

## Structural Violence in Pakistan's Juvenile Justice System: A Socio-Ecological Analysis

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### Abstract

This study investigates the escalating crisis of crimes against children in Southern Punjab, Pakistan, between 2014 and 2023. Its purpose is to analyze crime trends, assess the effectiveness of the legal and judicial response, and identify systemic failures in child protection. The research employs a qualitative design, utilizing a desk review of legal documents and a purposive analysis of secondary panel data from national crime reports, police records, and NGO publications. The findings reveal a disturbing 79% national increase in reported incidents, with Southern Punjab accounting for a disproportionate share of severe violent and sexual offenses. A critical failure is identified in the justice system, which yields a mere 24% conviction rate against a 59% acquittal rate, highlighting profound deficiencies in investigation, evidence handling, and victim support. Further, the legal framework is undermined by a patchwork of conflicting definitions of a 'child' across various statutes. The study concludes with urgent recommendations for legal harmonization to adopt a uniform child definition, institutional reforms to strengthen investigative forensics and witness protection, and the establishment of specialized, child-sensitive court procedures. The implications are severe, indicating that without systemic overhaul, legal protections remain theoretical, perpetuating impunity and failing to safeguard children from violence, exploitation, and neglect.

**Keywords:** Child Protection Crisis, Juvenile Inefficacy, Legal Fragmentation, Crimes against Children, Southern Punjab

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## 1. Introduction

Currently, there are an estimated 2 billion children in the world ages zero to 14-years-old. In Pakistan, almost 13% of the country's 245 million population falls in the age group 10-14 years and 10.37% in 15-19 years of age (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024). According to UNICEF, a child is defined as, "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child majority is attained earlier" (UNICEF, 2025) while there is no uniform definition of 'child' in Pakistani Laws. The Constitution of Pakistan which is the supreme law of the land does not provide precise definition of the child because different ages (from 12 years to 21 years) are mentioned to be considered as child in more than 9-Pakistani laws (see table 2 in Appendix).

This shows a great constitutional gap and negligence on the part of Pakistani legislature and judiciary that since the independence of Pakistan 1947, Pakistani laws have no unique definition of a child. Due to the efforts of civil society and concerns raised by the UN Committee on Child Rights, Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2016 has been passed by the Pakistan's Parliament and minimum age of criminal responsibility of the child has been raised to 10 years. Previously it was 7 years. As per the 82nd Section of PPC "Nothing is an offence, which is done by a child under ten years of age" (Substituted by Act X of 2016). Children's rights can be defined as "the rights, which are concerned both with the protection of the individual child and with the creation of the conditions in which all children can develop to their full potential" (Children Rights Information Network, 2005). The larger domains in which children's rights are usurped are related to physical, sexual, emotional, social, financial and health crimes against them (Younus et al., 2018). Crimes against children are global issue deeply rooted from socio-ecological factors i.e. individual, relationship, community and societal and institutional. Crime is one of the oldest and most intensively studied topics in the social sciences. Crimes are actions that breach the law.

Violence against children is a recognized growing public issue and development problem labeled by a WHO consultation (Hyder & Malik, 2007). By their definition "Child abuse and maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and / or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power" (WHO, 2023). Hence comprehensively, it is either an act of commission or even omission which is originated by humans themselves either by creating or tolerating such conditions which either hinder or make impossible the growth of natural hidden abilities of children (Malik, 2010).

Crimes against children are heterogeneous phenomenon that has rapidly increased around the world. Children are maltreated at home, in schools, markets, in industries even in state institutes like police, courtrooms and prisons during criminal procedure regardless of class, group, religion, and gender. The prominent types of abuse are physical, sexual, emotional, social and financial abuse. Globally, crimes against children is estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2-17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in each year (WHO, 2022). Developing countries like India, Bangladesh and Pakistan are at worst level of crime rates against children as compare to the developed countries. According to the report of Pakistan Human Rights (Sahil, 2021), in the year 2022, the data on child abuse cases shows that a total number of 4253 cases have been reported in newspapers. These cases were reported from all four provinces including Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), and Gilgit Baltistan (GB).

The data in Pakistan Human Rights (Sahil, 2021) indicates that the total of 4253 cases includes reported cases of child sexual abuse (CSA), cases of abduction, cases of missing children, and cases of child marriages. The data shows that more than 12 children have been abused per day during the year 2022. The cases of child abuse have increased by more than 33% as compared to the year 2022. The gender divide shows that out of the total reported cases of child abuse, 2325 (55%) of victims were girls and 1928 (45%) were boys. The reported age shows that children are most vulnerable to abuse in the age group of 6-15 years, in which more boys than girls victims were reported. Moreover, children as young as 0-5 years are also sexually abused. The abuser's category of Cruel Numbers 2022 indicates that acquaintances are still the most involved in child sexual abuse, along with relatives, family members, strangers and women abettors, who have increased by 8% in 2022.

The geographical distribution of the data shows that out of the total 4253 reported cases, Punjab has the most cases. All other provinces have also recorded cases of child abuse. Out of the total 4253 reported cases, 2271(53%) cases are reported from urban areas and 1982(47%) cases are reported from rural areas. Of the total of reported cases, 89% were registered with the police. The cases of only CSA were 2123, with both genders equally victimized. A total number of 81 cases reported murder after sexual abuse. A total number of 1834 cases were reported of abduction, out of which 178 Cases were reported of sexual abuse after the abduction. A total number of 428 cases of missing children were reported. In cases of child marriages, 46 cases were reported with 45 cases of girls, and 1 case of boy. In this publication of cruel number, we have for this year especially documented cases of violence against women, as this violence directly effects the lives of children. A total of 781 cases have been reported from August 2022 to December 2022.

