

# ***Tackling Illegal Activity and Ill Mental Health among Teenagers: Chinese Teenagers' "I don't care" Mindset***

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**Abstract:** Teenagers hardly want to speak their thoughts, making it is hard for adults to understand them. The major concern in China is with teen involvement in underage drinking, smoking, and prostitution. This has also caused teenagers to have terrible mental health situations as they are exposed to the internet where they can access any information. In China, there is a new movement called the "Bai lan" movement which directly translates to letting it rot and not participate in society at all. Chinese teenagers have picked up this trend too. Therefore, this paper proposes for people who have been through smoking and drinking addiction, prostitution, and depression to come present at schools to tell their story because teenagers do not want to listen to lectures. They simply do not care. These presenters will be revealing stories about their life to inspire the teenagers to transition out of the "I don't care" mindset to truly solve the root issue. Teen prostitution occurs usually in rural areas, so the program will be collaborating with a local law firm to teach rural teenagers about their own rights, preventing them from vulnerably sharing their information online.

**Keywords:** Chinese teenagers, teen mentality, illegal activities, mental health, solutions

## **1. Introduction**

Teenagers (those 13 to 19 years old) regardless of nationality are notorious for their "know-it-all attitude" as they transition out of childhood, striving for independence and exploring adult "things" such as alcohol, smoking, and sex. Coupled with this interest is also the pressuring realization of the responsibility an adult hold. The author observes often how teenagers stress drink and smoke. This leads to the question whether if it is a national issue.

During puberty, teenagers are often depressed and woeful as "hormones surge", "bodies transform", "school pressures mount", and "individuation creates conflict at home" [1]. Specifically, in China, the current concern is the new "tang ping" and "bai lan" movement among teenagers. "Tang ping," directly translating to lying flat, was a 2021 social movement to promote the idea of "just doing enough to get by" and is now eclipsed with the term "bai lan," meaning letting it rot "by not even attempting to participate in society, to begin with" [2]. As the news outlet for recruitment Unleash has stated, "Gen Z is leading the Great Resignation in 2023," not only in China but even worldwide this mindset applies [3-5]. This research paper will be referring to this phenomenon as the "I don't care" mindset. Prone to this mentality is the pleasure in illegal activities as teenagers no longer have expectations for life. The local law does not serve as a proper deterrent for behavior such as sexual harassment, smoking, and alcohol consumption. Through the contextual lens of the current "I don't

care” mindset, this article will evaluate the factors surrounding illegal activities among teens in China and propose a remedy.

## **2. The Teenage Problems**

### **2.1. Mental Health**

#### **2.1.1. Suicide**

The leading cause of mortality for teenagers worldwide is suicide according to the Oxford Textbook of Suicidology and Suicide Prevention [6]. Yet, there is still a lack of research presented on the reasoning for suicidal rates among 15-19-year-olds [7].

This is particularly due to the aforementioned strive for independence during the teen years, causing teens to refuse to share information about their moods as those who are suicidal are typically “feeling empty, hopeless, trapped, or like there’s no reason to live” [7]. Such suicidal thoughts are destructive to one’s mental health as it ruins their “ability to enjoy life,” and their “cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being” [7]. Researchers Bahman Zohuri of the Electrical Engineering and Computer Department at the University of New Mexico and Siamak Zadeh of the Ageno School of Business in San Francisco mention in their report Global Suicide Rate Among Youngsters Increasing Significantly that social media causes many to live in silo mode as there is a strong dependency on it. Thus, teenagers, being in Gen Z, the generation that has not lived without technology, social media is a vital part of their life. Zohuri and Zadeh stated that “being a member of a social media is like adding salt to injury as far as we are concerned” [7].

On November 22, 2015, Rina, a south-eastern Russian teenager took her life a day after posting a selfie with her middle finger pointed [8]. This was allegedly the start of the Blue Whale Challenge, an online “suicide game” aimed towards teenagers to finish a task a day over 50 days with the last challenge to kill themselves. In China, specifically, there were seven publically reported victims of this game, but potentially more [9]. The world was shocked by how one game could manipulate one's perception of their life, specifically, those who are dependent on technology. This incident directly reflects who that audience is – the teens. Of these Chinese teens, most of them showed poor school performance or absenteeism. This is also a mirror of the Chinese education system [9].

