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MEASURING WHAT MATTERS: TOWARD AN OUTCOME-BASED JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM IN CHHATTISGARH

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Abstract
India's juvenile justice law is often praised for its child-centred design, but the success of a justice system cannot be judged by its statutes alone. This article argues that juvenile justice in Chhattisgarh is still measured largely by inputs, such as the number of institutions established and the number of cases disposed of, rather than by outcomes in the lives of children. Drawing on national crime statistics, district-level institutional records and judicial interpretation, it identifies five signals of strain: a rising child-protection burden, an exceptionally high juvenile crime rate, the educational disconnection of children in conflict with law, uneven access to timely adjudication, and the under-use of residential care in districts of high need. The article treats preliminary assessment under Section 15 of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 as a test case for this measurement gap. It then proposes an outcome-based accountability framework built around a simple and demanding question: did the child's life improve after contact with the system?

Keywords: juvenile justice, rehabilitation, outcome measurement, child rights, Chhattisgarh, Juvenile Justice Act 2015, preliminary assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Every justice system measures something. Criminal courts count convictions, police forces count arrests, and administrators count disposed files. These numbers are useful, but they describe what institutions do rather than what happens to the people who pass through them. For most of the criminal justice system, that limitation is tolerable, because its central task is to decide guilt and impose a lawful consequence. For juvenile justice, the limitation is serious, because the system's stated purpose is not merely to process children but to change the direction of their lives.

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 commits India to the care, protection, development, treatment, rehabilitation and social reintegration of children (Juvenile Justice Act, 2015). It speaks to two groups: children alleged or found to be in conflict with law, and children in need of care and protection, such as those who are abandoned, orphaned, abused, trafficked or forced into labour. The Act is therefore not a penal statute in the ordinary sense. It is a welfare-oriented and rights-based law that attempts to reconcile the protection of children with the legitimate concerns of public safety.

In Chhattisgarh, the formal architecture of the Act is largely in place. Juvenile Justice Boards, Child Welfare Committees, Special Juvenile Police Units, District Child Protection Units, Child Care Institutions and Specialised Adoption Agencies have been mapped across the State's districts (High Court of Chhattisgarh, 2026). Recent socio-legal research, however, draws a sharp line between the presence of these institutions and their performance, concluding that the central deficit is the gap between statutory promise and the lived experience of the child (Rathod, 2026).

This article builds on that distinction and takes it one step further. It argues that the gap between presence and performance will not close until the State changes what it chooses to measure. A system that counts buildings, posts and disposals will tend to improve buildings, posts and disposals. A system that counts school re-enrolment, family stability and recovery will tend to improve children's lives. The article proceeds in eight parts. It first sets out the conceptual and legal foundations of juvenile justice, then explains the measurement problem that a rehabilitative law creates. It places the discussion in the socio-legal context of Chhattisgarh, examines five empirical signals of strain, and considers preliminary assessment under Section 15 as a test case. Finally, it proposes an outcome-based framework and a practical pathway for implementing it.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND LEGAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 The Developmental Case for a Separate System

The idea of juvenile justice rests on the recognition that childhood is a distinct stage of human development. A child's emotional maturity, moral reasoning, judgment and self-control are still forming. Adolescents are more susceptible to peer influence, more likely to act on impulse, and less able to weigh long-term consequences than adults. They are also more exposed to the conditions around them, including family stress, poverty, neglect, abuse, interrupted schooling and substance use (Bajpai, 2017).

Two conclusions follow. The first is that children are generally less culpable than adults for the same act, because the capacities on which adult responsibility rests are not yet fully formed. The second, and more hopeful, conclusion is that children are more capable of change. The same developmental openness that makes adolescence turbulent also makes it a period in which the right support can redirect a life. A juvenile justice system is built on this second conclusion. Its justification lies in the belief that intervention during childhood can succeed where punishment in adulthood usually fails.

2.2 Constitutional and International Commitments

The Constitution of India supplies the normative foundation for this approach. Article 15(3) permits the State to make special provisions for children, so that differential treatment in their favour is consistent with equality. Article 21, as interpreted by the courts, guarantees not merely life but a life with dignity, which in the context of children includes a justice process that is sensitive to their age and vulnerability. Articles 23 and 24 prohibit trafficking, forced labour and hazardous child labour. The Directive Principles in Article 39(e) and (f) direct the State to ensure that children are not abused and are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity.

