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# Intervention and Responding to Internet Addiction of Minors Under the Perspective of Community Policing

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**Abstract**

With the increasing popularity of Internet use among minors in China, more and more minors appear to use the Internet excessively and even become addicted to it. Community policing, as an important force of community collaborative governance, plays an irreplaceable role in intervening and responding to juvenile Internet addiction behaviors. In the practice of community policing, it is found that the prevention and suppression of minors' Internet addiction behavior also needs the information-sharing, coordination and co-governance of multiple social actors.

This paper collects the work of the community police in preventing and curbing the excessive use of the Internet by minors, focusing on profile of Internet-addicted minors, definition, causes and harmful consequences of such deviant behavior. At the same time, based on the deviant behavior theory and the practical experience of community policing, this paper, from two aspects of prevention and suppression, aims to further improve the on-going collaborative intervention mechanism of «police-home-school-community» through sharing, coordination and co-governance directed against minors' Internet addiction.

**Keywords**

deviant behavior, minors' internet addiction, community policing, sharing, coordination and co-governance, collaborative intervention mechanism

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Оригинальная статья

# Вмешательство и реагирование на интернет-зависимость несовершеннолетних с позиции общественной полиции

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## Аннотация

С ростом популярности использования Интернета среди несовершеннолетних в Китае все больше и больше несовершеннолетних пользуются Интернетом чрезмерно и даже становятся зависимыми от него. Общественная полиция, как важная сила совместного управления сообществом, играет незаменимую роль во вмешательстве и реагировании на поведение несовершеннолетних, связанное с интернет-зависимостью. В практике работы полиции с населением установлено, что предотвращение и подавление интернет-зависимости несовершеннолетних также требует обмена информацией, координации и совместного управления множеством социальных субъектов.

В этой статье собрана информация о работе местной полиции по предотвращению и ограничению чрезмерного использования Интернета несовершеннолетними, основное внимание уделяется профилю несовершеннолетних, зависимых от Интернета, определению, причинам и пагубным последствиям такого девиантного поведения. В то же время, основываясь на теории девиантного поведения и практическом опыте работы полиции с населением, данная статья, с учетом двух аспектов профилактики и пресечения, направлена на дальнейшее совершенствование текущего механизма совместного вмешательства «полиция-дом-школа-сообщество» путем обмена информацией, координации и совместного управления, направленного на борьбу с интернет-зависимостью несовершеннолетних.

## Ключевые слова

девиантное поведение, интернет-зависимость несовершеннолетних, работа полиции с населением, обмен информацией, координация и совместное управление, механизм совместного вмешательства

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The «2020 National Underage Internet Use Research Report» released by China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC) pointed out: in 2020, the number of underage Internet users in China had hit 183 million, with the Internet availability rate reaching 94.9 percent, and it had maintained growth for two consecutive years<sup>1</sup>. As underage netizens gradually become a major force of Internet users, disseminators and producers of Internet culture, the behaviors of Internet overuse and even Internet addiction are worsening. The Law of the People's Republic

of China on the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency was revised and adopted on Dec 26, 2020, and came into effect on June 1, 2021. According to Article 28 of Chapter III of the Law, «Internet addiction» among minors is a bad behavior, that is, behavior that is not conducive to the healthy growth of minors. Article 30 further stipulates that public security organs, residents and villagers' committees or neighborhood committees shall promptly stop minors under their jurisdiction from engaging in bad behavior and urge their parents or other guardians to perform their

<sup>1</sup> The number of underage Internet users in China in 2020 hit 183 million (2021). Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China. *China Government Website*. Retrieved August, 05, 2023, from [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-07/20/content\\_5626236.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-07/20/content_5626236.htm)

duties of guardianship according to law. Accordingly, the public security organs have become one of the important intervention forces to deal with minors' bad behaviors such as excessive use of the Internet and Internet addiction. All along, the community police officers, with the support of local police stations, have constantly innovated their working methods and measures, and achieved remarkable results in preventing and curbing Internet addiction among minors.

