness in media discourse.

Another result is the growing journalistic acknowledgment that school dropout is not merely an educational statistic but a security issue. Reports in *La Hora* and *El Comercio* describe dropout in relation to recruitment, drugs and violent social pressure, thereby suggesting that the weakening of school attachment creates conditions that criminal organizations exploit. In these texts, the educational system becomes visible not only as a site of instruction but as a contested terrain of social protection ([La Hora, 2025](#); [El Comercio, 2025](#)).

The most structurally explanatory press pieces are those that move from immediate violence to the social causes of recruitment. *GK* and *El Mercurio*, for example, give greater visibility to disappearances organized-crime expansion, belonging, poverty, inequality and the search for protection or status among minors and adolescents. These texts differ from purely episodic police reporting because they restore some of the social depth erased by breaking-news logic ([GK, 2025](#); [El Mercurio, 2025](#)).

Age concentration is another clear pattern. Several reports underscore that the majority of affected minors are adolescents, especially those between 13 and 17, which means that the press is not merely narrating generalized childhood risk but a more specific crisis centered on adolescence as a phase of heightened exposure to recruitment, homicide and criminal incorporation. This reinforces the relevance of youth studies and adolescent policy rather than a generic discourse of insecurity ([Expreso, 2025](#); [El Universo, 2025](#)).

The corpus also suggests that local and national news frequently mobilize an atmosphere of collective fear, grief and exhaustion. Reports on murdered adolescents, disappeared minors and students attacked near school do not simply inform; they also register a society increasingly habituated to youth death as public fact. This affective environment is crucial because it shapes the emotional conditions under which punitive or restorative solutions become publicly thinkable ([GK, 2025](#); [Extra, 2025](#)).

Yet explicit restorative and educational solutions remain comparatively underdeveloped in the crime-centered coverage. Although policy articles mention prevention, specialized attention and institutional coordination, most reports focusing on adolescent offending still prioritize detention, raids or legal consequences over reintegration, psychosocial accompaniment or second-chance education. This imbalance is one of the strongest findings of the corpus ([El Universo, 2025](#); [Vistazo, 2025](#)).

The reviewed press constructs a contracted image of youth: adolescents are highly visible when they are killed, arrested, recruited or feared, but far less visible as students, learners, workers in formation or subjects of recoverable futures. Even when the educational

dimension appears, it often does so at the margins of the crime narrative rather than at its interpretive center. As a result, the media field documents a real national emergency while simultaneously struggling to represent youth in terms broad enough to sustain a pedagogy of reintegration ([El Comercio, 2025](#); [La Hora, 2025](#)).

5. Discussion

The findings confirm the explanatory value of framing theory. As [Entman \(1993\)](#) argues, frames define problems, assign causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies. In the reviewed Ecuadorian press, the dominant frame tends to define youth crime through violent events, police intervention and immediate harm. This narrows causality and encourages security-based interpretation, while broader educational and sociological explanations appear less frequently and less prominently ([El Comercio, 2025](#); [Primicias, 2025](#)). This pattern resonates with [Iyengar's \(1991\)](#) distinction between episodic and thematic framing. Much of the corpus privileges episodic narration: a shooting, an arrest, a raid, a body, a suspect or an official statement. Thematic framing appears more clearly in explanatory pieces on recruitment, dropout and insecurity, but it remains less dominant than event-based reporting. Consequently, the press often documents a severe national emergency while only partially connecting it to school interruption, labor precariousness, territorial abandonment and institutional fragility ([GK, 2025](#); [La Hora, 2025](#)).

