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Governing Community Corrections and Local Economic Development in China: A Longitudinal Case Study of the Jiangbei New Area

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Article

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the two-way relationship between community corrections and local economic development in China following the enactment of the Community Correction Law. Design/methodology/approach: An exploratory longitudinal case study of the Jiangbei New Area of Nanjing draws on administrative statistics covering 1,621 offenders under community corrections between 2017 and 2021, analyzed through descriptive trend analysis and triangulated with policy documents and institutional records. Findings: Three coupling mechanisms – resource endowment, cost substitution and developmental spillover – organize the relationship. Community corrections and local economic development have co-evolved positively, but lean staffing, lagging digital infrastructure and thin social participation generate three structural tensions. Originality/value: The study provides the first local-level longitudinal account of the implementation of China's Community Correction Law and develops a portable analytical framework for understanding corrections-economy coupling in the world's largest community corrections system.

1. Introduction

Across advanced and emerging economies alike, the punishment of offenders has been drifting out of prisons and into communities. Community sanctions – probation, parole, community service, electronic monitoring and their national variants – now account for a substantial share of all persons under correctional supervision in most jurisdictions. Two considerations have driven this drift. The first is evidential: decades of evaluation research show that, for many offender groups, the criminogenic effects of short-term imprisonment match or exceed its deterrent gains (Lipsey and Cullen, 2007; Nagin, Cullen and Jonson, 2009), while well-designed community programs can reduce reoffending at lower risk. The second is fiscal: custody is expensive, and the full social cost of imprisonment includes not only the operating budget of prisons but the lost legitimate production of confined offenders and their depressed post-release productivity (Posner, 2014). Under conditions of fiscal stress, community corrections presents itself as a technology of punishment that governments can scale without proportional increases in expenditure.

China has embraced this technology more comprehensively than any other jurisdiction. The Community Correction Law of the People's Republic of China, adopted on 28 December 2019 and effective from 1 July 2020, brought four categories of non-custodial offenders – persons sentenced to public surveillance, persons given suspended sentences, parolees, and offenders approved for temporary execution outside prison – under a single statutory regime of community-based supervision, education and assistance (Wang, 2020). In scale, the Chinese system is without parallel: since its pilot expansion in the early 2000s, several million offenders have been supervised in the community, and the system continues to grow as sentencing practice liberalizes and courts increasingly prefer non-custodial penalties. Yet despite its scale, the Chinese community correction system remains understudied outside China, and even within the Chinese literature, systematic empirical work at the local level is rare.

This neglect matters for two reasons. First, the Chinese case differs structurally from the Western welfare-state and common-law models on which most theorizing about community sanctions is built. In China, community corrections is not primarily an alternative sentence administered by an autonomous probation service; it is an instrument of social governance embedded in the local administrative apparatus, executed by justice administrative organs through grassroots judicial offices, and legally mandated to mobilize social forces – enterprises, universities, social organizations – through government service purchase. The system's capacity is therefore conditioned directly by local fiscal, technological and organizational endowments, and its performance feeds back into precisely the development indicators that Chinese local governments are evaluated on: social stability, employment, business environment and talent attraction. Second, the economic dimension of community corrections has been systematically undertheorized everywhere. The dominant anglophone literatures concentrate on recidivism and reentry (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005) and on the concentrated damage that imprisonment inflicts on disadvantaged neighborhoods (Clear, 2007), while the two-way coupling between correctional systems and local economies – corrections as a consumer of local resources and as a producer of local economic value – has rarely been examined empirically.

This article examines that coupling through an exploratory longitudinal case study of the Jiangbei New Area of Nanjing, Jiangsu Province – the only national-level new area in China explicitly mandated by the State Council to put the rule of law first. Over the period 2017–2021, a total of 1,621 offenders received community corrections in the New Area while its population and regional economy expanded rapidly, making the corrections-economy nexus both visible and consequential. The study addresses three questions. RQ1: How do local economic conditions – fiscal capacity, industrial and educational resources, and the local ecology of social organizations – enable and constrain community correctional work? RQ2: Through what mechanisms does community correctional work feed back into local economic development? RQ3: What structural tensions emerge in the coordinated development of community corrections and the local economy, and how can they be managed?

The article makes three contributions. First, it provides the first local-level longitudinal account of how China’s Community Correction Law is operationalized in practice, documenting the mechanisms through which a national statute is localized through fiscal, technological and social arrangements. Second, it develops a three-mechanism analytical framework – resource endowment, cost substitution and developmental spillover – that organizes the two-way relationship between correctional systems and local economies and can be applied comparatively beyond China. Third, it identifies three structural tensions – lean staffing against a growing caseload, lagging digital infrastructure, and thin social participation – that are likely to constrain any jurisdiction scaling up community sanctions under budgetary and demographic pressure. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the institutional background of community corrections in China. Section 3 develops the analytical framework. Section 4 explains the data and methods. Section 5 presents the findings. Section 6 discusses implications against the international literature, and Section 7 concludes.

