

Child in Conflict with Law and Role of JJ Act in India

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ABSTRACT

Children are one of the most vulnerable sections of any society. Issues pertaining to crimes committed by children, need to be analyzed bearing in mind their physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual and developmental characteristics. In India, reference to juvenile delinquent has gradually being replaced with the more child centred phrase 'child in conflict with the law' (CCL).

This terminology acknowledges the child as an individual whose behaviour has unfortunately resulted in confrontation with the judicial system as opposed to a per se offender.

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 governs the care of those children accused or found guilty of an offence, the same in tandem tries to harmonise the goals of rehabilitation and social reintegration with accountability and safety to society.

This paper aims to explore the magnitude of juvenile delinquency in the country, the various reasons contributing to juvenile offending that span socio-economic, familial, psychological as well as environmental factors; and the legislative reforms enacted overtime in this field. The working of the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB), the legal principles guiding every action related to an CCL, the detention and bail provisions, Rehabilitation efforts, special procedure for heinous offenses for children in the age group of 16-18 years have been looked into in detail. Chapter XV of the 2015 Act and the preliminary inquiry mechanism would be dealt with.

The paper also gives an insight into relevant judicial pronouncements such as Gopinath Ghosh v. State of West Bengal; Sheela Barse v. Union of India; Salil Bali v. Union of India; Shilpa Mittal v. State (NCT of Delhi); Sampurna Behrui v. Union of India; Barun Chandra Thakur v. Master Bholu, along with analysis of NCRB data for recorded crimes committed by children, to highlight major trends. A broader framework through the International child rights approach via the Convention on the Rights of the child will also be examined in part. This study finds that adolescent crime is multifaceted and cannot be solely due to an individual's 'moral failure'; it can be compounded due to dysfunctional families, peer influences, exclusion in schools, poverty, drug abuse, exploitation and marginalization.

KEYWORDS: Juvenile justice; child in conflict with law; juvenile delinquency; Juvenile Justice Act, 2015; Juvenile Justice Board; rehabilitation; Section 15; preliminary assessment; child rights; restorative justice; social reintegration.

I. INTRODUCTION

Childhood and adolescence are stages of significant physical, emotional, psychological and intellectual development. Consequently, the commission of an offence by a child cannot automatically be understood in the same manner as the commission of an offence by an adult. The traditional expression

“juvenile delinquency” generally referred to criminal or antisocial conduct committed by persons below the age of maturity. In contemporary Indian legal discourse, however, the expression “**child in conflict with law**” has increasingly replaced the terminology of “juvenile offender.”

This change in terminology reflects an important philosophical development. A child is not regarded as permanently delinquent merely because he or she has committed an offence. Instead, the child is understood as a developing individual whose conduct has brought him or her into contact with the law. The focus consequently shifts from punishment alone towards care, protection, development, treatment, rehabilitation and social reintegration¹.

The principal legislation governing this area is the **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015** (“JJ Act”). The Act came into force on January 15, 2016, and provides a specialized legal framework for children in conflict with law and children in need of care and protection². It recognizes that children possess different developmental capacities from adults and therefore require specialized institutions and procedures.

Section 2(13) of the JJ Act defines a “child in conflict with law” as a child who is alleged to have committed, or has committed, an offence and who had not completed eighteen years of age on the date of commission of the offence³. The relevant point for determining juvenility is therefore the child's age on the date of commission of the offence.

Society has a legitimate interest in protecting victims and preventing criminal behaviour. Serious offences committed by adolescents may cause substantial physical and psychological harm and cannot simply be disregarded. At the same time, children remain developmentally different from adults. UNICEF India similarly emphasizes that justice systems designed primarily around adults may fail to respond adequately to children's rights and developmental needs and supports rehabilitation, diversion and child-sensitive procedures⁴.

The central question is therefore how India can respond effectively to criminal conduct by children while protecting both **public safety and the developmental interests of the child**.

Research Methodology

The research adopts a doctrinal and socio-legal methodology. The doctrinal component examines statutes, judicial decisions, constitutional principles and international instruments. The socio-legal component uses crime statistics, institutional reports and policy materials to understand the practical functioning of the juvenile justice system.