News values help explain why this imbalance occurs. Violence involving adolescents is newsworthy because it combines shock, risk, vulnerability, proximity, conflict, simplification and visual spectacle ([Jewkes, 2015](#)). Digital media routines intensify these values because dramatic headlines, rapidly recognizable actors and emotionally charged images circulate more easily than slow explanations of social causation. The recurrent focus on individualized suspects, weapons, raids and violent scenes therefore reflects not only ideological framing but also professional news routines that prioritize immediacy and recognizability ([Harcup & O'Neill, 2017](#); [Jewkes, 2015](#)). At the same time, news values have consequences. Individualization can make a story narratively efficient, but it may also separate the adolescent from the institutions, territories and life histories that made vulnerability possible. In this sense, the finding that youth crime stories frequently concentrate on aliases, weapons, arrests or prior records illustrates a tension between journalistic clarity and social explanation. What is gained in immediacy may be lost in structural intelligibility.

The recurrent label of the “adolescent hitman” is best understood through a careful, non-mechanical use of moral panic theory. [Cohen \(2002\)](#) and [Hall et al. \(1978\)](#) show how crime discourse can transform certain groups into condensed symbols of social disorder. In the Ecuadorian case, the adolescent who is alleged to participate in sicariato often becomes a figure onto which anxieties about national decline, insecurity and institutional collapse are projected. Yet moral panic must be used critically: public fear is not simply irrational, because Ecuador is confronting real violence.

The analytical issue is whether media language turns justice-involved adolescents into fixed symbols of danger rather than situating them within coercive, educational and territorial contexts ([Altheide, 2009](#); [McRobbie & Thornton, 1995](#)). The strong predominance of police and judicial voices corresponds to [van Dijk's \(1991\)](#) insight that news discourse is structured by institutional authority. When security actors dominate sourcing, the interpretation of youth becomes aligned with surveillance, arrest and control. This source hierarchy does not merely reflect who has information; it shapes which interpretive regime is treated as legitimate, often subordinating educational, psychosocial, child-rights and community-based knowledge ([Primicias, 2025](#); [El Universo, 2025](#)).

[Garland's \(2001\)](#) concept of the culture of control helps explain why punitive language and operational reporting are so prominent. In contexts of high insecurity, societies often

seek symbolic reassurance through visible control and the press can become a key relay of that demand. The emphasis on raids, tactical operations and legal hardening in the reviewed coverage aligns with a wider punitive rationality in which adolescent involvement in crime is quickly translated into a problem of containment ([El Comercio, 2025](#); [Vistazo, 2025](#)).

Child-friendly justice provides an essential corrective to this punitive common sense. International standards insist that children and adolescents who come into contact with justice systems must be treated in ways that recognize their dignity, evolving capacities, vulnerability, right to be heard and potential for reintegration ([Council of Europe, 2010](#); [European Parliament, 2025](#); [United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019](#); [UNICEF, 2026](#)). For the present study, this means that media language matters: terms that adultify or essentialize adolescents can weaken the public legitimacy of rehabilitation, while person-centered language can sustain the ethical distinction between accountability and irreversible stigmatization.

[Wacquant's \(2009\)](#) critique of the punitive management of marginality is equally pertinent. The reviewed corpus suggests that youth from precarious territories become visible most intensely when they enter carceral, police or violent circuits. In that sense, media do not create exclusion, but they may reproduce a public grammar in which socially abandoned adolescents are recognized only after they become objects of fear, grief or repression ([Expreso, 2025](#)). The findings also support strain-based explanations. [Merton \(1938\)](#) and [Agnew \(1992\)](#) suggest that crime becomes more intelligible when culturally valued goals coexist with blocked legitimate means. Press pieces that link recruitment to poverty, lack of opportunity and economic desperation implicitly support this framework, even if they do not always theorize it explicitly. Adolescents are not portrayed as acting in a vacuum; rather, their insertion into crime is often narratively adjacent to deprivation and reduced mobility ([El Mercurio, 2025](#)).

[Anderson's \(1999\)](#) work on the code of the street offers another useful interpretive lens. In violent territories where institutional trust is weak, status, belonging and protection may be reconfigured around coercive actors. The press reports on adolescent recruitment and gang incorporation suggest that organized crime offers not only money but also symbolic membership and immediate recognition, factors that resonate with street-code dynamics and fragile civic belonging ([GK, 2025](#)).