These commitments are reinforced by international law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. It further requires that every child alleged to have infringed the penal law be treated in a manner that promotes the child's sense of dignity and worth, takes into account the child's age, and aims at reintegration and a constructive role in society (United Nations, 1989). India ratified the Convention in 1992, and its influence is visible throughout the 2015 Act.

2.3 The Statutory Architecture

The 2015 Act translates these principles into an institutional framework. Juvenile Justice Boards, each composed of a magistrate and two social worker members, at least one of whom must be a woman, inquire into cases involving children in conflict with law. Child Welfare Committees decide matters relating to children in need of care and protection. Special Juvenile Police Units and Child Welfare Police Officers are meant to ensure that a child's first contact with the State is not a frightening one. District Child Protection Units coordinate rescue, placement, sponsorship, foster care and follow-up. Child Care Institutions, including Observation Homes, Special Homes, Children's Homes and Open Shelters, provide residential care where family-based alternatives are not possible.

The Act also sets out general principles that govern every decision. These include the presumption of innocence, the principle of dignity, the principle of family responsibility, the principle that institutionalisation is a measure of last resort, and the principle of a fresh start, under which records relating to a child are to be erased so that a childhood mistake does not follow a person into adulthood. Scholars have described the development of this framework as India's journey from a welfare model, in which the child was treated as an object of supervision, to a rights model, in which the child is recognised as a holder of entitlements (Kumari, 2010).

3. THE MEASUREMENT PROBLEM IN A REHABILITATIVE LAW

A rehabilitative law creates a particular difficulty of measurement. Punishment is easy to count. A sentence is either imposed or it is not, and a conviction can be recorded on the day it is pronounced. Rehabilitation is different. It is a process that unfolds over months or years, often long after the formal proceedings have ended. Whether a child has been rehabilitated cannot be known on the day the Board passes its final order. It can only be known later, by asking whether the child has returned to school, remains safely with family, has stayed away from further conflict with the law, and is recovering from whatever harm brought them into the system.

Most administrative data in juvenile justice stops at the point of disposal. It records how many cases were instituted, how many were decided and how many remain pending. It records the sanctioned capacity of institutions and the number of children housed there on a given day. These are input and process measures. They are necessary, but they cannot reveal whether the system is achieving its purpose. A Board that disposes of cases quickly may be doing excellent work, or it may be passing mechanical orders that leave children no better off. Without outcome data, the two are indistinguishable.

This is not merely a technical gap. What a system measures shapes what it values. Institutions under pressure tend to optimise for the indicators on which they are judged. If the indicator is disposal, the incentive is to dispose. If the indicator is a child's return to school, the incentive is to secure that return. Kumari (2010) traces India's shift

from welfare to rights. The argument of this article is that the next shift must be from a rights model on paper to a results model in practice.

4. THE SOCIO-LEGAL CONTEXT OF CHHATTISGARH

Any assessment of juvenile justice in Chhattisgarh must begin with the setting in which the State's children live. According to the State's Directorate of Economics and Statistics, about 76.76% of the population lives in rural areas. Forests cover roughly 44.21% of the State's geographical area, and Scheduled Tribes make up approximately 30.62% of the population (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2012). These features do not make children in Chhattisgarh more vulnerable in themselves. They do, however, shape how a child protection system must work if it is to reach them.

In a largely rural and forested State, distance is a real barrier. A Child Welfare Committee or Juvenile Justice Board in a district headquarters may be several hours away from the village where a child lives. Families may be unfamiliar with formal legal processes, may speak languages other than Hindi, and may have reason to distrust institutions. Children in tribal communities may face particular difficulties in schooling, documentation and access to services. At the same time, the State's growing urban centres, such as Raipur, Bilaspur, Durg and Bhilai, generate different kinds of vulnerability, including street-connected children, child labour in informal markets and exposure to online exploitation.