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*Internet addiction refers to the uncontrolled behavior of Internet use without addictive substances, which is reflected in the obvious academic, occupational and social impairment after excessive use of the Internet*

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### **An Overview of Internet Addiction Among Minors**

#### **1.1 Deviant Behavior and Internet Addiction of Minors**

Deviant behavior is defined academically from two perspectives of norm and situation<sup>2</sup>. First, the normative perspective holds that deviant behavior violates generally accepted social norms or established legal norms. Accordingly, behaviors that simply violate social norms can be classified as deviant behaviors, but still legal ones. Only when deviant behaviors violate legal norms can be labeled as illegal or criminal conducts. Second, the situational perspective builds on the normative perspective by emphasizing time and space. Based on when and where individual's problematic behaviors occur, cultural customs and values can influence whether certain behaviors should be classified as deviant or not. According to this, when a behavior is negatively defined by society, but still fits into the social normative structure, it can still be considered traditional instead of being deviant, such as workaholism and tattooing. However, certain behaviors that do not conform to the social norm structure and are considered «unacceptable» by cultural customs and values are labeled

as deviant behaviors.

According to Articles 17 and 18 of the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China, a person under the age of 18 is a minor. According to the Core Information and Interpretation of Health Education for Chinese Adolescents (2018 edition) issued by National Health Commission of China, Internet addiction refers to the uncontrolled behavior of Internet use without addictive substances, which is reflected in the obvious academic, occupational and social impairment after excessive use of the Internet. Among them, duration is an important criterion for the diagnosis of Internet addiction disorder. Generally, it takes at least 12 months for the behavior to be diagnosed. By this definition, Internet addiction is a behavior that not only does not conform to generally accepted standards of behavior, but is considered by cultural conventions and values to be unacceptable or even wrong. Therefore, Internet addiction is a deviant behavior, but it still falls into the category of legal conduct.

#### **1.2 The Causes of Internet Addiction among Minors**

Internet addiction should not be regarded simply as a disease. The excessive use of the Internet by minors is often accompanied by other factors, involving their own behavior and psychology as well as their social and family environment. Therefore, it is essential to make a cross analysis from behaviorism, psychological needs, social cognition and other theories and perspectives to jointly explain the causes of minors' Internet addiction.

First, from the behavioral point of view, modern science and technology brings infinite possibilities to the virtual world, which attracts minors to devote a lot of time and energy to it. This addiction can be interpreted as a behavior that is influenced by a reward and punishment mechanism. Online platforms often provide reward feedback through game achievements or stage clearance, social media likes, comments and other ways, which stimulates minors to continue to use the Internet, so as to meet their psychological needs, thus inducing a sense of dependence on the online world.

Secondly, from the perspective of mental health, when minors face psychological pressure, anxiety or negative emotions, they tend to seek ways online to escape from reality, like academic pressure, family problems or social troubles. However, this way of escape can only make them temporarily forget the problems and troubles in their growth. In the long run, it leads to the accumulation and aggravation of real problems, which is not conducive to those minors' physical and mental health

Finally, from a sociological point of view, minors are more susceptible to the influence of society and their peers. Social cognitive theory studies have found that individuals learn by imitating others and construct their

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to the study of deviant behavior (2021). Retrieved August, 10, 2023, from [https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/109955\\_book\\_item\\_109955.pdf](https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/109955_book_item_109955.pdf)

self-perception through social comparison. Therefore, minors' Internet addiction behavior may be influenced by their peers. They may imitate the behaviors of their peers in an attempt to gain social recognition and social status in the Internet world, or they may constantly seek satisfaction and recreation in the fantastic virtual world presented by the Internet. The sense of social recognition, satisfaction and recreation in the virtual world is likely to cause minors to neglect important activities in the real world.

### 1.3 Internet Addiction Profile among Minors and Harmful Consequences

Overall, the comprehensive profile of Internet addicted minors depends on the degree of the individual's obsession with the Internet, the time spent using the Internet, the agitated emotional state and the adverse consequences caused by excessive Internet use.