The research is primarily qualitative, supported by quantitative secondary data. NCRB statistics are used to identify broad trends in recorded juvenile offending, while judicial decisions are analysed to understand the interpretation and application of juvenile justice legislation.

A significant limitation is that NCRB statistics represent reported and registered offences rather than the complete incidence of juvenile offending. Consequently, the statistics cannot be treated as a complete measurement of actual juvenile crime.

¹ Juvenile Justice (Care & Prot. of Children) Act, 2015, No. 2, Acts of Parliament, 2016 (India), §§ 3, 18, 39–40.

² Id. § 1(3).

³ Id. § 2(13).

⁴ UNICEF India, *Justice for Children*, UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/india/justice-children>.

II. BODY AND ANALYSIS

A. Nature and Extent of Juvenile Crime in India

Juvenile offending may range from minor property offences to serious violent and sexual offences. The existence of juvenile crime must nevertheless be considered within the broader developmental and social context of adolescence.

According to NCRB's *Crime in India 2023*, 31,365 cases were registered against juveniles in 2023, compared with 30,555 cases in 2022, representing an increase of approximately 2.7 percent. The official government data identifies NCRB, Ministry of Home Affairs, as the source agency for the *Crime in India 2023* dataset⁵.

The official NCRB data also contains separate datasets concerning IPC crimes and crimes under Special and Local Laws involving juveniles in conflict with law⁶.

The statistics must nevertheless be interpreted carefully. They represent cases reported to and registered by police authorities and therefore do not measure all offences committed by children. The OGD platform itself cautions that the State and Union Territory figures are supplied by those jurisdictions and should not be compared solely on the basis of crime numbers⁷.

B. Historical Trends

Official parliamentary material records juvenile crime figures of 32,269 cases in 2019, 29,768 in 2020 and 31,170 in 2021⁸.

The decline during 2020 should be interpreted cautiously because the COVID-19 pandemic substantially affected mobility, social interaction, police functioning and judicial processes. Consequently, year-on-year fluctuations should not automatically be treated as evidence of corresponding changes in actual juvenile criminal behaviour.

C. Factors Contributing to Juvenile Offending

Juvenile offending is a multidimensional phenomenon. No single factor can adequately explain why a child becomes involved in criminal activity.

1. Family Environment

Family structure, parental supervision and the quality of family relationships can influence children's behavioural development. Neglect, domestic violence, parental conflict, substance abuse and inadequate supervision may increase vulnerability to behavioural problems.

A difficult family environment, however, does not inevitably produce criminality. The relationship should instead be understood through the interaction of multiple risk factors.

2. Peer Influence

Peer relationships become particularly significant during adolescence. Children may engage in offending because of peer pressure, imitation, a desire for acceptance or fear of exclusion. This is consistent with differential association theory, under which criminal behaviour may be learned through interaction with others.

⁵ National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Crime in India 2023* (2024), <https://kerala.data.gov.in/resource/stateut-wise-indian-penal-code-ipc-crimes-juveniles-conflict-law-during-2023>.

⁶ National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *State/UT-wise Indian Penal Code (IPC) Crimes: Juveniles in Conflict with Law During 2023*, <https://kerala.data.gov.in/resource/stateut-wise-indian-penal-code-ipc-crimes-juveniles-conflict-law-during-2023>.

⁷ Id. The official OGD dataset expressly notes that the data are supplied by States and Union Territories and should not be compared purely on the basis of crime figures, <https://kerala.data.gov.in/resource/stateut-wise-indian-penal-code-ipc-crimes-juveniles-conflict-law-during-2023>.

⁸ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 4552: Crime Against Children* (Mar. 28, 2023).

3. Poverty and Social Exclusion

Economic disadvantage can expose children to circumstances in which education, healthcare, stable housing and family support are limited. Children living or working in vulnerable environments may consequently face increased exposure to criminal networks.

Poverty should not, however, be regarded as an automatic cause of crime. Socioeconomic disadvantage interacts with other social and individual circumstances.

4. School Dropout

Schools provide education, social structure and opportunities for positive peer relationships. School exclusion or dropout may increase unsupervised time and exposure to negative peer influences.