More broadly, the Chinese case belongs to a wider East Asian pattern in which community sanctions have expanded rapidly under developmental states that weigh penal policy against fiscal discipline, social stability and labor-market objectives. Japan relies on a hybrid of professional probation officers and a large volunteer probation officer system; Korea has expanded community service and electronic monitoring while retaining strong state direction; Singapore has scaled community-based rehabilitation alongside a famously deterrent penal posture. What distinguishes China is not the existence of community corrections but its statutory coupling to social governance and its execution through local administrative apparatuses with explicit development mandates. For comparative criminology, this makes China a strategic site for examining whether the economic logic of community sanctions – cheap punishment that keeps offenders working – can be institutionalized without collapsing correctional ends into development means.

2. Community corrections in China: institutional background

Under the Community Correction Law, supervision in the community applies to four categories of offenders: persons sentenced to public surveillance; persons whose imprisonment of three years or less was suspended; parolees serving the remainder of their sentences in the community; and offenders temporarily executed outside prison for reasons of serious illness, pregnancy or nursing. Responsibility for execution lies with county-level justice administrative organs, which act through grassroots judicial offices staffed by civil servants and supported by social workers, volunteers and contracted service providers. The law establishes three statutory functions for the system: supervision and management (to prevent reoffending), education and assistance (to support resocialization, including vocational training and psychological counseling), and, implicitly, the restoration of harm through compensatory community service and victim-offender mediation (Li, 2015).

Three design features distinguish the Chinese arrangement from Western probation and parole systems and are analytically central to this study. First, embeddedness in local governance: judicial offices are units of the general local administrative apparatus rather than autonomous correctional agencies. Correctional capacity – personnel, premises, equipment, programs – is therefore supplied from the same local budgets and personnel quotas that fund other governmental functions, and it is directly exposed to local reforms such as administrative streamlining. Second, the statutory principle of combining specialized agencies with social forces : the law expects governments at all levels to include community correction funding in their budgets, and it endorses the purchase of correctional services from social organizations and the cooperation of enterprises, schools and other social units. Third, the informatization mandate: the law directs the use of information and communication technology in supervision, and national policy has promoted the construction of "smart correction" platforms combining positioning, verification, and online education.

These features make the corrections-economy relationship in China unusually direct. A Western probation service typically draws on national or state budgets and is insulated, at least formally, from local development agendas. A Chinese judicial office depends on the fiscal health of its district, the

presence of universities and enterprises willing to cooperate, and the availability of social organizations able to contract for services. Conversely, the performance of the local correctional system – whether offenders remain employed, whether communities feel safe, whether conflicts are resolved before they escalate – enters the evaluation environment of the district government and shapes its reputation among investors and migrants. Studying the coordinated development of community corrections and the local economy in China is thus not an artificial theoretical construction but a description of how the system actually works. The system's intellectual lineage – from religious and labor-based penitence through psychological treatment to risk-based correction – has been extensively traced in the Chinese and comparative literature (Zhai, 2013a, 2013b; Jiang, 2019).

Procedurally, the system operates through a standardized sequence: entry assessment at sentencing or release, classification of offenders into management levels by risk and need (Li, 2017), individualized correction plans combining reporting, education, community service and assistance, periodic assessment and reclassification, and termination upon completion or transfer. The classification architecture matters for the economic analysis that follows, because it is the vehicle through which supervision intensity is differentiated – and through which, as the Jiangbei case shows, work-compatible arrangements for business-involved offenders become administratively possible.

3. Analytical framework: three coupling mechanisms

We conceptualize the coordinated development of community corrections and the local economy as a two-way relationship sustained by three mechanisms, each corresponding to one link in a circular causal chain. The chain begins with local economic development, which supplies the resource endowment on which correctional work depends (mechanism 1). Correctional work, once resourced, performs cost substitution: it replaces a more expensive mode of punishment – custody – with a cheaper one while preserving productive participation (mechanism 2). The performance of correctional work then generates developmental spillovers – stability, human capital retention and governance reputation – which renew and enlarge the local endowment (mechanism 3). Coordination is achieved when all three links hold; it degrades when any one of them weakens.

(1) Resource endowment. Community correction is resource-intensive in ways that are easy to underestimate. Its infrastructure – standardized community correction centers, restorative justice and education-assistance bases – must be built and continuously operated; its professional staff must be recruited, trained and retained; its supervision technology must be procured, upgraded and maintained. All of these depend on local public budgets, which in turn depend on regional economic performance. The endowment mechanism extends beyond the state: in economically developed areas, government service-purchasing mechanisms are more mature, social organizations are more numerous and specialized (Lian, 2021), and universities and enterprises are more available for cooperation. There is also a community-level analogue: research on urban neighborhoods shows that local fiscal investment and residents' sense of security can moderate the negative effect that a visible correctional population exerts on neighborhood cohesion (Cai and Wang, 2021). Well-resourced communities absorb

correctional activity more easily than poorly resourced ones. We therefore expect correctional capacity to covary with local economic capacity (P1).