#### **2.1.2. National College Entrance Examination**

In China, students must take the annual national College Entry Examination, in Chinese the Gaokao, to qualify for college. Many students view this as the most important event in their life as it wipes out or makes up for all their hard work in the past 12 years. With a high score, students will be able to go to top schools, which in China ultimately determines “their future job, salary level, and social position or class” [10]. Weighing 100% of their college application, rural students have the chance to alter their social class through grades and those who are of the upper class are expected to score highly with tutoring for the sake of familial reputation. Not only is the whole nation competing for the top scores, but parents expect highly from their children to succeed. These teenagers, who are not yet adults, must carry the responsibility of setting the trajectory of their life, having no room for mistakes. Thus, this is the most stressful period for teenagers, causing a possible “higher proportion of depression onset,” as well as the “I don't care” mentality to develop if they fail or succeed so that they just work the bare minimum [10].

## 2.2. Illegal Activity

### 2.2.1. Explicit Exposure

A major factor as to why teens engage in underage alcohol consumption, prostitution, and smoking is due to societal exposure to such activities. These are all illegal; yet, we can see all these being described in songs. The Wild Cat Tribune compared love songs from 1980 to 2020 as seen below [11].

“Oh, I wanna dance with somebody, I wanna feel the heat with somebody”

(“I Wanna Dance With Somebody”, Whitney Houston, 1980)

“When I see your face

There’s not a thing that I would change

‘Cause you’re amazing

Just the way you are”

(“Just The Way You Are”, Bruno Mars, 2010)

"Now from the top, make it drop that's a"

(“WAP”, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, 2020)

The lyrics get more explicit as time passes from the mentioning of someone to directly implying sex. Spotify data science manager at Spotify Mark Bannister states that since 2001, “there hasn’t been a year without at least one single carrying a parental advisory label” and that in 2017, 75% of the top 100 songs were explicit [11]. Yet, many creators and platforms fail to realize minors can access these songs with just a click.

According to BBC, many Chinese listen to Western music as they are also exposed to it. Yet, because of their traditional manners that deem explicit music in public inappropriate, there is less explicitness about sex in Chinese music. In China, the greater issue is the accessibility to pornographic videos and readings as they can pop up as advertisements on websites for any age. The main conflict is between the reserved traditional manners and the sprouting curiosity of teens – they want to explore sex, but they are repressed through the culture as it is a “forbidden” public topic.

According to the Chinese Journal of Public Health, in a 2017 survey about reproductive and sexual health, the teenage average score for correct answers was only 53% [12]. This directly mirrors how sex education is not implemented adequately in China. Many teenagers who are curious about adult behaviors often fall into the desire to behave the same way. Thus, they try to do so in an implicit manner – sexting, which is understood as sending sexually explicit images or messages through a mobile device.

By doing so, it is hard for the government to track such information and they have too many people to care for to be even charged with an offense. This conflict between personal desires and societal standards then creates a phenomenon called sex repression, society views sex as shameful and private, minimizing children's education around such activities, which further stimulates their curiosity. However, many teenagers who are used in the process by grown men or women may get their photos leaked and can suffer from tremendous psychological effects.

### 2.2.2. Alcohol Consumption

According to an observational study of 105,752 students who ranged in age from 9 to 21 years, the prevalence of current drinking among students was 7.3%, and 13.2% of students reported having alcohol-related problems [13]. Yet, the legal drinking age is 18 and the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Minors states that legal guardians must not allow minors to drink. With these regulations in place, one would think underage drinking would not be an issue; however, “the law isn't strictly enforced and it's easy for anyone to buy and consume alcohol” – It is illegal, but not

a crime [14]. This circumstance is apparent because as aforementioned in the explicit exposure section, there is a lack of sex understanding among teens in China, lowering the possibility that teenagers will commit sexual violations when unconscious. Therefore, adults do not mind that teenagers drink because 61.7% of male adults and 20.3% of female adults drink [12]. With this drinking culture, most adults are elated that their children are close to the drinking age and hope to “practice” their drinking abilities, not to mention how teens themselves group in clubs for nightlife. However, the public and the teenagers themselves do not realize the impending danger as Chinese medical specialists forecast that “new cases of, and deaths from esophageal cancer are predicted to increase by about 1.5 times in the coming 25 years” [15].