5. Substance Abuse

Substance use may be associated with impulsive behaviour and involvement in criminal activity. Preventive approaches should therefore include counselling and treatment rather than relying exclusively upon punitive measures.

6. Digital Environment

Technological development has created new forms of offending involving online deception, harassment, image-based abuse and other technology-enabled conduct. Juvenile justice policy must therefore also incorporate digital literacy and cyber-awareness.

7. Exploitation by Adults

Children may be persuaded, manipulated, coerced or exploited by adults to participate in criminal activity. UNICEF notes that children who come into conflict with law may have been used or coerced by adults and supports responses that address exploitation and promote rehabilitation and reintegration⁹.

D. Theoretical Perspectives

1. Social Disorganization Theory

Social disorganization theory associates crime with weakening community structures. Poverty, unemployment, inadequate educational facilities and family instability may reduce informal social controls and increase exposure to criminal influences.

2. Differential Association Theory

Edwin H. Sutherland's differential association theory explains criminal behaviour as behaviour learned through social interaction¹⁰. This perspective is particularly relevant during adolescence, when peer relationships can significantly influence behaviour.

3. Strain Theory

Strain theories suggest that offending may result from blocked opportunities, frustration and social pressures. Academic failure, economic disadvantage and perceived inability to achieve socially valued goals may contribute to offending.

This does not mean that poverty inevitably results in crime. Rather, socioeconomic disadvantage may interact with family problems, school exclusion, substance use and negative peer influences.

4. Psychological and Developmental Perspectives

Adolescence is characterized by continuing development in decision-making, impulse control and emotional regulation. This developmental context is especially relevant when considering whether an adolescent should potentially be subjected to adult criminal proceedings.

⁹ UNICEF India, *Justice for Children*, supra note 4. UNICEF identifies adult coercion/exploitation, diversion, restorative justice and reintegration as relevant components of child justice, <https://www.unicef.org/india/stories/justice-children>.

¹⁰ Edwin H. Sutherland, *Principles of Criminology* (4th ed. 1947).

In **Barun Chandra Thakur v. Master Bholu**, the Supreme Court considered the nature of the preliminary assessment required under Section 15 and emphasized consideration of the child's mental and physical capacity, ability to understand consequences and the circumstances of the alleged offence¹¹.

E. Evolution of Juvenile Justice Legislation in India

The development of juvenile justice law in India reflects a gradual movement towards specialized and child-centred justice.

Various State Children Acts were followed by the **Juvenile Justice Act, 1986**, followed by the **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000**. The 2015 Act substantially replaced the earlier framework and introduced classifications of petty, serious and heinous offences.

The current statute specifically provides a preliminary-assessment mechanism for children who have completed or are above sixteen years of age and are alleged to have committed heinous offences¹².

F. Principles of the Juvenile Justice Act

Section 3 of the JJ Act establishes the general principles governing administration of the Act, including presumption of innocence, dignity and worth, participation, best interests of the child, family responsibility, safety, positive measures, non-stigmatizing semantics, institutionalization as a measure of last resort, fresh start and diversion¹³.

These principles demonstrate that the JJ Act is not merely a sentencing statute. It establishes a framework directed towards protection, development, rehabilitation and reintegration.

G. Juvenile Justice Boards

The Juvenile Justice Board is the principal institutional mechanism for dealing with children in conflict with law. Sections 4 and 8 of the Act establish and define the functions and responsibilities of the Board¹⁴.

The Board performs functions including conducting inquiries, considering bail applications, examining the circumstances of the child, passing appropriate rehabilitation-related orders and conducting preliminary assessment where Section 15 applies.

The JJB therefore differs substantially from an ordinary criminal court. Its statutory framework is designed around a child-friendly and rehabilitative approach.

H. Bail and Detention

Section 12 of the JJ Act establishes the statutory framework concerning bail for a child alleged to be in conflict with law¹⁵. The provision reflects the broader principle that unnecessary deprivation of liberty should be avoided.

The international framework similarly emphasizes that deprivation of liberty should be used only as a last resort and for the minimum necessary period. The United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty expressly characterize imprisonment as a last resort and emphasize reintegration into society¹⁶.