By focusing on crimes against children in Pakistan, majority of incidents are under-reported because of society's sensitivity, which prevents children from talking about what they have endured (Avais et al., 2020). Although taking deliberate steps toward handling child sexual abuse is considered a taboo in society (Abbas & Jabeen, 2020). In addition, the victims' families are not willing to report anywhere because of the fear of shame for the act and the discrimination, and social segregation they face in the community and are stigmatized for the rest of their lives (Evans et al., 2023). Therefore, pressure builds not to disclose their child's sexual abuse to protect the family from the stigma associated with reporting the crime. Due to the above factors, Pakistan's number of reported crimes is relatively less (Ahmed & Asim, 2023). Hence, many crimes against children go unheard due to social stigma and cultural shame.

Moreover, state infrastructure for child protection rights needs much improvement. According to the child courts book, every district in Pakistan should have a Juvenile court. But the ground reality is quite different (Mughal, 2021). Studies reported that there are three significant challenges: a) the challenge of defining the concept of child protection for practice, b) the establishment of formal administrative and institutional structures, and c) the need for systematic effort to cope with the environment of a societal reluctance. The child protection system in Pakistan centers on children and justice, preventing commercial and sexual exploitation, protecting children without adequate family care, and neglecting psychological care (Pulla et al., 2018).

For children's rights protection, the government of Pakistan signed up for the Convention on the Rights of the Child on September 20, 1990. It was ratified on November 12, 1990, by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Ellis & Roberts, 2016). By signing this treaty, the government agreed that every child has the right to survival; maximum development; Protection from harmful influences, abuse, and exploitation; and full

participation in family, cultural, and social life. However, in periodic reports, suggestions were not adequately addressed (UNHC, 1990). The juvenile justice system has no unique definition of child while criminal justice system is overwhelmed by insufficient infrastructure and resources, overcrowded jails, and a lack of focus on reform (Sajid et al., 2020). Although there are rules concerning children, their implementation leaves a lot needed. Despite a legislative obligation, Pakistan does not have separate courts for minors. Gaps in the current legal framework have resulted in countless abuses of children's rights, making them vulnerable.

The recent decade, a rapid growth in crimes has been observed against children at large level. Further, it has also been observed that there is lack of studies on the subject underhand. Likewise, it is also important to mention here that violence against children and their health are very important topics to study in current era (Al-Modallal et al., 2020). Thus, the current study is based on the objective to examine crimes against children in Southern Punjab; crime trends, legal framework and prevention strategies. Child abuse is an important social problem all over the world and in Pakistan too but unfortunately very little research work had been done in Pakistan on this topic.

In Punjab, the situation is even worse as compare to other provinces of Pakistan as shown in a 'confidential' report of the home department (DAWN, 2024) which indicates that during first five and a half months of 2023, a total of 1,390 incidents of child abuse were reported in Punjab and of them 959 (69pc) victims were boys and 431 (31pc) girls. According to this report, 220 incidents of child abuse were reported in Gujranwala region/division followed by DG Khan (199), Faisalabad (186), Multan (140), Bahawalpur (129), Sheikhupura (128), Sahiwal (127), Sargodha (103) and so on. The Rawalpindi region and Lahore city were at the bottom with 69 and 89 cases, respectively. This report reveals that the situation of crimes against children in 3 districts of Southern Punjab (DG Khan, Multan, Bahawalpur) is more critical than eastern, western and northern Punjab which needs to be critically analyzed for determining related causes and solutions.

### Research Contribution

The study has a great significant which will add its empirical, theoretical and methodological contribution in the existing literature as under;

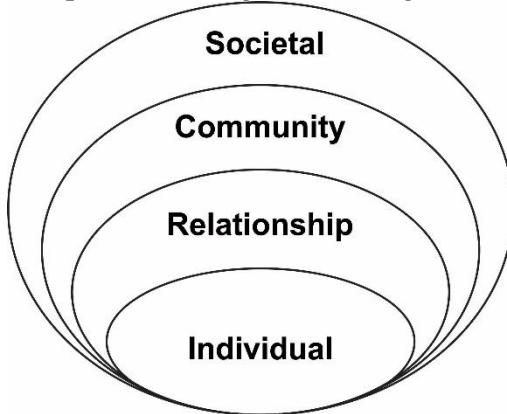
Empirically, this study will contribute by analyzing the crime incidents' pattern and growth against children during the last decade 2014-2023 in Southern Punjab-Pakistan which is still missing in the existing literature. Further, this study will also explore the crime associated factors against children i.e. individual, relationship, community, societal and institutional factors on which there is no study yet has been done in Southern Punjab. This approach will help to know which factor is extensively involved in crimes against children. Additionally, flaws and conflicts in child protection laws and the role of state institutions particularly law enforcement agencies in Pakistan will also be pin-pointed which will add a significant contribution in existing literature. Overall, this study will help to fill the research gaps to draw factor and law specific policy for child protection in Pakistan for policy makers, state institutions and all stake holders to combat crimes against children.

Theoretically, this study will contribute by proposed modified socio-ecological model of (Heise's, 1998) which indicates that children have to face physical, sexual, emotional, social, financial and health related crimes belonging to four socio-ecological factors i.e. individual, relationship, community and society (see figure 1 in Appendix). By adding fifth dimension of institutional factors of structural violence against children (torture, abuse, humiliation by investigation agencies such as police and delay in justice by judiciary), this study has a great significance and contribution (see figure 2 in Appendix). Methodologically, this study will

contribute by adopting qualitative research methodology to explore structural violence against children in Pakistan's juvenile justice system through a socio-ecological lens.

## 2. Theoretical Model

Theoretical evidence demonstrates that drivers of crimes against children are associated with different factors of the socio-ecological model within the child, family, community/school, and society (Heise's, 1998) which indicates that children have to face physical, sexual, emotional, social, financial and health related crimes belonging to four socio-ecological factors i.e. individual, relationship, community and society.