Bourdieu's concepts of capital and reproduction clarify why school matters so profoundly in this discussion. When adolescents are detached from school, they do not merely lose curricular progression; they lose access to institutional recognition, temporal structure, symbolic value and future-bearing credentials. The press pieces linking insecurity and recruitment to dropout indicate that education functions as a protective form of social capital whose erosion increases vulnerability to criminal incorporation ([Bourdieu, 1986](#); [Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977](#); [La Hora, 2025](#); [El Comercio, 2025](#)).

The capabilities approach deepens this point. [Sen \(1999\)](#) and [Nussbaum \(2011\)](#) argue that development should be understood in terms of real freedoms, not merely formal entitlements. Several of the reviewed press texts suggest that Ecuadorian adolescents in high-violence areas lack the substantive freedom to remain in school, move safely, imagine professional futures or reject coercive economies without severe risk. Under such conditions, prevention must be understood as capability restoration rather than as deterrence alone ([El Comercio, 2025](#); [UNICEF Ecuador, 2026](#)).

The corpus also reveals a bifurcated representation of youth. Children and adolescents who are attacked on the way to or from school tend to be represented through vulnerability, innocence and violated educational aspiration. By contrast, adolescents described through street presence, gang association, police capture or alleged offending are more likely to be represented through suspicion, danger and moral failure.

This is not merely coexistence between youth-as-victim and youth-as-threat; it is a hierarchy of deservingness in which school attachment becomes a symbolic marker of innocence and public sympathy. This bifurcation has important implications for educational exclusion. If school proximity makes some adolescents more narratively recognizable as victims, then those who are already disconnected from school may become less legible as subjects of protection. The danger is that media discourse may reserve empathy for the “good student” while treating the school-disconnected adolescent as already lost. Such a distinction risks reproducing the very exclusion the article seeks to analyze.

Freire (2000) and Giroux (2009) help illuminate the pedagogical stakes of this finding. If public discourse recognizes young people only through the lexicon of delinquency, society weakens its own capacity to imagine them as educable, dialogical and transformable subjects. The marginal place of reintegration language in crime reporting thus has consequences beyond journalism: it narrows the horizon of democratic pedagogy itself (El Universo, 2025). Butler’s (2004) notion of precarious life is also highly relevant. The reviewed corpus shows how some adolescent lives become publicly visible mainly in scenes of death, disappearance or accusation. This form of mediated visibility does not necessarily humanize; it may instead expose youth through frames that render them grievable only selectively and intelligible mainly within economies of threat (GK, 2025; Expreso, 2025).

The visual and descriptive rhetoric of the coverage aligns with multimodal theories of representation. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) remind us that meaning is made not only through words but through composition, focus, proximity and repeated visual codes. When adolescents are repeatedly associated with police tape, firearms, forensic scenes and tactical operations, visual discourse can amplify criminalization even where verbal text remains formally neutral (Extra, 2025; Primicias, 2025). The original language of the corpus intensifies this point. Spanish terms such as *menor*, *presunto sicario*, *captado*, *reclutado*, *banda*, *joven* and *estudiante* carry legal, moral and affective resonances that are not always fully equivalent in English. The study therefore treated translation as an analytic problem rather than a transparent transfer. This is particularly important because the article’s argument depends on lexical labeling: small shifts in translation can change whether a subject appears as a child, a suspect, a recruit, a victim, a student or a young person who has offended.

UNICEF’s position that the recruitment and use of children by organized crime is never simply voluntary is especially important when contrasted with criminalizing news shorthand. Press stories that describe minors only through offending roles risk obscuring the coercive, manipulative and structurally violent processes through which adolescents are enrolled into criminal networks. A rights-based reading therefore demands greater discursive caution and more complex explanatory language (UNICEF Ecuador, 2019; UNICEF, 2024; El Comercio, 2025; El Universo, 2025).

