

**Drug Abuse and Youth Crime in Pakistan: An Empirical Investigation of the Relationship
Between Substance Addiction and Juvenile Delinquency**

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ABSTRACT

Drug abuse has emerged as one of the most serious public health and social challenges worldwide, with profound implications for crime, public safety, and youth development. In Pakistan, the increasing prevalence of substance addiction among adolescents and young adults has raised concerns regarding its relationship with juvenile delinquency and criminal behavior. Although drug use and crime are closely associated, the relationship is complex and cannot be explained solely by the need to finance drug consumption. Existing research suggests that socioeconomic deprivation, family dysfunction, peer influence, psychological disorders, unemployment, and limited access to education interact with substance abuse to increase the likelihood of juvenile offending. This study critically examines the relationship between drug addiction and youth crime in Pakistan by reviewing empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives on substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. It evaluates how drug dependence contributes to various forms of criminal behavior, including theft, robbery, violence, drug trafficking, and other offenses committed by juveniles. The paper further explores the role of Pakistan's criminal justice system, rehabilitation services, and drug treatment programs in addressing substance-related offending. The findings indicate that punitive criminal justice responses alone are insufficient to reduce drug-related crime. Instead, comprehensive prevention strategies, accessible treatment facilities, community-based rehabilitation programs, family support services, educational interventions, and evidence-based public policies are essential for reducing both substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. The study concludes that strengthening rehabilitation and reintegration mechanisms, rather than relying primarily on punishment, can significantly improve youth outcomes, reduce recidivism, and enhance public safety in Pakistan.

Keywords: Drug abuse, substance addiction, juvenile delinquency, youth crime, rehabilitation, criminal justice system, Pakistan, substance use disorder, crime prevention, public health

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Drug abuse and youth crime have become major public health, social, and criminal justice concerns in Pakistan. The increasing prevalence of substance addiction among adolescents and young adults has contributed to rising rates of juvenile delinquency, violent crime, theft, drug trafficking, and other criminal activities. As one of the world's youngest countries, with approximately 64% of its population under the

age of 30, Pakistan possesses significant human capital that could drive national development. However, persistent socioeconomic inequalities, widespread unemployment, poverty, inadequate educational opportunities, family instability, and limited access to mental health and rehabilitation services have increased the vulnerability of many young people to substance abuse and criminal behavior.

The relationship between drug abuse and youth crime is complex and multidimensional. While substance addiction is strongly associated with criminal behavior, it is rarely the sole cause of delinquency. Rather, drug abuse interacts with various structural, psychological, economic, and environmental factors that collectively increase the likelihood of criminal involvement. Young people suffering from substance dependence may engage in theft, robbery, burglary, drug trafficking, cybercrime, gang-related activities, and violent offenses to finance their addiction or as a consequence of impaired judgment and reduced self-control. Conversely, involvement in criminal networks often exposes juveniles to illicit drug markets, creating a cycle in which crime and substance abuse reinforce one another.

Pakistan has experienced rapid urbanization, population growth, economic instability, and widening social inequalities during the past two decades. These structural challenges have intensified competition for employment, education, and social mobility, leaving many young people marginalized and socially excluded. Economic deprivation, peer pressure, family disintegration, school dropout, domestic violence, and weak community support systems have further increased the risk of both drug addiction and juvenile delinquency.

This study examines the empirical relationship between drug abuse and youth crime in Pakistan by investigating how substance addiction contributes to juvenile delinquency within the broader context of socioeconomic deprivation, family dynamics, peer influence, and institutional effectiveness. It seeks to identify the underlying factors linking substance abuse to criminal behavior and to evaluate the effectiveness of existing prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation mechanisms. The findings are expected to contribute to the fields of criminology, public health, sociology, and criminal justice by providing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, educators, healthcare professionals, and social welfare institutions.

Ultimately, addressing youth crime in Pakistan requires a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach that extends beyond punitive criminal justice responses. Sustainable solutions should prioritize drug prevention, quality education, employment opportunities, family strengthening, mental health services, community engagement, and effective rehabilitation programs. By addressing the root causes of substance abuse and juvenile delinquency, Pakistan can better protect its youth, reduce crime, strengthen public safety, and promote long-term social and economic development.

Urbanization, Social Disorganization, Family Dynamics, and Peer Influence

Urbanization and Social Disorganization

Rapid and unplanned urbanization has become one of the most significant structural factors contributing to youth crime and substance abuse in Pakistan. Over the past few decades, major metropolitan cities such as Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Faisalabad, and Peshawar have experienced substantial population growth due to rural-to-urban migration. Young people migrate to urban centers in search of better educational opportunities, employment, and improved living standards. However, the inability of urban infrastructure and public institutions to accommodate this rapid population growth has resulted in overcrowded settlements, inadequate housing, unemployment, poverty, and limited access to quality education and healthcare services.

According to **Social Disorganization Theory**, communities characterized by poverty, residential instability, social inequality, and weak social institutions are less capable of maintaining informal social control, thereby increasing opportunities for criminal behavior. In many urban slums of Pakistan, weakened neighborhood cohesion, limited community participation, and ineffective law enforcement have created environments where juvenile delinquency, gang activities, drug trafficking, and violent crime are more likely to flourish.

Young people living in socially disorganized communities often encounter criminal subcultures at an early age. Exposure to drug markets, organized criminal groups, and street violence normalizes deviant behavior and increases the probability of involvement in criminal activities. Street children and homeless adolescents are particularly vulnerable because they frequently lack parental protection, educational opportunities, and stable sources of income. As a result, many become involved in theft, drug distribution, begging networks, or other forms of juvenile delinquency as survival strategies. These conditions illustrate that youth crime is not solely the result of individual choices but also reflects broader structural deficiencies within rapidly urbanizing societies.

Family Breakdown and Psychological Factors

The family serves as the primary institution responsible for children's socialization, moral development, and emotional well-being. Stable family environments provide supervision, discipline, emotional support, and positive role models that discourage delinquent behavior. Conversely, family instability significantly increases the risk of juvenile offending and substance abuse.

Pakistan has experienced considerable changes in family structures due to economic hardship, unemployment, labor migration, marital conflict, and rapid social transformation. Many households struggle with financial insecurity, domestic violence, parental separation, substance abuse within the family, and inadequate parental supervision. Such adverse experiences can have long-lasting psychological effects on children and adolescents.

Children raised in dysfunctional family environments often experience neglect, emotional abuse, physical violence, or inconsistent parenting. These experiences may contribute to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, aggression, and poor emotional regulation. Psychological distress can, in turn, increase vulnerability to substance abuse and criminal behavior as young people attempt to cope with stress or seek acceptance from peers.

