



POLICY BRIEF

# Closing the Child Justice Data Gap

Incorporating Child-Centred Methodologies  
in Justice Needs Surveys

# Overview

This policy brief explores how to collect child-centred data in practice, providing justice sector practitioners, researchers, and policymakers with actionable methodological insights to safely and rigorously collect data to measure children's justice needs. It serves as a direct follow-on to the Justice for Children Policy Brief: Evidence and Data<sup>1</sup>, published by the Global Working Group on Justice for Children in 2024. The brief established a clear, urgent consensus: children are virtually invisible in global justice data, and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16<sup>2</sup> requires a shift toward child-centred data collection. This current policy brief is designed to operationalise the recommendations set out in 2024.

**Children under the age of eighteen make up 30% of the world's population. In many countries, over half of the population is under the age of eighteen.**<sup>3</sup>

Despite this, children are amongst those most at risk of facing obstacles that prevent them from accessing justice and upholding their rights. The global justice gap affects an estimated 5.1 billion people worldwide<sup>4</sup>, and children experience barriers to justice in distinct, interconnected, and more complex ways. The scale of the challenge is significant. In 2023, more than 473 million children were living in conflict-affected areas; approximately 166 million children under the age of five lacked legal identity; and an estimated 240 million children lived with disabilities, often facing compounded barriers to participation and access to services.<sup>5</sup>

**The growing global movement towards people-centred justice is proving to be wide-reaching and socially transformative.**

Assuring child-centred justice is core to people-centred justice efforts ensures children are supported to prevent the emergence of justice problems, and, when they do arise, empowered to resolve them in an age-appropriate, inclusive, and accessible environment.

**Justice remains largely designed for adults, with adult-focused procedures, definitions, and institutions.**

The need for child-centred pathways to justice is not sufficiently recognised or adequately measured. Children have distinct rights, needs, and experiences when seeking and accessing justice, which are not regularly considered in the design of the systems they navigate. This is rooted in children's human rights, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and affirmed in the upcoming UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.27 on children's right to access to justice and to an effective remedy.

**Children's evolving capacities, limitations placed on their legal agency, restrictions on opportunities to express their views, and reliance on the adults in their lives to facilitate the realisation of their rights create unique obstacles to accessing justice.**

These barriers are particularly acute for children facing exclusion, discrimination, conflict, violence, and all other forms of structural marginalisation.<sup>6</sup>

1 Foussard, C., Shields, S., & Davidson, J. (2024). *Evidence & Data: Child-Centred Methodologies and Gamechangers to Achieve Justice for Children*. Justice for Children Policy Brief Series, Report 3. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde. [www.inspiringchildrensfutures.org/j4c-resources](http://www.inspiringchildrensfutures.org/j4c-resources).

2 SDG 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies. Read more: [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/).

3 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2024). *World Population Prospects 2024*. Online Edition. <https://population.un.org/wpp/>.

4 World Justice Project. (2019). *Measuring the Justice Gap: A People-Centered Assessment of Unmet Justice Needs Around the World*. <https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/measuring-justice-gap>.

5 United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF). (2024). *'Not the new normal' - 2024 'one of the worst years in UNICEF's history' for children in conflict*. Press Release. [www.unicef.org/press-releases/not-new-normal-2024-one-worst-years-unicefs-history-children-conflict](http://www.unicef.org/press-releases/not-new-normal-2024-one-worst-years-unicefs-history-children-conflict).

6 Foussard et al. (2024, p. 13).

### **Evidence and data underpin the realisation of child-centred justice.**

While the common justice problems facing children are known to be driven by systemic factors (such as exclusion, violence, and detention), addressing these problems requires a comprehensive picture which can only be captured in global, child justice data. Robust, child-centred data collection efforts can drive effective responses to both long-standing and emerging justice challenges children face. Evidence can provide the pathway to improve, design, apply, and scale what works well.

### **The persistence of the child justice data gap is not inevitable; it is a design failure.**

Closing this gap requires a fundamental evolution of traditional Legal Needs Surveys, expanding their parameters to capture broader, child-centred justice needs. This approach focuses on lived experiences rather than legal categories and captures the full spectrum of children's rights, justice needs, experiences, and problems. To get there, key priorities for action include:

- Prioritise children in justice data reform efforts: People-centred justice cannot be achieved while children remain largely invisible in the evidence base.
- Move toward holistic justice needs frameworks: Existing approaches lack the flexibility to capture children's experiences and must be complemented or replaced by holistic justice needs frameworks.
- Invest in child-centred methodologies: This includes tools, partnerships, and systems that allow for safe, meaningful participation.
- Strengthen the evidence base on children's everyday justice problems: Current data is often skewed toward civil and family-related issues; more work is needed to understand the full spectrum of children's justice experiences and their systemic drivers.

