

If a 13-year-old murders a ten-year-old, is it a crime

At what age does an illegal act by a child become a crime? A **grisly** murder in China has brought this question to the fore. Last month a 13-year-old boy in Dalian, a city in the north-east, confessed to sexually assaulting a ten-year-old girl and **stabbing** her to death. The boy will not spend any time **behind bars**, however, because under Chinese law children are not held criminally responsible for their actions until they turn 14.

grisly 可怕的; 恐怖的

stab 刺; 戳

behind bars 坐牢

Such a rule is not unusual. The United Nations recommends that countries set their minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) no lower than 12, and encourages them to make the limit older. Many do. More than 40 countries set the cut-off at 14. A handful draw the line at 16. Elsewhere, the minimum age is much younger.

Often there are calls to lower the MACR after an under-age child commits a particularly **egregious** offence. The recent murder in China has provoked a debate about whether exempting children from prosecution prevents justice from being done. One problem is that, in most legal systems, offenders are not criminally liable if they do not understand they have done something wrong. Determining when a child is capable of having criminal intent can be difficult.

egregious 惊人的; 过分的

Opponents of punishing children argue that youngsters are often victims of circumstance. Many come from poor families or are manipulated or exploited by adults. Criminalising them may only compound these harms, limiting job prospects and encouraging **recidivism**.

recidivism 再犯