According to the data on the degree of addiction to the Internet in the 2021 National Underage Internet Use Research Report, 19.5 percent of Chinese underage netizens think they are very dependent on the Internet (they need to go online when they have leisure time) or relatively dependent on the Internet, basically the same as in 2020. Meanwhile, 42 percent of them think that they are not dependent on the Internet at all or not very dependent on the Internet, an increase of 3.3 percentage points over 38.7 percent in 2020<sup>3</sup>. In addition, according to the Survey Report on the Phenomenon of Minors Addicted to Mobile Online Games, the majority of minors addicted to mobile online games are boys, accounting for about 93 percent, while the proportion of girls is relatively small. The youngest of these minors is 11 years old, the oldest is about to turn 18, and the most are between 14 and 17. Given that online gaming accounts require a lot of top-up to use, these minors are also most likely to be trapped in financial distress.

In terms of minors' time-consumption on Internet, the family has a great influence on children's Internet use. The 2021 National Research Report on Minors' Internet Use found that minors are more likely to become addicted to the Internet when their parents are busy or lack attention and care for them. However, from the perspective of family structure, no matter it is joint family, inter-generational family, nuclear family or single-parent family, the phenomenon of Internet addiction among minors exists<sup>4</sup>.

Most studies have also found that minors with Internet addiction may feel insecure, anxious, irritable and even depressed without access to the Internet. On the one hand, these emotions may be related to activities in which the virtual world presents great excitement and pleasure. Therefore, minors may experience mood swings when they do not have access to the Internet. On the other hand,

excessive use of the Internet may affect minors' social ability in real life, bring about difficulties in face-to-face communication, and easily lead to emotional irritability. At the same time, minors tend to have verbal and physical conflicts with parents, family members or others who persuade them to reduce their Internet use, and even threaten them with suicide or self-injury.

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*To better address minors' Internet addiction, the construction of a positive interaction between police officers and minors is pivotal for achieving effective communication and cooperation*

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It is not difficult to find that the interaction of multiple factors makes minors show different characteristics and behaviors in Internet addiction, which causes many adverse effects on their normal life, study and healthy growth. First of all, Internet addiction disrupts the rest and diet of minors, damaging their health. Secondly, being in the virtual online world for a long time affects the normal study of minors, and even causes them to drop out of school. Finally, Internet addiction among minors is also likely to lead to many serious and even illegal consequences. On the one hand, minors may become victims of online pornography, online fraud, online bullying or violent crimes in the Internet; On the other hand, the initial bad behavior of Internet addiction is prone to evolve into serious bad behavior or criminal risk. For example, they may steal money or commit fraud to top up gaming accounts.

### 2. Community Policing Practices for Preventing and Curbing Minors' Internet Addiction

Based on the above analysis, it is argued that for those labeled as Internet addicts it is because of the social

<sup>3</sup> The 2021 National Underage Internet Use Research Report (2022). Retrieved August, 05, 2023, from <http://cagd.gov.cn/data/uploads//ueditor/php/upload/file/2022/11/1669791740317797.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> "Research Report on Minors' Addiction to Mobile Online Games" Released (2021). Retrieved August, 05, 2023, from <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-08-10/doc-ikqcfnc1991600.shtml>



environment and their failed interaction with the real life that “excessive” Internet use has emerged and become rampant. Considering that minors’ Internet addiction may cause harmful consequences to their physical and mental health, academic development, social skills, social adaptability and many other aspects, it is imperative to collaboratively intervene and respond to this issue. In practice, the public security organs have been playing a leading and central role, employing measures such as proactive services, establishing collaborative intervention mechanisms, and effective guidance to prevent minors from relapse into Internet addiction. These efforts constitute a comprehensive strategy to contribute to a warm, harmonious, and healthy environment for their growth within the community.

### **2.1 Promoting Preventive Policing: Taking initiative and Offering Proactive Services**

Initially, community police regularly carry out publicity and education campaigns in the communities, homes and schools. On the one hand, they educate parents and community volunteers about the dangers of Internet addiction as well as some preventive measures, reminding parents to enhance supervision and guidance on minors’ online behavior. On the other hand, police officers collaborate with primary and secondary schools and even high schools to provide Internet literacy education, helping minors, unruly and less self-controlled ones in particular, develop the ability to use the Internet correctly and raising awareness of the risks of Internet addiction. Additionally, they establish communication platforms with parents, step up patrols and oversight in the community and Internet cafes and broaden their scope of work to closely monitor minors’ Internet usage. Finally, in regions where cases of problematic behavior among minors are more severe, it is encouraged to establish community service teams within police stations, which offer professional assistance to addicted minors, identify issues promptly, and understand the root of the problematic behavior. By actively listening and providing consultation, the community service teams offer a platform for minors to seek help, aiding them in correcting their misconducts or deivent behaviors as well as preventing further deterioration.