### **This policy brief offers responses and recommendations on strengthening data collection to close the global child justice data gap. Special emphasis is placed on mobilising child-centred justice needs surveys.**

By establishing actionable methodologies to close the child justice gap, this policy brief contributes to the efforts of HiiL, alongside a growing coalition of national and international actors, in making justice systems more people-centred, driven by the vision of a world where everyone, including children, has access to fair and effective justice. It also contributes to the child-centred justice agenda of the Global Working Group on Justice for Children.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The international, multi-agency Global Working Group on Justice for Children is convened by the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures at the University of Strathclyde, with support from the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies. It includes Child Friendly Justice European Network, Defence for Children International, ECPAT International, International Legal Foundation, the Legal Empowerment Fund, OECD, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, Terre des hommes Lausanne Foundation, and UNICEF. Read more: <https://inspiringchildrensfutures.org/> and <https://inspiringchildrensfutures.org/justice-for-children-justice-for-all>.

# The Child Justice Data Gap

Currently available justice data often does not give the specific insights that justice leaders, policymakers, and funders need to drive systemic change.<sup>8</sup> While global justice data deficits vary widely in nature and substance, the gap is particularly wide when it comes to data on children. This leaves a significant portion of the population excluded from the very datasets used to design people-centred solutions. Addressing this gap requires improving the quality and diversity of data, building a continuum of data across life stages, and ensuring that children's unique justice experiences are understood from their own perspective.

## A. The Data Gap

Current data collection efforts are largely limited to descriptive metrics that lack age-disaggregated, baseline, comparative, and trend data essential to track progress. Furthermore, amongst the descriptive data currently collected, the only consistent data relates to children in conflict with the law, such as those accused of criminal offences or children in detention. Even so, in many places, there is no data on the number of children in detention at any given time.<sup>9</sup>

This creates a significant absence of data capturing children's broader justice journeys. Importantly, critical data such as school attendance rates, access to healthcare, poverty levels, and how those factors intersect with justice interactions, are often not connected. A connected, holistic picture is needed to fully understand the range of factors which shape children's experiences of justice. Without this diverse and integrated evidence base to define what works, policy responses will remain reactive, fragmented, and unable to scale successful interventions.<sup>10</sup>

### IN FOCUS: ESSENTIAL DATA CATEGORIES

To move beyond purely descriptive metrics and build a truly useful evidence base, data collection frameworks should include the following categories of data:

- **Disaggregated data:** Data broken down specifically by age and gender, rather than all children under 18 years of age collected in one category. Example: In England and Wales, Youth Justice Statistics are routinely broken down by age and gender. This allows us to observe that in 2024–25, 78% of children and young people accused of an offence were aged 15–17. Of these, the majority were boys (83%). And so, we can potentially use these stats to guide targeted investment and/or protective measures towards older adolescents.<sup>11</sup>
- **Baseline and comparative data:** The starting point (baseline) is captured, and then compared across time, location, or population group. Example: Data collected shows 50% of children were held in pre-trial detention. 2 years after child-centred policy reform, 10% of children were held in pre-trial detention, showing trackable progress.
- **Trend and longitudinal data:** Data collected over time identifies patterns, changes, or longer-term outcomes. Example: Monitoring an early intervention/diversion programme over the course of 10 years shows a steady decrease in recidivism rates, but spikes in times of financial instability.

8 Chapman, P., et al. (2021). *Grasping the Justice Gap: Opportunities and Challenges for People-Centered Justice Data*. Washington, D.C.: World Justice Project; New York: Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies; Paris: OECD, 2021. p. 45. Available at [www.sdg16.plus/justice/](http://www.sdg16.plus/justice/), <https://worldjusticeproject.org>, and [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org).

9 United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2019). *Global study on children deprived of liberty*. [www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/united-nations-global-study-children-deprived-liberty](http://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/united-nations-global-study-children-deprived-liberty)

10 Davidson et al. (2026, p. 6).

11 UK Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Youth justice statistics 2024 to 2025*. [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2025/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2025](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2025/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2025)

- **Evaluation and impact data:** Data used to assess the effectiveness of a policy, programme, or intervention. Example: Evaluation of free-at-point-of-use, child-friendly legal aid service shows children who received support were more likely to understand judicial proceedings and reported higher satisfaction with the outcome of proceedings.
- **Equally robust quantitative and qualitative data:** Combining numerical data with testimony of children’s views, lived experiences, and justice needs paints a more comprehensive picture. Example: 60% of parents responded to a survey that their children enjoyed adequate access to education. However, interviews with the children revealed that floods in the summer made the journey to school dangerous and caused many missed days of school.