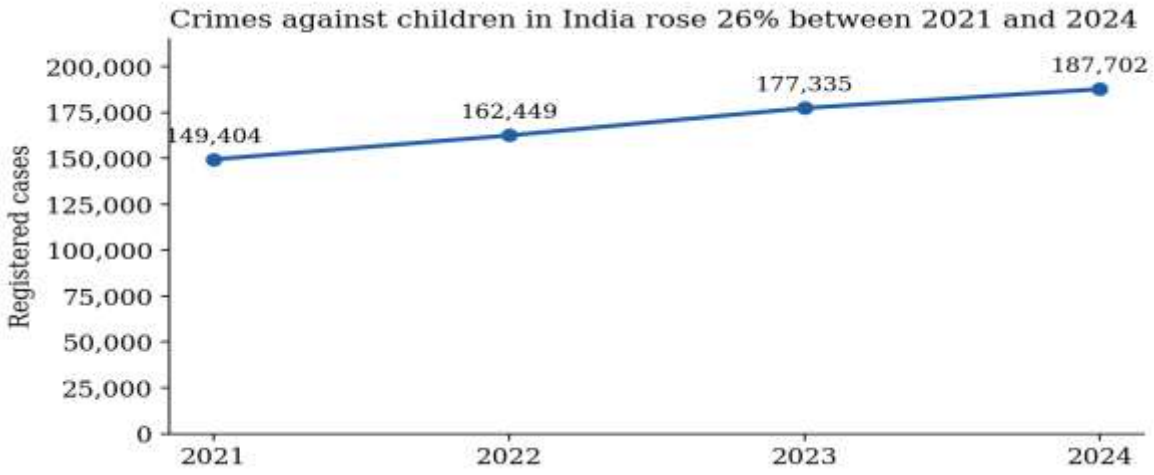
A juvenile justice system designed around a single urban template will therefore struggle in Chhattisgarh. The same statutory institution can mean very different things to a child in Raipur and a child in Jashpur or Dantewada. This is one reason why State-level averages can be misleading, and why outcome data must be collected and reported district by district.

5. FIVE SIGNALS OF A SYSTEM UNDER STRAIN

5.1 A Growing Child-Protection Burden

The first signal is scale. At the national level, crimes against children have risen in every year since 2021, from 149,404 registered cases in 2021 to 187,702 in 2024 (National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB], 2026). Figure 1 shows this trend.

Figure 1 Crimes Against Children in India, 2021–2024



Note. Data from NCRB (2026).

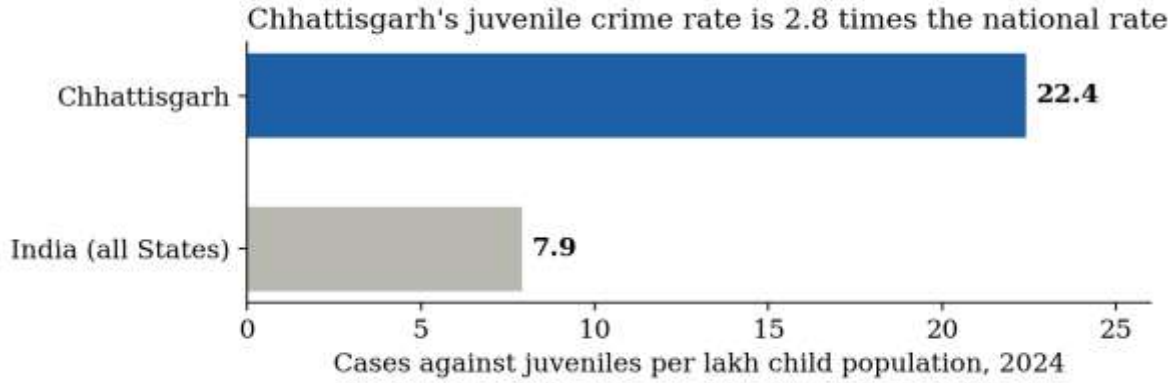
The burden is not limited to one kind of harm. Kidnapping and abduction of children and offences under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act together account for the majority of cases, but child labour, trafficking, abandonment and cyber offences are also significant. Each requires a different institutional response. A child rescued from labour needs school re-entry and family support; a child who has been sexually abused needs medical care, trauma counselling and protection as a witness; a trafficked child may need long-term shelter and rehabilitation.

Chhattisgarh mirrors this national pattern. The State recorded more than 5,900 cases of crimes against children in each year from 2021 to 2023 (NCRB, 2026). In 2024 it also reported 268 cybercrimes against children, the highest number among the States, which points to a newer and fast-growing form of vulnerability. For each of these children, the registration of a First Information Report is only the beginning of the State's obligation. A system that counts registrations but does not track recovery sees only the first step of a long journey.