(2) Cost substitution. The comparative economics of punishment provide the second mechanism. Custodial execution requires the construction, maintenance and staffing of prison facilities, and it imposes indirect costs that rarely appear in penal budgets: the loss of offenders' legitimate production during confinement, the criminogenic and stigmatizing effects of incarceration, and reduced post-release productivity (Posner, 2014; Nagin, Cullen and Jonson, 2009). Chinese cost studies estimate that substituting community corrections for imprisonment saves approximately 76–90 percent of execution costs (Liu, 2016), and this cost advantage has been an explicit argument for the system's expansion (Wang, 2009; Kong and Xie, 2014). Cost substitution, however, is not automatic. It is realized in practice only if supervision calibrations – restrictions on movement, approval requirements, reporting burdens – leave room for offenders to work, run businesses and care for families. A community correction regime that keeps offenders idle or unemployable captures the budgetary saving but forfeits the larger economic prize. We therefore expect the value of substitution to depend on the work-friendliness of supervision practice, not merely on the statutory availability of community sanctions (P2).

(3) Developmental spillover. The third mechanism runs from correctional performance back into the local economy. Its channels are several. Safety: community corrections resolves conflicts, manages risk and contains disorder at low fiscal cost, contributing to the subjective and objective security on which consumption, investment and housing decisions depend. Human capital: offenders retained in employment and family networks do not exit the labor force, and their successful resocialization avoids the long-run productivity losses associated with reoffending and repeated confinement. Reputation: visible, law-governed correctional practice signals the quality of local governance to firms and skilled migrants choosing where to locate. In the Chinese context these channels carry particular weight because local governments operate under performance evaluation systems that reward social stability, employment and investment attraction. We therefore expect correctional performance to contribute measurably to the local development environment (P3).

The framework also defines the boundary conditions of coordination. Three tensions follow directly from the mechanisms. Because the endowment mechanism ties correctional capacity to local fiscal and personnel envelopes, rapid caseload growth or administrative streamlining can open a staffing gap (tension 1). Because cost substitution increasingly depends on technology-intensive flexible supervision, lagging digital infrastructure converts a fiscal saving into a supervisory risk (tension 2). And because the spillover mechanism depends on mobilizing social forces, a purely governmental correctional apparatus will under-produce spillovers no matter how well resourced it is (tension 3).The empirical sections examine each mechanism and each tension in turn.

4. Data and methods

This study adopts an exploratory longitudinal case study design, appropriate when the research objective is to trace mechanisms within a bounded system rather than to estimate causal effects (Yin, 2018). Jiangbei New Area was selected for three reasons. First, institutional salience: it is a national-level new area whose official mandate includes pioneering rule-of-law construction, which makes correctional innovation both politically encouraged and observable. Second, contrast and stress: the New Area has experienced among the fastest population growth of Nanjing's districts, which stresses the correctional system and renders the coupling with the local economy visible – the case is, in the language of case study methodology, an information-rich critical case rather than a typical one. Third, access: the author's institutional position permitted sustained observation of administrative records and working practices over the study period.

The empirical materials comprise three bodies of evidence. First, administrative statistics of the Jiangbei justice administration for 2017–2021 covering all 1,621 offenders who received community corrections in the New Area during the period, including annual caseload, sanction type, household registration origin, marital and education profiles, and employment status during supervision. Second, official statistics on regional gross product, general public budget revenue and permanent population for the New Area and comparator districts. Third, policy documents, institutional records and official reports describing correctional infrastructure, inter-agency cooperation and digital construction. Analysis proceeds by descriptive trend analysis of the statistical series, organized by the three-mechanism framework; qualitative materials from institutional records are used to interpret the quantitative patterns. Individual-level records are administrative, and no personal identifiers appear in the analysis.One data note is required: official statistical publications in China appear with a one-year lag, so the 2018–2022 editions of published statistical sources report figures for the 2017–2021 study period; the justice bureau's administrative registers cover the same period directly.

Three limitations qualify the findings. First, a single case cannot support statistical generalization; the value of the study is analytical transferability rather than representativeness. Second, the analysis is descriptive: without a comparison jurisdiction or exogenous variation, the mechanisms are traced and triangulated, not causally identified. The co-movement of caseload and regional product, for example, is consistent with the framework but cannot by itself demonstrate its direction or magnitude. Third, administrative data reflect official categorizations, and reoffending outcomes could not be observed over a sufficiently long follow-up window. These limitations define rather than undermine the study: they specify exactly the multi-site, outcome-linked research agenda that would follow.