I. Preliminary Assessment Under Section 15

¹¹ *Barun Chandra Thakur v. Master Bholu*, (2022) 10 SCC 184 (India).

¹² Juvenile Justice (Care & Prot. of Children) Act, 2015, No. 2, Acts of Parliament, 2016 (India), § 15. The official India Code text confirms that Section 15 requires assessment of mental capacity, physical capacity, ability to understand consequences and the circumstances of the alleged offence and permits assistance from psychologists or psycho-social workers.

¹³ Id. § 3.

¹⁴ Id. §§ 4, 8.

¹⁵ Id. § 12.

¹⁶ United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty ¶¶ 1–3, G.A. Res. 45/113, annex, U.N. Doc. A/RES/45/113 (Dec. 14, 1990), https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/res45_113.pdf

Section 15 is one of the most significant and controversial provisions of the 2015 Act. Where a child who has completed or is above sixteen years is alleged to have committed a heinous offence, the Board must conduct a preliminary assessment concerning:

- the mental capacity of the child to commit the alleged offence;
- the physical capacity of the child to commit the alleged offence;
- the ability of the child to understand the consequences of the alleged offence; and
- the circumstances in which the offence was allegedly committed¹⁷.

The Board may take assistance from experienced psychologists, psycho-social workers or other experts¹⁸. Importantly, the provision does **not automatically convert every sixteen-to-eighteen-year-old accused of a heinous offence into an adult accused**. Instead, it establishes an individualized assessment mechanism.

J. Barun Chandra Thakur v. Master Bholu

The Supreme Court's decision in *Barun Chandra Thakur v. Master Bholu* is central to the interpretation of Section 15. The Court emphasized that the preliminary assessment requires careful consideration of the child's developmental and psychological capacities rather than a mechanical determination of whether the child knew that the conduct was wrong¹⁹.

The decision reinforces the importance of expert assistance and indicates that Section 15 is intended to operate as a substantive safeguard in determining whether the circumstances justify the subsequent statutory process applicable to older adolescents.

K. Shilpa Mittal v. State (NCT of Delhi)

In *Shilpa Mittal v. State (NCT of Delhi)*, the Supreme Court considered the meaning of “heinous offence” under the JJ Act²⁰.

The Court held that an offence carrying a maximum punishment of more than seven years but without a prescribed minimum sentence of seven years does not fall within the statutory definition of a heinous offence under Section 2(33). Such an offence was to be treated as a serious offence under the statutory scheme²¹.

The classification of an offence is important because it determines the procedural framework applicable to the child.

L. Salil Bali v. Union of India

The debate concerning juvenile justice intensified following the 2012 Delhi gang-rape case. One major issue was whether the age of juvenility should be reduced in response to serious offences committed by adolescents.

In *Salil Bali v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court considered constitutional challenges to the juvenile justice framework and upheld the fundamental basis of specialized juvenile justice²².

The decision demonstrates the importance of maintaining a broader developmental and constitutional perspective rather than allowing exceptional cases to determine the general philosophy of juvenile justice.

¹⁷ Juvenile Justice (Care & Prot. of Children) Act, 2015, § 15(1).

¹⁸ Id.

¹⁹ *Barun Chandra Thakur v. Master Bholu*, (2022) 10 SCC 184 (India).

²⁰ *Shilpa Mittal v. State (NCT of Delhi)*, (2020) 2 SCC 787 (India).

²¹ Id.

²² *Salil Bali v. Union of India*, (2013) 7 SCC 705 (India). The Supreme Court judgment is available through the Supreme Court of India's official repository, <https://api.sci.gov.in/jonew/judis/40577.pdf>

M. Sheela Barse v. Union of India

In *Sheela Barse v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court emphasized the need for special protection of children in custody and addressed the inappropriate placement of children in ordinary prison environments²³.

The decision illustrates the constitutional importance of ensuring that children deprived of liberty receive treatment appropriate to their age and status.

N. Sampurna Behrua v. Union of India

In *Sampurna Behrua v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court examined the implementation of juvenile justice legislation and identified problems concerning institutional mechanisms, including Juvenile Justice Boards and child-protection authorities²⁴.