### **2.2 Strengthening Collaborative Governance: Establishing Coordinated Intervention Mechanism**

Community police officers take the initiative to establish a multi-dimensional coordinated mechanism involving the police, family, school and community to ensure effective implementation and achieve results in curbing minors’ Internet addiction. Under the framework of «police-home-school-community» coordinated intervention mechanism, the community police officers take the lead and collaborate with partners to devise plans for Internet addicts to abstain from Internet, in which responsibilities and tasks of all sides are specified. Secondly, police officials coordinate resources from families, schools, communities and others to establish a collaborative network and information-sharing platform for minors

addicted to the Internet. With platform, police officers pay regular visits to addicted minors and their families, enabling timely intervention. Moreover, police officers, in collaboration with community neighborhood committees, regularly invite psychologists specializing in emergency psychological services to conduct lectures for community volunteers, parents, and teachers involved with minors. These lectures teach communication skills with minors and enhance the quality and effectiveness of communication between parents and children. Meanwhile, professionals in emotional guidance and stress relief are also invited to provide mental health caring and counseling for addicted minors, assisting them in managing their emotional and psychological issues. Finally, in order to cultivate a healthy environment for Internet usage and personal growth, community police officers implement a range of intervention measures. First, Internet usage regulations are made for Internet-addicted minors, including time duration and content restrictions. Second, routine inspection, checks and monitoring are conducted systematically to enhance minors’ self-management capabilities. Third, mutual trust is expected to be should be fostered between community police officers and Internet-addicted minors by employing a series of methods such as “surrounding-cases-based approach”. Fourth, minors excessively using the Internet are encouraged to engage in a diverse array of extracurricular activities.

### **2.3 Ensuring Post-Intervention: Effective Guidance to Prevent Relapse**

A robust support system is established to provide on-going attention and assistance to minors who have quit Internet addiction. Community police officers help them gradually adapt to real-life situations and reduce the risk of relapse. First of all, personalized intervention files and follow-up plans are developed for each minor who has quit Internet addiction. These records comprehensively cover the causes of Internet addiction, behavioral characteristics, family structure, family income level, individual traits, and specific intervention plans. Follow-up plans are designed to monitor and track the effectiveness of treatment approaches based on specific intervention records. Periodic evaluation of intervention measures and timely adjustments are particularly important. Secondly, community police regularly organize diverse community cultural and sports activities for minors who have quit the Internet addiction. This not only encourages them to develop hobbies and practical social skills by means of establishing positive social networks in real life, but also makes them feel the support and care from the community so as to reduce the dependence on the Internet. Lastly, community police officers continue to inspect the families of minors who have quit Internet addiction, collaboratively make Internet usage standards and norms, and provide education on Internet risks and cybercrime for these individuals, repeatedly reminding them to be vigilant against online risks.

### 3. The Improvement of Intervention Mechanism for Minors' Internet Addiction

The Report to 20<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress highlights the need to enhance the social governance system through information-sharing, coordination and co-governance to elevate the efficacy of social governance. The report has provided a strategic direction for enhancing social governance capacity and advancing modernized social governance. It also offers new perspectives for community governance and presents new requirements for all community workers, including community police officers. Based on the framework of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era and existing laws and regulations in China, community police officers proactively establish a coordinated intervention mechanism of «police-home-school-community» that emphasizes information-sharing, coordination and cooperation. Measures are taken such as prevention before the event, intervention during the event, and follow-up after the event, and yield certain accomplishments. To ensure these results, consolidate the achievement, and upgrade practical paradigms, further improvement of the collaborative intervention mechanism for minors' Internet addiction under the «police-home-school-community» framework is required.