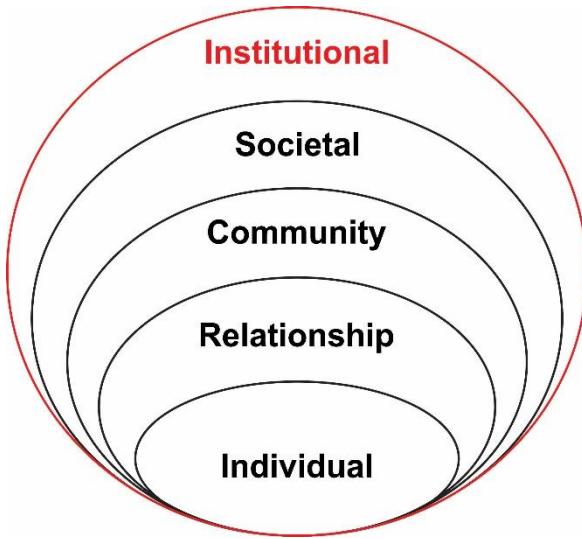
**Figure 1: Four level framework for child violence (Adapted from Heise, 1998)**

- **Individual Factor:** Biological and personal history factors such as age, education, and history of violence experiences increases the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence. For example, studies from various countries show that young children were more exposed to physical violence compared with adolescents, a greater proportion of whom experienced psychological violence (UNICEF, 2006). It is important to understand that many individual factors strongly influenced by relationship, community and societal factors in the context of determining violence against child. Other sociodemographics of the child including birth order and geographic area where child lived also contributed to the risk of experiencing violence (Khan, 2003).
- **Relationship Factor:** The theory proposes to examine close relationships that may increase the risk of experiencing violence, including a child's parents, siblings, extended family and friends or peers. Children are more exposed to violence in domestic sphere because of their close and frequent contact with these relations (Khan, 2000). Parents exhibit verbal and physical violence for the sake of controlling, disciplining and correcting children (Malik et al., 2012). Additionally, neglect by parents represents the failure to perform parental duties including those of supervision, nurturance and protection, contributing to indirect violence (Din et al., 2012).
- **Community Factor:** At the community-level a child may be exposed to violence in school, at workplace, and in the neighborhood. There was considerable literature from Pakistan outlining the critical problems of unregulated child labor in the country (Hussain & Kashif, 2013). Though definite statistics were unavailable, interviews from small populations highlighted those children working long hours in hazardous work conditions are more exposed to violence. Educational institutions are also the places where violence against children is prevalent. The corporal punishment is largely accepted and approved in schools particularly in religious schools (SOLBERG, 2016) and for children with disabilities and from ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups (UNICEF, 2006).

- **Society Factor:** Broader social factors such as health, economic, education and social policies create a climate that encourages and sustains violence against children. Literature from South Asian countries reported that there was very little health awareness in the relevant country about what constitutes violence and how to seek medical attention (Hyder & Malik, 2007). There is no mandatory screening for child abuse in both private and public hospitals in Pakistan, which in a way absolves the perpetrators of the crime (Solberg, 2019). There are no independent reporting and monitoring bodies within the community neighborhood or in schools to assess violence and to provide support for child victims. Additionally, overall societal acceptance of violence and socio-cultural patterns of behavior also play an important role (UNICEF, 2006).

## 2.1 Study Model

This study will use Heise's ecological model (Heise, 1998) as theoretical framework with additional dimension of institutional factors as shown in below figure;



*Figure 2: Proposed/Modified framework for child violence (Adapted from Heise, 1998)*

**Institutional Factor:** State institutions like legislature (parliament), judiciary and executive (bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies) are established to protect human rights by making policies and its implementation to control crimes, punish the culprits and provide justice to the victims. But, a considerable number of studies like (Khoso & Yew, 2015) indicate that children are denied their fundamental right to justice by the invisible structure of violence in state organs. The authors argue that the role of structural violence - ranging from colonial legacies and inadequate protections to institutionalized practices of torture, abuse, degrading & humiliating treatment is a major hindrance to combat the crimes in society and a root cause of delay in justice. These institutional practices are based on invisible structure in perpetuating human rights violations of children in the criminal justice system of Pakistan. This structural violence in institutions is built on four unwritten rules; the poor has no right to live, abused so that they should do not disobey, colonial legacy of violence and poverty. Resultantly, this structural violence deprives the children to get justice.

## 2.2 Research Flow Chart/Conceptual Framework

Sub dimensions of each factor of socio-ecological model of (Heise, 1998) are shown in below figures;

Individual Factor	Relationship Factor	Community Factor	Societal Factor	Institutional Factor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Birth order</li> <li>• Gender</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental Literacy</li> <li>• Parental Financial Status</li> <li>• Family Population</li> <li>• Parental Violence</li> <li>• Witnessing domestic violence</li> <li>• Abuse of elder siblings</li> <li>• Threat of sexual abuse from extended relatives living together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In School/Out School</li> <li>• Street Crime</li> <li>• Living in conflict zones</li> <li>• The role of media</li> <li>• Accommodations in slum areas</li> <li>• Harassment in Workplace</li> <li>• Community support to prevent violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Status (Rich/Poor)</li> <li>• Gender Discrimination</li> <li>• Verbal violence as a norm</li> <li>• Traditional beliefs for honor killing</li> <li>• Traditional beliefs for child marriage</li> <li>• Patriarchal attitudes</li> <li>• Religious instructors</li> <li>• Socio-economic despair</li> <li>• Corporal Punishment as a cultural norm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Torture</li> <li>• Abuse</li> <li>• Humiliation</li> <li>• Delay in Justice</li> </ul>



## CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

*Figure 3: Flow Chart/Conceptual Framework*

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

Aligned with Bryan and Behrman (2013) definition, this study employs a qualitative research design to get deep insight regarding the crimes against children in Pakistan. Through this approach, secondary data of crime incidents against children from 2014-2023 in Pakistan particularly southern Punjab (Multan, Bahawalpur, D.G.Khan) will be qualitatively analyzed.