The Court specifically recognized the importance of effective implementation and directed attention towards ensuring that statutory institutions actually function as contemplated by law²⁵.

The case therefore demonstrates that legislative reform alone is insufficient; effective juvenile justice depends upon institutional implementation.

O. International Child-Rights Framework

India's juvenile justice framework should also be understood against the background of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**.

Article 1 defines a child, for purposes of the Convention, as every human being below eighteen years unless majority is attained earlier under applicable law. Article 3 establishes the best interests of the child as a primary consideration, while Article 40 requires children accused or found to have infringed penal law to be treated consistently with their dignity and worth and in a manner conducive to reintegration²⁶.

The **Beijing Rules**, **Riyadh Guidelines** and **Havana Rules** similarly emphasize child-sensitive justice, prevention, diversion, proportionality and limitations on deprivation of liberty²⁷.

P. Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration

Rehabilitation is central to the JJ Act. The statutory framework provides for measures directed towards education, vocational development, counselling, psychological support and social reintegration²⁸.

UNICEF similarly supports diversion, restorative justice, community-based alternatives and individualized reintegration plans for children who come into contact with justice systems²⁹.

The appropriate intervention should therefore be individualized. A child involved in a property offence because of socioeconomic hardship may require a different intervention from a child involved in organized violent activity.

²³ *Sheela Barse v. Union of India*, (1988) 4 SCC 226 (India).

²⁴ *Sampurna Behrua v. Union of India*, (2018) 4 SCC 433 (India). The Supreme Court's judgment was delivered in W.P. (C) No. 473 of 2005 and concerned implementation of juvenile justice legislation. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/67162757/>

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Convention on the Rights of the Child arts. 1, 3, 40, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3. Article 40 specifically addresses the treatment and reintegration of children alleged or found to have infringed penal law, <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=3xS6qVjYj3Y6nv5Ov0ikcob%2BI93eLLKwJIpNc70XlpyM1VxhBUR e7VPAjTH03ZNLUqTUgOZZE3srxC32rnjfw%3D%3D>

²⁷ United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (The Beijing Rules), G.A. Res. 40/33, annex, U.N. Doc. A/RES/40/33 (Nov. 29, 1985); United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (The Riyadh Guidelines), G.A. Res. 45/112, annex, U.N. Doc. A/RES/45/112 (Dec. 14, 1990); United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty, G.A. Res. 45/113, annex, U.N. Doc. A/RES/45/113 (Dec. 14, 1990). The official UN material confirms the Beijing Rules and the Havana Rules as United Nations juvenile-justice standards, <https://cambodia.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/UN%20Beijing%20Rules-En.pdf>.

²⁸ Juvenile Justice (Care & Prot. of Children) Act, 2015, §§ 39–40.

²⁹ UNICEF India, *Justice for Children*, supra note 4. UNICEF expressly identifies diversion, restorative justice, community-based alternatives and personalized reintegration services. <https://www.unicef.org/india/stories/justice-children>

Q. Institutionalization

Institutionalization should not become the default response to juvenile offending. The JJ framework recognizes institutionalization as a measure of last resort³⁰.

The United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty likewise provide that deprivation of liberty should be a last resort and for the minimum necessary period³¹.

Institutional placement may be necessary where intensive intervention is required or where the child cannot safely remain in the family environment. However, institutions should promote education, counselling, healthcare, recreation, skills development and social reintegration rather than replicate prison conditions.

R. Challenges in Implementation

Several implementation challenges remain:

- inadequate infrastructure in some JJBs and child-care institutions;
- shortages of psychologists, counsellors, probation officers and social workers;
- procedural delays;
- inadequate aftercare;
- insufficient longitudinal data concerning rehabilitation and recidivism; and
- inconsistent institutional implementation.

The Supreme Court's observations in *Sampurna Behrua* are particularly relevant because the Court found significant problems in the implementation of juvenile justice legislation and stressed the need for functional institutions³².

S. Findings

The analysis demonstrates that juvenile offending is multidimensional and cannot be explained exclusively through individual moral failure.