Social Control Theory suggests that weak attachment to parents, schools, and community institutions reduces individuals' commitment to conventional social norms. When parental monitoring and emotional support are absent, adolescents are more likely to associate with delinquent peer groups and engage in risky behaviors. Therefore, strengthening family relationships and providing parental support programs are essential components of effective crime prevention strategies.

Peer Influence, Substance Abuse, and Youth Crime

Peer influence represents one of the strongest predictors of adolescent behavior. During adolescence, young people increasingly seek acceptance, identity, and social belonging from their peer groups. While positive peer relationships can promote healthy development, association with delinquent peers substantially increases the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities and substance abuse.

Differential Association Theory argues that criminal behavior is learned through interaction with individuals who support or normalize illegal conduct. Adolescents who regularly associate with peers

involved in drug use, theft, gang membership, or violent activities are more likely to adopt similar behaviors through observation, imitation, and social reinforcement.

Drug abuse is closely intertwined with youth crime in Pakistan. Many adolescents initially experiment with narcotics due to curiosity, peer pressure, emotional distress, or a desire for social acceptance. Commonly abused substances include cannabis, heroin, methamphetamine (commonly known as "ice"), prescription medications, and synthetic drugs. As addiction develops, individuals may commit offenses such as theft, burglary, robbery, drug trafficking, and other property crimes to finance their substance dependence. Furthermore, drug markets often expose juveniles to organized criminal networks, increasing their involvement in serious criminal activities.

The relationship between substance abuse and crime is reciprocal. Drug addiction may increase criminal behavior through impaired judgment, reduced self-control, and financial pressures, while participation in criminal activities simultaneously increases exposure to illicit drugs. Consequently, effective prevention requires integrated approaches that address both substance dependence and juvenile delinquency.

Media, Digital Technology, and Emerging Forms of Youth Crime

Advances in digital technology and widespread access to social media have transformed the social environment in which young people develop. While digital platforms provide educational and economic opportunities, they also expose adolescents to harmful online content, cybercrime, misinformation, extremist ideologies, and criminal subcultures.

Exposure to violent media, online gambling, drug-related content, and the glorification of criminal lifestyles may influence adolescents' attitudes toward violence and illegal behavior. Social media platforms sometimes portray wealth acquired through criminal activities as desirable, encouraging unrealistic expectations regarding success and social status. When these expectations conflict with limited economic opportunities, frustration and social strain may increase the likelihood of deviant behavior.

In addition, the rapid expansion of internet access has contributed to new forms of youth offending, including cyberbullying, identity theft, online fraud, financial scams, digital harassment, and unauthorized access to computer systems. These emerging crimes require modern policing strategies, digital literacy education, and stronger cybersecurity awareness among young people.

Overall, urbanization, family instability, peer influence, substance abuse, and digital environments are interconnected factors that collectively shape juvenile delinquency in Pakistan. Addressing youth crime therefore requires comprehensive policies that strengthen families, improve urban governance, expand educational and employment opportunities, enhance mental health services, combat drug abuse, and promote positive youth engagement within communities.

Educational Failures, Governance Deficits, Cultural Pressures, and the Constitutional Framework for Youth Offender Rehabilitation

Educational Failures and Lack of Opportunities

Education is widely recognized as one of the most effective protective factors against juvenile delinquency and substance abuse. A quality education system equips young people with knowledge, life skills, ethical values, and employment opportunities, thereby reducing their vulnerability to criminal behavior. However, Pakistan's education sector continues to face persistent structural challenges, including unequal access to

education, inadequate infrastructure, high dropout rates, teacher shortages, low educational quality, and significant disparities between urban and rural regions.

According to national and international education reports, millions of school-age children in Pakistan remain out of school, while many who enroll fail to complete secondary education. Economic hardship, child labour, early marriages, inadequate school facilities, and regional inequalities contribute significantly to educational exclusion. As a result, many adolescents enter adulthood without the qualifications and skills necessary to compete in an increasingly competitive labour market.

Even among graduates, a substantial mismatch exists between academic qualifications and labour market demands. Universities often produce graduates whose skills do not correspond with the requirements of modern industries, particularly in areas such as information technology, technical education, entrepreneurship, and vocational training. Consequently, youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistent challenges despite increasing educational attainment.

From the perspective of **Strain Theory**, when young people are unable to achieve socially valued goals such as education, employment, financial independence, and social mobility through legitimate means, they may experience frustration, disappointment, and social strain. Under these circumstances, some individuals may resort to illegal activities including theft, fraud, cybercrime, drug trafficking, or gang involvement—as alternative means of achieving economic survival or social recognition. Therefore, strengthening educational quality, expanding vocational education, and improving employment opportunities should be considered essential components of youth crime prevention strategies.

Governance Failures and Weak Criminal Justice Institutions

Structural weaknesses within state institutions significantly contribute to the persistence of youth crime in Pakistan. Effective governance requires transparent institutions, efficient law enforcement agencies, accessible judicial systems, and comprehensive rehabilitation mechanisms. However, various governance challenges including corruption, political interference, institutional inefficiency, and limited administrative capacity continue to undermine the effectiveness of Pakistan's criminal justice system.

One of the principal concerns is the inconsistent enforcement of criminal laws. Weak investigative capacity, shortages of trained personnel, procedural delays, and limited accountability reduce public confidence in law enforcement institutions. When criminal behavior is not investigated promptly or prosecuted effectively, the perceived risk of punishment decreases, thereby weakening the deterrent effect of the justice system.

Judicial delays represent another significant institutional challenge. Criminal cases involving juveniles often remain pending for extended periods because of overloaded courts, procedural complexities, and shortages of judges. Such delays not only violate the principle of speedy justice but also expose young offenders to prolonged uncertainty, psychological stress, and social stigmatization.

Furthermore, rehabilitation services remain inadequate across many regions of Pakistan. Limited numbers of probation officers, psychologists, social workers, vocational instructors, and rehabilitation centres reduce opportunities for successful reintegration into society. Without appropriate educational, psychological, and vocational interventions, many juvenile offenders face difficulties in returning to productive community life, increasing the likelihood of repeat offending.

Consequently, institutional reform should focus not only on improving law enforcement and judicial efficiency but also on strengthening rehabilitation services, community-based corrections, and restorative justice mechanisms.