5. Findings: the co-evolution of corrections and the local economy

5.1 A rising caseload alongside rapid growth

Figure 1 plots the annual number of offenders under community corrections against the regional gross product of Jiangbei New Area from 2017 to 2021. Both series rise steadily throughout the period, and three observations follow. First, the caseload grows every year, indicating both the maturation of local

correctional mechanisms – the system acquires the capacity to absorb and manage more offenders – and the expansion of the pool of eligible offenders as sentencing liberalizes. Second, the two series are positively associated, consistent with P1: growth in the regional economy coincides with growth in correctional throughput, because a larger economy both produces more mobile, working-age residents (the demographic from which the correctional population is drawn) and funds a larger correctional apparatus. Third, the association is not mechanical: the ratio of the correctional population to the general population remains small, but the direction of change matters, since each additional supervised offender must be matched by additional supervision capacity. The figure thus sets up the central question of the case – whether the local system can scale as fast as its caseload.

5.2 Economic development as the enabling condition (RQ1, mechanism 1)

The resource endowment mechanism is visible in both its fiscal and its organizational dimensions. On the fiscal side, the general public budget revenue of the New Area increased continuously over the period, and community correction funding was incorporated into the budget of the justice administration as the law requires. Budget growth financed the construction and operation of standardized facilities: a smart community correction center integrating supervision, verification and education functions; restorative justice venues where offenders perform compensatory community service; and education-assistance bases combining legal education, psychological counseling and vocational training. It also financed staffing: recruitment of personnel with legal and social-work qualifications, routine duty performance, and recurrent professional training. In a system where frontline supervision is performed by civil servants of lean judicial offices, the ability to attract and retain qualified staff depends on the district's overall compensation environment – a classic endowment effect in which regional economic conditions translate directly into correctional human capital.

On the organizational side, the concentration of universities, science and technology enterprises and research institutes in the New Area made possible a distinctive tripartite model of socialized execution. In the first strand, community correction centers are co-built with law firms under government service purchase arrangements; lawyers participate in basic correctional work – entry assessments, individualized correction plans, legal education – which standardizes the penal execution of community sanctions and encourages offenders to undertake reparative community service. In the second strand, assistance bases are established in cooperation with enterprises: vocational skills training is delivered to people released from prison as well as to offenders under supervision, and enterprises provide placement opportunities that directly attack the employment-risk-reoffending chain. In the third strand, cooperation with universities supplies both technology – positioning and verification systems that make flexible supervision safe – and theory: project partnerships support the development of correctional methods and the training of staff. The three strands are not decoration on a governmental core; they are the way a lean public apparatus extends its reach, and they exist because the local economy supplies the partners. Where the industrial and educational ecology is thin, the same statutory framework would run on governmental effort alone.

5.3 Community corrections as a cost-saving substitute (RQ2, mechanism 2)

The cost substitution mechanism operates through two channels, both visible in the case. The first is the calibrated management of offenders' economic activity. Article 27 of the Community Correction Law requires offenders to obtain approval from the correctional institution before leaving their city or county of residence. Applied mechanically, this provision would disable any offender whose work requires travel – traders, contractors, drivers, managers of small enterprises. The Jiangbei justice administration instead differentiates: for business-involved offenders whose enterprises require frequent travel, supervision plans are adjusted and out-of-area activities are approved within the scope of the law, with verification handled through positioning and reporting technology rather than through prohibition. The practice has a double yield. It preserves the legitimate production of offenders whose enterprises employ others, and it signals to the local private sector that correctional supervision distinguishes between risk and mere mobility – an important reassurance in a district whose development strategy depends on private investment. The illustration supports P2: the economic value of substitution is realized not by the statute but by supervisory practice that keeps work possible.

The second channel is employment during supervision. Figure 2 shows the composition of the correctional population by sanction type: suspended sentences constitute the largest share (97.0 per cent), followed by parole (2.3 per cent), temporary out-of-prison execution (0.6 per cent) and public surveillance (0.1 per cent). The predominance of suspended sentences matters analytically, because this group – unlike parolees – has not passed through prison and therefore retains social ties, work histories and skills; with modest support they can continue ordinary economic life during supervision. Figure 3 reports the employment outcomes: 660 offenders, or 40.7 per cent, were employed during the correction period (41.4 per cent including those in farm work). Behind the figure lies a set of deliberate arrangements – correctional education to stabilize behavior, psychological counseling to manage crisis, vocational training delivered through the enterprise-based bases, and job-matching assistance – whose joint purpose is to convert supervised offenders into self-supporting workers rather than idle dependents. In the logic of mechanism 2, every offender retained in legitimate employment compounds the fiscal saving: the state avoids the direct cost of custody, avoids the lost production of confinement, and avoids the downstream costs of reoffending. The aggregate magnitudes are consistent with national estimates that community supervision costs a fraction of imprisonment (Liu, 2016), but the case evidence adds the mechanism-level point that the saving depends on supervisory design.