## B. Establishing a Data Age Continuum

Existing justice data about youth illustrates how people of different age categories often have distinct experiences of justice. In HiIL’s Justice Needs and Satisfaction (JNS) data globally, the 18-24 age group is a consistent outlier. Young people typically report fewer ‘traditional’ justice problems, such as land disputes or neighbour problems. Instead, they often report higher rates of crime victimisation, debt-related issues, problems obtaining identity documents, and digital disputes.<sup>12</sup> This trend coincides with young people navigating the distinct life transition known as ‘emerging adulthood’.<sup>13</sup> During this phase, young people begin to take on independent adult responsibilities, such as signing their first contracts, managing debt, and entering the labor market. Often, they do so without the family safety nets that typically shield children, or the established assets and legal experience held by older adults. This young adult data trend indicates that youth under 18 likely also have unique justice needs that cannot simply be inferred from standard adult surveys.

These variations highlight a critical gap in data systems that are siloed by age group, preventing a holistic understanding of justice journeys over time. To ensure child-centred justice is at the heart of people-centred justice efforts, ministries of justice, national statistical bureaus, and international justice data producers must establish a data continuum which builds and links robust child justice data, youth justice data, and adult justice data. This holistic approach helps construct the complete picture of every justice journey, avoids a hierarchy of needs, and allows for an understanding and inclusion of all justice needs.

12 The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiIL). (n.d.). Justice Dashboard. <https://dashboard.hiil.org/>.

13 Arnett, J. J. (2000). *Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties*. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066X.55.5.469>.

## IN FOCUS: CANADA'S LIFE-COURSE DATA CONTINUUM

Connecting data across different age groups helps policymakers track how childhood experiences directly affect legal and social outcomes later in life.

Example: Canada's Justice Data Modernization Initiative (JDMI)<sup>14</sup> provides a strong example of how integrated data systems can link information across child, youth, and adult justice stages. By connecting justice data with other sectors such as health, education, and housing, this life-course approach provides the full continuum of justice needs and experiences. This enables policymakers to track long-term trajectories of justice involvement and design more effective prevention and early intervention strategies.

Meaningful participation is not only about the legitimacy of data collection, but also its relevance. Children bring expertise from their lived experience to make sure that the right questions are asked, needs and experiences are accurately captured, and qualitative insights deepen understanding in a way that statistics never could. To effectively operationalise these partnerships, capacity building must focus heavily on the frontline execution of research. This includes explicitly recruiting and training field researchers and community intermediaries in trauma-informed and child-sensitive communication techniques, which serves as a safeguard to protect children's psychological well-being and actively avoid re-traumatisation during the data collection process.

Mitigating apprehensions and building partnerships with children and young people are both urgent, and can take time. Facilitating the inclusion of children as active participants and agents of change in justice efforts requires both **more** and **less**:

### C. Child-Centred Data

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of data to people-centred justice, child-centred data collection has faced significant challenges. The data gap has been reinforced by understandable apprehension when key stakeholders are faced with exploring how children can safely and meaningfully share their experiences and views to inform reforms. There are legitimate concerns about the ethics and safeguards required to uphold children's rights and refrain from causing further harm during data collection, and the trust and risk appetite required amongst institutions to make this happen. However, child-centred methodologies and building new partnerships with those who do data collection well and those with expertise - child rights experts, data protection experts, social researchers, etc. - can support governments and policymakers to incorporate ethical data collection methods.

#### MORE:

- time
- effort
- expertise
- partnerships
- collaborations
- supportive and supporting adults
- training
- capacity

#### LESS:

- reliance on traditional, adult-centric power dynamics
- assumptions about children's needs and wishes
- practices that speak on behalf of children without ever consulting them

<sup>14</sup> Department of Justice Canada (2022). *Justice Data Modernization Initiative (JDMI)*. Ottawa: Research and Statistics Division. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jdmi-imdj.html>.

This expertise is best realised through participatory action research frameworks. Instead of treating young people as passive subjects, research designs must combine academic expertise with 'expertise by experience', meaningfully engaging youth in co-designing the study, deploying peer-led data collection models, involving them in collaborative data analysis, and including them as co-authors on final research outputs.<sup>15</sup>

## IN FOCUS: YOUTH CO-PRODUCTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Safe and meaningful partnerships with children throughout the research process is essential to ensure justice data truly reflects their real-world experiences and needs.