Cultural and Societal Pressures

Youth behaviour is influenced not only by economic and institutional conditions but also by cultural values, gender expectations, and societal norms. In Pakistan, traditional concepts of honour, masculinity, family reputation, and social status often shape the behaviour and decision-making processes of young people.

Young males, in particular, frequently experience social pressure to become primary economic providers for their families. In circumstances where legitimate employment opportunities are limited, this expectation may generate considerable psychological stress and economic frustration. Some adolescents may therefore become involved in criminal activities, including theft, drug trafficking, organized crime, or financial fraud, in an attempt to achieve economic success or maintain social status.

Gender inequality further contributes to social exclusion among vulnerable groups. While young men may face pressure to fulfil traditional provider roles, young women often encounter barriers to education, employment, and participation in public life. Marginalized youth—including children living in poverty, street children, refugees, and individuals with disabilities—are particularly vulnerable to criminal exploitation because of limited access to social protection, education, and economic opportunities.

Media and digital technologies also influence contemporary youth culture. Exposure to violent entertainment, criminal lifestyles, online gambling, cybercrime, and substance-related content may normalize illegal behaviour and encourage unrealistic expectations regarding wealth and social success. Consequently, digital literacy, responsible media consumption, and community awareness programs should form integral components of youth crime prevention strategies.

Constitutional Principles Supporting Youth Offender Rehabilitation

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan provides the legal and moral foundation for protecting children's rights and promoting rehabilitation within the juvenile justice system. Constitutional principles recognize that juveniles require special legal safeguards because of their age, developmental stage, and capacity for reform.

The Constitution emphasizes equality before the law, due process, human dignity, and the protection of vulnerable groups. These constitutional guarantees support a juvenile justice system that prioritizes rehabilitation, education, and reintegration rather than purely punitive responses.

Article 25: Equality Before the Law

Article 25 guarantees that all citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal legal protection. Although equality is a fundamental constitutional principle, Article 25(3) permits the State to enact special legislation for the protection of women and children. This provision provides the constitutional basis for specialized juvenile justice legislation, including the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018.

Article 37: Promotion of Social Justice

Article 37 requires the State to promote social justice and improve the welfare of vulnerable populations. This constitutional obligation supports government initiatives relating to child welfare, education,

healthcare, vocational training, rehabilitation, and social protection. Effective juvenile rehabilitation programs are therefore consistent with the broader constitutional objective of promoting equitable social development.

Article 10A: Right to Fair Trial

Article 10A guarantees every individual the right to a fair trial and due process of law. Within the juvenile justice context, this includes timely judicial proceedings, access to legal representation, impartial courts, and procedural safeguards that protect children's rights throughout the criminal justice process. Ensuring fair trial rights is essential for preventing miscarriages of justice and promoting confidence in juvenile justice institutions.

Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 and Youth Rehabilitation

The **Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018** represents Pakistan's primary legal framework governing children in conflict with the law. The Act reflects constitutional principles and international human rights standards by emphasizing rehabilitation, diversion, and reintegration.

Key features of the Act include:

- establishment of specialized procedures for juvenile offenders;
- diversion programs for minor offences to reduce unnecessary criminalization;
- probation and community-based rehabilitation measures;
- provision of state-funded legal assistance for eligible juveniles;
- prohibition of the death penalty and life imprisonment without the possibility of release for offences committed by juveniles;
- protection of juveniles during arrest, investigation, and trial;
- establishment of Juvenile Justice Committees to facilitate diversion, mediation, and alternative dispute resolution; and
- encouragement of rehabilitation through education, counselling, vocational training, and family reintegration.

Although the Juvenile Justice System Act provides a progressive legal framework, effective implementation remains dependent upon adequate institutional resources, trained professionals, inter-agency coordination, and sustained political commitment. Strengthening these institutional capacities is essential to achieving the constitutional objective of protecting children while promoting rehabilitation and reducing juvenile recidivism.

Research Problem

Drug abuse among adolescents and young adults has become one of the most pressing public health and criminal justice challenges in Pakistan. The growing availability of illicit drugs, increasing rates of substance dependence, and the involvement of juveniles in drug-related crimes have raised serious concerns

among policymakers, law enforcement agencies, educators, and public health professionals. Although numerous studies acknowledge a relationship between substance abuse and criminal behavior, empirical evidence explaining how drug addiction contributes to juvenile delinquency in Pakistan remains limited.

Socioeconomic inequalities, poverty, unemployment, family instability, peer pressure, school dropout, and weak rehabilitation services further complicate this relationship. Many juveniles become involved in theft, robbery, drug trafficking, violent offences, and other criminal activities either to finance their addiction or through association with criminal networks. Despite existing anti-narcotics legislation and the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018, Pakistan continues to face significant challenges in preventing substance abuse, rehabilitating addicted youth, and reducing juvenile crime.

Furthermore, limited coordination among law enforcement agencies, health institutions, educational organizations, and social welfare departments has reduced the effectiveness of existing prevention and rehabilitation programs. The lack of comprehensive national data on substance abuse among juvenile offenders also limits evidence-based policymaking. Therefore, there is a need for empirical research examining the relationship between substance addiction and juvenile delinquency in Pakistan and identifying effective policy interventions to reduce youth crime through prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation.

Research Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between drug abuse and juvenile delinquency in Pakistan.
2. To identify the socioeconomic, psychological, family, and environmental factors associated with substance abuse among youth.
3. To investigate the influence of substance addiction on different forms of juvenile criminal behavior.
4. To assess the effectiveness of Pakistan's legal, health, and criminal justice institutions in addressing drug-related juvenile crime.
5. To evaluate existing prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs for juvenile offenders with substance use disorders.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between substance abuse and juvenile delinquency in Pakistan?
2. Which socioeconomic, psychological, and family-related factors contribute to drug abuse among Pakistani youth?
3. How does substance addiction influence different types of juvenile criminal behavior?
4. How effective are Pakistan's anti-narcotics policies, juvenile justice system, and rehabilitation programs in addressing drug-related youth crime?

5. What policy reforms can strengthen prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration of juvenile offenders suffering from substance addiction?

Research Design

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design**, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between drug abuse and juvenile delinquency in Pakistan. The mixed-methods approach is appropriate because it enables the researcher to measure statistical relationships while also exploring the social, psychological, and institutional factors influencing substance abuse and youth crime.

The quantitative component examines patterns of drug use, criminal behavior, and associated socioeconomic variables through survey data. The qualitative component explores the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders—including law enforcement officials, probation officers, rehabilitation professionals, educators, and juvenile offenders—regarding the causes, consequences, and prevention of substance-related juvenile crime.

