Cultural Dislocation and Double Anomie in Offending among Afghan Migrants: A Criminological Analysis of Criminal Policy and Penal Responses in Iran and Western Jurisdictions

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Abstract

Migration is not merely a geographical movement but a multidimensional social process involving changes in identity, cultural belonging, social bonds, economic opportunities, and relations with legal and political institutions. This article examines offending among Afghan migrants through the concepts of cultural dislocation and double anomie and analyzes the ways in which criminal policy and penal responses in Iran and selected Western jurisdictions may either mitigate or intensify criminogenic vulnerability. Using a comparative and analytical criminological approach, the study argues that migrant offending cannot adequately be explained by nationality, ethnicity, or migration status. Instead, it should be understood through the interaction of structural marginalization, blocked legitimate opportunities, weakened informal social control, discrimination, neighborhood disadvantage, insecure legal status, and incomplete integration into the host society. The concept of double anomie is developed to describe a condition in which migrants experience simultaneous or sequential weakening of normative attachment to the society of origin while remaining only partially integrated into the normative and institutional structure of the receiving society. Particular attention is given to second-generation Afghan migrants, for whom the discrepancy between subjective belonging and institutional recognition may become especially pronounced. The article further distinguishes actual offending from processes of criminalization and emphasizes that irregular migration status, selective enforcement, administrative violations, and differential exposure to policing may increase contact with criminal justice institutions without necessarily indicating greater criminal propensity. The comparative analysis shows that both Iranian and Western criminal policies contain punitive and integrative tendencies, including detention, deportation, surveillance, social prevention, procedural safeguards, community-based interventions, and reintegration measures. The study concludes that an effective criminal policy should combine proportionate enforcement with social inclusion, legal stability, victim protection, educational and employment opportunities, and stronger institutional legitimacy. Reducing double anomie requires addressing the social conditions that generate exclusion rather than treating migrant identity itself as a source of criminal risk.

Keywords: Afghan Migrants; Cultural Dislocation; Double Anomie; Migrant Offending; Criminology; Criminal Policy; Penal Response; Social Exclusion; Migration and Crime; Iran; Western Jurisdictions

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1. Introduction

International migration is among the most significant social transformations of the contemporary era, reshaping demographic structures, labor markets, cultural relations, family systems, and the institutional boundaries of citizenship and belonging. Migration cannot be reduced to the physical movement of individuals from one territory to another because it ordinarily involves a simultaneous transition between normative orders, social institutions, economic structures, and systems of identity. Castles and colleagues conceptualize international migration as a multidimensional process embedded in broader political, economic, and social transformations rather than as an isolated demographic event (Castles et al., 2014). From a criminological perspective, this multidimensional character is particularly important because migration may alter the social bonds, opportunities, sources of strain, community controls, and cultural expectations that influence individual conduct. Yet the relationship between migration and crime remains one of the most controversial areas of criminological inquiry. Comparative research has repeatedly demonstrated that simplistic assumptions according to which immigration inherently increases crime are empirically and theoretically inadequate (Ousey & Kubrin, 2018). Migrant involvement in crime therefore needs to be situated within the structural and institutional contexts in which migrant populations live rather than attributed to nationality, ethnicity, or foreign status as such.

The case of Afghan migration to Iran presents a particularly important setting for such an analysis. Decades of political instability, armed conflict, economic deprivation, and insecurity in Afghanistan have contributed to successive waves of migration to neighboring Iran, producing a migrant population characterized by considerable internal diversity in duration of residence, documentation status, occupational position, generation, age, education, and degree of cultural integration. Afghan migrants may share important linguistic, religious, historical, and cultural affinities with substantial segments of Iranian society, but cultural proximity does not automatically guarantee equal social incorporation. Iranian criminological scholarship has emphasized that migrant experiences frequently intersect with urban marginalization, restricted socioeconomic opportunities, and unequal access to social resources (Najafi Abrandabadi, 2019). Research focusing specifically on Afghan migrants has also drawn attention to the relationship between social discrimination and delinquency, indicating that exclusionary experiences can influence the social environment in which offending becomes more likely for some individuals (Habibi & Karimi, 2022). These findings suggest that the analytically relevant issue is not Afghan identity itself but the social position into which migrants are incorporated and the degree to which that position permits stable participation in the normative and institutional life of the host society.

The distinction between migration and criminality is particularly important because migrants may simultaneously occupy the positions of suspected offender, actual offender, victim, marginalized worker, undocumented resident, and object of administrative control. Criminal policy directed toward foreign nationals can consequently operate at the intersection of criminal justice and immigration governance. Farajiha and Moghaddasi demonstrate that Iranian criminal policy concerning foreign nationals, particularly Afghan refugees, encompasses both offending and victimization and therefore cannot be understood solely through punishment-oriented approaches (Farajiha & Moghaddasi, 2020). The legal status of a migrant may determine exposure to administrative sanctions, detention, exclusion from particular occupations, or removal measures independently of conventional criminal liability. At the same time, insecure legal status can discourage victims from reporting offenses committed against them or seeking institutional protection. The result is a complex relationship in which migrants may be subjected to intensified regulation while simultaneously experiencing reduced access to protective mechanisms. Such circumstances make it necessary to distinguish between the causes of offending and the processes through which particular populations become more visible to police, prosecutors, administrative agencies, and penal institutions.

Criminological analysis is especially useful for explaining this complexity because several established theoretical traditions identify mechanisms through which social transition and marginalization may influence deviance. Durkheim's conception of anomie emphasized the destabilizing consequences of weakened normative regulation during periods of rapid social transformation (Durkheim, 1951). Merton subsequently reformulated anomie in terms of the contradiction between culturally promoted aspirations and institutionally available means for realizing them (Merton, 1938). These perspectives are directly relevant to migrant populations who may encounter expectations of economic improvement and social mobility while facing significant limitations in access to legitimate employment, education, stable housing, and institutional participation. General strain theory further broadens this analysis by emphasizing that negative experiences, blocked goals, loss of valued conditions, and exposure to adverse treatment can generate emotional pressures that may increase the likelihood of maladaptive coping under particular circumstances (Agnew, 2006). None of these theories predicts that migrants will necessarily offend. Rather, they identify social mechanisms through which unequal opportunity and sustained frustration can produce criminogenic pressures when adequate coping resources and institutional support are absent.

The cultural dimensions of migration add another layer to this problem. Acculturation involves the psychological and social adjustments that occur when individuals and groups encounter different cultural systems, and successful adaptation depends partly on whether migrants can maintain meaningful elements of their original identity while participating in the host society (Berry, 2005). Where neither cultural continuity nor successful incorporation is attainable, migrants may experience cultural dislocation. This condition can involve uncertainty regarding belonging, weakening of familiar normative expectations, intergenerational disagreements, changes in gender and family roles, and unresolved tension between origin-country norms and host-society expectations. Cultural criminology further reminds us that crime and control are mediated through meaning, identity, symbolic boundaries, and cultural interpretation rather than through material deprivation alone (Ferrell et al., 2015). Migrant offending must therefore be examined in relation to the subjective experience of exclusion, the construction of foreignness, and the ways in which both migrants and institutions interpret cultural difference.

The concept developed in this article to capture the particular intensity of these overlapping pressures is “double anomie.” Double anomie refers to a condition in which a migrant experiences simultaneous or sequential weakening of normative integration in relation to both the society of origin and the host society. Migration may diminish the effectiveness of traditional social controls, kinship networks, community expectations, and familiar cultural institutions without necessarily enabling equivalent incorporation into the institutions of the receiving country. The migrant may therefore become partially detached from one normative order while remaining incompletely integrated into another. This condition differs from ordinary cultural change because it concerns not merely adaptation to new norms but the possibility of occupying an unstable position between two systems of social regulation. It also differs from a purely economic understanding of strain because legal recognition, cultural belonging, family relationships, identity, neighborhood organization, and institutional trust are implicated alongside material opportunities.