### 2.2.3. Smoking

Like drinking, smoking is also a cultural norm in China for most men, so the illegal aspect of it is often neglected as it is not a crime. If one needed a favor from another, they would offer them a cigarette. In fact, “three of every five Chinese smokers begin smoking at the age of 15-20 years” [16].

Teenagers also have increasingly favored vaping. In a national youth tobacco survey, the awareness and use of e-cigarettes increased from “45% to 69.9%,” with 288,192 middle school students [17]. As a personal observation, most teenagers share vapes in areas such as their own house when their parents are gone or in karaoke rooms or nightclubs. Vapes are mostly targeted towards the younger generation in China as are sold in colorful packets and customers can choose their designs and shapes. Cigarettes and vapes are so prevalent to the point that

“at least 50 million of the children now living in China will be killed by smoking” [16].

### 2.2.4. Prostitution

Though rural areas in China also have issues of smoking and drinking, they have a more prevalent one with teen prostitution. Tan Zhao, an assistant professor for public administration at Ren Min University in China, states that he sees that “as long as the village cadres can accomplish their state tasks, the local state would permit and protect their corrupt activities as a reward” [18].

In 2018, the Shenmu government confirmed that a 15-year-old Chinese school girl was forced into prostitution and beaten to death by six teenage suspects after hearing a customer they referred to as “uncle” was not satisfied [19]. These teens allegedly beat her “with belts, fists, and bricks for a few hours until she died..... Dismembered the girl before burying her remains” [19]. This all occurred in Shenmu City, a rural part of China. Even in rural China, technology is a large part of a teenager's life as the victim's mother Ms. Wang claimed that “her daughter had got to know the suspects online” [19]. Hence, this further justifies how the internet is prone to expose the underaged persona to illegal entities as they cannot fully discern danger, creating a larger community of teens involved in prostitution to promote or force peers.

## 3. Solving the Issue

Before deciding how to solve these teenage behaviors, a goal must be set for a successful solution. The most direct reflection of success is the outcome because ultimately, the goal is to prevent such behaviors. Even if there is a time lag, when there is a positive change of outcome, that marks the time of change.

### 3.1. Stakeholders and Influences

With the audience being teenagers in China, the school is a major stakeholder for all behavior because it is mandatory to go to middle school for a teenager. However, it is also very likely for teens to go

to high school too. This then means the school is where teenagers make friends and socialize, directly creating relationships and connections that could lead to group drinking, smoking, sexting, or events that can lead to mental health issues. Depending on the type of peers, they can either be an ally or an opponent.

In this complex social circle, the school plays a major role in regulating student behavior and educating students on social issues to prevent such events from happening. The school authority acts as an ally.

Family is also a major factor that influences a teenager's behavior. If the parents drink or smoke, it is very likely for the teenager to obtain such substances. If the parents abuse the child mentally and physically, it can increase the possibility of teenage depression or suicide. Thus, the family can either be an ally or opponent to the situation depending on their values.

Mostly applicable to prostitution and mental health, the accessibility online with "predators," adults who prey on minors, and sex traffickers allows different entities to disguise themselves to deceive teenagers. If the teenager falls into the situation, they can be harmed mentally (post-traumatic stress disorder) and physically (raped or killed). These stakeholders are opponents of the social issue.

Lastly, the government has the overarching power to ban different activities and properly use the law as a deterrent based on the punishment. However, due to the Chinese culture, many laws are not punished such as underage drinking, and allow for corruption in rural areas as long as the village cadres complete their annual tasks. Thus, the government can act as an ally, but unintentionally they can be worsening the situation if their policies are not evaluated from various perspectives.