The study is guided by **Social Learning Theory**, **Social Control Theory**, and **General Strain Theory**, which explain how family environments, peer influence, social inequality, and psychological stress contribute to substance abuse and criminal behavior among adolescents. These theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for analysing the complex interaction between drug addiction and juvenile delinquency within the Pakistani context.

The research employs empirical analysis to examine the association between substance addiction and youth crime while also reviewing relevant legal frameworks, including the **Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018**, the **Control of Narcotic Substances Act, 1997**, and Pakistan's national anti-drug policies. Data collected through surveys, interviews, and documentary analysis will be analysed using appropriate statistical and thematic techniques to generate evidence-based conclusions and policy recommendations.

Research Approach

The study adopts an **empirical mixed-methods approach**, integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine the relationship between substance abuse and juvenile delinquency in Pakistan. This approach enables the researcher to investigate not only the statistical association between drug addiction and youth crime but also the underlying social, psychological, economic, and institutional factors that contribute to this relationship.

The quantitative component focuses on measuring the prevalence of substance abuse, the patterns of juvenile offending, and the influence of socioeconomic variables through structured survey data. The qualitative component provides an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders, including law enforcement officials, probation officers, rehabilitation professionals, educators, social workers, and juvenile offenders.

The study critically examines the relationship between:

- substance abuse and juvenile delinquency;
- socioeconomic deprivation and youth involvement in crime;
- family environment, peer influence, and drug addiction;

- rehabilitation services and recidivism among juvenile offenders;
- Pakistan's anti-narcotics policies and juvenile justice framework; and
- national policies in comparison with international best practices for drug prevention and juvenile rehabilitation.

Secondary Data

Secondary data are obtained from:

- peer-reviewed journal articles;
- books on criminology, psychology, sociology, and public health;
- Government of Pakistan reports;
- Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) publications, Ministry of Narcotics Control reports, National Commission on the Rights of Child reports, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports;
- World Health Organization (WHO) publications, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports; and
- Pakistan Bureau of Statistics publications.

Legal and Policy Documents

The study also reviews relevant legal and policy documents, including:

- Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973; Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018; Control of Narcotic Substances Act, 1997; National Anti-Narcotics Policy; National Youth Policy; Child Protection Laws; Relevant judicial decisions concerning juvenile offenders and drug-related offences.

Sampling Technique

The study employs **purposive sampling** and **stratified random sampling** techniques.

Purposive sampling is used to select professionals with expertise in juvenile justice, rehabilitation, and drug prevention, while stratified random sampling is applied to select respondents from different categories of youth.

Data Analysis Method

Quantitative data are analysed using the **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 29)**.

The following statistical techniques are employed:

- Descriptive Statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations);
- Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha);

- Pearson Correlation Analysis;
- Multiple Regression Analysis;
- Independent Sample t-test and One-Way ANOVA (where appropriate).

Qualitative interview data are analysed using **thematic analysis**. Interview transcripts are coded systematically to identify recurring themes related to:

1. Causes of substance abuse among Pakistani youth;
2. Relationship between drug addiction and juvenile crime;
3. Family and peer influences;
4. Socioeconomic determinants of delinquency;
5. Effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes;
6. Institutional and policy challenges;
7. Barriers to reintegration of juvenile offenders; and
8. Policy reforms for reducing drug abuse and youth crime.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between substance addiction and juvenile delinquency, enabling the formulation of evidence-based policy recommendations for Pakistan.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, and Pakistan's juvenile justice system independently, relatively few empirical investigations have comprehensively explored the relationship between substance abuse and juvenile crime within the Pakistani context.

Existing literature presents several important gaps. First, there is limited empirical evidence examining how different forms of substance abuse influence specific categories of juvenile offending. Second, comparatively few studies investigate the combined influence of family environment, peer associations, socioeconomic conditions, mental health, and educational attainment on drug-related delinquency. Third, limited research evaluates the effectiveness of rehabilitation centres, diversion programmes, and community-based treatment in reducing recidivism among substance-dependent juvenile offenders.

Furthermore, most available studies rely primarily on legal analysis or descriptive statistics, while fewer employ mixed-methods approaches that integrate quantitative evidence with qualitative perspectives from juvenile offenders, law enforcement personnel, healthcare professionals, probation officers, educators, and policymakers. Addressing these gaps would provide stronger evidence for improving prevention strategies, rehabilitation services, and public policy.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary criminological and sociological theories that explain the relationship between substance abuse and juvenile delinquency in Pakistan.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura (1977), argues that individuals acquire behaviours through observation, imitation, and interaction with others. Adolescents who associate with peers involved in drug use, gang activities, or criminal behaviour are more likely to adopt similar behaviours. In Pakistan, peer pressure, exposure to drug networks, and criminal subcultures increase the likelihood of substance abuse and juvenile offending. This theory explains how drug addiction and criminal behaviour are learned and reinforced through social interactions.

Social Control Theory

Hirschi's Social Control Theory (1969) suggests that strong bonds with family, schools, and communities discourage criminal behaviour, whereas weak social attachments increase the risk of delinquency. Young people who experience family breakdown, school dropout, social isolation, neglect, or weak parental supervision are more vulnerable to substance abuse and criminal involvement. The theory helps explain how deteriorating family relationships and limited community support contribute to youth crime in Pakistan.

General Strain Theory

General Strain Theory, developed by Agnew (1992), explains that individuals who experience stress, frustration, poverty, unemployment, discrimination, or blocked opportunities may adopt deviant behaviour as a coping mechanism. Many Pakistani adolescents face economic hardship, educational exclusion, and limited employment prospects. These strains may increase psychological distress, leading some young people to engage in drug abuse and criminal activities. This theory provides an important framework for understanding how structural inequalities influence juvenile delinquency.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive explanation of how social, economic, psychological, and environmental factors interact to influence substance abuse and youth crime in Pakistan.

Expected Contribution of the Study

This research is expected to make several important academic and practical contributions.

- 1) It provides empirical evidence regarding the relationship between substance abuse and juvenile delinquency in Pakistan.
- 2) It identifies the major socioeconomic, psychological, family, and environmental factors contributing to youth involvement in drug-related crime.
- 3) It evaluates the effectiveness of existing anti-narcotics policies, juvenile justice institutions, and rehabilitation programmes in addressing substance abuse among young offenders.