This perspective is particularly useful for analyzing second-generation and long-term migrant populations. The children of migrants may have limited experiential connection to their parents' country of origin while continuing to encounter social categorization as foreigners within the country in which they were raised. Research on second-generation Afghan migrants in Iran has linked social disorganization to delinquency, indicating that neighborhood and community conditions remain important beyond the immediate experience of migration itself (Rahmati, 2022). Research on migrant youth in European settings similarly indicates that cultural discontinuity can combine with structural blockages in shaping pathways toward offending (Simmler et al., 2017). Such evidence suggests that the criminologically relevant experience may not be movement across a border in itself but prolonged uncertainty regarding social membership, legitimate opportunity, recognition, and normative attachment.

The social ecology of migrant settlement must also be taken seriously. Shaw and McKay demonstrated that crime rates are influenced by neighborhood-level conditions, particularly instability, poverty, and weakened community organization (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Sampson and Groves later provided empirical support for social-disorganization explanations emphasizing the mediating role of weakened local networks and informal social control (Sampson & Groves, 1989). In the Iranian context, sociological analyses of marginalized urban areas have similarly linked delinquency to conditions of concentrated disadvantage and social exclusion (Goudarzi & Sadeghi, 2021). Afghan migrants who are concentrated in informal or economically deprived neighborhoods may therefore encounter criminogenic conditions that are not generated by migrant culture but by the organization of urban space and the unequal distribution of social resources.

The same logic applies to social bonds. Hirschi's control theory proposes that attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief connect individuals to conventional society and reduce the likelihood of delinquency (Hirschi, 1969). Migration may affect these bonds when unstable residence interrupts schooling, informal employment weakens occupational commitment, discrimination reduces identification with institutions, or family separation diminishes attachment. The weakening of these bonds is not inevitable, and migrant families and communities may in many circumstances provide exceptionally strong sources of informal control. Nevertheless, when cultural dislocation, structural marginalization, and insecure legal status operate simultaneously, the protective capacity of these bonds may be substantially reduced.

The objective of this article is to develop a criminological explanation of offending among Afghan migrants through the combined concepts of cultural dislocation and double anomie and to evaluate how criminal policy and penal responses in Iran and selected Western jurisdictions interact with these conditions. The article does not assume that Afghan migrants possess a greater propensity for criminal behavior, nor does it treat crime statistics as transparent representations of underlying conduct. Instead, it distinguishes offending from criminalization and investigates how social exclusion, cultural disruption, weakened institutional attachment, legal vulnerability, and differential enforcement may jointly shape both criminal behavior and contact with the criminal justice system. The central argument is that criminal policy can either reduce the pressures associated with double anomie by facilitating social inclusion and procedural equality or intensify them by combining punitive criminal justice practices with exclusionary immigration controls.

This approach also requires a comparative perspective. Western jurisdictions provide neither a single model nor an inherently superior response to migrant-related crime. Comparative criminology demonstrates considerable variation in the relationship between ethnicity, immigration, criminal justice, and punishment across national contexts (Tonry, 1997). Some systems rely heavily on surveillance, detention, deportation, and exclusionary control, whereas others combine criminal justice with integration programs, community prevention, social welfare, and restorative mechanisms. Iran likewise combines conventional penal norms, immigration regulation, administrative control, and varying forms of social accommodation. The comparative purpose of the present study is therefore not to contrast a punitive Iranian model with an inclusive Western model, but to identify how different policy configurations can reproduce or mitigate the structural and normative conditions associated with migrant offending.

The article proceeds from the premise that the most effective criminal policy cannot be based on the ethnicization of crime. Criminal behavior emerges from interactions among individuals, communities, institutions, opportunities, and forms of social control. Iranian scholarship on deviance has long emphasized the importance of understanding crime within broader processes of social disorder and structural transformation (Mohseni Tabrizi, 2017), while analyses of anomie in contemporary Iran highlight the destabilizing effects of weakened norms and institutional inconsistency (Rafipour, 2018). These insights can be extended to migration by asking what occurs when general conditions of social anomie intersect with the specific experience of cultural displacement. The resulting condition may be understood as an intensified form of normative instability in which migrants are exposed to both the general strains of the host society and the particular uncertainties of incomplete social membership. It is this interaction between cultural dislocation, double anomie, and institutional response that provides the organizing framework for the analysis that follows.

2. Cultural Dislocation and Double Anomie: A Criminological Framework

Anomie remains one of the most enduring concepts in sociological criminology because it explains deviance not primarily as the product of individual abnormality but as a possible consequence of disturbed relationships between individuals and the normative organization of society. Durkheim used the concept to describe situations in which social regulation becomes insufficient and individuals lose clear limits for expectations and conduct (Durkheim, 1951). The central insight is that human behavior is regulated not only by law but also by shared expectations, moral obligations, social roles, institutional routines, and collective understandings about legitimate aspirations. When these regulatory frameworks weaken, become contradictory, or fail to provide coherent guidance, individuals may experience uncertainty regarding both desired goals and acceptable means. Migration is particularly relevant to this formulation because moving between societies can transform the normative environment more rapidly than individuals and communities can reconstruct stable forms of belonging. The migrant may retain internalized expectations from the society of origin while simultaneously encountering new legal rules, cultural practices, institutional demands, and definitions of acceptable behavior in the host society.

Merton's reformulation of anomie shifted attention from general normative deregulation toward the structural contradiction between culturally prescribed goals and unequal access to legitimate means (Merton, 1938). This approach is highly relevant to migrants who relocate partly in pursuit of safety, employment, education, family security, or improved living conditions but subsequently encounter barriers to achieving those objectives. Migrants can become incorporated into the aspirational culture of the host society through employment, media, consumption, schooling, and everyday interaction while remaining excluded from many institutional pathways through which those aspirations are conventionally realized. Restricted occupational opportunities, discrimination in labor markets, informal employment, unstable legal status, limited access to credit, housing insecurity, and obstacles to professional mobility may create a particularly visible gap between expectations and attainable outcomes. Studies of the relationship between urban poverty and petty offending in Iranian metropolitan settings reinforce the importance of opportunity structures in explaining forms of low-level crime (Mousavi & Taheri, 2021). The relevance of such conditions to migrant populations derives from their structural position rather than from cultural origin.

General strain theory adds psychological and relational dimensions to this structural account. Agnew argues that strain may result from failure to achieve positively valued goals, removal of valued conditions, and exposure to negative stimuli (Agnew, 2006). For migrants, these forms of strain can coexist. A person may encounter blocked economic mobility while simultaneously experiencing separation from family, insecurity regarding residence, humiliation, workplace exploitation, discrimination, or fear of removal. Such pressures do not mechanically produce crime, because individuals differ in coping resources, social support, moral commitments, and access to lawful alternatives. Nevertheless, repeated strain accompanied by anger, frustration, perceived injustice, or hopelessness may increase the attractiveness of illicit coping strategies for some individuals. This perspective also helps explain why punitive treatment can sometimes be criminogenic: if criminal justice intervention adds further exclusion, stigma, unemployment, or family disruption without creating opportunities for reintegration, it may intensify rather than resolve the strains underlying offending.

The concept of cultural dislocation extends this analysis beyond socioeconomic deprivation. Cultural dislocation refers to a disruption in the continuity between the normative framework through which an individual previously understood social life and the framework encountered in the receiving society. Berry's work on acculturation demonstrates that adaptation to a new cultural setting is not a single linear process of abandoning one identity and acquiring another (Berry, 2005). Individuals may pursue integration, assimilation, separation, or experience marginalization depending on their preferences and the opportunities provided by the host society. Marginalization is particularly relevant because it involves weak identification with both the culture of origin and the wider receiving society. This condition resembles one component of double anomie, although the present argument places stronger emphasis on criminological processes of regulation, opportunity, social control, and institutional legitimacy.