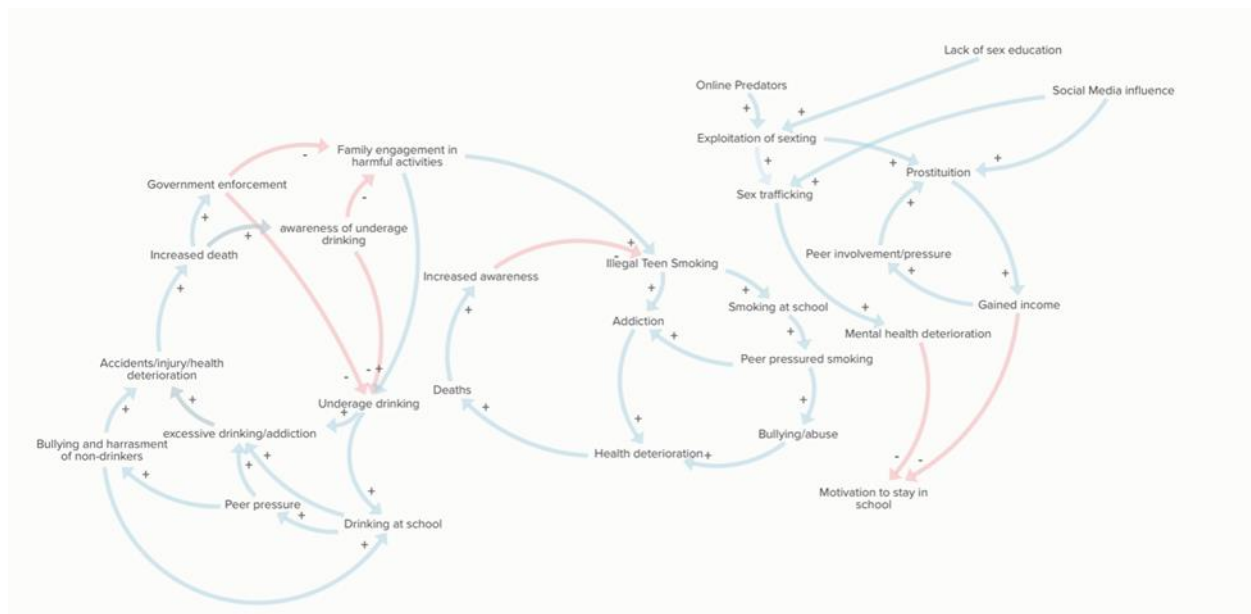


Figure 1: Systematical visualization of teenagers' social issue impact.

### 3.2. Approaches

Schools in China have been trying to solve such growing behavior. In an interview with a previous principal of Qinghua secondary school, he stated that when he first started working, he encountered students in teacher bathrooms smoking. It was a huge issue until they implemented a strict watch on students with warnings and reflections, which helped the situation. The principal also mentioned how the nature of these issues is that these habits are collective, and students can always find a way to get into nightclubs or their hands on alcohol through older friends or family. However, the issue with their approach to implementing strict measures was that the schools never investigated the students'

backgrounds to understand the root issue, which is why it is still prevalent. He said that there are simply too many people to care about in China. Through this, it is understood that the approach must be reflective of the root issue rather than preventing it at all costs.

Next, I interviewed the Headmaster at the Chestnut Grove Academy in the UK and he stated that there was no existence of such issues in the school. However, if there were, there are a one-to-one conversation with parents and health classes are required to educate students about such behaviors. Another Headmaster at a private school named Bedales mentioned how schools must have educational conversations with teenagers rather than immediate discipline because they will hardly listen to warnings. They need to think through and understand the impacts of their behavior.

The approaches of the solution must be effective on the audience, able to be implemented as a non-profit organization, and have an appropriate time of development.