#### 3.1 Optimization of Police Resource Allocation

To further accelerate the development of the «police-home-school-community» collaborative intervention teams, it is necessary to maintain a high standard of police force in terms of quantity, structure, quality and mobility. Initially, more police personnel who are interested, passionate and possess adequate knowledge in psychological health should be recruited to participate in addressing minors' Internet addiction. This ensures a sufficient number of competent police personnel available for preventing, curbing and stopping minors' Internet addiction. Furthermore, in terms of structural optimization, law enforcement officers from various departments can be included in the team for minors' services, including criminal investigation officers and psychological health professionals. They can provide the team with professional guidance and support, jointly engaging in Internet addiction intervention efforts. Similarly, community police officers with diverse backgrounds in terms of ages and social experiences can be integrated into the established service team, enabling better utilization of “surrounding-cases-based approach” strategy. Additionally, in order to more effectively address minors' Internet addiction, community police officers can continuously improve their capacity building by the expansion of educational and training resources. For instance, regular seminars and workshops are held to share intervention experience, case studies and the latest research results, so as to continuously improve the professional competence of community police

officers. Furthermore, experts and scholars can be invited to conduct training sessions, imparting the latest psychological intervention techniques and methods, aiding community police officers in effectively caring out Internet addiction interventions. Last but not least, to ensure the mobility of police resources, it is recommended to establish a rotation system, allowing members of the intervention teams to rotate across different departments, thereby acquiring a wider range of experiences.

#### 3.2 Expansion of Cooperative Network

Given the multi-faceted nature of preventing, curbing and stopping minors' Internet addiction, involving aspects such as family response, policy and regulations, collaborative education, professional intervention and management, as well as increased corporate responsibility and enhanced measures, community police officers, departments at the municipal, district, and county levels, and even the precincts can extend their cooperative networks. This includes the incorporation of additional social actors or forces into minors' Internet addiction intervention efforts. By establishing cooperative relationships with social organizations, volunteers, media, universities, and enterprises, a collaborative force is developed, delivering comprehensive and multi-tiered interventions and support, realizing the shared goal of community governance, and creating a healthier Internet environment for minors. First of all, collaborations can be developed with businesses and industries. Mechanisms can be established in collaboration with Internet enterprises and the gaming industry to jointly devise measures for restricting online games, thus reducing the likelihood of minors becoming addicted to these games. Secondly, working with media can facilitate the dissemination of information regarding the harms of Internet addiction and preventive methods, increase societal awareness and promote correct Internet-usage cognition. Thirdly, establishing relationships with youth organizations and youth activity centers can enable the joint offering of diverse courses, lectures and activities, aiming at guiding minors to use the Internet rationally and enhancing their social skills. Finally, mobilizing a broad spectrum of social forces, involving more volunteers in the prevention and intervention of Internet addiction among minors.

#### 3.3 Construction of a Positive Police-Citizen Relationship

Chinese public security organs have long emphasized the combination of specialized work with the mass line. However, in practice, community policing faces challenges of distant police-citizen relationships and ineffectiveness of police-community collaborations. To better address minors' Internet addiction, the construction of a positive interaction between police officers and minors is pivotal for achieving effective communication and cooperation. Primarily, community police officers should adopt an approachable, friendly, and affable demeanor towards

minors in their daily work, demonstrating goodwill, patience and friendliness. Regularly engaging with schools and communities, conducting visits and exchanges, organizing interactive activities that are both entertaining and educational, sharing experiences and stories to foster mutual understanding can establish a foundation of trust between police and minors. Secondly, community police officers should actively listen and earnestly respond to the concerns and needs of minors, showing sincere care and understanding. During conversations, police officers

can also inquire about minors' studies, lives, interests and more. When minors encounter problems, community police officers can provide guidance and lead them onto the right path. Finally, examples speak louder than words. Instead of verbal instructions, police officers, especially those in the community, should show a good image towards minors. Through participation in community services, acts of assistance and rescue work, police officers can pass on the sense of social responsibility and values to minors.

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### Authors' contribution

All authors made an equal contribution to the development of the research, the processing of its results and the writing an article.

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