

## Exploring the Juvenile Justice Act: Legal Framework and Psychosocial Interventions for Children in Conflict with the Law

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### ABSTRACT

Understanding and supporting children in conflict with the law (CCL) is vital for their positive transformation. By exploring the factors influencing their behaviour, developmental influences, historical context of juvenile justice and effective interventions, we empower these youths for a brighter future. CCL refers to individuals under 18 alleged or found to have committed an offense. Recognizing their needs and challenges is essential for devising suitable rehabilitation strategies. Identifying risk factors contributing to children's criminal involvement is essential for effective intervention. These factors range from individual and family aspects to wider community and societal influences. Targeting these factors can prevent CCL. Embracing a developmental perspective is crucial for understanding the reasons behind a child's unlawful actions. Positive parenting, quality education, healthy peer interactions and community support play pivotal role in shaping a child's choices. Exploring the history of juvenile justice offers insights into societal responses to young offenders. A shift from punitive measures to rehabilitation reflects an evolving understanding of CCL's unique needs. Understanding definitions from the Juvenile Justice Act is vital for effective work with CCL. Concepts like "best interest of the child" and "observation home" guide interventions and decisions. Implementing psychosocial interventions addressing cognitive, emotional, and social needs proactively rehabilitates CCL. Disciplinary measures, counselling, vocational training, mentorship, and access to education with a positive approach are the key. Integrating these aspects creates a holistic framework to support CCL. This approach fosters personal growth, safer communities, and a just society.

## 1. Introduction

Children in conflict with the law are minors, generally defined as individuals under the age of 18, who have committed or are accused of committing offenses that violate legal codes. This term typically applies to children who are accused of engaging in criminal behaviour, regardless of the severity of the offense and encompasses a wide range of actions from minor infractions to serious crimes. The terminology emphasizes that these children are in a legal conflict, who need attention not just as offenders but as individuals whose circumstances require intervention, care and protection. According to the CRC (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), a child is defined as anyone under the age of 18, unless national law defines a lower age limit. The Convention promotes the principle that all actions concerning children should be in their best interests, including when they come into conflict with the law. Article 40 of the CRC mandates that children in conflict with the law should be treated with dignity and should have access to appropriate legal and psychological support, emphasizing reintegration over punishment (UNICEF, CRC, 1989). The Indian Juvenile Justice Act defines a child in conflict with the law as a person below 18 years of age who has committed an offense. In some cases, if a child between 16 and 18 commits a heinous offense (punishable by seven or more years of imprisonment), they may be tried as an adult (Juvenile Justice Act, 2015).

The juvenile justice system is intended to address the unique needs and vulnerabilities of children in conflict with the law. By emphasizing rehabilitation, protection of rights, restorative justice, and reintegration, it seeks to guide juveniles toward responsible adulthood and reduce recidivism. The system underscores the importance of treating children as individuals in need of care and development rather than merely as offenders, recognizing their potential for change and growth.

## 2. Overview of the Juvenile Justice Act (JJA)

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, often referred to as the Juvenile Justice Act (JJA), is a law in India that aims to provide care, protection, treatment, development, and rehabilitation of children in conflict with the law and those in need of care and protection. The act focuses on ensuring that children are

treated differently from adult offenders, keeping in mind their vulnerability and developmental needs. This was first enacted in 1986 as the Juvenile Justice Act, 1986. It was amended several times, with the most notable changes made in 2000 and 2015, responding to changes in society and legal judgments. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 replaced the previous laws. (JJA, 2015). This act was a significant refurbishment due to public demand for rigorous action following incidents involving juveniles committing heinous crimes (such as the infamous 2012 Delhi gang rape case). The key objectives of this act are protection of children, Rehabilitation and Reintegration; it covers two categories of children such as children conflict with law and children in need of care and protection. This act also provides for both institutional care and non-institutional care (JJ Amendment Act, 2021).