The chosen approach to this social issue is through changing societal mindsets. Teenagers are notorious for being rebellious, so if there were stricter laws, they will always try to find loopholes. Thus, the main issue is the mind of teenagers and their ability to control their curiosity. As mentioned before, many teenagers have adopted the "I don't care" mindset in life and see no hope for acceleration in the future. Therefore, when creating this solution, it must be kept in mind that reaching the potential in life is not a common goal. This is often a mistaken assumption in different programs because many teenagers simply just do not care and sit through a whole session thinking it was useless. Hence, the solution must be targeted toward changing and motivating the teenage mind.

With this in mind, the approach to this paper's solution is to introduce a program into schools starting from 6th grade up to 12th. The program will be unique in a way that it will consider the current teenage mind in the course. The course will consist of a conversation with adults who have been through different life journeys whether it be prostitution, underage drinking, or sexting. Teenagers love stories, they do not like lectures. Therefore, if the courses are presented over a range of time as a story with interactive conversation, it may truly intrigue students. The theory of Change, which is illustrated in Table 1 is applied to the design.

Table 1: The design roadmap applied theory of change.

Activities	Intermediate Outcomes		Ultimate Outcome	
What you will do	Causes	Behaviors: What others must do	Causes	What you will achieve
Create a program that combats teenage illegal activity engagement with a more convincing method where people who have been through drug addiction, alcohol addiction, and prostitution tell their story to teenagers to rid the “I don’t care” mindset. Programs in rural areas will collaborate with Law firms to educate teenagers about their rights in sight of sexual harassment or abuse.		Schools must need to agree to the program.  Participants must agree to sharing their experiences.  Students and parents must agree to being comfortable with the content and give consent.		Students must take the warnings and life advice to heart, thinking about the social consequences.  There will be a change in the mindset of teenagers so that when they are approached with illegal activities.

For this solution to take place, schools must allow the program to be implemented into the curriculum. Possible issues could be that there are too many logistical procedures, creating a time lag, or it simply may not fit the school. Therefore, to prevent such possibilities, the program will be edited accordingly to the circumstances of the school. For example, if it is an all-girls school, then the presenter assigned will most likely be a female, so their experiences are similar.

The presenters, who have been through teenage years and had trouble with illegal behavior or the “I don’t care” mindset may not know how to share experiences with teenagers. Therefore, the program will also create examples and guidelines to aid them with the process.

However, the whole curriculum hones down to the teenagers themselves and if they are comfortable with the explicit content being shown as some teenagers may be triggered by different aspects due to the background difference in every student. This is an unintended adverse consequence. Thus, there will be variations to the program with less explicit content in the specified area to make sure the presenters avoid certain topics. In the information sheet, there will be a requirement for teenagers to fill out their experiences. The organization will have very strict privacy rules and measures so we will name them by numbers. The numbers will be put into groups based on the responses. Students will receive their number and can choose not to tell anyone.

### 3.3. Program Design Details

#### 3.3.1. Casual Links

Though the program may be designed to help teenagers understand the negative impacts of illegal activities in an engaging way targeted towards them, teenagers may still be uninterested in the genuineness of the presenters and behave rudely. To mitigate such problems, the organization will collaborate with public school teachers or personnel and organizations who have experience dealing with teenagers who are troublesome and ask for advice and training methods for the program's staff. Further concerns are also included in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: A feedback program designed for school and multiple participants.

Key individual or institution	How you will get their feedback
School	<i>Through weekly meetings</i>
Presenters	<i>Gather feedback through reflection meetings</i>
Organizers	<i>Gather feedback through reflection meetings</i>
Teenagers	<i>Give them a form to fill out after a week or two to see if they still remember the stories and advice given</i>
Parents (only, if necessary, probably parents who are involved with schools)	<i>Give them a form to fill out if they notice a change in behavior in their children or children nearby.</i>

Table 3: The details of activities and feedback circles.