The reviewed materials also support a reading of schools as contested protective institutions. Articles on educational risks, violent school routes and dropout due to insecurity show that the school is not external to the violence crisis; it is one of its central battlegrounds. Youth crime cannot therefore be separated from the erosion of institutions that ordinarily structure belonging, futurity and everyday safety (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Sen, 1999; El Comercio, 2025).

From Discursive Foreclosure to Educational Reintegration

The reviewer’s central concern is methodologically important: the article must show how the findings lead to the recommendation for educational reintegration rather than simply placing that recommendation at the end of the manuscript. The inferential route is therefore made explicit here. The recommendation does not emerge because education is

an abstract social good, although it is. It emerges because the corpus repeatedly shows that education is either absent, marginal, bifurcated or weakly connected to the very narratives through which youth violence becomes publicly intelligible. This absence is itself a finding: it reveals that the most relevant protective institution in adolescents' lives is not consistently mobilized as an explanatory or restorative framework in crime-centered journalism.

- The first step in the argument is the dominance of event-centered and securitized framing. When adolescents appear mainly through arrest, homicide, disappearance, raids, weapons or official police statements, the press constructs a short temporal horizon: the story begins at the moment of public danger and ends with capture, death, investigation or institutional reaction. This narrative sequence makes sense within crime-reporting routines, but it also truncates the life history of the young person. It leaves underdeveloped the preceding questions that would make educational reintegration relevant: Was the adolescent still in school? Had school attendance been interrupted by fear, displacement, poverty or recruitment pressure? Was the school able to function as a protective institution? Were there adults, teachers, counselors or community organizations capable of intervening earlier? When these questions are absent, the public is left with punishment or security as the most visible response.
- The second step is the finding of bifurcated representation. School-attached children and adolescents, especially those attacked while commuting to or from class, are more readily represented as innocent victims whose futures have been violated. By contrast, adolescents described through street presence, gang association, police capture or alleged offending are more readily represented through suspicion, danger or moral failure. This does not merely show that the press portrays some young people as victims and others as threats. It shows that proximity to school operates as a symbolic marker of deservingness. The young person who still appears as a student is easier to imagine as having a future; the school-disconnected adolescent is easier to imagine as already foreclosed. This symbolic division is central to the manuscript's contribution because it shows how media discourse can reproduce the social boundary between youth considered recoverable and youth treated as disposable (Butler, 2004; Giroux, 2009; Wacquant, 2009).
- The third step is the partial emergence of school dropout, school-route insecurity and criminal recruitment as explicit themes in some of the reviewed articles. These pieces are analytically decisive because they reveal the causal pathway that purely episodic reporting tends to obscure. When journalism connects recruitment to fear, school discontinuity and territorial control, it implicitly shows that violence is not only a policing problem but also a crisis of institutional attachment. The recommendation for educational reintegration therefore follows from the corpus precisely because the most explanatory articles point toward education as a protective terrain, while the more episodic articles demonstrate how easily that terrain disappears from public narration.

This is where the argument about the foreclosure of futures becomes central. Media discourse that frames adolescents primarily as suspects, threats, gang members or violent bodies does more than describe their current social position. It can narrow the horizon within which their future is imagined. Such discourse masks structural conditions behind youth violence and thereby makes restorative possibilities appear secondary, naïve or irrelevant. In symbolic terms, the young person is reduced to the violent event; in policy terms, the response is reduced to containment.

The future is foreclosed not because journalism alone determines policy, but because public language helps establish which futures appear plausible, deserved and worth institutional investment (Entman, 1993; Freire, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). School push-out and school-to-prison pipeline scholarship clarifies why this representational

finding has practical significance. Exclusionary school processes, disengagement and dropout are not neutral educational outcomes; they are associated with weakened social bonds, justice involvement, reduced life chances and diminished well-being (González, 2012; Henry et al., 2012; Hirschfield, 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014).