- 4) It contributes to the literature on criminology, public health, sociology, and juvenile justice by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives within the Pakistani context.
- 5) It offers evidence-based recommendations for strengthening drug prevention strategies, rehabilitation services, family support programmes, educational interventions, and community-based crime prevention initiatives.
- 6) It assists policymakers, law enforcement agencies, healthcare professionals, educators, social workers, and rehabilitation practitioners in designing more effective interventions aimed at reducing drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, and recidivism.
- 7) Ultimately, the study seeks to promote a comprehensive policy framework that prioritizes prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration as sustainable approaches for reducing substance abuse and youth crime while supporting the healthy development of Pakistan's young population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Juvenile Justice and Rehabilitation

The juvenile justice system is a distinct branch of the criminal justice system that addresses offences committed by individuals under the age of eighteen. Unlike the adult criminal justice system, its primary objective is not punishment but the rehabilitation, protection, and successful reintegration of young offenders into society. Modern juvenile justice systems are founded on the principle that children differ from adults in terms of psychological maturity, cognitive development, and decision-making capacity. Consequently, legal responses to juvenile offending emphasize education, counselling, behavioural reform, and social support rather than retribution.

Over the past century, many countries have shifted from punitive models of juvenile justice to child-centred and restorative approaches. This transformation has been influenced by advances in developmental psychology, criminology, and international human rights law, all of which recognize that most juvenile offenders possess a strong capacity for behavioural change when provided with appropriate guidance and rehabilitation services.

Historical Development of Juvenile Justice

The development of specialized juvenile justice systems began during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the establishment of separate juvenile courts in the United States and several European countries. These reforms were based on the understanding that children who violate the law should not be treated in the same manner as adult offenders. Instead, the justice system should consider their age, social environment, emotional development, and potential for rehabilitation.

Over time, this philosophy expanded globally and encouraged governments to establish specialized juvenile courts, probation systems, diversion programmes, and rehabilitation centres. These reforms shifted the emphasis from punishment towards prevention, treatment, education, and social reintegration, recognizing that early intervention is often more effective than incarceration in reducing future offending.

International Standards Governing Juvenile Justice

International organizations, particularly the United Nations, have played a significant role in shaping contemporary juvenile justice policies. The adoption of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of**

the Child (1989) established comprehensive legal standards for protecting children involved in criminal proceedings. The Convention requires that detention be used only as a measure of last resort and that every child be treated with dignity, fairness, and respect for their developmental needs.

Other important international instruments include the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules, 1985), the United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (Riyadh Guidelines, 1990), and the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (Havana Rules, 1990). Collectively, these frameworks promote diversion, legal assistance, rehabilitation, educational opportunities, family involvement, and community-based alternatives to detention.

Juvenile Delinquency in Pakistan

Juvenile delinquency has become an increasingly important social issue in Pakistan as a result of rapid population growth, urbanization, economic instability, and changing family structures. Existing literature identifies multiple factors contributing to youth involvement in crime, including poverty, unemployment, educational exclusion, family conflict, peer influence, child labour, substance abuse, and exposure to violence.

Researchers argue that juvenile offending rarely results from a single cause. Instead, it reflects the interaction of individual vulnerabilities with broader socioeconomic and environmental conditions. Children growing up in disadvantaged communities often experience limited educational opportunities, weak social support, and increased exposure to criminal activities, all of which elevate the risk of delinquent behaviour.

Several studies also indicate that adverse childhood experiences—including neglect, domestic violence, parental substance abuse, emotional trauma, and school dropout—significantly increase the likelihood of juvenile offending. Economic hardship may further encourage children to participate in theft, drug distribution, robbery, or other illegal activities as survival strategies.

Legislative Development of Juvenile Justice in Pakistan

Pakistan has progressively strengthened its juvenile justice framework through constitutional protections and specialised legislation. The **Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (JJSO), 2000** represented the country's first comprehensive legal framework dedicated to children in conflict with the law. It introduced separate procedures for juvenile offenders, restricted the application of harsh punishments, and recognised the importance of rehabilitation.

Despite these legal innovations, the implementation of the Ordinance remained weak because of limited institutional capacity, inadequate financial resources, and insufficient training among criminal justice professionals.

To address these shortcomings, the Government of Pakistan enacted the **Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018**, replacing the earlier Ordinance with a more comprehensive legal framework. The Act strengthened procedural safeguards by introducing diversion programmes, state-funded legal assistance, probation, rehabilitation services, child-sensitive investigation procedures, and specialised mechanisms for handling juvenile cases. It also reaffirmed the principle that imprisonment should be used only when absolutely necessary and prohibited capital punishment for offences committed by juveniles.

Although the JJSA 2018 reflects international best practices, numerous studies conclude that substantial implementation gaps remain. Several provinces continue to experience shortages of specialised juvenile courts, probation officers, trained investigators, rehabilitation centres, psychologists, and social workers, thereby limiting the practical effectiveness of the legislation.

Institutional Challenges within Pakistan's Juvenile Justice System

A consistent theme throughout the literature concerns institutional weaknesses that undermine effective juvenile justice administration. Police officers frequently receive limited training in child-sensitive investigation techniques and international child-rights standards. Consequently, juveniles may be processed using procedures designed primarily for adult offenders, increasing the risk of procedural violations and inadequate protection of children's rights.

Judicial delays represent another significant challenge. Overburdened courts, procedural complexities, and shortages of judicial personnel often prolong the resolution of juvenile cases. Extended delays not only weaken public confidence in the justice system but also negatively affect children's psychological well-being, education, family relationships, and rehabilitation prospects.

The literature further highlights the limited availability of probation and parole services across Pakistan. Community-based supervision remains underdeveloped in many districts, reducing opportunities for diversion and successful reintegration. Without effective counselling, educational support, vocational training, and post-release supervision, many young offenders encounter considerable difficulties when attempting to return to society, thereby increasing the likelihood of reoffending.

Overall, existing scholarship indicates that Pakistan has made notable progress in establishing a modern juvenile justice framework; however, the effectiveness of these reforms depends largely on strengthening institutional capacity, improving inter-agency coordination, expanding rehabilitation services, and ensuring the consistent implementation of legal protections throughout the country.

Police Practices, Drug-Related Youth Crime, and Protection of Juvenile Rights

Police officers are generally the first representatives of the criminal justice system to interact with young people involved in drug-related offences and other forms of juvenile delinquency. Their decisions at the time of arrest, investigation, and referral significantly influence the legal process and the future rehabilitation of young offenders. International child-rights standards recommend that law enforcement agencies adopt child-sensitive procedures that prioritize protection, rehabilitation, and diversion instead of punitive responses.