Cultural discontinuity may arise in many domains simultaneously. Family authority may change when younger migrants acquire linguistic and cultural competence more rapidly than their parents. Traditional gender expectations may encounter different institutional and social expectations in education or employment. Informal community sanctions may lose effectiveness when families are geographically dispersed or when migrant neighborhoods are unstable. Young migrants may adopt styles, aspirations, and identities associated with the host society while being reminded through discrimination or legal categorization that their membership remains conditional. Simmler and colleagues identify cultural discontinuity and structural blockages as significant elements in understanding pathways toward crime among young migrants (Simmler et al., 2017). The interaction is crucial: cultural difference alone need not generate offending, while structural exclusion alone does not capture the identity and normative conflicts that can accompany migration. Criminogenic risk may become particularly pronounced when cultural ambiguity and blocked opportunity reinforce each other.

Cultural criminology provides an additional interpretive framework by emphasizing that crime and control are constituted through symbols, identities, emotions, styles, and contested meanings (Ferrell et al., 2015). The migrant may not merely experience material exclusion but also symbolic exclusion. Labels such as “foreigner,” “illegal,” “refugee,” or “dangerous migrant” can structure everyday encounters and influence self-perception, public attitudes, and institutional practice. Such labels may produce boundaries between those perceived as legitimate members of society and those viewed as temporary, suspect, or culturally incompatible. Criminalization can therefore operate culturally before it operates legally. When public discourse repeatedly associates a migrant group with insecurity, visible policing may increase, informal discrimination may become normalized, and ordinary conflicts involving members of that group may be interpreted through a preexisting criminalizing narrative. This process can contribute to a feedback cycle in which institutional visibility is misread as evidence of inherent criminality.

Double anomie emerges when these cultural, structural, and institutional dimensions are combined. The first dimension concerns erosion of effective normative integration with the society of origin. Migration can weaken direct supervision by extended family, neighborhood elders, religious networks, occupational communities, or other institutions that previously regulated conduct. Traditional expectations may also lose authority when they appear incompatible with the practical demands of life in the receiving society. For second-generation migrants, the origin society may exist primarily as a transmitted cultural memory rather than as a directly experienced institutional environment. Norms retained within the family can therefore possess moral significance without being supported by the broader social institutions that originally reinforced them. This form of partial detachment does not necessarily imply rejection of cultural heritage. Rather, it describes a structural weakening in the capacity of origin-based institutions to regulate everyday life.

The second dimension concerns incomplete incorporation into the normative and institutional order of the receiving society. Formal residence does not necessarily produce substantive membership. A migrant may work, study, raise children, and participate economically in the host country while remaining excluded from stable legal status, full labor-market participation, political membership, housing opportunities, or equal recognition. Research on discrimination and migrant delinquency in Iran suggests that perceptions and experiences of social discrimination can become important components of migrant marginalization (Habibi & Karimi, 2022). Where institutions appear inaccessible or hostile, individuals may comply with law instrumentally while developing weak identification with the institutions responsible for enforcing it. The distinction between legal obedience and normative legitimacy is therefore central. Stable social order depends not only on the threat of punishment but also on a widespread belief that institutions are legitimate and that conformity offers meaningful participation in society.

The idea of double anomie does not propose that migrants live in a normless condition. On the contrary, they may be exposed to an excess of competing norms. Parents, ethnic communities, employers, schools, religious institutions, migration authorities, police, peer groups, and media may communicate conflicting expectations. The problem is not the absence of norms but fragmentation in their authority. A young Afghan migrant may be expected to preserve family traditions, conform to Iranian social expectations, satisfy occupational demands, navigate legal restrictions associated with foreign status, and respond to peer-group cultures that offer alternative forms of belonging. When these expectations cannot be reconciled, the individual may develop situational rather than stable normative commitments. Different contexts may produce different standards of conduct, weakening the coherence that ordinarily supports informal social control.

Social bond theory helps explain why such instability matters. Hirschi argues that attachment to significant others, commitment to conventional goals, involvement in legitimate activities, and belief in social rules restrain delinquency (Hirschi, 1969). Each of these elements may be affected by insecure migration conditions. Family separation can weaken attachment, blocked educational or occupational mobility can reduce commitment, exclusion from organized activities can decrease involvement, and discriminatory institutional encounters can undermine belief in the fairness of rules. At the same time, strong migrant families, religious communities, educational institutions, and supportive workplaces can reinforce these bonds and reduce offending. The double-anomie framework must therefore be understood probabilistically: it identifies conditions under which conventional bonds are vulnerable, not a deterministic sequence leading from migration to crime.

Neighborhood context provides another critical level of analysis. Shaw and McKay's social-disorganization perspective directs attention toward the capacity of communities to maintain collective regulation in conditions of poverty, mobility, and heterogeneity (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Sampson and Groves later demonstrated that weak friendship networks, limited organizational participation, and reduced informal supervision help explain how structural disadvantage becomes associated with crime (Sampson & Groves, 1989). These insights are especially relevant where migrants reside in peripheral or disadvantaged urban environments characterized by unstable tenancy, informal employment, overcrowding, and limited municipal investment. Iranian research concerning delinquency in marginalized areas similarly emphasizes that deviance must be connected to the organization of urban inequality rather than treated merely as an individual pathology (Goudarzi &

Sadeghi, 2021). Migrants may thus enter neighborhoods where local institutions are already weakened, amplifying the effects of their own legal and economic insecurity.

Second-generation migrants can experience this condition in an especially complex form. Rahmati's analysis of second-generation Afghan migrants links delinquency to social disorganization, illustrating that the criminological problems experienced by migrant communities cannot be explained solely through the act of immigration (Rahmati, 2022). Individuals born or raised in the host society may speak its language fluently, share many of its cultural aspirations, and possess little practical knowledge of the parental country of origin. Yet if they continue to encounter restricted status or social stigma, the disjunction between subjective belonging and external recognition may become particularly pronounced. First-generation migrants may compare their circumstances with those they left behind and perceive significant gains despite hardship, whereas their children are more likely to compare themselves with peers in the host society. Consequently, relative deprivation rather than absolute deprivation may become increasingly important across generations.

The concept of double anomie can therefore be understood as a multilevel criminological model. At the macro level, immigration rules, labor-market segmentation, citizenship arrangements, economic inequality, and public discourse shape opportunities for incorporation. At the community level, residential concentration, neighborhood resources, family networks, schools, and migrant associations influence social control. At the interpersonal level, discrimination, peer relationships, family conflict, and occupational experiences generate or buffer strain. At the individual level, identity, coping capacity, moral commitments, and perceptions of legitimacy affect behavioral responses. Criminal justice institutions form an additional level because policing, prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation can alter each of the other dimensions. A single criminal conviction may lead to job loss, family instability, residential displacement, stigma, or immigration consequences, thereby deepening the very forms of exclusion that contribute to anomie.

Iranian sociological discussions of social deviance reinforce the need to locate individual offending within transformations of social organization (Tavassoli, 2016). Mohseni Tabrizi similarly situates deviance within broader patterns of social relations and normative regulation rather than reducing it to isolated personal characteristics (Mohseni Tabrizi, 2017). Rafipour's account of anomie and social disorder in contemporary Iran further suggests that inconsistency between social expectations and institutional realities can produce widespread normative instability (Rafipour, 2018). Afghan migrants live within this general social environment while also confronting migration-specific forms of uncertainty. Double anomie therefore refers not simply to anomie "twice," but to the interaction between general societal norm erosion and a migrant-specific crisis of belonging between origin and host normative systems.

This theoretical model also requires a distinction between criminogenic vulnerability and actual offending. Structural exclusion may increase exposure to circumstances associated with crime without determining individual behavior. Many migrants facing severe disadvantage remain law-abiding, maintain strong family relations, participate in legitimate economic activity, and construct resilient communities. Indeed, migration itself can strengthen motivation for conformity because migrants may fear legal consequences, deportation, or loss of economic opportunities. The value of the double-anomie concept lies precisely in avoiding categorical assumptions. It identifies a set of pressures whose effects depend on the presence or absence of protective factors. Stable documentation, educational access, lawful employment, family unity, community organization, and fair institutional treatment can interrupt the movement from dislocation toward deviance.