5.4 Developmental spillovers (RQ2, mechanism 3)

The third mechanism is the least visible and the most characteristic of the Chinese setting. Figure 4 tracks three composition indicators among the correctional population: the share of registered residents from other cities, the share of married persons whose household registration is outside Nanjing, and the share with senior secondary education or above. All three display a broadly upward, wave-like trend over the period. Read in isolation, these trends are merely descriptive; read through mechanism 3, they are

informative. A district's correctional population is drawn from its mobile working-age population, so the rising share of non-local registrants and of better-educated offenders mirrors rising in-migration of working families – the same families whose settlement decisions drive demand for education, health care and housing. The mirror is not flattering in a narrow sense, but it is significant in a developmental one: skilled households are choosing to live in the New Area, and a stable, law-governed social environment is part of what they are choosing. Community corrections contributes to that environment by resolving conflict and managing risk at low fiscal cost; its visible, standardized and reparative practice signals governability. The mechanism closes the circle that P3 predicts: development funds corrections (Section 5.2), corrections stabilize and legitimate development (this section), and the renewal of development funds corrections again.

5.5 Three structural tensions (RQ3)

Against this positive co-evolution, the case reveals three tensions that threaten the durability of coordination. The first and most binding is the staff-caseload gap. Figure 5 compares year-end permanent population across Nanjing's fast-growing districts in 2022 and 2023: the Jiangbei New Area is one of the largest and the fastest-growing of them, and development planning projects roughly one million additional residents within five years. Figures 6 and 7 map the geography of the correctional population: non-local offenders come predominantly from central and northern Jiangsu (Suqian, Xuzhou, Huai'an) and neighboring Anhui, tracking the New Area's population inflows with striking fidelity. Combined with the national trends toward penal leniency and expanded non-custodial sentencing, the caseload is expected to grow substantially. Yet the ongoing administrative-streamlining reform of the New Area keeps staffing quotas lean, concentrating workload on a small corps of civil servants in judicial offices. The tripartite model relieves but does not remove this constraint: lawyers, enterprises and universities can deliver services, but statutory supervision duties remain with public staff. Tension 1 is thus endogenous to the endowment mechanism – the same fiscal discipline that makes the district attractive limits the growth of its correctional apparatus.

The second tension is digital lag. Smart supervision requires continuous renewal: positioning and verification systems must keep pace with device and network cycles, platforms require maintenance and security upgrading, and new functions – full-process audio-visual recording of law enforcement, judicial cloud platforms, online education – mature from pilot to routine. National policy explicitly directs the informatization of community corrections (Guo, 2022), and the New Area has made genuine progress with self-developed verification platforms. But rollout of newer instruments remains incomplete, and hardware and software maintenance competes for the same lean staffing. The tension is consequential because mechanism 2 increasingly presupposes technology: flexible, work-friendly supervision is safe only when verification is reliable. Digital lag therefore converts directly into a choice between economic value and supervisory risk.

The third tension is participatory thinness. Despite the statutory principle of combining specialized agencies with social forces, the mechanism for social participation remains incompletely established even in this high-performing district. Professional social workers are scarce and their role under-

institutionalized; university think-tank resources are tapped on a project basis rather than embedded in routine practice; inter-departmental resources – labor, civil affairs, education -are mobilized unevenly; and the boundary between governmental responsibility and social contribution remains contested. The tripartite model described in Section 5.2 is real but concentrated: a limited set of flagship partnerships rather than a dense ecology. Because mechanism 3 depends on exactly these social channels, participatory thinness caps the spillover yield of an otherwise well-resourced system.

Table 1
Coupling mechanisms, evidence and tensions in the Jiangbei New Area

Coupling mechanism	Evidence in the Jiangbei case	Policy implication
Resource endowment	Budget growth financed smart correction centers, restorative justice venues, education-assistance bases and staffing; tripartite cooperation with law firms, enterprises and universities	Index correctional budgets to supervised population; raise professional entry requirements; co-deliver training with universities and judicial organs
Cost substitution	Calibrated approval of business travel preserving enterprise operation; 41% of offenders employed during supervision	Keep supervision work-compatible; extend enterprise-based training and job-matching; evaluate substitution value in cost-benefit terms
Developmental spillover	Rising shares of non-local, cross-city married and better-educated offenders mirroring in-migration and talent attraction	Treat correctional performance as part of the development environment; sustain visible, reparative and standardized practice
Boundary tensions	Staff-caseload gap under administrative streamlining; incomplete smart-correction rollout; thin social participation	Caseload-indexed budgeting; digital infrastructure with procedural safeguards; pluralized service purchase and mixed correction teams

5.6 Summary of findings

Table 1 summarizes the analysis. The Jiangbei case is, on balance, a case of successful coordination: each mechanism of the framework is visible in the evidence, and the three tensions, though real, are managerial rather than structural – they concern the adequacy of staffing, technology and participation, not the feasibility of the model itself. The finding matters because the same configuration that makes coordination possible in Jiangbei – a rich local economic and organizational endowment – cannot be assumed in the less developed districts that will account for most of China's future caseload. The framework thereby turns a local success story into a diagnostic instrument: given a district's fiscal

capacity, industrial ecology and demographic trajectory, the three mechanisms predict where coordination will hold and where it will fail.