5.2 An Exceptionally High Juvenile Crime Rate

The second signal concerns children in conflict with law. In 2024, Chhattisgarh registered 2,180 cases against juveniles, a rate of 22.4 per lakh child population. This was the highest rate of any State and close to three times the national figure of 7.9 (NCRB, 2026), as Figure 2 illustrates.

Figure 2 Juvenile Crime Rate, Chhattisgarh and India, 2024



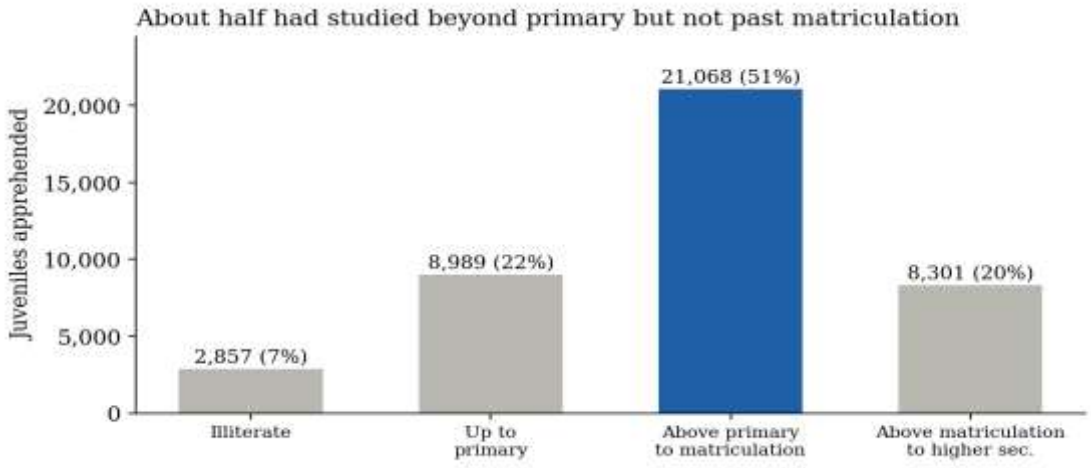
Note. Data from NCRB (2026). Rate = cases registered against juveniles per lakh child population.

This figure is easily misread. It does not show that children in Chhattisgarh are more inclined to crime than children elsewhere. Crime rates reflect reporting practices, policing patterns and the degree to which particular forms of conduct are brought into the formal system, as well as underlying behaviour. More importantly, a high rate is not an argument for a harsher response. Rathod (2026) puts the point well: a high juvenile crime rate should lead to deeper rehabilitation, not harsher labelling. The appropriate question is not how to control these children more tightly, but what unmet needs, in education, family support, mental health and livelihoods, the figure reveals.

5.3 Children Disconnected from School

The third signal emerges from the profile of children who come into conflict with law. National data for 2024 shows that 77.7% of apprehended juveniles, or 33,129 of 42,633, were aged between 16 and 18 years (NCRB, 2026). Their educational background is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Educational Level of Juveniles Apprehended in India, 2024



Note. Data from NCRB (2026). Percentages are shares of the 41,215 juveniles for whom educational level was recorded.