Example: The *2014 Legal Needs of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland*<sup>16</sup> survey embedded a Young People's Advisory Group to actively co-shape research questions, data collection tools, and interpretation, ensuring that children's lived experiences directly informed justice data. By combining this partnership approach with diverse methods (focus groups, surveys, and stakeholder interviews) and engagement through trusted intermediaries, the study improved both the depth and relevance of data on children's legal needs, demonstrating how meaningful participation strengthens evidence and impact. For more information, see **Annex: Promising Practices..**

## Key Messages for Policymakers

To close the child justice data gap, policymakers and justice leaders must address systemic institutional blind spots and structurally prioritise children within national and global data frameworks. The following key messages outline the strategic commitments and foundations required to establish a comprehensive, people-centred evidence base:

- 1. Close the child justice data gap.**  
People-centred justice cannot be achieved while children remain virtually invisible in the evidence base. Transitioning away from structural design failures requires stakeholders to prioritise children in data reform efforts and dedicated funding pathways specifically for child-centred data gathering.
- 2. Overcome stakeholder apprehensions by building expert partnerships.**  
Legitimate concerns regarding the ethical sensitivities of interviewing minors must not result in their exclusion from data collection. Policymakers need to actively build capacity and form strategic partnerships with child rights organisations, social researchers, and data protection authorities to implement safe, inclusive methodologies.
- 3. Establish a data continuum to capture all justice journeys.**  
Ministries of justice, national statistical bureaus, and international data producers must deliberately build and link robust child, youth, and adult data to construct a complete picture of every justice journey and avoid a hierarchy of needs. This structural continuity is essential because different age, gender, and other groups experience justice distinctly, as evidenced by the 18 - 24 age group acting as a consistent data outlier.

15 Harvey, H., Pierce, J., & Hirshberg, D. (2023). Using Participatory Research to Develop a Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Assessment Tool. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.77624>; Esterhuizen, L. (2012). Child Led Data Collection: A guide for young people to learn how to do research and create positive change. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/child-led-data-collection-guide-young-people-learn-how-do-research-and-create-positive>.

16 Emerson, L., Lloyd, K., Lundy, L., Orr, K., & Weaver, E. (2014). *The Legal Needs of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland; the views of young people and adult stakeholders*. Belfast: Centre for Children's Rights, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast. [https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/files/33279301/LEGAL\\_NEEDS.pdf](https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/files/33279301/LEGAL_NEEDS.pdf).

**4. Expand methodologies to include holistic, everyday justice realities.**

Data frameworks must look beyond narrow, institution-centred legal categories that often do not reflect a child's everyday justice needs. Survey methodologies should explicitly capture the informal, everyday barriers children encounter in their homes, schools, and communities, such as bullying, family conflict, lack of identity documents, and administrative exclusion.

**5. Implement multisectoral data sharing.**

Creating holistic evidence initiatives requires cross-referencing justice data with insights from the education, health, and social welfare sectors. Because a child's justice journey is naturally linked to their environment, integration across these sectors is key to reveal the systemic drivers of their problems.

## Incorporating Child-Centred Methodologies: Children in Legal Needs Surveys

Legal needs surveys (LNS) are the primary instrument used to collect people-centred justice data. Understanding legal needs is crucial due to their link to wider social outcomes. The OECD reports a well-established association between experiencing legal problems and wider societal issues across health, welfare, and well-being<sup>17</sup>. Unresolved legal problems have also been shown to have a distinct adverse impact on young people (15-29), across physical and mental health, loss of income, and increased risk of experiencing violence, homelessness, relationship breakdowns, and barriers to education and employment.<sup>18</sup> And so, needs surveys are a central pillar of data collection and towards people-centred justice evidence, capturing: the types of legal problems people experience, how they attempt to resolve them, and how to understand the justice system from the perspective of those who navigate it.

### Methodological Barriers

Despite their importance, LNS often exclude children. This exclusion happens due to three main methodological barriers:

#### A. Holistic Justice Frameworks

Traditionally, legal needs surveys have focused narrowly on legal problems that explicitly interact with formal justice systems. However, everyday justice problems rarely begin or end in a courtroom, and this is especially true for children. A child's experience of justice is closely intertwined with their familial, social, and educational environments. By rigidly measuring only formal legal categories, data collection efforts overlook the broader range of children's everyday justice needs, such as feeling safe from harm, securing fair outcomes in family separation, or being heard in administrative processes.

17 OECD. (2019). *Equal Access to Justice for Inclusive Growth: Putting People at the Centre*. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/597f5b7f-en>.

18 OECD. (2023). *OECD Child-Friendly Justice Framework: Building a people-centred justice system*. OECD Public Governance Policy Papers. <https://doi.org/10.1787/6a60970e-en>.

When survey designs focus exclusively on narrow legal definitions, they naturally fail to capture the wider social drivers and compounding consequences of unmet needs, effectively excluding children's realities, and likely other marginalised groups as well. Expanding data collection parameters to encompass a holistic, everyday justice framework reframes the methodology around the user's journey. This inclusive approach captures the full lived reality of children's experiences and justice journeys, ensuring that a lack of interaction with justice institutions is no longer treated as an absence of need.