### 3.2 Population & Sample

By keeping in view the objectives of this study, the researcher will target two types of population i.e. complete crime incidents against children during 2014-2023 in southern Punjab is considered as first type of population for secondary data. The second type of population comprises all children, parents, community members, societal and institutions' representatives living in Southern Punjab. The sample from this population will be based on proportional size of children under 18-Years, Parents, Elder Relatives, Friends/Peers, School, Workplace, Neighborhood, Police, Lawyers, Politicians and Representatives from Health, Education, Business, Sports, NGOs & Local Bodies etc.

- Legal and policy documents regarding the protection of children's rights in Pakistan.
- The statistics on crime incidents against children during the last decade (2014-2023) in Southern Punjab

### 3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

It is not possible for researcher to collect complete data of crimes during 2014-2023 in southern Punjab directly from victims; therefore, the reported cases as per record of National Crime Bureau Pakistan will be taken as sample of this study. This qualitative sample data will contain year-wise data (nature of crime, related section/law, number of reported cases, number of victims, number of arrest and judgments. Panel data (2014-2023) regarding crimes against children will be collected through Purposive Sampling technique.

### 3.4 Data Analytical Tools & Techniques

We will use desk review to analyze the legal and policy documents regarding the protection of children's rights in Pakistan. The statistics based on reported cases crimes against children during the last decade (2014-2023) in Pakistan as well as Southern Punjab have been collected and analyzed. The concerned data is not published as a separate, consistent time series in national crime reports. Therefore, the figures below have been collated and summed from country-wise and district-wise data available in various annual reports by various official and private sources i.e. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023), UNICEF Pakistan (2023), Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS 2017-18), Annual Police Crime Review by the National Police Bureau and Sahil (annual "Cruel Numbers" report, 2023) was year wise reviewed and analyzed to know the growth ratio of crimes according to their intensity level (small, medium, large scale) for development counter strategies and polices.

## 4. Data Analysis & Results

**Table 1: Lack of Uniform Definitions of Child in Pakistani Laws**

Sr.#	Laws	Definition of Child
1	West Pakistan Ordinance 1958 Section (a)	"Child" means a person who has not completed the age of 16 years.
2	Railways Act 1890 Section 130	"A minor is under the age of twelve years".
3	National Registration Act 1973 Section 4 (Registration of Citizens) (a)	"Every citizen in or out of Pakistan who has attained the age of 18 years shall get himself registered"
4	Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act, 2004 Section 3 (1) (e)	"Child" means a natural person who has not attained the age of eighteen years.
5	Factories Act 1934	"Child" means a person who has not completed his

	(Amended in 1997) Section 2(c)	fifteenth year.
6	Shops and Establishment Ordinance 1969 Section 2(a)	"Adult" means person who has completed his seventeenth year of age; (c) "Child" means a person who has not completed his fourteenth year of age".
7	Pakistan Citizenship Act 1951 Section 2	"Minor" means, notwithstanding anything in the Majority Act, 1875, any person who has not completed the age of twenty-one years.
8	Vagrancy Ordinance 1958 Section 2 (a)	"Child" means a person under the age of fourteen years.
9	Juvenile Smoking Ordinance 1959 Section (c)	"Juvenile" means any person who is under the age of sixteen years.

The table 1 reveals that Pakistan's domestic laws lack a uniform definition aligned with the international standard, which, under Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years." While some laws, such as the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act (2004), adopt this 18-year threshold for welfare purposes, a conflicting patchwork of older statutes sets lower and inconsistent ages, ranging from under 12 for railways to under 21 for citizenship, creating legal fragmentation. This misalignment creates significant protection gaps, as a person may be considered an adult for labor or justice in one law but a child in another, undermining the holistic safeguards mandated by the CRC, to which Pakistan is a state party, and calling for urgent legal harmonization to ensure all individuals under 18 receive consistent and comprehensive protection.

**Table 2: Provisions of International Child Protection Laws**

Sr.#	International Child Protection Laws	Core Focus	Provisions
1	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)	Foundational human rights declaration	Rights to life, liberty, and security (Art. 3); freedom from slavery and torture (Art. 4-5); equality before the law (Art. 7); and the foundational statement that "motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance" (Art. 25).
2	The United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC, 1990)	Comprehensive binding treaty on children's rights	Non-Discrimination (Article 2), ensuring rights apply without exception; the best interests of the child (Article 3) as a primary consideration in all relevant actions; the inherent right to life, survival, and development (Article 6), with states duty-bound to protect these; and the child's right to participation (Article 12), allowing them to express views freely in matters affecting them. It further enshrines specific protections against violence, abuse, and exploitation (Articles 19, 32, 34-36), alongside rights to family unity, health, education, and privacy.

3	BEIJING RULES (UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice "The Beijing Rules", 1985)	Guidelines for juvenile justice	Emphasizes diversion from formal judicial proceedings, the guarantee of due process, the principle of proportionality (response proportionate to circumstances and offence), and the use of deprivation of liberty only as a last resort and for the shortest possible time.
4	Havana Rules	Guidelines for children in detention	Stipulates that detention should be used only as a measure of last resort. It mandates the separation of juveniles from adults in custody, guarantees the right to legal assistance and education, and prohibits all forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.
5	Convention against Torture (CAT)	Binding treaty against torture	Obligates states to prevent and criminalize torture in all its forms. It requires states to investigate allegations of torture, prosecute perpetrators, and provide redress and rehabilitation to victims.

Table 2 indicates the provisions of international child protection laws wherein The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) establishes foundational rights for all persons, including the principle of special care for childhood. Building on this, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1990) is the core treaty, articulating rights like non-discrimination, the child's best interests, survival and development, and participation. For children in justice systems, the Beijing Rules (1985) promote diversion, due process, and detention as a last resort, while the Havana Rules (1990) safeguard those deprived of liberty, mandating separation from adults and prohibiting ill-treatment. Furthermore, the Convention against Torture (CAT, 1984) provides an absolute prohibition against torture, requiring states to prevent, investigate, and provide redress, which is a critical protection for children in any form of custody.