6. Discussion

The Jiangbei case supports and sharpens the three-mechanism framework, and it does so in ways that speak to several international debates. Consider first the resource endowment mechanism. Western scholarship has long noted that correctional capacity tracks the fiscal fortunes of states, but the Chinese case displays the linkage at a finer granularity: because community corrections is executed through local administrative apparatuses, district-level fiscal health, personnel quotas and administrative reforms translate almost one-for-one into correctional capacity. This finding refines the expectation (P1) in a comparative direction: the endowment mechanism will be strongest where correctional administration is most embedded in local government, and weakest where specialized correctional services are insulated by national financing. Jurisdictions contemplating the devolution of correctional responsibility – as several European systems have done under austerity – should expect the Chinese pattern of sensitivity to appear at their own local level.

Second, the cost substitution mechanism. The international evidence that imprisonment frequently fails to pay its way – criminologically and fiscally (Nagin, Cullen and Jonson, 2009) – is echoed in the Chinese material, but the case adds a governance-level insight consistent with P2: the value of substitution is set by supervisory practice, not by the sentencing statute. Approval calibration for business-involved offenders is the sort of low-visibility administrative decision that determines whether community sanctions preserve economic life or merely avoid prison costs. This resonates with the reentry literature's emphasis on the practical terms of community supervision – travel, work, family obligations – as the real substance of reintegration (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005), and with critical scholarship warning that supervision regimes can become managerial nets that capture and disable rather than reintegrate (Robinson and McNeill, 2016). The Jiangbei practice is best read as an attempt to steer between those poles, using technology to make liberty compatible with verification.

Third, the developmental spillover mechanism. Where the anglophone literature examines the community-level harms of concentrated punishment (Clear, 2007), the Chinese case suggests a complementary possibility: a well-governed, visible and reparative correctional system can operate as a positive input into a locality's development environment. The claim should not be overstated -the composition trends in Fig. 4 are mirror measures, not outcomes – but the mechanism is theoretically plausible, consistent with the evidence, and of obvious practical interest to the many governments in Asia and beyond for whom social stability and investment attraction are first-order objectives. The comparative question the case opens is whether the Chinese coupling of correctional performance to developmental evaluation strengthens or distorts the correctional mission: the same incentives that motivate investment in community corrections may bias attention toward demonstration and stability rather than offender outcomes.

The three tensions carry policy implications that map one-to-one onto the mechanisms. To manage the staff-caseload gap (tension 1), correctional budgeting should be indexed to supervised population and task volume rather than fixed administratively: community correction funding should be a protected budget line rising with the caseload; centers and bases should be functionally zoned and diversified to support individualized correction; and staffing quality should be raised through stricter professional entry requirements and recurrent training co-delivered with judicial organs and universities. To close the digital gap (tension 2), informatization should be treated as core correctional infrastructure – functional platforms, online education for special cases, scheduled upgrades and dedicated maintenance – and, because digital supervision touches directly on offenders' rights and dignity (Gong, 2015), technical investment should be accompanied by procedural standards for data use, verification and remedy. To pluralize participation (tension 3), governments should retain law-enforcement functions while contracting non-enforcement tasks to legal service, psychological counseling and skills-training institutions under clear responsibility lists; mixed teams of judicial office staff, social workers, volunteers and family members should be formed for key offenders; and enterprise- and university-based bases should be expanded so that employment counseling, psychological construction and legal education draw systematically on local talent resources. None of these measures is novel in the abstract; the contribution of the case is to show that they follow from identifiable mechanisms, and that neglecting any one of them degrades the whole circle.

A further implication concerns digital supervision and rights. The case shows technology doing double duty: it is what makes flexible, work-compatible supervision safe enough to grant, and it is what makes supervision intrusive enough to worry about. Positioning, verification and online education lower the marginal cost of supervising more offenders with fewer staff, but they also extend the state's informational reach into daily life for a population whose liberty is already restricted. The procedural standards proposed above – data-use rules, verification protocols, remedy channels – are therefore not bureaucratic garnish but a condition of the mechanism's legitimacy: supervision that offenders experience as arbitrary will undermine the cooperation on which community corrections, as a socialized rather than custodial technology, ultimately depends.

7. Conclusion

Drawing on five years of administrative data from Jiangbei New Area, this study has traced how community corrections and local economic development have co-evolved in China since the Community Correction Law came into force. Economic development supplies the fiscal, technological and organizational endowments on which correctional work depends; community corrections substitute for costly imprisonment, preserve offenders' productive participation and stabilize the social environment on which investment and talent attraction rest; and the resulting development renews the endowment. The same case shows that the circle is fragile: lean staffing against a growing caseload, lagging digital infrastructure and essentially governmental participation are the three fault lines along which coordination may fail. Securing the budget base, professionalizing and digitizing supervision under procedural safeguards, and pluralizing participation are the corresponding priorities.