## B. Ethics, Safeguarding and Privacy

Many LNS justify children's exclusion by citing the same ethical, safeguarding and privacy concerns as those discussed in the previous section. Where children are included, participation is often limited to older adolescents (typically, aged 15 and above).<sup>19</sup> In addition, some surveys try to address this gap by surveying justice-experienced adults on the legal needs they experienced during childhood.<sup>20</sup> While these concerns may be credible reasons for children's exclusion – and it is not the intention of this brief to promote children's inclusion in unsafe or tokenistic ways – they do not fully explain children's regular absence from data collection.

To safely operationalise fieldwork, researchers must move beyond treating ethical safeguards as bureaucratic barriers and instead implement a robust, dual-layered consent framework. In practice, this requires pairing formal parental or guardian proxy permission with a distinct, child-friendly ongoing 'assent' process that respects the child's autonomous agency, ensuring they are empowered to refuse to answer or withdraw their participation at any point during the survey framework.<sup>21</sup>

## C. The 'Household Head' Assumption

An additional contributing factor is a misplaced assumption within legal needs survey design that measuring a household head's legal needs sufficiently measures the justice needs of a child in that household. However, children are often only included in survey sections on civil and/or family justice disputes, where adults report how a child was impacted by a family justice process. This assumption overlooks the diversity of children's justice needs and experiences. Furthermore, there can be no assumption or guarantee that a household head is able or willing to accurately recognise and report a child's justice needs. Proxy measurements can distort the reality of children's justice problems, leaving their independent perspective unmeasured.

### IN FOCUS: CAREGIVER PROXY GAPS IN ETHIOPIA

Relying on adult caregivers to report a child's legal problems risks leaving critical safety and protection needs invisible.

Example: Hiil's 2020 Ethiopia JNS<sup>22</sup> provides initial insights into how adult proxy measurements might not reflect the lived realities of children. In the survey, adults were asked to evaluate the outcome of the resolution of their family disputes. In this case, family problems included: divorce, parental/custody rights, disputes over child support, inheritance and wills, forced marriage, among others.

### Strikingly, only 26% of people with resolved family problems reported that the outcome brought safety and security for the children.

While gathering the perspectives of children's primary caregivers is absolutely necessary, it is insufficient. When an adult reports that a dispute has been resolved, a child's independent experience of the process remains unclear and unmeasured.

**In the child's perspective, did the outcome bring them safety and security?** Did they find any services provided to be accessible and helpful? Did they feel protected and informed, or were they marginalised by the justice process? Ultimately, proxy measurements can distort the reality of children's justice problems, experiences and needs.

19 See: Balmer, N. J. (2013). English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice Panel Survey: Wave 2. Legal Services Commission (sampling 16 years old upwards); Coumarelos, C., Macourt, D., People, J., McDonald, H. M., Wei, Z., Iriana, R., & Ramsey, S. (2012). *Legal Australia-wide survey: Legal need in Australia*. Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales (sampling 15 years old upwards); and Coumarelos, C., Wei, Z., & Zhou, A. (2006). *Justice made to measure: NSW legal needs survey in disadvantaged areas*. Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales (sampling 15 years old upwards).  
20 Lightlower, C. (2022). *Improving Legal Support for Children and Young People in Conflict with the Law: A Scoping Study*. Clan Childlaw. [www.clanchildlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/scopingreport-improvinglegalsupportforchildrenandyoungpeopleinconflictwiththelaw003.pdf](http://www.clanchildlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/scopingreport-improvinglegalsupportforchildrenandyoungpeopleinconflictwiththelaw003.pdf).  
21 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti. <https://childethics.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ERIC-compendium-approved-digital-web.pdf>.  
22 Hiil. (2020). *Justice Needs and Satisfaction in Ethiopia 2020*. [www.hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-survey-in-ethiopia/](http://www.hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-survey-in-ethiopia/).

## Structural and Cognitive Barriers

### D. Adapting to Children’s Capacities and Realities

To dismantle the remaining barriers to inclusion, research design must address the structural and cognitive constraints embedded within traditional survey frameworks. Three core reasons why standard methodologies frequently exclude children are:

1. Children’s distinct nature means they may not know their rights;
2. Legal Needs Surveys do not set out to define justice problems in a way that would capture children’s justice needs; and
3. The responsibility of judiciable justice problems often lies with others rather than children.<sup>23</sup>

While these findings accurately describe the limitations of traditional legal needs survey models, they must be treated as design challenges to overcome, rather than justifications for continued data exclusion. A gap in rights awareness is a reflection of inaccessible survey design, not a valid reason to leave one third of the population unmeasured. Children do not need to understand complex legal terminology for their lived experiences to be valid.