The framework is equally useful for analyzing criminalization. Migrants who occupy marginalized public spaces, work in regulated informal sectors, or lack secure documents may come into contact with enforcement institutions more frequently even when their involvement in conventional crime is not greater than that of citizens. Comparative criminological research warns that observed differences in arrest, prosecution, or imprisonment cannot automatically be interpreted as differences in underlying criminal behavior (Tonry, 1997). Ousey and Kubrin likewise emphasize the contentious and methodologically complex nature of claims regarding immigration and crime (Ousey & Kubrin, 2018). The double-anomie framework therefore connects the sociology of offending with the sociology of criminal justice. It asks not only why some migrants may engage in crime, but also how institutions identify, regulate, and punish migrant conduct and whether those responses strengthen or weaken long-term social integration.

The resulting theoretical proposition is that cultural dislocation becomes criminologically consequential when it is combined with structural blockage, weak social bonds, neighborhood disadvantage, and institutional exclusion. Double anomie names the condition in which migrants experience weakened normative incorporation at both ends of the migration process, while penal and immigration institutions can either alleviate or intensify this instability. The explanatory advantage of the concept lies in connecting cultural adaptation, strain, social control, neighborhood organization, and criminalization within a single analytical framework. It thereby provides a foundation for examining the specific experience of Afghan migrants in Iran and for comparing that experience with patterns identified in Western migration and criminal-policy systems.

3. Afghan Migration, Double Anomie, and Criminogenic Vulnerability in Iran and Western Societies

Afghan migration to Iran has developed through prolonged historical interaction rather than through a single migration episode. The relationship between the two societies includes geographic proximity, linguistic overlap, religious connections, labor migration, family networks, and repeated displacement caused by political and economic instability. These characteristics distinguish the Iranian case from many Western migration settings in which migrants may encounter more pronounced linguistic or religious difference. Nevertheless, cultural similarity does not eliminate structural inequality. Najafi Abrandabadi's criminological analysis of migration and urban marginalization in Iran emphasizes that migrant status becomes intertwined with conditions of settlement, social exclusion, and unequal participation in urban life (Najafi Abrandabadi, 2019). The Afghan migrant experience therefore demonstrates why cultural proximity and social integration must be treated as analytically distinct. Individuals may understand the host society's language and many of its cultural codes while still occupying a socially peripheral position.

The socioeconomic dimensions of this position are central to criminogenic vulnerability. Migrants who lack stable documentation or recognized professional credentials may be concentrated in low-wage, insecure, or physically demanding occupations. Informal employment can reduce access to contractual protection, social insurance, legal remedies, and occupational mobility. Where lawful opportunities remain narrow while migrants are exposed to the same consumption norms and expectations of material advancement as the wider population, a Mertonian contradiction between aspirations and legitimate means can emerge (Merton, 1938). The relevance of this contradiction is reinforced by Iranian research connecting urban poverty with petty crime in metropolitan areas (Mousavi & Taheri, 2021). Such research does not establish that poverty inevitably produces criminality, but it indicates that economic exclusion can alter opportunity structures, increase exposure to illicit markets, and reduce the perceived costs of certain low-level offenses.

General strain provides another mechanism through which structural marginalization may acquire behavioral significance. Economic insecurity is often accompanied by humiliation, uncertainty, unstable housing, family pressure, or fear of losing residence or employment. Agnew's framework suggests that the accumulation of negative experiences may create criminogenic strain when individuals lack legitimate coping resources (Agnew, 2006). For Afghan migrants, strain can be intensified by the perception that hardship is linked not merely to class position but to social identity and foreign status. Habibi and Karimi specifically identify social discrimination as an important factor in understanding migrant delinquency (Habibi & Karimi, 2022). Perceived discrimination can reduce trust in social institutions and weaken expectations that conformity will be rewarded with equal treatment. When repeated disadvantage is interpreted as unjust rather than accidental, frustration may become more difficult to absorb through conventional coping mechanisms.

Urban marginalization can further consolidate these pressures. Migrants with limited financial resources are often pushed toward neighborhoods where housing is cheaper but social infrastructure is weaker. Social-disorganization theory predicts that concentrated disadvantage, population turnover, and weak local institutions can impair the ability of residents to exercise informal social control (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Sampson and Groves demonstrate that community organizational capacity mediates the relationship between structural conditions and crime (Sampson & Groves, 1989). This means that the relevant criminological variable is not ethnic concentration itself but the availability of stable networks, trusted institutions, collective supervision, and neighborhood resources. Iranian studies of marginalized urban communities similarly show that delinquency is embedded in broader conditions of social disorganization (Goudarzi & Sadeghi, 2021). Afghan migrants living within such environments may therefore be exposed to risks generated by urban inequality rather than by migrant culture.

The family can function both as a protective institution and as a site of cultural strain. First-generation migrants often retain strong attachments to family obligations, religious norms, and origin-country traditions. These attachments may reduce offending by providing supervision, moral expectations, and social support. Hirschi's theory predicts precisely this protective effect where attachment and commitment remain strong (Hirschi, 1969). Yet migration can also transform family authority. Younger family members may acquire greater familiarity with the host society, participate in educational institutions, and develop expectations that differ from those of their parents. Parents, meanwhile, may attempt to preserve traditional norms as a defense against cultural loss. The resulting intergenerational tensions are not themselves criminal, but they can weaken the consistency of informal regulation when neither parental authority nor host-society institutions provide an uncontested normative framework.

Acculturation theory helps illuminate this tension. Berry explains that adaptation may involve integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization depending on both individual preferences and the receptiveness of the receiving society (Berry, 2005). Integration becomes difficult when migrants are encouraged to participate economically but remain socially marked as outsiders. Marginalization becomes particularly relevant where individuals gradually lose attachment to origin-based institutions while failing to achieve recognized membership in the host society. This is the social space in which double anomie becomes most visible. The individual may no longer experience traditional norms as fully authoritative but may also distrust or feel rejected by host-country institutions. Normative obligations become fragmented, and peer groups or informal networks may assume greater importance as alternative sources of status and belonging.

The second generation is particularly significant because it reveals that migrant-related criminogenic vulnerability cannot be reduced to the difficulties of border crossing or initial adaptation. Rahmati's examination of second-generation Afghan migrants in Iran links social disorganization with delinquency (Rahmati, 2022). Second-generation youth may be culturally closer to Iranian peers than to recently arrived migrants, yet they can remain exposed to inherited legal insecurity, residential disadvantage, occupational restrictions, or social stigma. Their expectations may consequently be shaped by the standards of the host society to a greater degree than those of their parents. If access to those standards remains unequal, the subjective experience of blocked mobility may become more intense. This helps explain why later generations can sometimes experience greater frustration than first-generation migrants even when their material circumstances have improved.

Comparative research in Western societies provides a useful parallel. Simmler and colleagues identify the interaction between cultural discontinuity and structural blockages in pathways to crime among young migrants (Simmler et al., 2017). Their findings support an interpretation in which migrant offending cannot be explained through cultural difference alone. Cultural discontinuity becomes particularly consequential when accompanied by restricted legitimate opportunities and weak integration. Tonry's comparative work similarly demonstrates that relationships among ethnicity, immigration, crime, and criminal justice vary substantially across national contexts (Tonry, 1997). These differences show that the social and policy environment matters. The same migrant population may display different outcomes depending on labor-market access, neighborhood conditions, welfare institutions, policing practices, citizenship rules, and educational opportunities.

The Western literature also complicates the assumption that immigration necessarily increases crime. Ousey and Kubrin's review finds that the relationship between immigration and crime is far more complex than popular political narratives often suggest (Ousey & Kubrin, 2018). In some contexts, immigrant communities may exhibit strong family cohesion, dense social networks, entrepreneurial activity, and informal supervision that protect against offending. This observation is crucial for the double-anomie model because it demonstrates that migration can generate both risk and resilience. Cultural continuity can strengthen social control, while successful integration can expand legitimate opportunities. Criminogenic vulnerability emerges most clearly where both of these protective systems become weak at the same time.