NCRB's 2023 data demonstrates that juvenile crime remains an important policy issue, while also requiring careful interpretation because it represents registered crime rather than the complete incidence of offending³³.

The statutory philosophy of the JJ Act places substantial emphasis on rehabilitation, social reintegration and child protection. At the same time, the Act recognizes the need for individualized accountability in certain heinous-offence cases involving adolescents above sixteen years.

Judicial decisions have played a particularly important role in ensuring that these safeguards are interpreted consistently with developmental and constitutional principles.

T. Recommendations

The following reforms are recommended:

1. **Strengthen Juvenile Justice Boards** through adequate infrastructure, trained members and child-friendly facilities.

³⁰ Juvenile Justice (Care & Prot. of Children) Act, 2015, § 3.

³¹ United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty ¶¶ 1–3, G.A. Res. 45/113, annex, U.N. Doc. A/RES/45/113 (Dec. 14, 1990). https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/res45_113.pdf

³² *Sampurna Behrua v. Union of India*, (2018) 4 SCC 433 (India). The Supreme Court specifically discussed deficiencies in implementation and the need for functioning Juvenile Justice Boards and Child Welfare Committees. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/67162757/>

³³ National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Crime in India 2023* (2024). The official OGD material identifies the NCRB dataset and cautions against purely numerical comparisons among States and Union Territories. <https://kerala.data.gov.in/resource/stateut-wise-indian-penal-code-ipc-crimes-juveniles-conflict-law-during-2023>.

2. **Ensure meaningful psychological and psychosocial assessment** under Section 15.
3. **Expand diversion** for appropriate cases.
4. **Strengthen family intervention** through counselling and parental support.
5. **Guarantee educational continuity** during and after interaction with the justice system.
6. **Expand vocational training** and employment assistance.
7. **Improve mental-health services** in observation homes and places of safety.
8. **Develop effective aftercare** involving education, employment, mentoring and family support.
9. **Improve police training** in child-sensitive investigation and interviewing.
10. **Address adult exploitation** by identifying and prosecuting adults who recruit or coerce children.
11. **Improve longitudinal data collection** concerning rehabilitation and recidivism.
12. **Encourage restorative justice** where appropriate and where victim rights are protected.
13. **Reduce procedural delays** in juvenile cases.
14. **Improve institutional conditions** so that observation homes and places of safety do not resemble prisons.
15. **Protect children from stigmatization** through confidentiality and the fresh-start principle.

III. CONCLUSION

Juvenile offending is a complex social and legal problem that cannot be adequately addressed through punishment alone. Children differ from adults in their cognitive, emotional, psychological and social development. Consequently, criminal conduct by children must be considered within the broader context of childhood and adolescence.

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 establishes a comprehensive statutory framework based upon care, protection, development, treatment, rehabilitation and social reintegration. The establishment of Juvenile Justice Boards, the statutory provisions relating to bail, specialized procedures and the emphasis on rehabilitation demonstrate the child-centred character of the legislation. At the same time, the Act recognizes the need for accountability in serious cases. Section 15 establishes a preliminary-assessment mechanism where children above sixteen years are alleged to have committed heinous offences. The Supreme Court's decision in *Barun Chandra Thakur* is particularly important because it emphasizes that such assessment must be comprehensive and informed by psychological and developmental considerations.

The decisions in *Salil Bali*, *Shilpa Mittal*, *Sheela Barse* and *Sampurna Behrui* further demonstrate the importance of judicial oversight in preserving child-sensitive principles and ensuring effective implementation of the statutory framework.

The NCRB data indicates that juvenile offending remains a matter of policy significance. However, registered crime should not be interpreted as evidence that adolescents are inherently criminal. Instead, prevention and intervention should focus on the developmental stage of adolescence and the social conditions associated with offending.

An effective juvenile justice system should therefore pursue **accountability without unnecessary stigmatization and rehabilitation without ignoring public safety**.

India should consequently pursue a four-pillar approach based on **child rights, accountability, rehabilitation and public safety**. These principles are complementary rather than contradictory. A system that successfully rehabilitates children and prevents reoffending can simultaneously protect children, victims and society.