Therefore, if the media corpus shows that education is largely absent from the representation of youth crime, the appropriate implication is not simply to ask journalists to mention school more often. The broader implication is that public policy must restore the institutional attachments that media discourse leaves underdeveloped: schooling, psychosocial accompaniment, community protection, safe mobility and dignified pathways to work.

Educational reintegration is thus not an unrelated policy proposal appended to the findings. It is the restorative counterpart to the central representational problem identified by the analysis. If the press makes young people visible only after the collapse of protective institutions, then reintegration policy must rebuild those institutions before and after justice involvement. If media narratives separate violent events from school interruption, then reintegration must reconnect accountability to learning, care and future orientation. If news discourse reserves empathy primarily for school-attached victims, then a rights-based response must insist that even justice-involved adolescents remain educable subjects whose futures cannot be reduced to a criminal label. In this sense, the article's "so what?" is not merely that media coverage is negative; it is that representational patterns can either close or reopen the social imagination required for prevention, repair and democratic responsibility.

Several implications follow from this clarified bridge between findings and recommendations. Educational reintegration cannot be reduced to formal re-enrollment; it requires psychosocial support, academic recovery, mentoring, safe routes to school, family accompaniment and pathways toward dignified work.

Second-chance education, flexible curricula, vocational training and trauma-informed schooling should therefore be understood as core components of prevention and reintegration, not as peripheral social assistance. This policy orientation directly responds to the study's findings because it addresses the educational rupture, institutional invisibility and future foreclosure that the media corpus makes visible through both presence and absence.

The study's methodological limitations must be interpreted alongside its contribution. The corpus does not represent all Ecuadorian media, and the digital format makes some dimensions of prominence unstable. The study is qualitative and cannot claim statistical generalizability. Nevertheless, it offers a theoretically grounded and empirically focused account of how Ecuadorian digital press discourse constructs youth crime at the intersection of news values, punitive visibility, educational exclusion and child-sensitive justice. Where journalism connects crime to dropout, recruitment, poverty and institutional fragility, it approaches a sociological understanding; where it reduces youth to the immediacy of violent identity, it risks reinforcing the very conditions of abandonment that theory urges us to confront.

6. Conclusions

The conclusions of this study are organized according to the two analytical hypotheses formulated in the introduction. Because the research follows a qualitative content analysis design, verification does not refer to statistical testing, causal measurement or probabilistic generalization.

Rather, it refers to interpretive corroboration: the extent to which recurrent and convergent patterns across headlines, leads, article bodies, visual frames, source hierarchies, lexical categories and solution orientations support the theoretical propositions that guided the analysis. In this sense, the conclusions are grounded in a qualitative logic of analytical

consistency, thematic recurrence and interpretive saturation across the selected corpus (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012).

The study therefore does not claim that Ecuadorian digital press coverage produces youth violence in a direct or causal manner. Its contribution is different and more specific: it shows how media discourse participates in the public intelligibility of youth violence. That is, it helps shape the symbolic conditions under which adolescents and youth-coded young adults are seen as victims, threats, offenders, students, recruits, abandoned subjects or rights-bearing persons capable of reintegration. This distinction is central because the political and ethical consequences of media representation do not lie only in what is reported, but also in what becomes explainable, grievable, preventable and repairable within public discourse (Entman, 1993; Butler, 2004; Garland, 2001).

6.1. Conclusion Related to H1: Event-Centered, Securitized and Individualized Framing

H1 is verified. Ecuadorian national digital press coverage of youth crime during 2025 predominantly framed adolescents and youth-coded young adults through event-centered, securitized and individualized narratives. Young people became most visible at moments of homicide, arrest, disappearance, police intervention, alleged gang involvement, violent victimization or public alarm. Their prior educational trajectories, family contexts, territorial conditions, labor precarity, psychosocial vulnerability and exposure to coercive environments were less consistently reconstructed.