In cases involving substance abuse, police are expected to distinguish between juveniles who require medical treatment and psychosocial support and those involved in organized drug trafficking or serious criminal activities. Best practices recommend immediate notification of parents or guardians, access to legal counsel, protection from coercive interrogation, and referral to rehabilitation services whenever appropriate.

Access to Legal Assistance

Access to competent legal representation is a fundamental element of a fair juvenile justice system and is particularly important for children accused of drug-related offences. Effective legal assistance enables juveniles to understand their rights, receive fair treatment during criminal proceedings, and access diversion or rehabilitation opportunities where appropriate.

Although Pakistani legislation recognizes the right of juveniles to legal representation, practical implementation remains uneven across provinces. Many families affected by poverty cannot afford private legal services, while publicly funded legal aid programmes remain limited in availability and capacity. As a result, numerous juvenile offenders navigate complex legal proceedings without adequate professional assistance.

Academic research consistently demonstrates that insufficient legal representation increases the likelihood of procedural irregularities, extended pre-trial detention, inappropriate sentencing, and reduced access to rehabilitation programmes. Strengthening state-funded legal aid services and developing specialized juvenile defence lawyers are therefore essential for protecting children's constitutional and legal rights.

International Perspectives on Drug Abuse and Juvenile Justice

Comparative research demonstrates that many developed countries have shifted towards rehabilitation-oriented responses for juvenile offenders with substance-use disorders. Nations such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand emphasize diversion, restorative justice, family intervention, and community-based treatment rather than incarceration for eligible juvenile offenders.

These countries invest in multidisciplinary approaches involving police, schools, healthcare providers, probation services, psychologists, and community organizations. Diversion programmes frequently combine substance abuse treatment with counselling, educational support, and vocational training, significantly reducing recidivism and improving long-term social outcomes.

Pakistan has introduced diversion and rehabilitation mechanisms through the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018, and has strengthened anti-narcotics policies. Nevertheless, implementation remains inconsistent because of institutional limitations, shortages of trained personnel, inadequate rehabilitation infrastructure, and limited coordination among relevant agencies.

Juvenile Justice Framework in Pakistan

The juvenile justice framework in Pakistan represents a legal and institutional mechanism designed to address offences committed by individuals below the age of eighteen while ensuring protection, rehabilitation, and social reintegration. In contrast to the conventional criminal justice system, which primarily focuses on punishment and deterrence, juvenile justice emphasizes the developmental needs of children and recognizes that young offenders have greater potential for behavioural change.

In the context of drug abuse and youth crime, the juvenile justice system plays a particularly important role because many young offenders involved in substance-related crimes are themselves vulnerable victims of social, economic, psychological, and environmental pressures. Adolescents involved in drug use, possession, or drug-related criminal activities often require treatment, counselling, education, and rehabilitation rather than purely punitive measures.

Pakistan's juvenile justice framework has gradually evolved through constitutional provisions, legislative reforms, judicial developments, and international commitments. The country's ratification of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990** created an obligation to develop a child-sensitive justice system that protects the rights and dignity of children in conflict with the law. This commitment contributed to the introduction of the **Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (JJSO), 2000**, which was later replaced by the more comprehensive **Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018**.

The JJSA 2018 introduced important reforms, including diversion mechanisms, legal assistance, specialized juvenile courts, probation services, rehabilitation measures, and procedural safeguards. These reforms are particularly significant for addressing drug-related juvenile offences because they encourage treatment-oriented approaches rather than excessive reliance on imprisonment.

Constitutional Foundation of Juvenile Protection in Pakistan

The Constitution of Pakistan provides the fundamental legal basis for protecting children involved in criminal proceedings. Several constitutional provisions support a rehabilitation-focused approach toward juvenile offenders.

Article 9 – Security of Person

Article 9 guarantees protection of life and liberty and states that no person shall be deprived of these rights except according to law. For juveniles, this constitutional protection requires that arrest, detention, investigation, and trial procedures comply with principles of legality, dignity, and fairness.

In cases involving drug-related offences, this provision requires authorities to ensure that young offenders are not subjected to unnecessary detention and that their age, psychological condition, and rehabilitation needs are considered during legal proceedings.

Article 10A – Right to Fair Trial and Due Process

Article 10A provides every individual with the right to a fair trial and due process. Within the juvenile justice context, this constitutional guarantee includes:

- access to legal representation;
- fair and impartial hearings;
- protection from unlawful detention;
- timely completion of judicial proceedings; and
- opportunities to present a defence.

For juveniles accused of drug-related crimes, fair trial protections are essential because many young offenders may come from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited awareness of their legal rights.

Article 25(3) – Special Protection for Children

Article 25(3) allows the State to introduce special laws for the protection of women and children. This constitutional provision provides the foundation for specialized juvenile legislation, including the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018.

The provision recognizes that children cannot be treated identically to adults because of differences in maturity, decision-making ability, and social circumstances.

Article 35 – Protection of Family and Children

Article 35 directs the State to protect the family, mother, and child. This principle supports rehabilitation-based juvenile justice by recognizing that children's welfare is a collective social responsibility.

In relation to drug abuse, Article 35 highlights the importance of family involvement, parental support, and community-based interventions in preventing substance addiction and reducing youth crime.

Historical Development of Juvenile Justice in Pakistan

Before the year 2000, Pakistan lacked a comprehensive juvenile justice framework. Children accused of criminal offences were frequently processed through general criminal procedures designed for adults. This approach failed to consider children's psychological development and often limited opportunities for rehabilitation and social reintegration.

The introduction of the **Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (JJSO), 2000** represented a major step toward child-sensitive justice. The Ordinance introduced several important protections, including separate procedures for juvenile offenders, restrictions on capital punishment, probation opportunities, and rehabilitation-oriented measures.

However, practical implementation of the Ordinance remained limited because of institutional weaknesses, inadequate financial resources, shortage of trained professionals, and lack of awareness among police and judicial officials.

Major Institutions Involved in Juvenile Justice and Drug-Related Youth Crime

Police Institutions

Law enforcement agencies represent the first institutional point of interaction between young offenders and the criminal justice system. In cases involving juvenile delinquency and drug-related offences, police authorities have a critical responsibility not only to enforce the law but also to ensure that children receive appropriate protection and guidance.

Under the juvenile justice framework, police officials are expected to:

- determine the age and status of individuals involved in criminal cases;
- immediately inform parents or legal guardians;
- protect juveniles from unnecessary detention and mistreatment;
- explain legal rights and available protections;
- ensure access to legal assistance; and
- refer suitable cases towards diversion and rehabilitation mechanisms.