From the early 20th century, the different Indian States enacted their own Children Acts. The Madras Children Act of 1920 was the first legislation enacted for the welfare of children, with similar acts soon following in Bengal (1922) and Bombay (1924). Though Bombay implement the provisions of the Bombay Children Act within the municipal Corporation Limits of Bombay. The State's Children Acts encompassed two groups of children: (i) youthful offenders and (ii) destitute and neglected children. Both categories were to be addressed by the Juvenile Courts. During this period throughout the world, children were dealt with under the "welfarist" mode. The well-being of the child was not stressed; hence Probation Officers played an important role and legal representation was unheard of. The Government of India enacted the Children Act of 1960 to "provide for the care, protection, maintenance, welfare, training, education, and rehabilitation of neglected or delinquent children". Under this Act, a Child is a boy below 16 years of age and a girl below 18 years of Age. The General Assembly on 29th November 1985 adopted the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice, and for the first time the word "juvenile" was coined. This shift in terminology was incorporated into domestic law with the enactment of the Juvenile Justice Act (JJA) in 1986. The Act was later amended in 2006 and 2011, and is now referred to as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2000. The Act was amended in 2015 and known as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015.

### **3. Psychosocial Factors Leading to Juvenile Delinquency**

Juvenile delinquency refers to illegal or antisocial behaviours committed by individuals under the age of 18. Psychosocial factors, which encompass both psychological and social dimensions, play a significant role in shaping the behaviours and outcomes of young individuals. Below are some of the major psychosocial factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency:

#### **A. Family Environment**

The family environment is one of the most critical factors influencing juvenile delinquency. Disrupted family structures, poor parenting, and lack of supervision can lead to increased delinquent behaviour.

**Parental Neglect or Abuse:** Children who experience neglect or abuse from their parents are more likely to engage in criminal activities. A lack of parental warmth, communication and involvement often contributes to anti-social behaviour.

**Family Conflict or Violence:** Exposure to domestic violence, parental substance abuse, or high levels of family conflict can also create emotional and behavioural instability in children, which may lead to delinquency (Demuth, S., & Brown, S. L. 2004).

#### **B. Peer Influence**

Peer groups become increasingly important during adolescence and peer influence is a major contributor to delinquent behaviour (DB).

**Peer Pressure:** Adolescents may be encouraged by peers to engage in risky or illegal behaviours, including drug use, vandalism, or theft. Being associated with delinquent peers raises the probability of becoming involved in similar behaviours.

**Socialization:** Youths are more susceptible to conforming to group norms, particularly when those norms endorse delinquent behaviour. The desire to fit in and gain approval can drive these behaviours (Haynie, D. L. 2001)

#### **C. Socioeconomic Status**

Low socioeconomic status (SES) is strongly correlated with juvenile delinquency. Children growing up in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods may lack access to education, recreational activities and other social services that promote positive and healthy development.

**Neighbourhood Environment:** Poor urban areas often have higher crime rates and children growing up in these environments are more likely to be exposed to criminal activities, gang violence and drug trafficking.

**Economic Stress:** Financial hardships at home can lead to feelings of hopelessness or frustration, which may push young people toward delinquent acts as a means of coping or survival (Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. 1997)

#### D. Educational Environment

School is another significant context in which psychosocial factors influence delinquency. Poor academic performance and disengagement from school are associated with an increased risk of criminal behaviour.

**School Failure / dropouts:** Struggling academically can lead to frustration, which may result in disengagement from the school system and involve in delinquent activities.

**School Environment:** A negative school environment, including bullying, teacher – student conflict, or a lack of support services, can exacerbate feelings of alienation or aggression, contributing to delinquent behaviours (Henry, K. L., & Huizinga, D. H. 2007)

#### E. Psychological Factors

Certain psychological traits and conditions can predispose adolescents to DB. Impulsivity, aggression, less tolerance level, and poor emotional regulation are often linked with delinquency.

**Mental Health Issues:** Conditions such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Conduct Disorder (CD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) are associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in delinquent acts.

**Low Self-Control:** Adolescents with low self-control may find it difficult to resist temptations or peer pressure, making them more prone to DB (Moffitt, T. E. 1993).

