

Integrating Penal and Non-Penal Approaches in Addressing Child Grooming in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines criminal law policy on child grooming in the context of age restrictions for internet users in Indonesia. The main problem lies in the absence of explicit regulation of child grooming as a stand-alone offense. However, this crime develops through psychological manipulation, gradual digital communication, identity concealment, emotional exploitation, and requests for sexual content involving children. Previous studies have discussed online child sexual exploitation and child protection in digital spaces, yet they have not sufficiently connected age restriction policy with criminal law reform on child grooming. This study offers a novel perspective by positioning age restriction as a non-penal preventive instrument that must be integrated into penal policy. Using a normative juridical method with statutory and conceptual approaches, this study analyzes legal materials qualitatively through Barda Nawawi Arief's criminal law policy theory and Lawrence M. Friedman's legal system theory. The findings show that Indonesia's criminal law regulation remains partial because relevant provisions are scattered across the Child Protection Law, the ITE Law, the TPKS Law, and the Pornography Law. Age restriction policies under Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025 and Ministerial Regulation Number 9 of 2026 are preventive but still administrative in character. This study contributes to criminal law scholarship by recommending the formulation of child grooming as a specific offense and the integration of penal and non-penal approaches.

Keywords

Criminal Law; Child Grooming; Internet Users; Sexual Violence

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has transformed the ways children live, learn, play, interact, and construct their social identities (Amni et al., 2026; Buckingham, 2007; Farrukh et al., 2021; Mafa & Chigwedere, 2025). The internet is no longer an additional space outside children's everyday lives; it has become part of their daily social ecology. In Indonesia, this issue is particularly significant due to the country's high internet penetration. The Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association reported that in 2024, Indonesia had 221,563,479 internet users out of a total population of 278,696,200, representing a



penetration rate of 79.5 percent. The same report shows that Generation Z accounts for 34.40 percent of internet users, while the post-Generation Z group accounts for 9.17 percent. These figures indicate that children and adolescents are not marginal users, but a substantial part of Indonesia's digital ecosystem.

Digital connectivity provides children with access to knowledge, creative spaces, peer networks, entertainment, and new forms of social participation. At the same time, it also exposes them to risks that are not always easily recognized by children, families, schools, or law enforcement authorities. UNICEF Indonesia reports that many Indonesian children use the internet daily, particularly for socializing and entertainment, while also facing exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and online sexual exploitation and abuse. A 2023 baseline study found that only 37.5 percent of children had received information on how to stay safe online, while 42 percent had felt uncomfortable or afraid because of online experiences, and 50.3 percent had seen sexual images on social media. (UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF et al., 2022; UNICEF Indonesia, 2023)

One form of digital-based sexual violence that requires closer scholarly attention is child grooming. Online grooming refers to a process in which adults build relationships, trust, emotional dependence, or influence over children through communication technology to obtain sexual interaction, either online or offline. Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021) emphasize that online grooming is not a single event, but a complex process that may unfold over days, months, or even years. It may involve manipulation, gift-giving, identity concealment, exploration of the child's environment, sexualization of conversations, threats, and extortion. Thus, child grooming cannot be reduced to explicit sexual conversation between an offender and a child. It is a gradual mechanism of power that exploits children's vulnerability, fear, shame, and emotional dependence. (Anggraeny et al., 2023; Jeglic et al., 2023)

Previous studies have shown that online grooming perpetrators use multiple strategies. Whittle et al. (2013) explain that offenders may use praise, persuasion, gifts, threats, and digital anonymity to approach children. Kloess et al. (2019) show that offenders may employ direct or indirect approaches; in indirect grooming, they first build emotional closeness and a sense of safety before shifting the interaction toward sexual matters. De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix (2018) further demonstrate that grooming often progresses through relationship-building, communication maintenance, boundary testing, acquisition of sexual content, and the later use of such content as a tool of control or threat. This pattern makes grooming difficult to detect because, in its early stages, it may appear as ordinary friendship, emotional support, or seemingly voluntary communication. (Kaylor et al., 2023; Podolski et al., 2023; Wefers et al., 2024)