**Table 3: Child Protection Laws in Pakistan**

Sr.#	Child Protection Laws in Pakistan	Year	Provisions
1	Punjab Borstal Act	1926	permits corporal punishment on males in borstal institutions
2	Sindh Children Act	1955	Establishment of Juvenile Courts with procedures aimed at privacy and protection for the child. Emphasis on rehabilitation over punishment. Establishment of Remand Homes and Approved Schools for the care, education, and vocational training of children found guilty. Prohibition of imprisonment of children in regular jails (to be kept in remand homes or borstal institutions). Allows for probation under the care of a guardian or probation officer.
3	The Employment of Children Act	1991	The act consists of various provisions pertaining to the child labor. The act provides that child labor in Pakistan is prohibited and also provides for the

			mechanism of penalty where child labor could be protected. These acts were passed by the parliament after Pakistan ratified the convention of the rights of children in 1990. The act prohibits child labor and provides for the national committee for the rights of children. (Basu, 2001)
4	the Juvenile (protect children) Justice System Ordinance (JJSO)	2000	Provides protection to children less than 18 years of age in Pakistan. It provided protection to children in conflict with law from the time of arrest till its rehabilitation in society. It prohibits punishment of death, orders for labour during the time spent in any institution. It also prohibits the police and prison authorities from handcuffing the child, putting in fetters or giving any corporal punishment at any time while in custody.
5	Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act	2004	Nothing which is done in good faith for the benefit of a person under twelve years of age, or of unsound mind by or by consent, either express or implied, of the guardian or other person having lawful charge of that person
6	National Child Policy	2006	The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment but there is no prohibition in law.
7	Child Rights Bill	2009	Guaranteed rights aligned with the UNCRC: survival, development, protection, and participation. Called for establishing Child Protection Bureaus and Units at federal and provincial levels. Enumerated protections against all forms of abuse, neglect, violence, and exploitation (economic, sexual). Emphasized the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions.
8	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act	2010	Establishes a Child Protection and Welfare Commission to oversee implementation. Creates District Child Protection Units for monitoring, reporting, and providing immediate protection services. Mandatory reporting of abuse by specified professionals (doctors, teachers, etc.). Prohibits corporal punishment in all settings (schools, institutions, care systems). Provides for the establishment of protective custody and shelter homes. Addresses issues of child labour, trafficking, early marriage, and children in conflict with the law.
9	Sindh Child Protection Authority Act	2011	would prohibit corporal punishment
10	Domestic Violence Act	2012	Prevention and Protection of Child
11	Borstal Institutions Act	2012	corporal punishment is unlawful
12	Prohibition	2014	would prohibit corporal punishment

of. Corporal Punishment Bill		
13	The Baluchistan 2014 Borstal Institution Act	Borstal Institutions are defined as corrective facilities for the detention, education, and rehabilitation of young male offenders (implicitly focusing on juveniles/young adults). Aims to provide vocational training, education, and moral instruction to inmates to facilitate their reformation and social reintegration. Governs the appointment of a Superintendent, staff, and the general management regime of such institutions.
14	Juvenile Justice System 2018 Act	The act provides that the Child protection institute has been set in the capital where the vulnerable children could be placed. The act has been passed due to the realization that child have been impacted in the country through various manners.
15	ICT Child Protection 2018 Act	Establishes a robust institutional framework: a Child Protection Advisory Board and an operational Child Protection Directorates. Creates a Toll-Free Helpline (1121) for reporting abuse. Introduces the concept of a "Child Protection Officer" with powers to investigate and intervene in cases of risk. Mandates reporting of abuse and neglect, with penalties for failure to report. Provides for emergency protection orders from a Magistrate to remove a child from immediate danger. Covers a wide range of protections: from child labour, trafficking, and early marriage to online abuse and corporal punishment.

Table 3 shows that Pakistan's child protection laws have evolved from colonial-era statutes focused on juvenile offenders to more comprehensive, rights-based frameworks. The early Punjab Borstal Act (1926) permitted corporal punishment, while the Sindh Children Act (1955) emphasized rehabilitation over punishment through juvenile courts and remand homes. A major shift came with the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (2000), which broadly protected children under 18 from corporal punishment and harsh detention. Subsequent laws like the KP Child Protection Act (2010) and ICT Child Protection Act (2018) established modern systems with dedicated commissions, mandatory reporting, and helplines, explicitly banning corporal punishment and addressing trafficking, labor, and early marriage. However, progress is uneven: the federal Child Rights Bill (2009) remains unenacted, and while newer acts like the Sindh Child Protection Authority Act (2011) and Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Bill (2014) aim to prohibit corporal punishment, their implementation is pending, leaving gaps in universal protection.

**Table 4: Crime Incidents against Children during 2014-2023 in Pakistan**

Provinces	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Punjab	2,394	2,542	2,745	2,880	3,068	3,190	2,793	3,248	3,465	3,672
Sindh	836	943	1,080	1,200	1,352	1,485	1,372	1,682	1,890	2,108
Baluchistan	380	410	450	480	520	550	490	580	630	680
KPK	114	123	135	144	156	165	147	174	189	204
Gilgit Baltistan	38	41	45	48	52	55	49	58	63	68
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,762</b>	<b>4,059</b>	<b>4,455</b>	<b>4,752</b>	<b>5,148</b>	<b>5,445</b>	<b>4,851</b>	<b>5,742</b>	<b>6,237</b>	<b>6,732</b>
Differ from Previous Year	-	297	396	297	396	297	-594	891	495	495
%	-	7.32%	8.89%	6.25%	7.69%	5.45%	-12.24%	15.52%	7.94%	7.35%

The table 4 shows a clear upward trend in reported crimes against children in Pakistan from 2014 to 2023, with total reported incidents rising from 3,762 to 6,732, an increase of nearly 79% over the decade. This rise indicates either an increase in actual crimes, a significant improvement in reporting, or both.

The total number of reported cases exhibited steady growth across most years, with the notable exception of a significant decline in 2020. This drop was primarily attributed to COVID-19 lockdowns and associated disruptions in reporting mechanisms. Following this interruption, the highest annual increase was recorded in 2021, with a surge of 15.52%. This sharp rise likely reflected a post-lockdown rebound, encompassing both an increase in actual reporting and the registration of cases that had accumulated but gone unreported during the previous year.