In cases involving substance abuse, police decisions are particularly important because many juveniles involved in drug offences may themselves require treatment and counselling rather than strict criminal

punishment. Young drug users, first-time offenders, and vulnerable adolescents should ideally be connected with rehabilitation services whenever appropriate.

However, existing research indicates that implementation of child-sensitive policing remains inconsistent throughout Pakistan. Many police officers have limited training regarding juvenile psychology, substance dependency, rehabilitation approaches, and child-rights standards. Shortages of specialized juvenile police units and weak monitoring mechanisms further affect the effective implementation of legal safeguards.

Therefore, strengthening police capacity through professional training, specialized juvenile desks, and improved coordination with rehabilitation institutions is essential for developing an effective response to youth crime and drug abuse.

Juvenile Courts

The Juvenile Justice System Act

Major Challenges of the Juvenile Justice System in Pakistan

Ineffective Implementation of Juvenile Justice Laws

Although Pakistan has introduced significant legal reforms through the **Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018**, the effectiveness of the juvenile justice system remains limited due to persistent gaps between legislative commitments and practical implementation. The existence of a comprehensive legal framework alone cannot ensure protection of juvenile rights unless supported by strong institutions, adequate financial resources, trained professionals, and effective coordination among justice-sector organizations.

A major challenge is the uneven implementation of juvenile justice provisions across Pakistan's provinces. Due to the country's decentralized administrative structure, provincial governments have varying levels of capacity, resources, and institutional development. Consequently, differences exist in the availability of juvenile courts, probation services, rehabilitation centres, trained personnel, and child protection mechanisms.

While some provinces have taken steps to establish specialized juvenile justice structures, many areas continue to rely on conventional criminal justice procedures that are not fully compatible with child-sensitive approaches. As a result, juveniles involved in criminal activities, including drug-related offences, may experience procedures similar to adult offenders despite the legal protections available under JJSA 2018.

Another important issue is limited awareness among criminal justice professionals regarding juvenile-specific legal requirements. Police officers, prosecutors, judges, and correctional authorities often lack sufficient training in areas such as age determination, diversion mechanisms, rehabilitation principles, child psychology, and alternative sentencing approaches. This lack of specialized knowledge reduces the effectiveness of juvenile justice reforms.

Furthermore, Pakistan faces significant challenges regarding data availability. There is no comprehensive national database containing information about juvenile arrests, types of offences, drug-related cases, court decisions, rehabilitation outcomes, and rates of repeat offending. The absence of reliable statistical information restricts research-based policymaking and prevents effective evaluation of juvenile justice programmes.

Police Practices and Protection of Juvenile Rights

Police institutions play a crucial role in determining the direction and outcome of juvenile justice processes because they represent the first point of contact between young offenders and the legal system. In cases involving drug abuse and juvenile delinquency, police decisions regarding arrest, investigation, and referral can significantly influence whether a young person receives punishment or rehabilitation.

International juvenile justice standards encourage law enforcement agencies to adopt child-sensitive approaches that emphasize protection, counselling, diversion, and prevention rather than immediate criminalization.

However, research on Pakistan's criminal justice system highlights several concerns regarding police handling of juvenile cases, including:

- failure to properly identify children during arrest procedures;
- unnecessary detention of juveniles;
- inadequate communication with parents or guardians;
- limited access to legal assistance;
- inappropriate questioning and investigation techniques; and
- insufficient referral of eligible cases to diversion and rehabilitation programmes.

One major reason behind these problems is the shortage of specialized training among police personnel. Traditional policing methods often prioritize investigation, confession, and prosecution, while juvenile justice requires a more balanced approach involving protection, psychological understanding, and rehabilitation.

This issue becomes particularly important in drug-related offences because many young people involved with substances are not only offenders but also victims of addiction, peer pressure, poverty, and social neglect. A purely punitive police response may increase criminal involvement rather than addressing the underlying causes of substance abuse.

To improve police practices, Pakistan requires specialized juvenile police units, regular professional training, cooperation with psychologists and social workers, and stronger monitoring systems to ensure compliance with child protection standards.

Delays in Juvenile Courts

Timely justice is a fundamental requirement of an effective juvenile justice system. Delays in resolving juvenile cases can negatively influence children's education, psychological development, family relationships, and future rehabilitation prospects. Although the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 emphasizes speedy resolution of juvenile cases, prolonged judicial procedures remain a major challenge in Pakistan.

Several factors contribute to delays in juvenile proceedings, including:

- shortage of specialized juvenile courts;
- excessive workload of judges;
- limited prosecution capacity;
- repeated adjournments;
- weak coordination between justice institutions;
- inadequate case management systems; and
- shortage of trained judicial officers.

Extended periods of detention before trial can have serious consequences for young offenders. Instead of providing opportunities for correction and rehabilitation, prolonged institutionalization may expose juveniles to negative influences, criminal networks, psychological stress, and educational disruption.

These challenges are particularly concerning for juveniles involved in drug-related offences, where early intervention, counselling, and treatment are often more beneficial than prolonged legal proceedings.

Improving juvenile justice outcomes requires expansion of specialized courts, efficient case management mechanisms, increased judicial training, and greater use of diversion and alternative dispute resolution programmes.

Lack of Effective Legal Aid Services

Legal representation is a fundamental component of fair justice, particularly for children who may lack awareness of their rights and legal procedures. The Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 recognizes the importance of providing legal assistance to juvenile offenders; however, implementation remains inadequate in many parts of Pakistan.

A large proportion of juvenile offenders belong to economically disadvantaged families who cannot afford private legal representation. Although some non-governmental organizations and legal aid programmes provide assistance, their services remain limited, particularly in remote and rural areas.

Insufficient legal support can result in:

- violation of procedural rights; unfair judicial outcomes; prolonged detention; lack of awareness regarding available rehabilitation options; and reduced opportunities for diversion.

For juveniles suffering from substance addiction, effective legal representation is especially important because lawyers can help ensure access to treatment-based interventions rather than unnecessary imprisonment.

Strengthening government-funded legal aid programmes, training specialized juvenile defence lawyers, and expanding legal awareness initiatives are necessary steps toward improving access to justice.

Overcrowding and Poor Conditions in Juvenile Detention Facilities

International juvenile justice principles emphasize that detention should only be used as a final option and for the shortest possible duration. Despite this principle, overcrowding and inadequate conditions remain significant challenges within Pakistan's correctional institutions.

Many juvenile detention facilities face multiple problems, including:

- insufficient accommodation;
- limited educational opportunities;
- inadequate healthcare services;
- shortage of psychological counselling;
- lack of recreational activities;
- insufficient vocational training; and
- inadequate separation between juvenile and adult offenders.