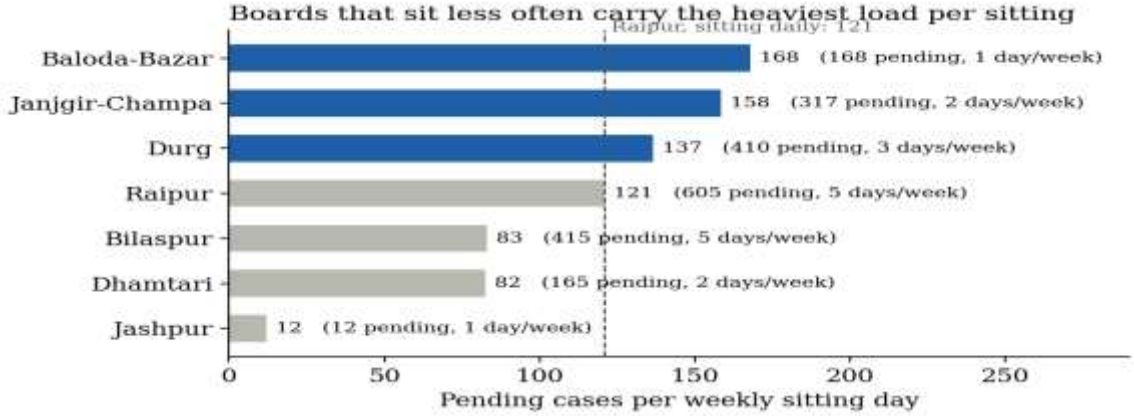
About half of these children had studied beyond the primary level but not past matriculation. Many will have dropped out or fallen behind during early adolescence, the very period when guidance and structure matter most. NCRB data also indicates that a large majority of apprehended juveniles were living with their parents (NCRB, 2026). Offending among children cannot, therefore, be explained simply by homelessness or the absence of family. Many children live with parents who are themselves struggling with poverty, migration, long working hours or conflict, and who are unable to provide the supervision and support the child needs.

These findings point directly towards an outcome measure. If educational disconnection is a common feature of children in conflict with law, then educational reconnection should be one of the first things a juvenile justice system seeks to achieve and to record. A dispositional order that does not ask whether the child is back in school within six months has missed the most obvious route to rehabilitation.

5.4 Uneven Access to Timely Adjudication

The fourth signal is time. Delay harms a child more than it harms an adult, because months spent waiting are months taken from schooling, family life and development. The Act requires inquiries to be completed within prescribed periods, but district records show that the pressure on Juvenile Justice Boards varies widely. Raipur's Board has 605 pending cases but sits on every working day. Baloda-Bazar's Board has 168 pending cases but sits only once a week. Durg's Board has 410 pending cases and sits three days a week, while a proposed additional Board in the district has been kept on hold (High Court of Chhattisgarh, 2026). Figure 4 compares these Boards by the number of pending cases for each weekly sitting day.

Figure 4 Juvenile Justice Board Pendency per Weekly Sitting Day, Selected Districts



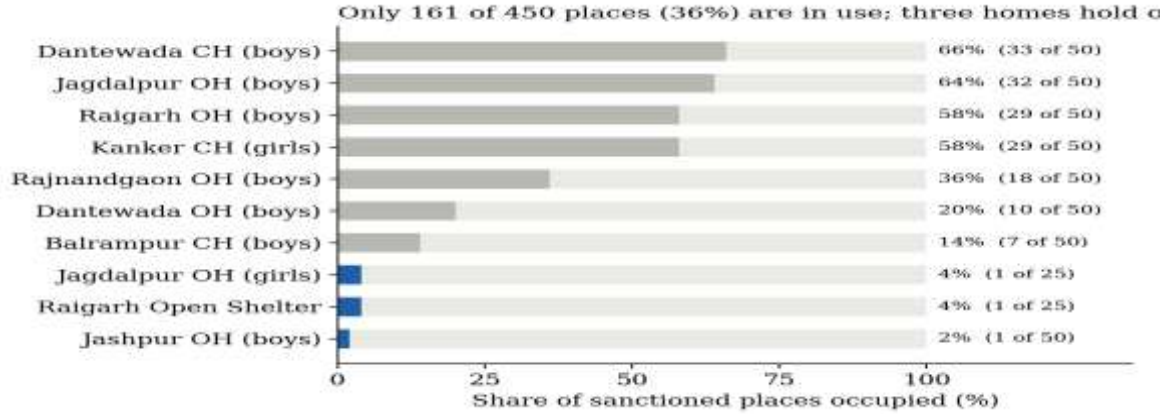
Note. Calculated from High Court of Chhattisgarh (2026). Boards sitting on all working days are counted as sitting five days a week.

This measure reveals something that raw pendency hides. A Board in a smaller district that sits only once or twice a week can impose a longer wait on each child than a larger urban Board that sits every day. Vacancies compound the problem. Where a Board lacks one of its members, its capacity to sit and to deliberate is reduced. The same unevenness appears in Child Welfare Committees: Raipur's Committee had 491 pending matters, and vacancies in the posts of chairperson or members were recorded in districts such as Gariaband and Jashpur (High Court of Chhattisgarh, 2026). Sitting patterns that are fixed regardless of caseload cannot respond to these differences.