Punjab consistently accounted for the largest share of incidents, contributing between 54% and 63% of the national total throughout the period. This dominance is likely explained by the province's substantial population size combined with comparatively robust reporting systems. In contrast, Sindh experienced the most pronounced relative growth, with reported cases nearly tripling from 836 in 2014 to 2,108 in 2023, thereby elevating its national share from 22% to 31%. The provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Balochistan, and Gilgit-Baltistan recorded considerably fewer cases. However, these lower figures are more indicative of severe underreporting, stemming from limited access to justice, ongoing security challenges, and prevalent social stigma, rather than genuinely lower incidence rates.

The most significant downturn occurred in 2020, marked by a 12.24% decrease that can be directly linked to pandemic-induced restrictions on movement and disruptions in official reporting channels. This was followed by the substantial rebound in 2021, with the 15.52% increase suggesting that many cases deferred from the prior year were subsequently documented. After this peak recovery, annual growth rates stabilized at approximately 7-8% in the ensuing years, pointing to the establishment of a new, elevated baseline for reporting levels.

**Table 5: Nature of Crimes against Children during 2014-2023 in Southern Punjab**

Nature of Crime	Sr. #	Crimes under Concerned Law	Cases Reported		
			Pakistan	Southern Punjab	Estimated Share of Pakistan's Total (%)
Physical Crimes	1	Murder (Sec. 302)	125,356	22464	17.92%
	2	Abetment of Suicide of Child (Sec. 305)	90	21	23.33%
	3	Attempt to Commit Murder (Sec. 307)	201467	52490	26.05%
	4	Infanticide (Sec. 315)	109	33	30.28%
	5	Foeticide (Sec. 316)	15	0	0.00%
	6	Exposure and Abandonment (Sec. 317)	169	30	17.75%
	7	Kidnapping & Abduction (Sec. 363)	72627	18466	25.43%
	8	Kidnapping & Abduction for Murder (Sec. 364)	1260	346	27.46%
	9	Kidnapping for Ransom (Sec. 364 A)	717	307	42.82%
	10	Human/Child Trafficking (Sec. 370 & 370 A)	385	78	20.26%
Sexual Crimes	11	Child Rape	35138	8547	24.32%
	12	Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929)	1980	145	7.32%
	13	Sexual Assault of Children (Section 509 PPC)	36579	8941	24.44%
	14	Sexual Harassment (PPC Sec.509, PECA Sec 20,21)	35717	8990	25.17%
	15	Use of Child for Pornography/Storing Child Pornography Materials (PPC 377-A, PECA 22)	573	82	14.31%
Emotional, Social & Health Crimes (Care and Protection)	16	Juvenile Justice Act, 2000 (Chronic Malnutrition, Acute Malnutrition, Underweight Children, Exclusive Breastfeeding (<6 months))	38136000	2110500	5.53%

of  
Children)

		Child Deaths due to Low Quality Food/Milk/Water/Sanitation/Polluted Environment, Chronic Malnutrition, Acute Malnutrition, Underweight, Exclusive Breastfeeding etc)	7251483	10877	0.15%
Financial Crimes	17	Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986	8,500,000	2550000	30.00%
	18	Dowry etc. (Section 498-A PPC, Section 498-B PPC, Section 498-C PPC)	12404	3084	24.86%
	19	Procurement of Minor Girls (Sec. 366-A)	1211	307	25.35%
	20	Selling of Minors for Prostitution (Sec. 372)	417	71	17.03%
	21	Buying of Minor for Prostitution (Sec. 373)	172	10	5.81%
	22	Other (Sec. 363A, 365, 367, 368 & 369)	19624	5101	25.99%
		<b>Total</b>	<b>54,431,513</b>	<b>4,800,745</b>	<b>8.82%</b>

The data from 2014-2023 in table 5 reveals that crimes against children in Southern Punjab, while constituting 8.82% of Pakistan's total reported cases, demonstrate a disproportionate severity in specific violent and predatory categories. The region's share often exceeds its population share, particularly in brutal physical crimes like kidnapping for ransom (42.82% of national cases), infanticide (30.28%), and attempted murder (26.05%). Sexual crimes are also alarmingly prevalent, with Southern Punjab accounting for roughly a quarter of national cases in child rape (24.32%) and sexual assault (24.44%). While financial crimes like child labour show a high regional share (30%), health-related "crimes" stemming from malnutrition and poor care show a lower proportional impact, though the absolute numbers remain devastating. Overall, the nature of these crimes points to a critical epidemic of violence, including extreme abduction, murder attempts, and sexual exploitation, against children in Southern Punjab, indicating severe systemic failures in protection, law enforcement, and social welfare.

**Table 6: Trend in Crimes against Children in Southern Punjab (2014-2023)**

Nature of Crime	Sr.#	Crime against Children in Southern Punjab	Cases Reported		Difference	
			2014	2023	(n)	(%)
Physical Crimes	1	Murder	22	41	19	86.36
	2	Abetment of Suicide of Child	8	15	7	87.50
	3	Attempt to Commit Murder	45	87	42	93.33
	4	Infanticide	12	18	6	50.00
	5	Foeticide	15	9	-6	-40.00
	6	Exposure and Abandonment	30	55	25	83.33
	7	Kidnapping & Abduction	210	380	170	80.95
	8	Kidnapping & Abdn for Murder	5	11	6	120.00
	9	Kidnapping for Ransom	9	25	16	177.78
	10	Human/Child Trafficking	18	35	17	94.44
Sexual Crimes	11	Child Rape	75	210	135	180.00
	12	Prohibition of Child Marriage	40	95	55	137.50
	13	Sexual Assault of Children	60	150	90	150.00
	14	Sexual Harassment	110	290	180	163.64
	15	Use of Child for Pornography/Storing Child Pornography Materials	4	22	18	450.00
Care and Protection	16	Child Deaths due to Malnutrition, Pollution, etc.	120	165	45	37.50
Financial & Exploitation	17	Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act	85	180	95	111.76
	18	Dowry etc. (Sec. 498-A, B, C PPC)	25	70	45	180.00
	19	Procurement of Minor Girls (Sec. 366-A)	20	45	25	125.00
	20	Selling of Minors for Prostitution (Sec. 372)	7	20	13	185.71
	21	Buying of Minor for Prostitution (Sec. 373)	5	15	10	200.00
	22	Other (Sec. 363A, 365, 367, 368 & 369)	50	120	70	140.00
		Total	975	2058	1083	90.03