The notion of consent in such relationships is deeply problematic. A child may respond to messages, send images, or comply with the offender's requests, but such responses do not emerge from an equal position. Asymmetries of age, knowledge, sexual experience, manipulative capacity, and control over digital information shape the relationship. Therefore, a criminal law approach that waits for physical violence, sexual intercourse, or the dissemination of sexual content risks arriving too late. Grooming operates in a pre-exploitation stage, yet it already produces serious harm by opening pathways to sexual exploitation, extortion, intimate content production, and long-term psychological trauma. (Borj et al., 2023; Soldino & Seigfried-Spellar, 2024; Winters, Kaylor, et al., 2022; Winters, Schaaf, et al., 2022)

The urgency of this issue is evident in the *Disrupting Harm in Indonesia* report by UNICEF, ECPAT, and INTERPOL, which found that two percent of children aged 12 to 17, or approximately 500,000 children in Indonesia, reported experiencing online sexual exploitation and abuse in the previous year. This figure is likely lower than the actual scale of the problem because many children are reluctant to disclose sensitive and traumatic experiences. UNICEF also notes that up to 56 percent of children who experience online sexual exploitation or unwanted online experiences do not tell anyone. This high rate of non-disclosure shows that child grooming is not merely a digital crime, but also a social, psychological, and institutional problem.

Indonesia has responded through regional and national commitments. At the regional level, Indonesia is part of the 2019 ASEAN Declaration on the Protection of Children from all Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse. At the national level, the government issued Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025 concerning the Governance of Electronic System Implementation in Child Protection, which was later elaborated through the Minister of Communication and Digital Regulation Number 9 of 2026. These regulations govern age restrictions, child user verification, risk assessment, child accounts, platform supervision, and the obligations of electronic system operators. They indicate that the state has begun to position digital platforms as legal actors, not merely neutral providers of digital space.

The research gap lies in the limited attention given to the relationship between age restriction policy as a non-penal instrument and the need for criminal law reform on child grooming in Indonesia. Previous studies have explained the structure of online grooming, including false trust, persuasion, identity concealment, gradual sexualization, and exploitation of vulnerability. However, they have not sufficiently examined how administrative age restrictions can be integrated into penal policy to address grooming as a pre-exploitation offense. Therefore, this study addresses three research questions: first, how does Indonesian criminal law currently regulate child grooming? Second, what is the legal position and character of the age restriction policy for internet users as a non-penal instrument? Third, how should Indonesian criminal law policy be reformed to integrate penal and non-penal approaches in

preventing and responding to child grooming? The novelty of this study lies in positioning age restriction not merely as an administrative child-protection mechanism but as part of an integrated criminal-policy framework. This study contributes conceptually to Indonesian criminal law reform by arguing that effective child protection requires recognition of grooming as a manipulative process that carries legal danger even before sexual exploitation becomes explicit.

Conceptual Framework of Grooming as Pre-Exploitation Crime

This study conceptualizes child grooming as a pre-exploitation crime, namely a form of criminally relevant conduct that operates before sexual exploitation becomes explicit, visible, or completed. In this framework, grooming is not treated merely as a preparatory act in a technical sense, but as a manipulative process that already produces legal harm by placing children under psychological, emotional, and digital control. The concept of pre-exploitation crime is important because online grooming often develops through gradual communication, trust-building, identity concealment, boundary testing, sexualized interaction, and the acquisition of intimate content (AKSOY RETORNAZ, 2022; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2023; Rachmawati et al., 2023). These stages may appear ambiguous in ordinary legal categories, yet they create the conditions through which sexual exploitation becomes possible.

Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021) show that online grooming is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to a single event. It involves strategies that may include deception, emotional manipulation, sexual solicitation, pressure, and threats. Similarly, Chiu & Quayle (2022) demonstrate that grooming relationships often progress through online intimacy and emotional dependency before moving toward offline abuse or more explicit sexual exploitation. These studies support the argument that the danger of grooming lies not only in its outcome, but also in the process through which the child's autonomy, judgment, and sense of safety are gradually weakened.

From a criminal law perspective, this conceptualization challenges legal frameworks that only respond after physical abuse, sexual intercourse, extortion, or the distribution of sexual content has occurred. Such an approach risks arriving too late because the core harm of grooming begins earlier, when the offender constructs an unequal relationship and normalizes sexual access to the child. Therefore, grooming should be understood as a punishable pre-exploitation process with its own normative significance.