For scholarship, the study contributes a portable framework – resource endowment, cost substitution, developmental spillover – for analyzing corrections-economy coupling, and a longitudinal account of how a national statute is localized through fiscal and organizational practice. For policy, it suggests that the economic case for community corrections rests not merely on the unit cost of supervision relative to custody, but on the system's capacity to keep offenders working, communities stable and jurisdictions governable. Future research should replicate the design across jurisdictions with contrasting fiscal and demographic profiles, link correctional records to reoffending and employment outcomes over longer windows, and test the cost-effectiveness of specific socialized execution arrangements against their fiscal and human costs. Such work would convert the mechanisms identified here from a plausible account of one Chinese district into comparative knowledge about how punishment and prosperity can be made to reinforce rather than undermine each other.

Finally, the scope of the findings should be stated plainly. Jiangbei is a coastal, fiscally strong district with an unusually dense ecology of enterprises and universities; inland districts with weaker endowments will face the same mechanisms under tighter constraints, and their failure modes will be correspondingly sharper. The framework predicts not uniformity but differentiation: where endowments are thin, cost substitution will be tempted toward work-unfriendly supervision, and spillovers will be sacrificed to stability management. Testing that prediction across districts of contrasting fiscal capacity is the most direct way to consolidate the account offered here.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Author Contribution

X.Z. is the sole author of this manuscript and is solely responsible for all aspects of the work, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection and analysis, writing of the original draft, review and editing, and approval of the final version.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the manuscript and its supplementary materials (Supplementary Information S1), which provides all aggregate tabulations underpinning

Figures 1–7. Official statistics on regional gross product and district populations are publicly available in the Nanjing Statistical Yearbook. The underlying administrative registers of the Jiangbei New Area Justice Bureau cannot be deposited in public repositories because they are law-enforcement records whose external use requires official approval; they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to such approval. No custom code was used.