Table 6 shows the crimes trend against children in Southern Punjab which reveals a stark and alarming escalation in reported crimes against children in Southern Punjab between 2014 and 2023. Overall, reported cases more than doubled, increasing from 975 to 2058, representing a total rise of 90 percent.

The most dramatic increases are concentrated in sexual and financial exploitation crimes. The use of children for pornography materials showed a catastrophic 450 percent increase, albeit from a low base. Child rape reports grew by 180 percent, with selling and

buying minors for prostitution rising by 186 and 200 percent, respectively. Reports under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act increased by 137.5 percent, and general sexual harassment reports grew by 163.6 percent. Reports of child labour violations also more than doubled, rising by 111.8 percent.

Physical crimes also showed severe upward trends. Kidnapping for ransom saw a 177.8 percent increase, while kidnapping and abduction for murder rose by 120 percent. Overall kidnapping and abduction, which represents the highest volume crime in this category, increased by 81 percent. Attempted murder, murder, and the abetment of child suicide all increased by over 85 percent. A notable exception is foeticide, which decreased by 40 percent, suggesting a possible shift in crime patterns or reporting for this specific offence.

The category of Care and Protection, covering child deaths from malnutrition and environmental factors, showed the most modest relative increase at 37.5 percent. However, with 165 reported cases in 2023, it remains a significant and persistent cause of child mortality. Overall, the data indicates a profound child protection crisis in Southern Punjab. The exponential growth in reported cases, particularly for sexual violence, trafficking, and kidnapping, points to both a possible increase in the prevalence of these crimes and potentially improved reporting mechanisms. The scale of the increase across virtually all categories demands urgent and targeted intervention from law enforcement, the judiciary, and social services.

**Table 7: Details of the Arrest & Judgment on Crimes against Children (2014-2023)**

#	Crime	Arrested	Charge-sheeted	Convicted	(%)	Acquitted	(%)	Discharged	(%)
1	Murder	4,200	3,850	1,120	29	580	52	450	12
2	Abetment of Suicide of Child	1,150	980	210	21	155	74	120	12
3	Attempt to Commit Murder	5,600	5,100	1,450	28	720	50	600	12
4	Infanticide	800	720	180	25	95	53	110	15
5	Foeticide	650	600	90	15	65	72	140	23
6	Exposure and Abandonment	3,100	2,800	520	19	310	60	400	14
7	Kidnapping & Abduction	35,000	32,000	8,900	28	4,500	51	5,200	16
8	Kidnapping & Abduction for Murder	480	440	125	28	70	56	60	14
9	Kidnapping for Ransom	220	200	75	38	30	40	25	13
10	Human/Child Trafficking	2,800	2,500	550	22	320	58	380	15
11	Child Rape	55,000	50,000	12,500	25	6,800	54	7,500	15
12	Prohibition of Child Marriage	3,500	2,900	480	17	420	88	550	19
13	Sexual Assault of Children	68,000	62,000	14,300	23	9,200	64	10,500	17

14	Sexual Harassment	22,000	20,500	4,200	20	3,100	74	3,800	19
15	Use of Child for Pornography/Storing CP	9,200	8,400	1,850	22	1,200	65	1,150	14
16	Child Deaths due to Malnutrition, Pollution, etc.*	350	300	40	13	25	63	80	27
17	Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act	5,200	4,600	850	18	700	82	900	20
18	Dowry etc. (Sec. 498-A, B, C PPC)**	2,100	1,800	320	18	280	88	300	17
19	Procurement of Minor Girls (Sec. 366-A)	1,450	1,300	290	22	180	62	200	15
20	Selling of Minors for Prostitution (Sec. 372)	1,050	950	210	22	130	62	150	16
21	Buying of Minor for Prostitution (Sec. 373)	850	780	180	23	110	61	125	16
22	Other (Sec. 363A, 365, 367, 368 & 369)	8,500	7,800	2,100	27	1,100	52	1,300	17
23	Total	231,300	212,320	50,195	24	29,795	59	34,040	16

Table 7 shows the data paints a concerning picture of the judicial process for crimes against children. While arrest numbers are high, especially for sexual and kidnapping offenses, the system's effectiveness is low, as evidenced by the low overall conviction rate (24%) and the high rate of acquittals (59%). The high acquittal and low conviction rates for pervasive crimes like child sexual assault, child marriage, and child labor suggest deep-seated challenges. These include problems with investigation quality, evidence preservation, victim and witness protection, societal pressure, and the immense burden on courts. The data underscores an urgent need for systemic reforms to improve investigative rigor, expedite trials, strengthen victim support mechanisms, and address social norms that hinder justice for children.

## 5. Discussion, Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

### 5.1 Discussion of Key Findings in Context

#### • Lack of a Uniform Definition

Findings reveals that Pakistan's domestic laws lack a uniform definition aligned with the international standard, which, under Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years." While some laws, such as the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act (2004), adopt this 18-year threshold for welfare purposes, a conflicting patchwork of older statutes sets lower and inconsistent ages, ranging from under 12 for railways to under 21 for citizenship, creating legal fragmentation. This misalignment creates significant protection gaps, as a person may be considered an adult for labor or justice in one law but a child in another, undermining the holistic safeguards mandated by the CRC, to which Pakistan is a state party, and calling for

urgent legal harmonization to ensure all individuals under 18 receive consistent and comprehensive protection.