#### F. Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is both a consequence and a cause of DB. Adolescents who abuse drugs or alcohol are more likely to engage in risky or criminal activities, such as theft, drug peddling, or violent behaviour.

**Gateway Behaviours:** Early experimentation with alcohol or drugs can serve as a gateway to more severe DBs, including criminal acts.

**Self-Medication:** Some youths engage in substance abuse to cope with stress, trauma, or mental health issues, which can exacerbate delinquency (Mason, W. A., & Windle, M. 2002).

#### G. Media Influence

Exposure to violent media, including video games, movies, and television shows, can desensitize adolescents to violence and increase the likelihood of engaging in aggressive or antisocial behaviour.

**Modelling Behaviour:** Adolescents who are frequently exposed to media portrayals of violence or criminal activity may begin to mimic these behaviours in real life, seeing them as normal or glamorous (Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. 2001).

Juvenile delinquency is a complex phenomenon influenced by a variety of psychosocial factors, including family dynamics, peer associations, socioeconomic conditions, education, psychological traits, and substance abuse. Understanding these contributing factors is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies that address the root causes of DB.

## 4. Review Of Literature

### A. Challenges and Criticisms of the Juvenile Justice Act

While the Juvenile Justice Act offers a progressive approach, several challenges persist. This review of literature criticizes the effectiveness of its implementation, especially in developing countries where resources are limited.

The work of Sen. S. 2016 & Nanjunda, D. C. 2008 bring out the limitations of the JJA. Those are as follow;

**Inconsistent Application:** Research shows that the law's application varies across regions, with many children still facing treatment akin to adult criminals, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas.

**Under-Resourced Rehabilitation Programs:** Many scholars have pointed out that the rehabilitation programs under the JJA lack adequate funding, trained personnel, and infrastructure, which hampers their ability to effectively reintegrate juveniles into society.

**Lowering the Age of Juvenility:** The 2015 amendment to India's Juvenile Justice Act, which allows for children between 16 and 18 years old to be tried as adults in certain heinous crimes, has sparked debate. Some argue that this undermines the rehabilitative focus of the law.

#### **B. Psychosocial Interventions for Juveniles in Conflict with the Law**

Psychosocial interventions are integral to the juvenile justice system as they target the behavioural, emotional, and social factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency. Various studies have explored the effectiveness of these interventions within the framework of the Juvenile Justice Act. These interventions often focus on rehabilitation, social reintegration, and the prevention of recidivism. The key Psychosocial Interventions are as follow:

**Counselling and Therapy:** Psychosocial interventions emphasize counselling and therapy as crucial for addressing the mental health issues that contribute to juvenile delinquency. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), trauma-informed care and family therapy are common approaches.

**Education and Skill Development Programs:** Educational initiatives and vocational training are often used to provide juveniles with the skills needed to reintegrate into society, reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

**Peer Support Programs:** Literature also emphasizes peer support and mentoring programs where former juvenile offenders or trained mentors provide guidance and support to children in conflict with the law.

The research of Huizinga, D., Loeber, R., & Thornberry, T. P. 1995 has demonstrated the importance of individualized interventions that consider the specific circumstances and needs of each child. Successful psychosocial interventions often rely on a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating input from psychologists, social workers, educators and legal professionals.

Despite the importance of psychosocial interventions, there are several challenges in their implementation, the work of Junger-Tas, J., & Decker, S. H. 2010, highlight the lack of trained professionals, insufficient funding and the stigma associated with juvenile delinquency that hinder the success of these programs. Additionally, recidivism remains a significant issue and research suggests that without sustained psychosocial support, many juveniles may revert to DB.