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Figures

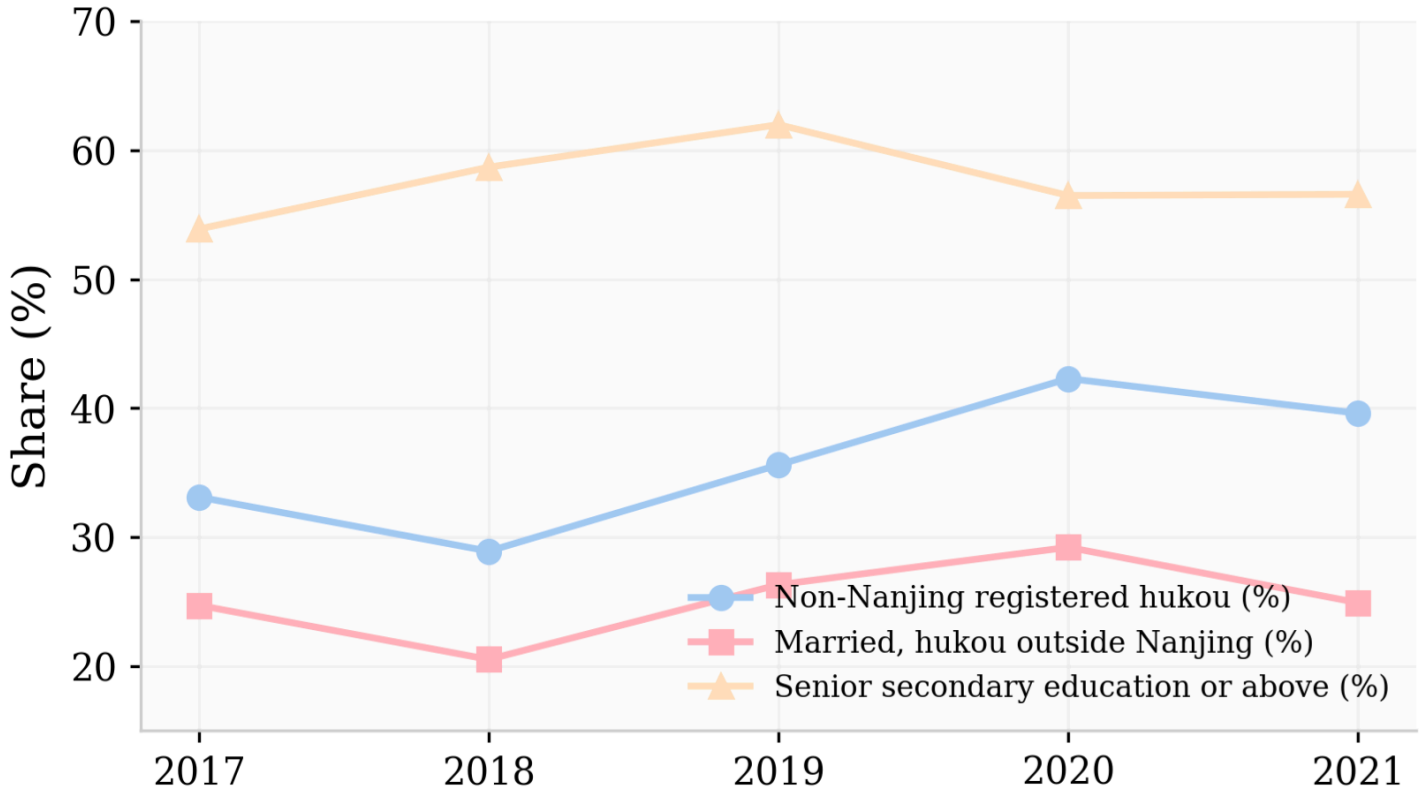


Figure 4

Shares of non-local registered residents, cross-city married residents, and residents with senior secondary education or above among offenders under community corrections

Source: Administrative registers of the Jiangbei New Area Justice Bureau (extracted October 2022)

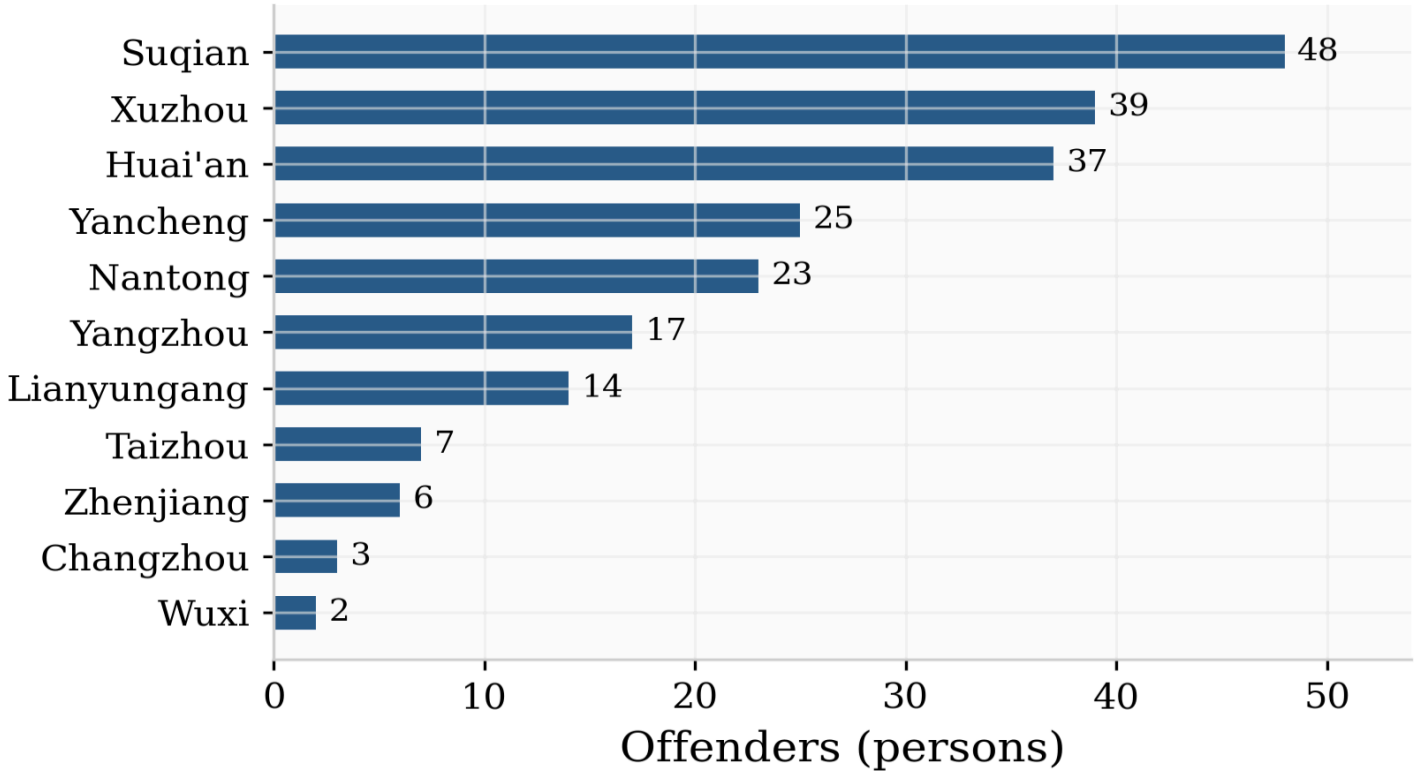


Figure 6

Origins within Jiangsu Province of non-local offenders under community corrections in Jiangbei New Area

Source: Administrative registers of the Jiangbei New Area Justice Bureau (extracted October 2022)

Supplementary Files

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