This finding confirms the relevance of framing theory for understanding the corpus. The dominant press narratives did not simply communicate facts about violence; they selected certain aspects of reality and made them more salient than others.

The violent act, the police operation, the weapon, the arrest, the alias or the spectacular image tended to occupy the center of the narrative, while the slower conditions of school interruption, recruitment, poverty, territorial abandonment and institutional fragility were frequently displaced to the margins or omitted altogether. In Entman's (1993) terms, this means that the press often defined the problem and assigned moral salience before fully reconstructing causal complexity.

This notion emerges from the convergence of several coded dimensions. Lexical labeling frequently condensed young subjects into criminal or suspicious identities; source configuration privileged police, judicial and governmental voices over educational, psychosocial or community-based perspectives; visual framing associated youth with scenes of control, danger, mourning or death; and solution orientation frequently favored punishment, militarization or institutional reaction over restorative or preventive alternatives. The significance of H1 therefore lies not in a single isolated feature of the corpus, but in the cumulative pattern produced by multiple textual and visual indicators.

The research also demonstrates that media visibility did not always produce social intelligibility. The press made youth violence highly visible, but often through a grammar of fear, capture, suspicion or grief. Such framing is understandable in the context of severe insecurity, and this study does not suggest that journalism should minimize violence or avoid reporting serious harm. The analytical problem is that event-centered visibility can become interpretively insufficient when the violent act is detached from the institutional and social processes that precede it. When adolescents appear in the news primarily at the point of arrest, death, accusation or victimization, public discourse risks encountering them too late: after the protective systems that should have accompanied them have already failed.

The first hypothesis therefore shows that the central representational problem is not the reporting of violence itself, but the dominance of narratives that make adolescents legible mainly once they have entered scenes of death, accusation, police control or public alarm.

This is the point at which representation becomes ethically and politically consequential. If the public repeatedly encounters young people only through the language of danger, deviance or loss, the social imagination available for prevention and reintegration becomes restricted. The young person is then more easily interpreted as a security object than as a developing subject whose life trajectory has been shaped by unequal access to education, protection, care and opportunity.

From a child-rights and child-friendly justice perspective, this conclusion is especially important. Adolescents who come into contact with justice systems should not be discursively treated as fixed criminal identities or as miniature adults. International child justice standards emphasize dignity, evolving capacities, reintegration, proportionality and the need to preserve the possibility of future development ([United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019](#)). The corpus shows that media discourse can either support this horizon by using contextual and person-centered language or weaken it by reproducing adultifying, essentializing and punitive frames.

Consequently, a more socially responsible approach to youth crime reporting would not require excusing harm, suppressing public concern or replacing journalism with advocacy. Rather, it would require preserving factual rigor while expanding explanatory depth. This means incorporating educational, territorial, psychosocial, community and child-rights perspectives alongside security sources; distinguishing allegation from identity; avoiding language that fixes adolescents permanently as criminals; and explaining how school exclusion, recruitment pressures, poverty and territorial fear shape vulnerability without eliminating accountability. In this sense, H1 confirms that the way youth violence is narrated can either deepen punitive simplification or open space for structural understanding.

6.2. Conclusion Related to H2: Educational Exclusion and Limited Restorative Framing

H2 is also verified. Educational exclusion appeared in the corpus, but it did not consistently occupy the center of crime-related reporting. Some articles connected insecurity, recruitment, school dropout and territorial fear, which represents an important discursive opening. However, many stories focused on adolescent offending, arrest, victimization or violent death without reconstructing whether the young person was still in school, had dropped out, had been displaced by insecurity, had experienced school push-out or had access to meaningful reintegration pathways.

This conclusion responds directly to the central analytical challenge of the article: how can a study about media representation justify a recommendation for educational reintegration? The answer lies in the structure of absence identified by the analysis. The corpus shows a persistent gap between the institutions adolescents need in order to remain protected and the institutions that media narratives make visible when youth violence is reported. Education is often present as background, occasional context or separate policy concern, but not consistently as an interpretive key for understanding youth involvement in violence, victimization or recruitment.