5.5 Under-Used Residential Care in Districts of Need

The fifth signal concerns Child Care Institutions. Across ten selected institutions in the State, only 161 of 450 sanctioned places were occupied, as shown in Figure 5. The Observation Homes for boys in Jashpur and for girls in Jagdalpur, and the Open Shelter in Raigarh, each held a single child (High Court of Chhattisgarh, 2026).

Figure 5 Occupancy of Selected Child Care Institutions in Chhattisgarh



Note. Data from High Court of Chhattisgarh (2026). OH = Observation Home; CH = Children's Home. Grey track shows sanctioned capacity.

Low occupancy can look like success. The Act treats institutionalisation as a last resort, and fewer children in institutions may mean that more are being cared for within families. But low occupancy in districts with high levels of rural poverty, migration and tribal vulnerability may also mean that children who need protection are not reaching the system at all. An Open Shelter that houses one child is either meeting a very small need or failing to reach a larger one. Without data on outreach and referral, the State cannot tell which.

Where institutions are in use, the quality of care matters as much as capacity. The Superintendent's post at the Raigarh Observation Home was recorded as vacant (High Court of Chhattisgarh, 2026), and the availability of counsellors and psychologists across institutions is uneven. Many children entering residential care carry experiences of abuse, neglect, trauma, substance use or family rejection. Residential care without therapeutic support amounts to custody rather than rehabilitation.

6. PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT UNDER SECTION 15 AS A TEST CASE

Section 15 of the Act is its most contested provision. It applies to a child who has completed or is above the age of sixteen and is alleged to have committed a heinous offence. In such cases, the Juvenile Justice Board must conduct a preliminary assessment of the child's mental and physical capacity to commit the offence, the child's ability to understand its consequences, and the circumstances in which it was allegedly committed. On the basis of that assessment, the Board may transfer the case to a Children's Court, which may try the child as an adult (Juvenile Justice Act, 2015).

The provision was introduced in response to public concern about grave offences committed by older adolescents. Critics have argued that it introduces a punitive logic into a framework founded on rehabilitation. The national data show why the debate matters in practice: with more than three-quarters of apprehended juveniles aged 16 to 18 (NCRB, 2026), the age group to which Section 15 applies is the core population of the juvenile justice system, not a marginal one.

The Supreme Court in Barun Chandra Thakur v. Master Bholu (2022) held that preliminary assessment is not a routine formality. It must be conducted carefully, with the assistance of experienced psychologists or psycho-social workers where needed, and with full attention to the child's individual circumstances. This is an essential procedural safeguard. It prevents Section 15 from becoming an automatic gateway to adult trial.

Section 15 also exposes the measurement problem described earlier. When a Board decides whether a child should be tried as an adult, it is in effect making a prediction about whether that child can be rehabilitated within the juvenile system. Yet the system rarely collects the evidence that would make such predictions reliable. Boards do not generally know how children in comparable circumstances fared after rehabilitative orders, how many returned to school, or how many came into conflict with the law again. An outcome-based system would add an evidential safeguard to the procedural one. If assessment rested on evidence of what rehabilitation achieves, rather than on the gravity of the offence alone, the principle that seriousness of conduct cannot by itself convert a child into an adult (Rathod, 2026) would acquire practical force.

7. TOWARD AN OUTCOME-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

What would it mean for Chhattisgarh to measure what matters? This article proposes that the State supplement its existing input and process indicators with a small set of outcome indicators, collected for every child and reported district by district in anonymised form. Table 1 sets out the proposed framework.

Table 1 Proposed Outcome Indicators for Juvenile Justice in Chhattisgarh

Indicator	What it measures	Why it matters
Time to disposal	Average days from first production before a Board or Committee to the final order	Delay disrupts schooling and prolongs uncertainty
Educational reconnection	Share of children enrolled in school or vocational training 6 and 12 months after the order	Educational disconnection is a common feature of children in conflict with law
Stability of restoration	Share of children restored to family who remain safely at home at follow-up	Restoration is only meaningful if the home is safe and supportive
Mental health access	Counsellors and psychologists per child in each Child Care Institution	Care without therapeutic support amounts to custody

Indicator	What it measures	Why it matters
Further conflict with law	Share of children with a fresh case within 12 months, read as a signal of service gaps	Repeat contact often reflects unmet needs, not only individual failure
Reach	Institutional occupancy and referrals compared with district child-protection caseloads	Low use in high-need districts may mean children are being missed

Note. All indicators to be reported in aggregated, anonymised form by district.