Irregular legal status constitutes another mechanism through which vulnerability and criminalization intersect. A migrant who lacks secure residence may experience barriers to lawful employment, formal housing, banking, education, or mobility. Such restrictions can increase dependence on informal intermediaries and unregulated labor markets, thereby increasing exposure to exploitation and illicit opportunities. At the same time, irregularity makes migrants more visible to administrative enforcement. Kazemi and Rezaei's analysis of crime-control policies and Afghan migrants in Iran illustrates the importance of migration status within broader systems of social and criminal regulation (Kazemi & Rezaei, 2020). This means that some forms of official “offending” associated with migrant populations may arise directly from the regulation of status rather than from conduct ordinarily understood as harmful crime.

The distinction between criminal behavior and criminalized status is therefore essential. Entering or remaining within a country without required authorization can trigger legal intervention even where the migrant has committed no interpersonal or property offense. Informal employment may also produce legal violations that are inseparable from restrictions on access to formal work. If enforcement data combine such status-related violations with conventional crime, public interpretations of migrant criminality may become distorted. Farajiha and Moghaddasi's examination of criminal policy toward foreign nationals underscores the need to consider the legal treatment of migrants in relation to both offending and victimization (Farajiha & Moghaddasi, 2020). A sound criminological analysis must therefore ask what proportion of migrant contact with authorities results from conduct criminalized because of immigration status and what proportion involves offenses that would be treated similarly if committed by citizens.

Victimization represents the other side of this institutional vulnerability. Migrants working informally may be exposed to wage theft, unsafe working conditions, assault, fraud, exploitation, or coercion while possessing limited capacity to seek redress. Fear that reporting victimization will expose irregular status can discourage contact with police and other public institutions. Social isolation may further reduce access to legal advice. The result can be a paradoxical condition in which a population subject to increased surveillance is simultaneously underprotected as a victim population. This contradiction is criminologically important because victimization itself can become a source of strain and can weaken trust in legal institutions. A person who perceives that the law primarily functions as a mechanism of control rather than protection may develop lower normative commitment to that legal order.

Cultural criminology helps explain how such institutional asymmetry is reinforced through representation. Public narratives about migrant crime can convert isolated events into symbolic evidence about an entire group. Ferrell and colleagues emphasize that crime is interpreted through cultural processes that give events meaning beyond their immediate factual content (Ferrell et al., 2015). When migrant identity becomes part of the narrative through which offending is reported or discussed, nationality may acquire explanatory significance even where equivalent citizen offending would be interpreted individually. This symbolic amplification can produce fear, stigma, and pressure for punitive policy. Migrants may then experience collective suspicion, making everyday social integration more difficult and reinforcing the very sense of exclusion that contributes to double anomie.

The Iranian context is distinctive because Afghan migrants often possess considerable cultural familiarity with Iranian society while simultaneously being subject to boundaries associated with nationality and legal status. This can create a particularly subtle form of dislocation. The migrant may understand the host society well enough to participate culturally but remain excluded institutionally. Such a condition differs from classical accounts of cultural conflict in which migrants encounter entirely unfamiliar values. Here, the problem may be less one of misunderstanding norms and more one of unequal access to the social rewards associated with conformity. The individual may know precisely what forms of education, occupation, consumption, and social mobility are culturally valued but perceive that some routes toward them remain blocked.

This problem can be intensified in adolescence and early adulthood. Young people derive identity not only from family but also from school, peers, media, neighborhoods, and imagined futures. If migrant youth experience weak educational attachment, employment barriers, and discriminatory encounters, peer networks may become especially influential. Salimi and Ahmadi connect migration and marginalization with juvenile delinquency in the Iranian context (Salimi & Ahmadi, 2018). Their analysis reinforces the importance of considering developmental stages in which social recognition and peer status are particularly significant. When conventional institutions provide limited opportunities for achievement, alternative status systems can become more attractive, especially in marginalized neighborhoods.

Yet the same communities can develop strong protective resources. Kinship networks, religious organizations, migrant associations, supportive schools, employers, and neighborhood ties can provide both material assistance and normative regulation. Social-disorganization theory does not imply that poor neighborhoods lack all organization; rather, it asks whether local networks possess sufficient capacity for collective action and informal control. The resilience of migrant communities therefore needs to be incorporated into any balanced analysis. A double-anomie condition is most likely where both origin-based and host-based protective institutions weaken, while successful integration can occur where individuals maintain meaningful cultural continuity and simultaneously acquire full access to the institutions of the receiving society.

The comparison with Western jurisdictions demonstrates that policy design can influence which of these trajectories becomes more likely. Where integration policies expand access to language education, schooling, lawful employment, housing, and stable residence, migrants have greater opportunity to form conventional commitments. Where criminal justice and immigration control become closely intertwined, minor offending or status violations can trigger consequences that destabilize employment, residence, and family life. Comparative criminology therefore shifts attention from migrant characteristics toward institutional arrangements. Castles and colleagues emphasize that migration systems are shaped by states, markets, transnational networks, and historical structures (Castles et al., 2014). Criminal policy is one part of this broader migration regime and can either stabilize or destabilize social incorporation.

The concept of double anomie provides a way to interpret these interacting processes without stigmatizing Afghan migrants. Cultural dislocation refers to instability in identity and normative orientation; structural strain concerns unequal access to legitimate opportunities; social disorganization concerns weakened community control; social-bond theory concerns attachment and commitment; and criminalization concerns differential exposure to institutional control. None of these mechanisms is unique to migrants, but migration can bring them together in distinctive combinations. The central criminological problem is therefore not the presence of Afghan migrants in Iranian society but the conditions under which migrants become socially incorporated, economically positioned, legally recognized, culturally accepted, and institutionally governed.

From this perspective, migrant offending is best understood as one possible outcome within a larger field of adaptation. Many migrants respond to hardship through intensified work, family solidarity, religious commitment, entrepreneurship, education, or avoidance of risky environments. Others may become vulnerable to offending when cumulative strains coincide with weakened bonds and limited opportunity. Still others may come into contact with criminal justice institutions primarily because their legal status makes otherwise ordinary activities subject to regulation. A scientifically defensible criminal policy must distinguish these pathways. Failing to do so risks treating migration as a criminogenic identity rather than identifying the specific mechanisms through which exclusion, dislocation, and institutional practices influence both offending and official reactions to it.

4. Criminal Policy and Penal Responses in Iran and Western Jurisdictions

Criminal policy toward migrant offending operates at the intersection of crime control, immigration governance, social policy, and institutional conceptions of membership. The starting point for a coherent analysis is the distinction between criminal liability based on conduct and administrative control based on migration status. In principle, substantive criminal law applies to individuals because they engage in prohibited conduct, whereas immigration law regulates admission, residence, employment, documentation, and removal. In practice, however, these domains frequently overlap. A migrant suspected of an ordinary criminal offense may encounter consequences that extend beyond those imposed on a citizen, including immigration detention, loss of residence rights, or deportation. Conversely, conduct related solely to immigration status may bring migrants into enforcement systems that resemble criminal justice. This interaction creates the possibility that foreign status becomes an additional layer of punishment even where the formal criminal sanction is identical.

Iranian criminal policy toward Afghan migrants must be evaluated within this broader intersection. Farajiha and Moghaddasi's analysis of offending and victimization among foreign nationals demonstrates that the Iranian response cannot be reduced to substantive criminal law alone (Farajiha & Moghaddasi, 2020). Immigration rules, documentation requirements, labor restrictions, policing, and access to justice all shape how Afghan migrants encounter state institutions. Kazemi and Rezaei likewise identify the position of Afghan migrants as an important component of Iranian crime-control policy (Kazemi & Rezaei, 2020). The key normative question is therefore whether criminal policy treats migrant status as relevant only where legally necessary or whether it indirectly transforms foreignness into a general risk category.