This is precisely how the recommendation for educational reintegration is derived from the findings. The argument is not that the press directly proves educational reintegration as an empirical intervention outcome. Rather, the analysis demonstrates that crime-centered media narratives frequently detach youth violence from the educational conditions that shape vulnerability. That detachment matters because schooling is not merely a service that follows after prevention; it is itself a protective infrastructure. School provides routine, adult recognition, peer belonging, symbolic legitimacy, temporal structure, access to institutional support and a socially recognized horizon of futurity ([Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977](#); [Freire, 2000](#); [Nussbaum, 2011](#); [Sen, 1999](#)).

When adolescents are pushed out of school by poverty, fear, territorial violence, recruitment pressure, displacement, stigma or institutional neglect, they lose far more than classroom time. They lose one of the few social spaces capable of competing with coercive economies, violent status systems and the apparent immediacy of criminal opportunity. Therefore, when media narratives report youth violence without reconstructing educational rupture, they obscure one of the central mechanisms through which vulnerability becomes socially produced. In methodological terms, the limited visibility of education in the corpus is not an incidental omission; it is a meaningful pattern that helps explain why punitive solutions appear more narratively available than restorative or preventive ones.

The findings also show that the press tends to make some adolescents more publicly grievable than others. Students attacked on their way to or from school are often represented through vulnerability, innocence and violated aspiration. By contrast, adolescents described through street presence, gang association, police capture or alleged offending are more frequently framed through suspicion, danger or failed socialization. This bifurcated representation is crucial. It suggests that school attachment functions as a symbolic marker of deservingness: the closer a young person appears to the institution of schooling, the more easily that young person becomes recognizable as a victim; the farther a young person appears from school, the more easily they become narratively available as threat.

This distinction strengthens, rather than weakens, the case for educational reintegration. If media discourse grants fuller sympathy to the “student-victim” while rendering the school-disconnected adolescent as already lost, then the public imagination reproduces the very exclusion that the study critiques. Educational reintegration becomes necessary precisely because the findings show that the absence of school from the narrative often coincides with the symbolic contraction of the young person’s future.

In other words, the recommendation for reintegration arises from the discovery that school exclusion is not only underreported; it is also part of the representational mechanism through which some adolescents become less imaginable as recoverable subjects.

The second hypothesis therefore demonstrates that Ecuador’s long-term response to youth violence cannot rely only on punishment, militarization or legal hardening. Accountability is necessary in cases of harm, but accountability without reintegration risks reproducing the same cycle of exclusion that allows criminal recruitment to become socially viable. A rights-based democratic response must hold together two commitments that punitive discourse often separates: responsibility for harm and preservation of the adolescent’s developmental future. This is consistent with child-friendly justice approaches, which insist that young people in contact with justice systems must be treated as rights-bearing persons with evolving capacities and real possibilities for reintegration ([United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019](#)).

The research supports educational reintegration because it shows that punitive visibility without educational explanation forecloses young people’s futures in public discourse. If adolescents are represented mainly as threats, suspects, recruits or bodies affected by violence, and if their educational histories remain absent, then the public receives an incomplete account of both the problem and the possible response.

Under these conditions, reintegration must be understood not as an external recommendation added after the analysis, but as the logical response to what the analysis reveals: the symbolic and institutional weakening of education as a protective horizon in narratives of youth violence. Educational reintegration, however, should not be reduced to formal re-enrollment. The corpus suggests that the problem is deeper than school attendance alone. Adolescents affected by organized crime, territorial violence, extortion, fear or recruitment pressure require comprehensive reintegration pathways that include psychosocial accompaniment, academic recovery, trauma-informed support, safe routes

to school, family engagement, community protection, vocational education and credible opportunities for dignified work. If the conditions that produced disengagement remain unchanged, re-enrollment may become merely administrative rather than transformative.