Similarly, while adults often hold the formal responsibility for facilitating access to justice, children directly experience both the day to day problems and their ultimate outcomes. Whether dealing with child-specific situations (such as seeking a remedy to bullying at school) or navigating adult-led processes (such as custody or divorce proceedings), children are deeply affected and have an independent right to be heard. Capturing their unmediated perspectives is essential to understanding the actual fairness, effectiveness, and impacts of justice systems (both formal and informal).

Overcoming these structural challenges requires moving beyond rigid, adult-centric design and deploying practical, field-tested tools tailored to children’s capacities. These include:

- **Commitment to qualitative diversity:** Because children experience rights violations differently than adults, traditional interviews often fail to capture accurate representations of their lives. Where appropriate, and with proper ethical caretaking, standard adult survey recruitment ages can be safely lowered to age 16 to include older adolescents. For younger cohorts, however, researchers must deploy distinct child-centred methodologies that take into account children’s evolving capacities, including multi-sensory, ethnographic, visual, arts-based, or play-based data collection processes.<sup>24</sup>
- **Adaptive quantitative tools:** While qualitative methodologies provide crucial depth, scalable data requires adaptive quantitative instruments designed to measure prevalence and track longitudinal trends. Standard quantitative tools must be re-designed for children by utilising age-appropriate language, integrating visual or auditory aids, and decreasing the number of answer choices to reduce cognitive load. This requires extensive survey piloting to rigorously verify that children can comprehend and confidently respond to the instruments.

23 Balmer, N.J., Pleasence, P., McDonald, H.M., & Sandefeur, R.L. (2022). *The Public Understanding of Law Survey (PULS) Annotated Questionnaire*. Melbourne: Victoria Law Foundation. [www.victorialawfoundation.org.au/research-publications/the-puls-annotated-questionnaire](http://www.victorialawfoundation.org.au/research-publications/the-puls-annotated-questionnaire).

24 Sevón, E., Mustola, M., Siippainen, A., & Vlasov, J. (2025). Participatory research methods with young children: a systematic literature review. *Educational Review*, 77(3), 1000–1018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2215465>.

## Key Messages for Policymakers

To operationalise the call to close the data gap, justice researchers and institutions need to implement practical, child-centred methodologies based on what works well. Overcoming traditional design failures requires re-designing data collection methods to meet children's capabilities, using the following tools:

- 1. Dismantle the “household head” assumption in survey design.**  
Survey designs must remove the assumption that measuring a household head's experiences sufficiently captures the reality of children's justice needs. Adults cannot be guaranteed to accurately recognise or report a child's problems, and relying on proxy measurements can distort the distinct reality of children's experiences. Thus, survey parameters need to prioritise gathering children's independent perspectives. Legal Needs Surveys do not set out to define justice problems in a way that would capture children's justice needs; and
- 2. Design data collection tools around children's cognitive capacities.**  
A child's lack of formal rights awareness represents a structural failure of survey design, not a valid reason for data exclusion. Survey instruments must utilise child-friendly adaptations, such as age-appropriate language, visual/auditory aids, and reduced answer choices, validated by extensive field piloting.

- 3. Commit to qualitative diversity to capture complex childhood experiences.**  
Traditional, rigid interview scripts often fail to obtain accurate representations of children's lives. Research designs must actively incorporate diverse, non-traditional methodologies, including multi-sensory, ethnographic, visual, arts-based, or play-based processes.
- 4. Utilise participatory approaches to manage traditional power dynamics.**  
Standard data collection models frequently treat young people as passive subjects. True operationalisation requires shifting to participatory action research frameworks where children and young people act as active co-producers of data through study co-design, peer-led data collection, and collaborative analysis.
- 5. Deploy specialised, trauma-informed field intermediaries.**  
To maintain rigid ethical standards and explicitly prevent re-traumatisation, needs surveys must be supported by trusted community experts. Frontline researchers must be highly trained in child-sensitive, trauma-informed communication techniques.

To see more promising practice examples of children's inclusion in Legal Needs Surveys, see **Annex: Promising Practices**.

## Next Steps

The global movement towards people-centred justice cannot be secured whilst a third of people remain invisible in global and national datasets. Having established why child-centred data is urgent, the international justice sector must now pivot to how it is operationalised.

To transform these insights into sustainable field practices, ministries of justice, national statistical bureaus, donors, and international data producers should prioritise the following actions:

- **Prioritise children in justice data reform efforts:** Systematically review Legal Needs Surveys to eliminate adult proxy dependencies and expand survey parameters to capture children's independent perspectives on their justice needs and experiences.
- **Pilot capacity adapted research instruments:** Fund and conduct field testing for adaptive quantitative tools that minimise the cognitive load on children, alongside diverse, multi-sensory qualitative formats.
- **Institutionalise safeguards and ethical practices:** Standardise data collection protocols to include a dual-layered consent-and-assent framework while implementing comprehensive, trauma-informed communication training for all frontline community researchers.
- **Establish cross-sectoral data ecosystems:** Build secure data-sharing partnerships that link justice metrics with administrative datasets from the education, healthcare, and social welfare sectors to better understand the systemic drivers of children's justice needs.