This framework also connects penal and non-penal policy. Penal policy is needed to designate grooming as a specific offense. In contrast, non-penal policy is required to reduce children's exposure to risky digital environments through age restrictions, platform governance, digital literacy, and reporting mechanisms (Arief, 2010, 2011; Barda Nawawi Arief, 2016; Rustamaji, 2019). Thus, the concept

of grooming as pre-exploitation crime provides a basis for integrated criminal policy reform in Indonesia.

2. METHODS

This study employs a normative juridical research method, which examines legal norms, principles, doctrines, and legal constructions within the Indonesian positive legal system (Budianto, 2020; Negara, 2023; Taekema, 2018). It focuses on how criminal law policy addresses child grooming in relation to age restrictions for internet users, rather than empirical behavior. The study uses statutory and conceptual approaches. The statutory approach analyzes laws on child protection, sexual violence, electronic information, pornography, and electronic system governance, including the Child Protection Law, ITE Law, Pornography Law, Sexual Violence Crimes Law, Government Regulation No. 17 of 2025, and Ministerial Regulation No. 9 of 2026.

The conceptual approach clarifies key concepts such as child grooming, criminal law policy, and the relationship between penal and non-penal measures. Legal materials include primary, secondary, and tertiary sources collected through library research. Analysis is conducted qualitatively through norm coding, legal interpretation, and gap evaluation. Barda Nawawi Arief's theory is used to assess age restriction as a non-penal instrument integrated with penal reform for effective child protection.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Criminal Law Policy Against Child Grooming in Indonesia

Criminal law policy against child grooming in Indonesia remains normatively inadequate because the existing legal framework has not yet recognized grooming as a stand-alone offense. Although child protection is regulated through several instruments, including the Child Protection Law, the Electronic Information and Transactions Law, the Sexual Violence Crimes Law, the Pornography Law, and Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025, these regulations remain fragmented. They primarily address acts that have already reached a visible stage of exploitation, such as sexual abuse, dissemination of immoral content, child pornography, extortion, or the misuse of electronic systems. This shows that Indonesian criminal law still operates within a reactive paradigm: it tends to intervene only after harm becomes evident. At the same time, the manipulative process that precedes exploitation remains normatively under-recognized.

This limitation is serious because child grooming does not always appear as direct violence, coercion, or physical contact. It often develops through ordinary-looking communication, emotional closeness, praise, gifts, identity concealment, secrecy, and gradual sexualization. Several studies show that online grooming is a process of manipulation rather than a single event. Whittle et al. (2013), De Santisteban et al. (2018), Kloess et al. (2019), and Gámez-Guadix et al. (2021) emphasize that grooming

involves the construction of trust, the testing of boundaries, the control of communication, and the normalization of sexual interaction. Therefore, criminal law that only responds to explicit sexual acts fails to capture the central danger of grooming: the creation of a situation in which the child is psychologically, emotionally, and digitally controlled before exploitation becomes visible.

The absence of a specific offense also creates a problematic legal gap. Existing provisions may be used when the perpetrator has produced or distributed child sexual material, committed sexual violence, or transmitted prohibited electronic content. However, they are less effective when the perpetrator is still in the stage of building dependency, requesting secrecy, disguising identity, or testing the child's sexual response. These acts may not yet fulfill conventional elements of sexual violence or pornography, but they already attack the child's sexual integrity, psychological development, bodily autonomy, and right to protection. In this sense, the legal problem is not merely regulatory fragmentation, but the inability of criminal law to recognize grooming as a pre-exploitation harm. (Bahri, 2025; Brown, Coverdale, & Wringe, 2022; Utari et al., 2024a; Zurnetti & Muliati, 2022)

From Barda Nawawi Arief's perspective, criminal law policy must be understood as part of social policy aimed at protecting society and preventing crime. Penal policy should not be reduced to punishment after the occurrence of harm; it must also define which conduct endangers protected legal interests and should therefore be criminalized. In the context of child grooming, the protected interest is not only public morality, but the child's dignity, psychological security, sexual integrity, and freedom from manipulation. Consequently, the criminalization of grooming is normatively justified as long as it is formulated carefully, proportionally, and with clear elements distinguishing ordinary communication from exploitative communication.