#### **C. International Perspectives on Juvenile Justice and Psychosocial Interventions**

International literature also provides valuable insights into juvenile justice systems and psychosocial interventions, with comparative studies highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of different models. The work of Muncie, J., & Goldson, B. 2006, show that the U.S. juvenile justice system has been heavily criticized for its over-reliance on incarceration. However, some states have adopted restorative justice practices, which emphasize community-based interventions, mediation, and victim-offender reconciliation. Whereas Petrosino, A., Turpin-Petrosino, C., & Guckenburg, S. 2010, point out that many EU (European Union) countries focus on diversion programs that aim to keep children out of the formal justice system. The emphasis here is on community-based interventions and reintegration rather than punishment. The literature suggests that psychosocial interventions are most effective when they are part of a broader, restorative justice framework, as seen in many European models.

Therefore, the literature on the Juvenile Justice Act and psychosocial interventions underscores the importance of a holistic approach to juvenile justice, combining legal protections with effective rehabilitation programs. While the legal framework in many countries has made significant strides in prioritizing the welfare of children in conflict with the law, the success of the system ultimately depends on the effective implementation of psychosocial interventions. As the body of research suggests, these interventions need to be adequately resourced, individualized and focused on reintegrating children into society to reduce recidivism and promote long-term social well-being.

## **5. Role of Social Workers in the Juvenile Justice System**

Social workers play a critical role in the juvenile justice system by ensuring the protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration of children in conflict with the law. Their involvement is multifaceted, involving legal advocacy, psychosocial support, family interventions and community-based rehabilitation efforts. Within the framework of the Juvenile Justice Act (JJA), their work centres around safeguarding the rights of children and promoting their holistic development, away from punitive measures. Below are key roles that social workers perform in the juvenile justice system, particularly under the Juvenile Justice Act:

### **A. Assessment and Casework**

Social workers are often the first point of contact for children entering the juvenile justice system. They conduct detailed assessments to understand the child's psychological, social and familial background. This initial assessment is crucial in determining the child's needs and ensuring that appropriate interventions are in place.

**Role in Assessment:** Social workers assess the child's mental health, family dynamics, socio-economic conditions and educational background. This assessment helps Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs) and Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) make informed decisions about the child's legal and rehabilitation pathways (Singh, D., & Bala, N. 2016).

**Developing Care Plans:** Based on these assessments, social workers are responsible for formulating individualized care plans, which outline the necessary interventions ranging from counselling to family reunification and vocational training.

### **B. Rehabilitation and Psychosocial Support**

A significant responsibility of social workers within the juvenile justice system is providing psychosocial interventions. These interventions are aimed at helping children overcome the challenges that led to their delinquent behaviour and aiding their reintegration into society.

**Counselling and Therapy:** Social workers provide direct counselling to address emotional, behavioural, or psychological issues that children may face. They often utilize therapeutic approaches like cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), trauma-focused interventions, and family therapy to help children process trauma, cope with stress and reduce aggression or impulsivity.

**Life Skills Training:** Social workers frequently conduct life skills training sessions to enhance the emotional intelligence, decision-making abilities and social skills of the juveniles. These sessions prepare children for independent and responsible living post-rehabilitation.

**Group Interventions:** Group therapy sessions organized by social workers provide a supportive environment where juveniles can share experiences, build empathy and develop positive peer relationships (Singh, R., & Pant, M. 2017).

### **C. Family Engagement and Reintegration**

Family plays a crucial role in a child's rehabilitation. Social workers often act as mediators between the child and their family, working to resolve conflicts and ensure that family dynamics are conducive to the child's rehabilitation.

**Family Counselling:** Social workers provide family therapy to address underlying familial issues like neglect, abuse or conflict that may have contributed to the child's DB. This counselling is aimed at helping the family and support the child's positive development.

**Parental Training:** In some cases, social workers also offer parental training programs to help families develop the skills necessary to care for and supervise their children appropriately.

**Post-release Monitoring:** Upon the release of the child from correctional institutions, social workers continue to engage with families to monitor the child's progress and prevent recidivism. Their role here is to ensure a stable and supportive environment for the juvenile's reintegration (Kumari, V. 2009).

### **D. Legal Advocacy and Representation**

Social workers often serve as advocates for the rights of juveniles within the legal system. They ensure that children are not subjected to unfair trials, excessive punishment, or abuse and that their cases are handled in a



way that prioritizes rehabilitation over incarceration.