By actively introducing these child-centred methodologies into mainstream research, the international community can ensure that children are not an afterthought, but active participants, in the realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 16.



### ABOUT THE POLICY BRIEF

This Policy Brief is co-authored by The Hague Institute for Innovation of Justice (HiiL) and the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures at the University of Strathclyde, on behalf of the Global Working Group on Justice for Children.

#### Citation:

Please cite this as Shields, S., Taylor, R., Malik, Z., and Davidson, J. (2026). *Closing the Child Justice Data Gap: Incorporating child-centred methodologies in justice needs surveys*. HiiL Policy Brief.

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# Annex: Promising Practices

## The Legal Needs of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, (2014): Queens University Belfast<sup>25</sup>

### Research methodology:

Data collection occurred across four different sources, including:

- A review of existing data and literature on children and young people's legal needs in Northern Ireland
- 26 semi-structured interviews and a focus group with adult stakeholders
- 91 focus group interviews with children and young people
- An online survey of 426 young people across Northern Ireland.

The research adopted a robust, child-centred, mixed-methods approach which combined desk research with extensive data collection activities across multiple sectors. A major strength was its rights-based approach, placing children and young people at the centre of the research not only as participants but as active contributors through a Young People's Advisory Group. This ensured that research questions, data collection tools, and interpretation were grounded in young people's lived experiences and perspectives.

The study effectively used intermediaries - schools, youth organisations, specialist services, and advocacy bodies - to engage a diverse and often hard-to-reach population of children and young people. This enabled meaningful participation by groups such as young people in care, in detention, special educational settings, minority ethnic communities and those with disabilities, while safeguarding ethical standards and accessibility.

The mixed-methods approach strengthened the evidence-base by allowing for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. This included a comprehensive review of existing research and administrative data, semi-structured interviews with adult stakeholders across legal, education, health, justice and voluntary sectors, in-depth focus groups with young people, and a survey of over 400 secondary school-aged participants.

The research also demonstrated strong multi-sector data sharing and collaboration, drawing on data and insights from 28 organisations including statutory bodies, regulatory authorities, legal service providers, and civil society. While data availability and accessibility varied, the breadth of engagement accounted for this LNS providing a detailed picture of what justice problems faced children and young people in Northern Ireland, how they responded to those justice problems, and crucially, what gaps persisted.

Findings of the most common legal issues experienced by the young people surveyed were buying items that were faulty (79%), having poor or bad service (79%), having noisy neighbours (45%), being spoken to by the police (39%) and being bullied (30%). Fewer than 10 per cent of young people had ever had issues relating to having to get help in school because of a special educational need (9%), feeling treated unfairly by an employer in a part-time job (5%); being involved in legal issues about care, fostering or adoption (4%), being sacked from a part-time job (4%), having to deal with immigration issues (3%) or being expelled from school (1%).

Overall, 19 per cent of the young people surveyed said they had experienced a 'legal need'. Of those who experienced a legal need, 42% felt their need had been met.<sup>26</sup>

25 Emerson, L., Lloyd, K., Lundy, L., Orr, K., & Weaver, E. (2014). *The Legal Needs of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland; the views of young people and adult stakeholders*. Belfast: Centre for Children's Rights, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast. [https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/files/33279301/LEGAL\\_NEEDS.pdf](https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/files/33279301/LEGAL_NEEDS.pdf).

26 Emerson et al. (2022, pp. 6-7).

## Child-Centred Data Collection in Burkina Faso (2022): HiiL; Terre des hommes<sup>27</sup>

In 2022, HiiL and Terre des hommes set out to understand what child-centred data collection might look like in practice.<sup>28</sup> The research focused on the justice needs of internally displaced persons and host communities in Burkina Faso and included a qualitative element specifically addressing children's and adolescent's experiences with legal problems.

Rather than relying on the traditional JNS survey, the study utilised focus groups of six to ten children ages 12 to 15. To create a safe, child-friendly environment, the sessions alternated between discussions, collective games, and individual artistic expressions such as drawing. In order to fully capture the children's experiences, the research also allowed for a flexible definition of a legal problem, accommodating the children's perspectives and allowing them to describe their challenges in their own words.