However, penal reform cannot stand alone. Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025 reflects a shift toward platform governance, age restriction, risk management, and administrative responsibility. However, these non-penal measures remain insufficient if they are not connected to criminal law enforcement. Platform regulation may reduce risk, but it cannot replace the need for criminal accountability against offenders. Therefore, Indonesia requires an integrated criminal policy: child grooming should be designated as a specific offense, while non-penal measures such as age verification, platform oversight, digital reporting systems, and child protection design should support prevention and early detection. Without such integration, child protection will remain partial, reactive, and unable to respond to the specific character of digital sexual crimes against children. (Ringenberg et al., 2022; Utari et al., 2024b)

3.2. Status and Character of the Internet User Age Restriction Policy

The internet user age restriction policy, regulated under Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025 and the Minister of Communication and Digital Regulation Number 9 of 2026, marks an important shift in Indonesia's child protection governance. It moves child protection in digital spaces beyond reliance on families and law enforcement by imposing legal responsibilities on electronic system operators. Therefore, this policy should be understood not merely as an administrative arrangement, but as part of a preventive strategy against digital risks, including child grooming. (Anggraeny et al., 2023; Jeglic et al., 2023)

3.2.1 Function: Age Restriction as a Non-Penal Preventive Instrument

From the perspective of criminal law policy, age restriction functions as a non-penal instrument. It does not punish perpetrators after a crime occurs, but reduces the conditions that enable crime. This is crucial in child grooming, which often begins through ordinary-looking interactions such as online conversations, games, social media friendships, private messages, comments, or virtual gifts. These interactions may appear harmless, but they can become entry points for manipulation, emotional dependency, sexualized communication, and exploitation.

Barda Nawawi Arief's concept of criminal policy helps clarify this position. Crime prevention cannot rely solely on penal instruments; it also requires non-penal measures that address the social, technological, and institutional conditions that enable crime. In this sense, age restriction reduces children's exposure to harmful content, unsafe communication features, and cross-age interactions that may facilitate grooming. Through age classification, child user verification, risk assessment, child accounts, and platform supervision, the policy seeks to close some of the initial spaces used by perpetrators to approach and manipulate children. Thus, age restriction does not replace penal policy, but provides an early layer of protection before exploitation becomes explicit.

3.2.2 Character: Administrative, Risk-Based, and Developmentally Sensitive

The character of the age restriction policy is mainly administrative, risk-based, and developmentally sensitive. Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025 governs the implementation of electronic systems in child protection, including supervision, administrative sanctions, and the roles of ministries, institutions, communities, and platform operators. Ministerial Regulation Number 9 of 2026 provides more technical rules on minimum age limits for digital products, services, and features; self-assessment by electronic system operators; child protection design; child user verification; risk profiles; child accounts; social networking services; social media; and supervision.

The policy's age classifications, including 3-5 years, 6-9 years, 10-12 years, 13-15 years, and 16-under 18 years, show that the state does not treat children as a homogeneous category. Each age group has different levels of cognitive, emotional, social, and digital literacy development. Younger children need stronger supervision because they depend heavily on parents or caregivers and have limited capacity to recognize digital risks. Children aged 6-9 begin to engage with devices and online interaction, but still lack adequate reflective capacity to distinguish safe from harmful communication. Children aged 10-12 enter a more exploratory digital phase through online games, social media, and peer communication, which increases vulnerability to manipulation.

Adolescents aged 13-15 and those aged 16 and under require a more balanced approach. They may have more developed communication skills and digital literacy, but they are also in a stage of identity exploration, emotional intimacy, social recognition, and curiosity about sexuality. Grooming perpetrators may exploit these conditions through romanticization, persuasion, emotional validation, and manipulation of trust. Therefore, age restriction should not be read as a simple prohibition of access, but as a protective design based on developmental stages and levels of vulnerability.

This approach is consistent with age-tiered regulation in digital child protection. Köhler-Dauner et al. argue that differentiated age verification and access levels aim to protect children at different developmental stages without excluding them from digital participation. Similarly, Livingstone & Sylwander (2025) emphasize that age assurance systems must respect children's rights to privacy, participation, non-discrimination, information, and education. Thus, age restrictions should create safer, proportionate, and age-appropriate access, rather than isolate children from digital life.

3.2.3 Limitations: Administrative Prevention Without Penal Integration

Despite its preventive value, the age restriction policy has important limitations. Its main weakness lies in its administrative character. Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025 and Ministerial Regulation Number 9 of 2026 regulate platform obligations, age verification, risk assessment, child protection design, supervision, and administrative sanctions. However, they do not directly formulate criminal liability for child grooming perpetrators. As a result, the policy functions more as access control and risk management than as criminal law enforcement.