Activity indicators	Activity targets	Who will collect, record, and analyze the information
Conversation between the presenter and the teenagers	Having the conversation Intermediate outcome: reveal the teenager's underlying motivations to engage in illegal activities or other factors. Showing emotion is associated with genuineness.	There will be an observer in the room from the program taking note of the conversations. The program's staff will analyze the results after.
Behavior and other intermediate outcome indicators	Behavior and other intermediate outcome targets	Who will collect, record, and analyze the information
Engagement and interest from teenagers	Full engagement and interest from teenagers	The presenter will give out a form at the end of the session and the program's staff will analyze the results
Ultimate outcome indicator	Ultimate outcome target	Who will collect, record, and analyze the information
Number of teenagers involved in illegal activities	A decrease in the number of teenagers involved in illegal activities	Self-report forms by teenagers.  Will check with the police departments about the amount of participation.

### 3.3.2. Implementation

Because of the demand for presenters depending on the scale, the organization may not be able to recruit the needed number of presenters and maybe they will not be willing to make such a commitment. To solve this, the organization will reach out to rehabilitation centers to seek out alumni and have them contact people who fit the narrative, as well as have a pay.

Another weakness of the implementation process is the length of the course and how long the story will be told. To mitigate such concerns, staff members will create activities revolving around the presenter's life and have conversations. Each session consists of one aspect of the story. The program will run through three presenters over a whole school year with corresponding topics for each grade level and will be assigned according to relevance.

### 3.3.3. External Factors

This whole solution is reliant on the country and government regulations. If the government were to change the law someday for parents or families to easily give their children alcohol or cigarettes or even engage in nightclubs, then it would hurt the persuasiveness of our argument to not participate in such activities. Therefore, to mitigate this weakness, the organization will edit the program intentions to fit all situations, not just only the "illegal" aspect. It will be geared towards the well-being of teenagers.

One major weakness is how we will measure the cases of behavior. It is decided that self-report forms will be used coupled with verification from the police department to verify the outcomes of the survey if they are close to the numbers that they have. However, if the students know this, then they

will be afraid that we will report their cases to the police, or that the police will crack down on such cases. Therefore, to mitigate such fear, it is important to have a meeting with the police department to understand what they care about and how we can help the students.

### 3.3.4. Unintended Consequences

Because the presenters will have a history of engaging in illegal activities in the past, it is important to take note of their possible behaviors of abuse of the system – to get more teenagers connected with prostitution camps. Or people may judge these presenters due to their past experiences. Therefore, to fix this, the organization will monitor all behavior between the presenter and the students. Presenters can call from online via a screen and their voices and faces can be altered with AI technology.

In fact, for rural school areas, we will collaborate with a law firm for charity work by visiting rural schools to give presentations about the law so that the teenagers know their rights. Thus, if they ever get threatened to commit to an activity, they know what to do and who to call.

### 3.3.5. Testing

A pilot test will take place to examine the effects of this program. It will involve 36 participants from 6 different schools in the area – 3 from affluent areas and 3 from rural areas. The test would be particularly interested in how the students react and their engagement levels to the presenter's life story. We would seek unstructured feedback from the students and the issues of interest and motives for illegal activity would particularly interest us.

### 3.3.6. Evaluation

This program will be evaluated through the before and after method because it is the most direct method to measure change. The change will be measured through feedback surveys of how the students thought the program was effective or not before the program and after. If there are any changes in the outcome it would highly be possible that it was attributed due to the program.

## 4. Conclusion

With the emergence of social media and the acceleration of information, teenagers are susceptible to smoking, alcoholism, and prostitution due to the gullibility that exists as they are still transitioning into adulthood. However, this issue in China raises attention among teenagers because of the new trending "I don't care" mindset that plays a crucial role in altering the well-being of teens. To truly combat the issue, the paper proposes the creation of an organization that sends presenters to schools to tell their stories of being engaged in prostitution, smoking, and alcohol addiction. Stakeholders need to understand the interests of teens to help them and so, this solution revolves around the new teen mentality. We realize that teens do not care about lectures, they want to hear stories and despise that schools patronize them though they do not understand anything about the minds teens have. By combining my knowledge as a teenager at an international school in China, this solution aims to make students care about their future and well-being, which leads to a decrease in harmful activities – success in saving the new generation.

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