The groups were mediated by pairs of local child protection professionals, one leading the discussion and another observing and providing any psychosocial support required. The focus groups took place in a safe, well-known place within the displacement camps with the consent of parents or guardians. Adolescents ages 16-18 were included in the traditional quantitative survey, rather than the focus groups.

The researchers concluded:

*'From a methodological point of view, one of the main conclusions that can be drawn from this work is that qualitative research methods such as focus groups and observation are an essential part of data collection. Creating a space for researchers to record their observations of the social dynamics in which an interview or focus group takes place is essential to be able to interpret the results, including to read silences and identify areas of self-censorship'.<sup>29</sup>*

Importantly, this approach recognised the limitations of the traditional JNS data collection methodology and adapted to the needs of the children.<sup>30</sup> Researchers noted that the mixed-gender group settings stopped girls from discussing highly sensitive, taboo topics such as gender-based violence. This emphasises the need for highly tailored approaches, such as dividing respondents by gender, or holding individual interviews, to safely capture the full scope of children's justice needs.

27 HiiL. (2022). *Justice Needs and Satisfaction of IDPs and Host Communities in Burkina Faso*. [www.hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-of-idps-and-host-communities-in-Burkina-faso](http://www.hiil.org/research/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-of-idps-and-host-communities-in-Burkina-faso).

28 HiiL, 2022.

29 Translated from French. Original: « D'un point de vue méthodologique, l'une des principales conclusions que l'on peut tirer de ces travaux est que les méthodes qualitatives de recherche telles que les focus groupes et l'observation sont une partie essentielle de la collecte de données. Créer un espace pour que les chercheurs puissent enregistrer leurs observations de la dynamique sociale dans laquelle se déroule un entretien ou un groupe de discussion est essentiel pour pouvoir interpréter les résultats, y compris pour lire dans les silences et identifier les zones d'autocensure. » See Fichter, P., Hope, K., Jacques L., Mareschal, S. & Salam Zongo A. *Etude Sur Les Besoins Et La Satisfaction En Matière De Justice Dans Les Zones D'accueil Des Populations Déplacées Internes Au: Présentation Des Résultats Des Groupes De Discussion Avec Les Enfants Âgés De 12 À 15 Ans*. Terre des hommes Lausanne Foundation. [www.tdh.org/fr/mediatheque/documents/etude-sur-les-besoins-et-la-satisfaction-en-matiere-de-justice-dans-les-zones-daccueil-des](http://www.tdh.org/fr/mediatheque/documents/etude-sur-les-besoins-et-la-satisfaction-en-matiere-de-justice-dans-les-zones-daccueil-des).

30 Fichter et al. (2022).

## United States (Florida, 2001): Survey on the Legal Needs of Children<sup>31</sup>

Often credited as among the first to include children, the Florida Bar's 'Commission on the Legal Needs of Children' surveyed children directly to understand the legal issues affecting their lives. Children identified justice issues such as a strong demand for independent

legal representation in divorce, custody, care proceedings, school expulsions, and police questioning. They also shared justice problems related to bullying, school discipline, and police harassment.

## Latvia (2022): OECD Legal Needs Survey of Children<sup>32</sup>

Conducted as part of the OECD's *Towards a Child-Friendly Justice System in Latvia: Support to Barnahus Implementation*, this survey captured the everyday justice-related problems experienced by children and young people aged 12–18, their understanding of rights and responsibilities, where they seek help, and how

access to support could be improved. Among 409 participants, 25% reported experiencing at least one legal or justice-related issue between 2020 and 2022, most commonly related to schools, health and welfare, family matters, and employment or financial issues.

## Republic of Moldova (2017): Legal Empowerment Needs Assessment of Youth<sup>33</sup>

Led by the Soros Foundation Moldova in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice, this survey examined the legal needs of young people aged 14–23, with a focus on vulnerable groups. The study found that one in four young people had experienced a legal issue in the previous 12 months, with most seeking help

from informal networks such as family and friends. Key issues included discrimination (particularly affecting Roma youth), reluctance to engage with police, employment challenges, and health-related concerns.

31 The Florida Bar. (2002). *Commission on the Legal Needs of Children*. [www-media.floridabar.org/uploads/2017/04/finalInconversionfromjan-website-file.pdf](http://www-media.floridabar.org/uploads/2017/04/finalInconversionfromjan-website-file.pdf).

32 OECD. (2023). *Towards a Child-friendly Justice System in Latvia: Implementing the Barnahus model*. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/83ab7bf5-en>.

33 Soros Foundation-Moldova. (2017). *Needs Assessment of Legal Empowerment of Youth in the Republic of Moldova*. Center for Sociological Research and Marketing (CBS-AXA). [www.soros.md/event/infografic-abilitare-juridica-tineri-moldova](http://www.soros.md/event/infografic-abilitare-juridica-tineri-moldova).