A formal equality model would require that equivalent criminal conduct produce equivalent criminal liability regardless of nationality, subject only to legally justified distinctions. Yet substantive equality requires more than identical statutory rules. Migrants may require interpretation, access to legal information, effective counsel, and procedural accommodation to exercise rights on equal terms. A defendant who does not fully understand legal proceedings may formally possess the same rights as a citizen while being substantially less capable of using them. Likewise, an undocumented victim may possess a legal right to report violence but refrain from doing so because of fear that contact with authorities will expose migration status. Criminal policy must therefore be assessed according to both formal neutrality and practical accessibility.

The concept of crimmigration is useful for describing the convergence between criminal law and immigration enforcement, even though the intensity and institutional form of that convergence differ across jurisdictions. When immigration status becomes closely linked to policing and penal processes, ordinary encounters with law enforcement can carry consequences extending far beyond the immediate offense. Comparative work on ethnicity, immigration, and criminal justice shows that foreign and minority status often interact with broader penal structures in complex ways (Tonry, 1997). The comparative issue is not whether one jurisdiction has completely separated these domains while another has not, but the degree to which migration control changes the meaning and consequences of criminal justice intervention.

In Iran, the administrative regulation of Afghan migrants can generate specific forms of vulnerability when legal residence, work authorization, or documentation is unstable. Such instability can increase the probability of contact with authorities even in the absence of serious criminal conduct. It can also place migrants in informal labor markets where regulatory violations, exploitation, and criminal victimization become more likely. Najafi Abrandabadi's analysis of migration and urban marginalization emphasizes that the migrant's position within the social and spatial organization of Iranian cities is central to criminological understanding (Najafi Abrandabadi, 2019). An enforcement strategy focused primarily on visible control may therefore address manifestations of marginality without reducing the conditions producing them.

Policing is one of the most important institutional sites through which migrant criminalization can occur. Police exercise substantial discretion in deciding whom to stop, question, search, identify, warn, arrest, or refer to immigration authorities. Where public narratives strongly associate a migrant group with crime, discretionary enforcement can reproduce those assumptions through selective attention. The resulting arrest data may then appear to confirm the original stereotype. Comparative research on immigration and crime cautions against interpreting official statistics without considering differential exposure to law enforcement (Ousey & Kubrin, 2018). This methodological point has direct policy implications: policing strategies should be evaluated not only by arrest totals but by proportionality, legitimacy, effectiveness, and their effects on community cooperation.

Trust is especially important because migrant communities can be valuable partners in crime prevention when residents view the police as a protective institution. Victims and witnesses are more likely to report offenses, provide information, and participate in preventive initiatives when they believe contact with authorities will not expose them to unrelated immigration consequences. Conversely, where police are perceived primarily as immigration-control agents, cooperation may decline. This can create enforcement blind spots in which exploitation, domestic violence, workplace abuse, trafficking, and organized crime remain underreported. A policy designed to increase control can therefore paradoxically reduce the state's capacity to detect harmful offending.

The relationship between social discrimination and delinquency also makes procedural legitimacy relevant to prevention. Habibi and Karimi identify social discrimination as a factor associated with migrant delinquency (Habibi & Karimi, 2022). If discriminatory encounters extend into policing or criminal procedure, institutional responses may intensify perceptions of exclusion. General strain theory predicts that perceived unjust treatment can become an additional source of strain (Agnew, 2006). This does not mean that enforcement should be weakened where offenses occur. It means that legality, respectful treatment, transparency, and equal procedure are themselves criminological tools because they can preserve institutional legitimacy even when coercive intervention is necessary.

Pretrial detention represents another area in which migrant status can create differential effects. A court may view a defendant without stable residence or formal employment as presenting a greater flight risk. Yet those characteristics may themselves result from immigration restrictions rather than from individual unwillingness to comply with proceedings. If migrants are detained more frequently because they lack the conventional indicators of stability that immigration policy prevents them from obtaining, structural disadvantage can be converted into procedural disadvantage. Detention then generates further consequences such as job loss, family disruption, debt, and weakened community ties. From the perspective of social-bond theory, such consequences may undermine the attachments and commitments associated with conformity (Hirschi, 1969).

Sentencing raises a related question. Formal proportionality requires punishment to reflect the seriousness of the offense and the offender's legally relevant circumstances. Yet a migrant may experience consequences that citizens do not encounter, especially when conviction affects residence or leads to removal. The combined effect of criminal punishment and immigration consequences can function as a form of double penalization. The prison sentence or other criminal sanction addresses the offense, while deportation can disrupt family relationships, employment, community membership, and long-term residence. Even where deportation is formally classified as an administrative measure, its practical consequences may be severe. A proportional criminal policy therefore needs to recognize cumulative state coercion rather than evaluating each legal measure in isolation.

The effects of imprisonment are particularly important in a double-anomie framework. Incarceration temporarily removes individuals from community networks and can weaken family relationships, employment prospects, and social identity. These consequences occur for citizens as well, but migrants may face additional barriers after release. A criminal record may intersect with immigration status, employment restrictions, and social stigma. If release is followed by uncertainty regarding deportation or inability to return to lawful work, reintegration becomes difficult. The penal process can thereby deepen both dimensions of double anomie: ties to the host society are weakened through incarceration, while return to the origin society may be unrealistic because social ties there have already deteriorated.

This is especially problematic for long-term and second-generation migrants whose practical social world is located primarily in the host country. Deportation in such cases does not simply restore an individual to a stable society of origin. It may transfer a person to an environment with which they possess limited social connection, institutional familiarity, or economic support. The double-anomie perspective therefore highlights a temporal issue often missed by formal immigration categories: the significance of residence changes over time. A person who arrived recently and an individual raised from childhood in the receiving society may share the same nationality but possess entirely different levels of social embeddedness.

Western jurisdictions offer useful comparisons because many have developed extensive forms of crimmigration while also investing in integration and social prevention. Tonry's comparative analysis shows that penal outcomes associated with ethnicity and immigration vary substantially according to national institutions and political traditions (Tonry, 1997). Some Western systems combine criminal convictions with removal mechanisms, immigration detention, restrictions on re-entry, and intensified border enforcement. These practices demonstrate that punitive convergence between immigration and criminal justice is not unique to Iran. Indeed, the Western experience shows that liberal constitutional systems can simultaneously protect procedural rights and adopt highly coercive policies toward non-citizens.

At the same time, some Western jurisdictions have placed greater emphasis on integration programs, language acquisition, educational inclusion, neighborhood investment, youth intervention, and community policing. Such strategies can be interpreted through social-control and strain theories. Access to education and employment strengthens commitment to conventional goals, while community participation supports informal social control. Berry's acculturation model suggests that integration is more sustainable when migrants are not forced to choose between cultural continuity and participation in the host society (Berry, 2005). Criminal policy can support such integration indirectly by avoiding unnecessary criminalization and directly by investing in preventive institutions.

The distinction between punitive and preventive policy is therefore more useful than a simple Iran-versus-West contrast. Western states can adopt exclusionary policies, while Iranian institutions can employ inclusive and protective measures. The analytical question is which combination of policies reduces criminogenic strain and strengthens lawful participation. Social-disorganization theory suggests that neighborhood investment and community organization can be more effective in the long term than repeated enforcement against individuals emerging from the same structurally disadvantaged environment (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Iranian studies connecting marginalization and juvenile delinquency similarly support the importance of preventive approaches addressing social conditions (Salimi & Ahmadi, 2018).

A prevention-oriented policy toward Afghan migrants would therefore begin with the conditions that make lawful participation sustainable. Stable documentation reduces vulnerability to exploitative labor markets and allows individuals to plan long-term futures. Access to formal employment strengthens economic commitment and makes conventional success more attainable. Educational inclusion strengthens social bonds among young migrants and creates shared institutional identities. Neighborhood investment improves collective efficacy and reduces the concentration of disadvantage. Measures addressing discrimination can strengthen perceptions of fairness and belonging. None of these policies eliminates the need for criminal law, but they reduce the conditions under which penal intervention becomes the primary form of state-migrant interaction.