**Legal Guardianship:** In many jurisdictions, social workers may act as legal guardians or represent children in Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs), ensuring their rights are protected during legal proceedings.

**Advocating for Alternatives to Detention:** Social workers advocate for non-custodial measures, such as probation, community service, or diversion programs, where the child can be rehabilitated without being detained in juvenile homes or prisons.

**Restorative Justice Practices:** Social workers facilitate restorative justice practices, including victim-offender mediation and community service, as alternatives to punitive approaches, helping to repair harm and reintegrate the child into society (Bajpai, A. 2013).

#### E. Institutional Care and Oversight

For children who are placed in correctional or observation homes, social workers play a vital role in ensuring that the conditions of these institutions meet legal and ethical standards. They regularly monitor the welfare of the children within these institutions and work to ensure that they receive education, vocational training, healthcare, and counselling.

**Supervision of Juvenile Homes:** Social workers are responsible for monitoring juvenile homes and observation centres to ensure that the living conditions are humane, and that children's rights are upheld. They address cases of abuse, neglect, or misconduct within these institutions.

**Linking to External Resources:** Social workers often act as intermediaries, connecting children with external resources, such as educational institutions, vocational training programs and healthcare services (Kaushik, A. (2014).

#### F. Community-Based Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration

One of the primary goals of the Juvenile Justice Act is the reintegration of children into society. Social workers engage with communities to ensure that children leaving juvenile justice institutions are accepted back into their neighbourhoods and schools without stigma or discrimination.

**Community Mobilization:** Social workers often work to raise awareness in communities about the importance of reintegrating children in conflict with the law, thus reducing social stigma. This involves building a supportive network within the community to prevent recidivism.

**Diversion Programs:** These community-based alternatives to formal judicial processing are designed and implemented by social workers. Such programs offer rehabilitation within the community setting, preventing the child from being institutionalized.

**Monitoring and Follow-up:** Social workers frequently conduct follow-up visits to ensure that the child remains on a positive developmental path post-rehabilitation (Petrosino, A., Turpin-Petrosino, C., & Guckenburg, S. 2010).

Social workers play a pivotal role in implementing the objectives of the Juvenile Justice Act by combining their psychosocial expertise with legal advocacy to protect, rehabilitate and reintegrate children in conflict with the law. Their involvement spans the entire continuum of the juvenile justice process from initial assessments to post-release monitoring helping to create an environment where children can develop into responsible and law-abiding citizens. By addressing the individual needs of each child and working closely with families, legal authorities and communities, social workers make a significant contribution to reducing recidivism and promoting restorative justice.

## **6. Psychosocial Recommendation for Children in Conflict with the Law (CCL)**

### **A. Individual Level Interventions**

**Discipline:** Structured programs that emphasize discipline are crucial for shaping juveniles into responsible members of society. Implementing a well-organized daily schedule helps instil discipline, encouraging children to adopt positive behaviours and routines. This fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability, aiding their rehabilitation process.

**Yoga:** Yoga offers numerous benefits for the mental and physical growth of juveniles. By introducing various

practices such as Pranayama, Surya Namaskar, Halasana, Vajrasana, Trikonasana, Bhujangasana, Padmasana, Dhanurasana, Mudrasana, Vakrasana, and Shavasana, juveniles can enhance their physical fitness and mental well-being. These exercises promote flexibility, relaxation, and concentration, helping juveniles manage stress and maintain overall health.

**Meditation:** Regular meditation provides many benefits, including stress relief, improved focus, enhanced emotional stability, and better brain function. For juveniles, meditation can increase attention span, boost metabolism, and strengthen immunity. Introducing early morning meditation sessions with soothing music promotes a calm and positive mood, preparing children for a peaceful and productive day.

**Personality Development:** Building self-confidence and fostering a belief in personal growth are essential components of personality development for juveniles. Through awareness programs, life skills training, and sessions on moral values, efforts are made to help juveniles develop a positive self-image and distance themselves from negative influences. Encouraging juveniles to set goals and work towards their aspirations strengthens their character and self-esteem.