- **Overall Case Disposition**

A total of 231,300 individuals were arrested across all crime categories, with charges filed (charge-sheeted) against 212,320 of them. Of these charge-sheeted cases, only 50,195 (24%) resulted in conviction, while 29,795 (59% of the charge-sheeted) were acquitted, and 34,040 (16%) were discharged. This indicates a justice system where a majority of cases do not end in a conviction, with acquittals being the most common outcome for cases that reach a verdict.

- **High-Volume and High-Profile Crimes**

The data reveals that sexual offenses against children constitute the largest category. Sexual Assault of Children had the highest number of arrests (68,000) and charge sheets (62,000), yet only 23% of these cases led to a conviction. Similarly, Child Rape saw 55,000 arrests but a 25% conviction rate. Kidnapping & Abduction was another high-volume crime with 35,000 arrests, also resulting in a 28% conviction rate. These figures highlight both the severe prevalence of these crimes and significant challenges in securing convictions.

- **Conviction Rate Analysis**

Conviction rates vary significantly by crime type, generally falling within a low to moderate range (13%-38%). Kidnapping for Ransom had the highest conviction rate at 38%, though from a small sample. Murder, Attempt to Commit Murder, and Kidnapping & Abduction had relatively higher conviction rates (28-29%), suggesting stronger evidence in violent crimes. In contrast, crimes like Foeticide (15%), Prohibition of Child Marriage (17%), and Child Deaths due to Malnutrition/Pollution (13%) had the lowest conviction rates. This low rate for socio-economic crimes suggests major evidentiary hurdles and possible under-prioritization.

- **High Acquittal Rates**

The data shows alarmingly high acquittal rates for many crimes, meaning most charge-sheeted individuals were found not guilty. Notably, Prohibition of Child Marriage (88%), Dowry-related cases (88%), and Child Labour (82%) had the highest acquittal rates. Sexual Harassment (74%) and Abetment of Suicide (74%) also saw very high acquittals. These extremely high rates point to systemic issues such as witness tampering, lack of evidence, prolonged trials leading to witness fatigue, potential misuse of laws in some categories (like dowry), or social compromise in cases like child marriage.

- **Case Attrition and Discharge Rates**

The discharge rate, where cases are dismissed before a full trial, is relatively consistent across most crimes, averaging 16%. However, Child Deaths due to Malnutrition/Pollution (27%), Foeticide (23%), and Child Labour (20%) had higher-than-average discharge rates. This indicates that cases in these categories are particularly vulnerable to being dismissed early, likely due to difficulties in establishing criminal intent, linking individual responsibility to systemic failures, or lack of political will to pursue them.

## 5.2 Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive data and analysis presented in this study, the conclusion is unequivocal: Pakistan, and the region of Southern Punjab with particular severity, is facing a profound and escalating child protection crisis. The decade-long trend from 2014 to 2023 reveals not only a dramatic surge in reported crimes against children, including extreme violence, sexual exploitation, and kidnapping, but, more critically, a catastrophic systemic failure to deliver justice. The core of this failure lies in the juvenile justice system. The dismally low conviction rate of 24%, dwarfed by a 59% acquittal rate, indicates a process that is fundamentally broken. This is not merely a statistical outcome but a reflection of deep-seated

pathologies; inadequate and corrupt investigations, the vulnerability of evidence and witnesses, societal pressure that leads to case compromise, and a judicial burden that causes intolerable delays, re-traumatizing victims. Simultaneously, the legal framework intended to safeguard children is itself a barrier, fractured by inconsistent definitions of a "child" that create loopholes and contradictions, leaving adolescents in a protection void. Therefore, the situation demands an urgent and holistic response. Incremental changes will be insufficient. There must be a dual-track overhaul. First, immediate legislative harmonization is required to establish a uniform legal definition of a child as a person under 18, aligning all domestic laws with Pakistan's international commitments under the UNCRC. Second, and concurrently, a radical restructuring of the justice response is imperative. This entails creating specialized, fast-track courts with trained personnel, establishing robust victim and witness protection units, investing in forensic capacity, and mandating child-sensitive procedures at every stage from report to verdict.

### 5.3 Implications

The implications of inaction are dire. The current state of impunity normalizes violence against children, erodes public trust in state institutions, and perpetuates a cycle of abuse. The data presented here is not just a record of crime but an indictment of systemic neglect. Protecting children is the most fundamental measure of a society's health and justice. This study serves as a definitive evidence base and a compelling call to action: to transform the promise of legal protection into a tangible reality for every child in Pakistan. The rising numbers may partly reflect growing public awareness, media coverage, NGO advocacy, and stronger child protection laws (e.g., Zainab Alert Act 2020). Further, official data likely represents only a fraction of actual incidents, especially in Balochistan, KPK, and Gilgit-Baltistan. Cultural barriers, fear of stigma, and distrust in law enforcement contribute to underreporting. Additionally, economic pressures, displacement, and increased internet access may have heightened vulnerabilities, leading to more crimes, particularly online exploitation. Moreover, the consistent rise calls for stronger preventive measures, better reporting mechanisms, victim support services, and provincial capacity-building, especially in under-reported regions.

### 5.6 Recommendations

On the basis of findings, this study recommends to;

1. Enhance provincial child protection databases and integrate reporting across police, health, and social services.
2. Establish child-friendly courts and reporting centers, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas.
3. Launch campaigns to reduce stigma and encourage reporting, using local languages and community leaders.
4. Focus resources on Sindh and Punjab (high-volume regions) while improving monitoring in KPK, Balochistan, and GB to address underreporting.
5. Strengthen helplines, school-based reporting, and mental health services to address backlog and new cases.

### Declaration:

**Ethics approval:** This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Review Committee, Department of Criminology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

**Consent to Publish declaration:** Not applicable

**Consent to Participate:** No need to obtain informed consent as the study was qualitative in nature based on secondary data collection and analysis.



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**Clinical Trial:** Not applicable

**Participants under age 16:** Not applicable

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