The importance of social prevention is reinforced by Iranian criminological scholarship emphasizing the relationship between social harms and broader structural conditions (Sharafi, 2019). A criminal policy that responds only after an offense occurs is necessarily limited when the underlying causes involve labor exclusion, neighborhood instability, school disengagement, or institutional distrust. Goudarzi and Sadeghi's analysis of delinquency in marginalized areas further demonstrates that urban disadvantage forms part of the ecology within which crime develops (Goudarzi & Sadeghi, 2021). Preventive criminal policy must therefore extend beyond police and courts into social, educational, employment, and municipal institutions.

Protection of migrant victims should form another central component of criminal policy. The tendency to discuss migration primarily through the lens of offending obscures the vulnerability of migrants to exploitation and violence. Farajiha and Moghaddasi explicitly situate victimization alongside offending in their analysis of foreign nationals (Farajiha & Moghaddasi, 2020). Effective policy should create mechanisms through which migrants can report serious victimization without disproportionate fear that seeking protection will immediately trigger unrelated immigration sanctions. Such separation can improve crime detection while strengthening the legitimacy of law. When migrants experience the state as a source of protection as well as control, their normative incorporation into the host legal order is more likely to deepen.

Youth policy deserves particular emphasis. Second-generation Afghan migrants may encounter the strongest contradiction between cultural familiarity and institutional exclusion. Rahmati's findings regarding social disorganization among second-generation Afghan migrants indicate the significance of community context (Rahmati, 2022). Schools, recreational organizations, local associations, mentoring programs, and lawful employment opportunities can provide conventional attachments that compensate for weakened traditional controls. Punitive responses to minor youth offending, by contrast, can produce labeling, educational disruption, and association with more delinquent peers. A proportionate diversionary approach may therefore be more consistent with long-term crime prevention where public safety permits.

Cultural competence within criminal justice institutions is also important. Cultural competence does not mean excusing unlawful behavior on cultural grounds. It means ensuring that police, prosecutors, judges, probation officers, and social workers understand how migration experiences, language barriers, family structures, and legal insecurity can affect behavior and participation in proceedings. Cultural criminology emphasizes that legal conflicts are interpreted through systems of meaning (Ferrell et al., 2015). Misinterpreting unfamiliar behavior as hostility or noncooperation can escalate otherwise manageable encounters. Similarly, failing to recognize the significance of shame, family responsibility, or community mediation may limit the effectiveness of rehabilitation.

The double-anomie model also suggests that reintegration should be treated as part of criminal policy rather than as an issue arising only after punishment. A migrant who completes a sentence but remains excluded from lawful employment and stable residence may return to precisely the conditions associated with offending. If the objective of punishment includes reducing recidivism, reintegration mechanisms must address the interaction between criminal record and migration status. The state must decide whether its policy objective is permanent exclusion or lawful reintegration; an ambiguous system that demands conformity while denying realistic pathways to participation can reproduce Mertonian strain (Merton, 1938).

Comparative experience also counsels against assuming that harsher immigration consequences necessarily generate greater deterrence. Migrants with strong family and economic ties may indeed be highly deterred by the possibility of deportation, but extreme consequences can also discourage cooperation with law enforcement and increase concealment. Deterrence therefore interacts with legitimacy. A system viewed as proportionate and predictable is more likely to generate compliance than one perceived as arbitrary. Iranian sociological accounts of anomie emphasize that inconsistent institutional expectations can weaken normative regulation (Rafipour, 2018). When migrants are expected to integrate economically while their legal position remains perpetually insecure, institutional inconsistency can contribute to the very normative uncertainty that policy seeks to control.

The comparison between Iran and Western jurisdictions therefore reveals a common tension between security-oriented and integration-oriented criminal policy. Security-oriented policy emphasizes surveillance, detection, detention, exclusion, and removal. Integration-oriented policy emphasizes legal stability, social prevention, procedural equality, community trust, and reintegration. Neither orientation can completely replace the other because states possess legitimate interests in border regulation and crime control. The critical issue is proportionality and balance. Excessive reliance on exclusionary control can deepen marginalization, while complete neglect of serious offending would undermine public trust and the rule of law.

An effective Iranian policy toward offending involving Afghan migrants should consequently distinguish among serious crime, minor offending, victimization, and status-related violations rather than treating all forms of legal noncompliance as manifestations of a single problem. Serious violent and predatory offenses require firm and proportionate criminal justice responses regardless of nationality. Minor offending may be more appropriately addressed through diversion, rehabilitation, restitution, or community-based sanctions where legally available. Victimization requires accessible protection. Status violations should be evaluated primarily within the logic of migration administration rather than automatically transformed into evidence of criminal dangerousness. Such differentiation would reduce the symbolic association between Afghan identity and crime.

The broader lesson from Western experiences is that criminal policy cannot compensate indefinitely for failures of integration policy. Where migrants are structurally excluded from stable work, education, housing, documentation, and civic belonging, criminal justice institutions eventually confront some of the social consequences of that exclusion. Ousey and Kubrin's review of immigration and crime demonstrates why broad claims about migrant dangerousness are theoretically insufficient (Ousey & Kubrin, 2018). Policy should therefore focus on identifiable risk mechanisms rather than categorical identities. This approach is consistent with the double-anomie framework because it treats offending as the product of relationships among opportunity, culture, community, social bonds, and institutional response.

The ultimate objective should be an inclusion-oriented criminal policy capable of maintaining public security without transforming foreignness into a permanent criminological status. Such a policy would retain proportionate punishment for harmful conduct while reducing unnecessary criminalization, strengthening procedural safeguards, protecting migrant victims, promoting lawful social participation, and avoiding penal consequences that unnecessarily destroy family and community bonds. The success of criminal policy should then be evaluated not merely through numbers of arrests, prosecutions, or removals but through reductions in victimization, recidivism, social exclusion, and distrust. In this sense, migration policy and criminal policy cannot be separated completely, but their intersection should be designed to reduce rather than reproduce double anomie.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between migration and crime is too complex to be captured by explanations based on nationality, ethnicity, or foreign status. Afghan migrants in Iran constitute a socially and legally diverse population whose experiences differ according to generation, documentation, class position, neighborhood, education, employment, family networks, and degree of social incorporation. Any criminological analysis that treats Afghan identity as an independent cause of offending therefore begins from an analytically defective premise. The more relevant question concerns the conditions under which migration reorganizes relationships between individuals, social institutions, normative systems, and legitimate opportunities. The present analysis has argued that cultural dislocation and double anomie provide a useful framework for understanding those conditions without stigmatizing migrant populations or denying the reality that offending can occur within them.

Cultural dislocation describes the instability that can arise when migration weakens familiar systems of meaning and social regulation while requiring adaptation to a different social environment. Migrants may encounter changing family roles, new occupational expectations, unfamiliar institutional procedures, altered gender relations, intergenerational conflicts, and competing definitions of legitimate success. These changes are not inherently criminogenic. Many migrants adapt successfully and develop strong combinations of cultural continuity and social participation. Cultural dislocation becomes criminologically significant when it occurs alongside exclusion from the institutional structures necessary for stable integration. In those circumstances, migrants may understand the norms of the host society without believing that compliance provides an equal pathway to social membership.

The concept of double anomie captures the more specific condition in which normative attachment is weakened in relation to both the society of origin and the receiving society. The first dimension emerges when traditional community controls, family networks, local institutions, and familiar cultural expectations lose some of their regulatory authority after migration. The second emerges when the host society does not provide secure alternative forms of belonging, legitimacy, and opportunity. A person may consequently become situated between two normative orders, neither of which provides a complete framework for social identity and institutional participation. Double anomie should therefore be understood not as the absence of norms but as instability in their hierarchy, legitimacy, and capacity to organize everyday conduct.