**Counselling:** Consistent counselling by trained professionals is vital in supporting juveniles' mental health. Counselling helps them manage emotional trauma, overcome feelings of stigma, and build self-confidence. By addressing psychological challenges and guiding them towards personal growth and trauma healing, counselling plays a crucial role in their rehabilitation process.

**Art and Craft Therapy:** Engaging in art and craft activities allows juveniles to relax, improve motor skills and experience a sense of achievement. Regular training in various art forms such as music, dance and painting enhances creativity and offers therapeutic benefits. These activities also foster emotional expression and help juveniles build a lifelong hobby, which can serve as a constructive outlet for their energies.

**Farming, Gardening, and Animal Husbandry:** Involving juveniles in farming, gardening, and animal husbandry helps them develop practical skills that can lead to entrepreneurship. These activities teach responsibility, foster a connection with nature, and enable juveniles to cultivate skills that could support their self-sufficiency upon release, aiding their social and economic reintegration.

#### B. Family Level Interventions

**Supportive Psychotherapy:** Supportive psychotherapy is provided to the families of juveniles to enhance their coping mechanisms and reduce the emotional burden. Through active listening and empathetic support, social workers help family members manage their stress and develop a stronger, more cohesive familial environment, which is essential for the juvenile's rehabilitation.

**Enhancing Social Support:** Social support from family and friends plays a significant role in the well-being of juveniles. Social workers aim to foster positive interactions between juveniles and their support networks by enhancing four key types of supportive behaviours:

- o Emotional Support: Offering empathy and reassurance.
- o Instrumental Support: Providing tangible assistance.
- o Informational Support: Sharing helpful information and advice.
- o Appraisal Support: Offering constructive feedback and validation.

#### C. Community Level Interventions

**Vocational and Skill Training:** Institutions must carefully assess each juvenile to identify hidden talents and areas where additional training is required. Providing vocational courses, such as beauty culture, computer skills (e.g., MS Office, tally, hardware), tailoring, and fashion design enables juveniles to gain expertise and enhance their employability. Such training helps them develop life skills and offers a pathway to financial independence, facilitating their reintegration into society.

**Computer Education:** In today's digital age, computer literacy is essential. Offering computer education to juveniles not only equips them with valuable technical skills but also opens new opportunities for them to succeed in various fields. By mastering computer applications, juveniles can apply their knowledge practically and secure a more promising future.

**Community Organization Programs:** Community-based programs are integral to the rehabilitation of juveniles. Social workers help facilitate community mobilization, capacity building, advocacy campaigns and development initiatives. These programs engage community members and organizations to create an environment where juveniles are supported in their journey toward rehabilitation. Key activities include:

**Community Mobilization:** Encouraging active participation of residents in addressing issues related to juvenile rehabilitation.

**Capacity Building:** Offering training and workshops to empower individuals and organizations.

**Advocacy Campaigns:** Raising awareness about juvenile justice and social inclusion.

**Community Development:** Enhancing infrastructure, education, and healthcare services to promote overall community well-being.

By fostering a supportive community and providing access to educational, vocational, and therapeutic resources, these interventions aim to reintegrate juveniles into society, reduce recidivism, and promote long-term positive outcomes.

## **7. Conclusion**

The issue of children in conflict with the law requires a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted risk factors influencing their behaviour, from individual to community levels. Addressing delinquency among children demands not only legal intervention but also psychosocial support, education, family involvement, and community-based rehabilitation programs. By fostering a supportive environment, reinforcing positive development, and emphasizing rehabilitation over punishment, the justice system can offer these children an opportunity for reintegration and a future where they can contribute positively to society. The Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, combined with international human rights standards, provides a robust framework for protecting children's rights while ensuring justice. However, the continued focus must be on preventive interventions, family and community support, and developmental strategies to reduce juvenile offenses and promote the welfare of all children.

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