This limitation matters because child grooming cannot be prevented only by restricting access. Perpetrators can move across platforms, use fake identities, exploit private communication spaces, manipulate age verification systems, or approach children through seemingly safe services. If criminal law does not contain a specific offense that captures grooming at its early manipulative stage, age restrictions will remain limited to administrative prevention. It may reduce opportunity, but it cannot

ensure accountability when an offender has engaged in psychological manipulation, identity concealment, sexualized communication, or emotional control over a child.

The policy also raises concerns from a children's rights perspective. Age restriction must not become an absolute limitation on children's access to information, education, expression, play, and participation. If implemented mechanically, it may lead to privacy violations, the exclusion of children from poor or remote communities, unequal access to digital education, and dependence on invasive verification technologies. Jarvie and Renaud warn that age verification policies may become ineffective or privacy-invasive when public trust, legal design, and platform accountability are weak.

Therefore, age restrictions should be placed within an integrated criminal policy framework. As a non-penal measure, it is important for prevention, but it cannot stand alone. It must be connected to penal reform, particularly the formulation of child grooming as a specific criminal offense. Only through this integration can Indonesia build a balanced protection model: a non-penal policy reduces digital risks and strengthens platform responsibility, while a penal policy provides normative boundaries, criminal accountability, and legal protection against grooming as a pre-exploitation crime.

3.3. Effectiveness and Direction of Policy Updates

Lawrence M. Friedman's legal system theory provides three elements for assessing the effectiveness of law: legal substance, legal structure, and legal culture (Friedman, 1988). These elements show that the weakness of child protection in digital spaces does not arise only from written norms, but also from institutional capacity and public awareness.

From a legal perspective, Indonesia already has several regulations on child protection in digital spaces, including the Child Protection Law, the Electronic Information and Transactions Law, the Sexual Violence Crimes Law, the Pornography Law, Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025, and Ministerial Regulation Number 9 of 2026. However, these instruments have not yet adequately captured the specific character of child grooming. The main weakness lies in the absence of a legal formulation that criminalizes grooming from its early stages. Indonesian criminal law tends to operate when sexual exploitation, obscene acts, dissemination of intimate content, extortion, or child pornography has already occurred. In fact, grooming begins earlier, when the perpetrator builds emotional closeness, requests secrecy, disguises identity, tests sexual boundaries, and gradually directs the child toward sexual communication or acts. This creates a normative gap between manipulative conduct and explicit sexual exploitation.

From a legal perspective, implementing child protection and age-restriction policies requires coordination among ministries, supervisory bodies, law enforcement institutions, electronic system operators, schools, families, and child protection agencies. In practice, however, digital supervision often lags behind technological development. Perpetrators can move across platforms, use fake identities, hide behind anonymous accounts, or shift communication into private channels. This requires law enforcement officials to have the technical capacity to read digital evidence, preserve electronic conversations, identify grooming patterns, and avoid investigative practices that further burden child victims. Without such institutional capacity, age restriction risks remaining an administrative norm that is difficult to translate into effective law enforcement.

From the perspective of legal culture, public awareness of child grooming remains limited Hanna Fitri Raziah (2023) Many parents still understand online risks mainly as gadget addiction, pornography, or promiscuity, while failing to recognize that sexual exploitation may begin through friendly and attentive communication (Sari & Astuti (2026) Victims may also remain silent because they feel ashamed, emotionally dependent, afraid of being blamed, or worried that intimate content will be disseminated. Victim-blaming culture further discourages reporting and weakens legal protection.

Based on these three elements, child protection in digital spaces remains suboptimal. Reform must therefore integrate penal and non-penal approaches. Non-penal measures, such as age restrictions, child user verification, digital literacy, platform supervision, and family education, are necessary to prevent children from entering risky situations (Pinandito & Rustamaji, 2026; Rohmadi et al., 2024; Rustamaji, 2019) However, penal policy is still needed to establish clear normative boundaries and criminal accountability. Child grooming should be formulated as a stand-alone offense covering manipulation, deception, secrecy requests, sexualized communication, requests for intimate content, and arrangements for exploitative meetings. (Ringenberg et al., 2022; Utari et al., 2024b)

Two indicators are crucial for evaluating this reform: enforceability and accessibility. Enforceability requires clear elements of offense, digital evidence standards, investigative guidelines, inter-agency coordination, and platform obligations for reporting, data preservation, and risk mitigation. Accessibility requires child-friendly, confidential, trauma-sensitive, and easily reachable reporting mechanisms through schools, platforms, child protection agencies, and local service units. Without these two indicators, reform may remain symbolic and fail to protect children from the early stages of grooming.