This condition is particularly important for long-term and second-generation migrants. Individuals raised in Iran may share many of the aspirations, cultural references, educational experiences, and social expectations of Iranian peers while continuing to encounter boundaries linked to nationality or migration status. The resulting contradiction can be more psychologically significant than simple cultural difference because it involves a discrepancy between subjective belonging and external recognition. First-generation migrants may interpret migration through comparison with circumstances in the country they left behind, whereas later generations are more likely to compare their opportunities with those of peers in the society in which they have grown up. When these comparisons reveal persistent inequality, blocked opportunity may become a central source of frustration.

The analysis has also shown that structural disadvantage and cultural dislocation should not be examined separately. Poverty, informal employment, insecure residence, weak access to housing, neighborhood marginalization, and limited occupational mobility can generate strain, but their effects depend partly on the social relationships and normative frameworks through which individuals interpret them. Strong families, supportive communities, stable schools, lawful employment, trusted institutions, and meaningful prospects for mobility can substantially reduce criminogenic vulnerability even under difficult economic conditions. Conversely, when these protective institutions weaken simultaneously, the risk associated with cumulative strain becomes greater.

Neighborhood conditions form an important bridge between individual experience and broader social structure. Migrant populations concentrated in deprived urban areas may encounter weak community infrastructure, residential instability, limited public investment, overcrowding, and informal economic activity. Such environments can reduce the collective capacity of residents to supervise public spaces, support young people, resolve disputes, and maintain shared expectations. Crime emerging in these settings should not be interpreted as evidence of migrant culture. It is better understood as part of an ecology of disadvantage in which migrant status interacts with preexisting patterns of urban inequality.

The distinction between offending and criminalization is equally central to the argument. Migrants may appear disproportionately in official enforcement data for reasons that extend beyond differences in underlying criminal conduct. Irregular residence, documentation rules, employment restrictions, public-space regulation, and enhanced police attention can all increase contact with authorities. When status-related violations are incorporated into broader narratives of migrant criminality, legal categories may be mistaken for criminological characteristics. This creates a serious risk that criminal justice statistics will reproduce rather than test public assumptions about foreign dangerousness.

A related problem concerns the dual position of migrants as possible offenders and possible victims. Individuals who are highly visible to immigration enforcement may simultaneously be reluctant to report victimization because of fear that contact with authorities will expose their legal status. This contradiction undermines both justice and public security. Exploitative employers, violent offenders, traffickers, and other perpetrators may benefit when migrant victims believe that seeking protection creates additional personal risk. A criminal policy concerned with prevention must therefore strengthen the capacity of migrant communities to cooperate with public institutions rather than measuring effectiveness solely by the intensity of enforcement directed toward them.

The comparative analysis of Iran and Western jurisdictions demonstrates that there is no simple opposition between an exclusionary Iranian model and an inclusive Western model. Western countries themselves combine highly punitive migration-control measures with social integration initiatives, while Iranian policy contains both regulatory and potentially protective dimensions. The useful distinction is instead between policy mechanisms that deepen exclusion and those that support lawful integration. Immigration detention, excessive criminalization of status, disproportionate collateral sanctions, and weak procedural accessibility can intensify double anomie. Stable documentation, access to lawful work, education, community participation, victim protection, and reintegration can reduce it.

Penal policy must therefore be assessed in terms of cumulative consequences. A formally equal criminal sentence may produce unequal practical effects when a migrant also faces loss of employment, residence rights, family unity, or the possibility of remaining in the country. The possibility of deportation after punishment illustrates this problem particularly clearly. For migrants with weak social ties to their country of nationality and strong ties to the host society, removal may amount to a profound rupture rather than a simple administrative relocation. The social consequences of punishment must consequently be considered when evaluating proportionality, rehabilitation, and the prevention of recidivism.

This does not imply that migrant status should exempt offenders from criminal responsibility. Serious violent, property, and exploitative offenses require lawful and proportionate responses irrespective of nationality. The principle advanced here is differentiation rather than leniency. Criminal policy should distinguish serious harmful conduct from minor offending, administrative noncompliance, victimization, and conditions produced by legal insecurity. Failure to make these distinctions encourages overcriminalization and strengthens narratives that associate migration itself with dangerousness.

The double-anomie framework also changes the meaning of prevention. Prevention cannot be confined to surveillance, policing, prosecution, and punishment. It includes the social conditions through which individuals become capable of constructing stable conventional lives. Education is preventive because it creates attachment and future orientation. Lawful employment is preventive because it provides legitimate means of achieving social goals. Stable residence is preventive because it allows individuals to form durable community bonds. Equal access to justice is preventive because it strengthens belief in institutional legitimacy. Neighborhood investment is preventive because it enhances collective capacity for informal social control. These measures are not external to criminal policy; they are among its most important long-term components.

For Afghan migrants in Iran, an inclusion-oriented criminal policy would therefore seek to reduce unnecessary instability in legal and social status while preserving the state's legitimate authority to regulate migration and punish harmful conduct. Such a model would avoid interpreting nationality as a proxy for risk. It would focus instead on identifiable criminogenic conditions such as persistent exclusion, disrupted education, concentrated neighborhood disadvantage, labor exploitation, family instability, and repeated discriminatory treatment. Intervention would then be directed toward the mechanisms associated with offending rather than toward migrant identity.

The article's principal theoretical contribution lies in conceptualizing double anomie as a distinct form of normative instability generated by incomplete transition between societies. Traditional theories of anomie emphasize weakened regulation or blocked opportunity within a society. Migration introduces an additional dimension because the individual may simultaneously experience declining regulation by the institutions of the origin society and incomplete acceptance by those of the destination society. This produces an intermediary social position in which normative obligations, cultural identity, and institutional expectations may remain unresolved for extended periods. The concept is therefore especially suited to populations whose migration has become long term without producing full social incorporation.

Double anomie should nevertheless be treated as a variable condition rather than a permanent attribute of migrants. Individuals can move toward greater integration when legal, social, and economic conditions improve. Families can reconstruct stable authority. Migrant communities can develop institutions capable of supporting members and mediating cultural transition. Schools and workplaces can become major sources of attachment. Public institutions can build legitimacy through fair treatment. The same migrant who experiences severe dislocation at one stage of life may later become strongly integrated into the host society. This dynamic character prevents the concept from becoming another label attached to migrant identity.

Future empirical research should test the double-anomie framework by examining the relationships among cultural belonging, perceived discrimination, legal insecurity, employment conditions, neighborhood organization, social bonds, institutional trust, victimization, and self-reported offending. Comparative studies should distinguish first-generation from second-generation migrants and documented from undocumented populations. They should also separate conventional criminal offending from immigration-related administrative violations. Such distinctions are necessary if criminal policy is to be based on evidence rather than assumptions generated by official visibility.

The broader implication is that public security and migrant inclusion should not be treated as opposing objectives. Durable security depends partly on whether residents possess legitimate opportunities, stable social bonds, trust in institutions, and a meaningful stake in conformity. Policies that intensify exclusion may produce short-term appearances of control while weakening these longer-term foundations. Conversely, integration without effective law enforcement would fail to protect both citizens and migrants from serious crime. The appropriate model combines proportionate enforcement with social prevention, procedural equality, victim protection, and realistic pathways to lawful participation.

Afghan migrant offending should therefore be understood as a criminological issue of social structure, normative integration, and institutional response rather than as a characteristic of a national group. Cultural dislocation explains how migration can unsettle inherited systems of meaning; double anomie explains how this unsettlement can become prolonged when incorporation into the receiving society remains incomplete; structural theories explain how blocked opportunities and marginalized neighborhoods intensify strain; and institutional analysis explains how criminal policy can either reduce or reproduce these conditions. The most defensible criminal policy is consequently one that responds firmly to harmful conduct while refusing to transform migrant identity into a category of suspicion. Its ultimate measure of success should be not the number of migrants subjected to punishment or removal but the extent to which offending, victimization, marginalization, and repeated criminal justice contact are reduced through stronger social integration and more legitimate institutions.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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