The framework is deliberately modest. It does not require new institutions or legislation. Most of the information it needs is already generated in the course of ordinary work, in social investigation reports, individual care plans and follow-up visits. What is missing is the practice of recording it consistently and the expectation that it will be reported and reviewed.

Two cautions are necessary. First, outcome data about children must be handled with great care. The Act's guarantees of confidentiality and a fresh start must not be weakened in the name of measurement. All published data should be aggregated and anonymised, and individual records should be accessible only to those directly responsible for a child's care. Second, outcome indicators should be used to identify where the system needs support, not to punish individual officials or institutions. A district with poor outcomes may simply be one with fewer counsellors, longer distances and greater poverty. The purpose of measurement is to direct resources where they are needed most.

8. AN IMPLEMENTATION PATHWAY

The District Child Protection Unit is the natural home for an outcome-based approach. It is the only institution in the framework whose work extends from the moment of rescue or production to the period after formal disposal. It already conducts home verification, family tracing and follow-up. With modest additional staffing and a simple standard reporting format, it could record outcome indicators at six and twelve months after each order.

Second, the State should publish an anonymised, district-wise juvenile justice dashboard. It should present input and process measures, such as pendency, sitting days, vacancies and occupancy, alongside the outcome measures described above. Updated monthly or quarterly, such a dashboard would allow the High Court's Juvenile Justice Committee, the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, researchers and civil society to see where the system is working and where it is not. The Supreme Court's observation in Sampurna Behura v. Union of India (2018) that child-rights institutions must function in practice and not merely on paper applies to data as much as to buildings.

Third, the sitting days of Juvenile Justice Boards and Child Welfare Committees should be linked to caseload. Districts where pending cases per sitting day exceed a set threshold should be given additional sittings, additional Boards where justified, and priority in filling vacancies.

Fourth, every Child Care Institution should have regular access to trained counsellors and psychologists, and the ratio of mental health professionals to children should be reported as a standard indicator. Where full-time posts cannot be filled, arrangements with district hospitals, medical colleges and accredited voluntary organisations can provide interim support.

Fifth, outreach should be strengthened in rural, tribal and forested districts. Low occupancy and low pendency in such districts should prompt a review of whether children are being identified and referred, through schools, Anganwadi centres, panchayats, health workers and police stations. Digital safety should be part of this outreach, given the State's high level of reported cybercrime against children.

Finally, training for Board members, Committee members, police officers and institutional staff should include the use of outcome data. Decision-makers who can see what happened to children after earlier orders are better placed to design orders that work.

9. LIMITATIONS

This article relies on published national crime statistics and on district-level institutional data compiled by the High Court of Chhattisgarh. Crime statistics reflect registered cases and may not capture unreported abuse, hidden child labour or informal exploitation. Institutional data provides a snapshot at a point in time and may not reflect seasonal variation or later changes. The district comparisons presented here are illustrative rather than exhaustive. The proposed framework has not been piloted, and its practical demands would need to be tested in consultation with the officials and practitioners who would operate it. These limitations, however, reinforce the article's central argument: better decisions require better data about children's outcomes.

10. CONCLUSION

Chhattisgarh has done the essential groundwork of creating the institutions that the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 requires. Boards and Committees have been constituted, institutions have been established, and their details have been mapped and published. This is a real achievement, and it provides the foundation for everything that follows. The next step is harder and more important: knowing whether those institutions are working for the children who pass through them. The evidence examined here, including a rising child-protection burden, the highest juvenile crime rate among the States, widespread educational disconnection, uneven delays and under-used residential care, suggests that the system's formal presence has not yet translated into consistent performance. The deeper reason is that the system measures what it does rather than what it achieves.

A child's contact with the justice system should be judged by where that child stands a year later. Is the child back in school or training? Is the child safe at home? Is the child receiving support to recover from trauma? Has the child been able to move on, free of the stigma of the past? Until the State asks and answers these questions, it will continue to count files while losing sight of children. Measuring what matters is not an administrative refinement. It is the means by which the rehabilitative promise of the law can finally be tested, and kept.

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