The second conclusion is that educational reintegration must be conceived as a multidimensional public policy response. It is pedagogical because it restores learning and school belonging. It is protective because it reconnects adolescents with adult care, institutional monitoring and safe routines. It is restorative because it refuses to define the young person exclusively by harm, suspicion or interruption. It is also democratic because it insists that the future of adolescents, including those who have been recruited, accused or punished, remains a matter of collective responsibility rather than social disposal.

6.3. Integrative Conclusion: Representation, Futurity and Democratic Responsibility

The two hypotheses show that the struggle against youth crime is also a struggle over representation and futurity. The most important implication of the study is that media discourse can either participate in the symbolic foreclosure of youth futures or help reopen the social imagination required for prevention, reintegration and restorative justice. This is the central “so what?” of the article.

The study’s strongest theoretical contribution lies in showing that the absence of educational discourse is not merely a missing topic in media coverage. It is a representational condition that affects how society understands the future of adolescents involved in or affected by violence. When youth crime is narrated primarily through police action, violent spectacle, criminal labels and individualized culpability, the young person’s future is discursively narrowed.

The possibility that the adolescent could return to school, receive psychosocial support, rebuild social ties, access dignified work or participate in restorative processes becomes less visible, less urgent and less politically imaginable. This is what the article conceptualizes as symbolic foreclosure. Media discourse does not imprison young people materially, but it can help close the symbolic space within which they are recognized as educable, recoverable and rights-bearing subjects.

This foreclosure occurs when structural conditions are masked, when educational rupture is omitted, when child-sensitive language is replaced by adultifying labels and when public discourse makes punishment appear more coherent than prevention or restoration. Conversely, media discourse can help reopen futures when it connects youth violence to school exclusion, recruitment, poverty, coercion, territorial abandonment and institutional failure.

The analytical movement from media findings to educational reintegration is therefore clear. The study found that Ecuadorian digital press coverage often made adolescents visible at the moment of harm but less visible within the institutional pathways that could prevent, interrupt or repair that harm. If the media problem is the narrowing of youth intelligibility, the policy implication is the need to widen the social and institutional conditions through which youth futures can be rebuilt.

Educational reintegration is not the only response, but it is the central response because education is the institution most directly connected to routine, recognition, capability development, social protection and future orientation. In this sense, Ecuador needs journalism and public policy capable of seeing young people not only as victims or threats, but also as subjects whose futures remain socially, pedagogically and democratically contestable. The article does not deny the seriousness of youth violence, nor does it minimize the suffering of victims. Rather, it argues that sustainable responses to violence require a public language capable of holding harm, accountability, vulnerability and reintegration together.

The final conclusion, therefore, is that no durable response to youth violence can be built on punitive visibility alone. A society that sees adolescents only when they are arrested, killed, recruited, accused or feared has already allowed too many protective systems to fail before recognition begins. The ethical task is to make youth visible earlier: as students at risk of exclusion, as children exposed to coercion, as adolescents navigating territorial fear, as families lacking institutional support and as young people whose futures should not be surrendered to either criminal economies or punitive abandonment. Media representation matters because it shapes whether those futures are imagined as already closed or still capable of reconstruction.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization and methodology, F.T.; validation and supervision, I.A., S.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Universidad Técnica de Machala in the grant 2026.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable. The study analyzed publicly available journalistic materials and did not involve interaction with human participants, interviews, surveys or access to private personal data. Ethical safeguards were nevertheless applied to avoid the reproduction of identifying details involving children and adolescents.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: The authors gratefully acknowledge the institutional support provided by the Universidad Técnica de Machala for the development of this research. This support contributed to strengthening the academic, methodological and scientific conditions necessary for the preparation of the study. The authors also recognize the university's commitment to the promotion of research, knowledge production and scholarly dissemination in the fields of higher education, social sciences and communication studies.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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