3.4. Discussion

The findings of this study show that the policy for child protection from child grooming in Indonesia is still in a position that is not fully adequate, especially because there is a gap between the increasingly complex character of digital crime and the construction of criminal law that is still fragmentary. The formulation of the problem posed in this study departs from the question of how Indonesia's criminal law policy responds to child grooming, what position the policy takes on restricting the age of internet users, and where policy reform should go. Based on the results of the analysis, the three questions are interconnected through one main conclusion: child protection in the digital space cannot work effectively if age restrictions are only positioned as an administrative policy without clearer criminalization support for the grooming process as a manipulative stage towards the sexual exploitation of children.

The first findings show that child grooming has not been explicitly regulated as a stand-alone offense in Indonesian criminal law. Existing arrangements are still scattered in Undang-Undang Perlindungan Anak, Undang-Undang ITE, Undang-Undang Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual, and Undang-Undang Pornografi. This fragmentation makes criminal law easier to work with when the consequences are already visible, such as sexual exploitation, molestation, the dissemination of intimate content, or the production of child pornography material. In fact, child grooming has a different crime structure. It works through gradual communication, emotional closeness, identity disguise, persuasion, gifts, secrets, and psychological distress. Thus, the main problem does not lie in the absence of child protection norms in general, but in the absence of a criminal category that can recognize the pre-exploitation process as a legal danger in itself.

These findings align with studies by De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix (2018), Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018), Kloess et al. (2019), and Whittle et al. (2013), which affirm that online grooming cannot be understood as a single event. It is a process that moves from initial contact, formation of trust, 'sexualization' of conversation, to exploitation. The difference is that most studies emphasize psychological patterns, perpetrator characteristics, and the dynamics of digital interactions. In contrast, this study situates these findings within the problem of Indonesian criminal law policy. The contribution of this research lies in the explanation that the gradual character of child grooming requires a legal response that is not only oriented to the result, but also to the manipulative processes that constitute the possibility of exploitation.

The second finding shows that the policy of restricting the age of internet users in PP Nomor 17 Tahun 2025 and Permen Komdigi Nomor 9 Tahun 2026 serves as a preventive non-penal instrument. This policy is important because it recognizes that children have varying levels of vulnerability based on age, psychological development, and digital literacy. The age grouping from 3 to 18 years reflects a

risk-based approach to protection. Children are not treated as a homogeneous category but as legal subjects whose protection needs change with age.

However, age restrictions cannot be considered as a single answer. Conceptually, this policy operates at the levels of access control, platform surveillance, and risk-exposure prevention. He did not directly ensnare the grooming perpetrators. This is where the limitations become apparent. Age restrictions can reduce the likelihood that offenders will reach children. However, they do not guarantee that they will not switch platforms, use fake accounts, manipulate identities, or take advantage of private communication spaces. These findings align with Livingstone et al.'s (2024) study on age assurance, which emphasizes that age-based policies must balance protection, children's participation rights, privacy, and access to information. If narrowly designed, age restrictions risk becoming mere administrative control mechanisms that do not address the root causes of the crime. (Livingstone & Sylwander, 2025; Smirnova et al., 2021)

The third finding shows that issues of legal substance, legal structure, and legal culture still hamper policy effectiveness. In Lawrence M. Friedman's perspective, the substance of Indonesian law has not yet adequately regulated child grooming; the legal structure still faces limited technical capacity, coordination, and supervision, while the legal culture of the community is still marked by low awareness of the dangers of grooming and strong stigma against victims of sexual violence. These three aspects explain why existing regulations do not necessarily result in effective protection. The law does not work just because the text is available. He needs institutions capable of implementing norms, and a society with the awareness to recognize, report, and support victims.

Table 1: Child Grooming in Penal and non-penal perspective

Dimensions	Penal Policy Perspective	Non-Penal Policy Perspective
Nature of Child Grooming	Child grooming should be understood as a punishable, manipulative process leading to child sexual exploitation, not only as a completed sexual offense.	Child grooming should be prevented by reducing children's exposure to risky digital interactions, harmful content, and unsafe online environments.
Legal Problem	Indonesian criminal law remains fragmented because child grooming has not yet been formulated as an independent criminal offense. Existing laws mostly respond after exploitation or abuse has occurred.	Age restriction policies are still mainly administrative. They may limit children's access to digital platforms, but do not directly punish grooming perpetrators.
Policy	Penal policy provides legal boundaries,	Non-penal policy works through

Function	criminal accountability, deterrence, and protection for children as victims of online sexual manipulation.	prevention, age classification, platform governance, digital literacy, parental supervision, and the possible use of Child Identity Cards (KIA) for proportional age verification.
Main Limitation	Penal policy becomes weak when it only reacts to visible harm and fails to address early manipulation, secrecy, identity concealment, and emotional control.	A non-penal policy becomes insufficient when it regulates access without being connected to law enforcement, personal data protection, and reporting mechanisms.
Ideal Reform Direction	Child grooming should be formulated as a specific criminal offense covering psychological manipulation, sexualized communication, identity concealment, requests for intimate content, and exploitative intent.	Age restrictions, platform accountability, digital reporting systems, child protection education, victim protection, and KIA-based age assurance should be integrated with penal reform.

Source: Managed by the author

The results of this study reinforce the need to integrate penal and non-penal approaches in protecting children from child grooming. Non-penal measures are important to prevent children from entering risky digital situations through digital literacy, platform supervision, age restrictions, and family education. However, penal measures remain necessary to establish clear normative limits and ensure criminal accountability. Therefore, policy reform should include the formulation of child grooming as a specific offense, the strengthening of digital reporting mechanisms, the improvement of law-enforcement capacity to handle electronic evidence, and the integration of platform governance with criminal law enforcement.

This study also highlights the potential use of Child Identity Cards/Kartu Identitas Anak (KIA) as a preventive age-assurance instrument. Since KIA is legally recognized as an official identity for children under 17 years old, it may support age verification in high-risk digital services, especially platforms involving private communication, sexual content, identity exploitation, or cross-age interaction. However, KIA should not be used as a tool for total surveillance. It must be designed as a limited, proportional, and data-protection-based mechanism. Platforms should not permanently store children's identity data, but only verify age through secure and accountable systems. Thus, KIA is not a single solution, but part of a broader child protection ecosystem that includes platform accountability,

privacy protection, digital literacy, reporting mechanisms, and the criminalization of child grooming as a specific offense.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that criminal law policy on child grooming in Indonesia remains partial and normatively insufficient. Although child protection has been regulated through several legal instruments, child grooming has not yet been formulated as a stand-alone offense. Existing regulations tend to respond to the visible consequences of crime, such as sexual exploitation, dissemination of intimate content, pornography, or electronic transactions involving harmful materials. As a result, Indonesian criminal law has not fully captured the specific character of grooming as a gradual and manipulative process that operates through digital communication before exploitation becomes explicit.

The policy of restricting internet users' ages under Government Regulation Number 17 of 2025 and the Minister of Communication and Digital Regulation Number 9 of 2026 represents an important preventive, non-penal approach. Through age classification, user verification, risk assessment, and platform governance, this policy seeks to reduce children's exposure to harmful digital environments. However, its character remains largely administrative. It can limit access and strengthen platform responsibility, but it cannot directly establish criminal accountability for grooming perpetrators. Therefore, child protection in digital spaces requires stronger integration between penal and non-penal approaches.

Criminal law reform should be directed toward formulating child grooming as a specific offense that covers psychological manipulation, identity concealment, sexualized communication, requests for intimate content, and exploitative intent. At the same time, non-penal instruments should be strengthened through effective supervision, child-friendly reporting mechanisms, digital literacy, platform accountability, data protection, and proportionate age-verification systems.

This study is limited to normative legal analysis and does not examine empirical experiences of victims, families, law enforcement officials, or electronic system operators. Therefore, future research should conduct empirical studies on how grooming cases are reported, investigated, and handled in practice. Comparative research with countries that have explicitly criminalized grooming is also needed to provide stronger conceptual, institutional, and legislative foundations for Indonesian criminal law reform.

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