Exposure to inappropriate detention environments can negatively affect young people's psychological development and may increase their involvement in criminal activities. Instead of promoting rehabilitation, poorly managed detention facilities may expose juveniles to criminal networks and reinforce deviant behaviour.

For juveniles affected by drug addiction, detention without treatment facilities fails to address the underlying causes of offending. Effective responses require expansion of community-based alternatives, including probation, counselling, addiction treatment, educational programmes, and supervised reintegration.

Overall, improving detention conditions and reducing unnecessary imprisonment are essential for transforming Pakistan's juvenile justice system from a punishment-oriented model into a rehabilitation-focused framework.

Continuous capacity-building initiatives are necessary to ensure that the reforms introduced through the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 are effectively implemented. Without trained personnel, even progressive legislation may fail to achieve its intended objectives.

International Standards and Comparative Analysis

International Standards Governing Juvenile Justice

Contemporary juvenile justice systems throughout the world are increasingly influenced by international human rights frameworks that emphasize protection, rehabilitation, and social reintegration rather than punishment alone. These standards recognize that children involved in criminal activities differ from adults due to their age, psychological development, and greater capacity for reform.

International approaches increasingly support preventive interventions, diversion programmes, education, counselling, and community-based rehabilitation. These principles are particularly important in cases involving drug abuse, where many young offenders require treatment and social support rather than purely criminal sanctions.

Pakistan's juvenile justice framework has been significantly influenced by international commitments, especially following its ratification of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990**. Although Pakistan has incorporated many international principles into domestic legislation through the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018, practical implementation continues to face institutional and resource-related challenges.

Article 37: Protection Against Cruel Treatment and Unlawful Detention

Article 37 requires states to guarantee that:

- children are not subjected to torture, cruel punishment, or degrading treatment;
- capital punishment and life imprisonment without release are not imposed for offences committed by persons below eighteen years;
- detention is used only as a final option and for the shortest possible period; and
- detained children are treated with dignity and respect.

The Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 reflects these principles by restricting severe punishments and promoting rehabilitation-oriented approaches.

However, challenges remain regarding lengthy detention periods, limited rehabilitation facilities, inadequate psychological support, and weak monitoring mechanisms. These problems are especially significant for juveniles involved in drug-related offences, where early treatment and counselling are essential.

Article 40: Juvenile Justice Administration

Article 40 establishes detailed standards regarding children accused of violating criminal laws. It requires states to ensure:

- presumption of innocence; clear information regarding allegations; access to legal representation;
- fair and timely trials; protection of privacy; alternatives to formal judicial proceedings; and rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Pakistan's Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 incorporates many of these principles through provisions related to juvenile courts, diversion, legal assistance, and rehabilitation. Nevertheless, implementation remains inconsistent due to limited institutional capacity, shortage of trained professionals, and inadequate rehabilitation infrastructure.

Comparative Analysis of Juvenile Justice Systems

Pakistan and the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has developed a comprehensive juvenile justice model based on prevention, early intervention, diversion, and rehabilitation. Rather than relying primarily on imprisonment, the UK system emphasizes addressing the social and psychological causes of youth offending.

Important features include:

- specialized youth courts; youth offending teams; restorative justice programmes; community-based interventions; psychological support services; and effective probation mechanisms.

The UK approach focuses on preventing young people from entering formal criminal justice systems whenever possible.

Compared with the United Kingdom, Pakistan has made significant legislative progress through the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018. However, Pakistan continues to face institutional challenges, including limited juvenile courts, insufficient probation services, inadequate rehabilitation facilities, and shortages of trained professionals. The UK experience demonstrates that Pakistan can improve juvenile justice outcomes by expanding community-based interventions, strengthening rehabilitation services, developing specialized youth institutions, and integrating health and social services into crime prevention strategies.

Comparative Analysis: Pakistan and Germany

Germany represents one of the most advanced examples of a rehabilitation-focused juvenile justice system. The German model is based on the principle that young offenders should be guided towards positive social development rather than subjected to excessive punishment.

The German juvenile justice framework emphasizes:

- education and behavioural improvement; involvement of social workers; mediation and conflict resolution;
- restorative justice practices; individualized assessment of offenders; and limited use of imprisonment.

German juvenile courts carefully evaluate the personal circumstances of young offenders, including family conditions, educational background, psychological development, and social environment before determining appropriate interventions.

In comparison, Pakistan's juvenile justice system remains more dependent on formal criminal justice procedures. Although rehabilitation is recognized as a central objective under the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018, practical implementation remains restricted due to limited institutional resources, shortage of trained professionals, and inadequate rehabilitation facilities.

Germany's experience provides valuable lessons for Pakistan, particularly in expanding diversion programmes, strengthening probation services, and integrating social workers, psychologists, and community organizations into juvenile justice procedures. Such approaches are especially relevant for drug-related juvenile offences, where treatment and social support may be more effective than imprisonment.

Comparative Analysis: Pakistan and India

India provides an important regional comparison because of similarities in population structure, socioeconomic conditions, legal traditions, and challenges related to youth crime.

India's juvenile justice framework is primarily regulated through the **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015**, which emphasizes protection, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of children in conflict with the law.

Key features of India's system include:

- Juvenile Justice Boards; Child Welfare Committees; rehabilitation and social reintegration programmes;
- foster care mechanisms; adoption services; and institutional and community-based care systems.

Both Pakistan and India experience similar challenges, including: delays in juvenile case processing;

- limited rehabilitation resources; shortage of trained professionals; inconsistent implementation across regions; and inadequate community-based support systems.

However, India has developed stronger institutional mechanisms in several states through specialized juvenile boards, child protection departments, and structured rehabilitation programmes.

Pakistan can benefit from India's experience by strengthening specialized juvenile institutions, improving coordination among child protection agencies, and expanding rehabilitation opportunities for vulnerable youth, particularly those affected by drug addiction and social exclusion.

Comparative Analysis: Pakistan and Malaysia

Malaysia follows a juvenile justice approach that combines rehabilitation, supervision, and community-based interventions. The Malaysian system focuses on preventing repeated offending by addressing the educational, psychological, and social needs of young offenders.

Important features of the Malaysian model include:

- probation and supervision services; rehabilitation institutions; counselling programmes; vocational and technical education; family participation; and post-release support mechanisms.

Malaysia emphasizes skill development and social reintegration as important tools for reducing repeat offending. Young offenders are provided with opportunities to acquire education, employment skills, and behavioural support.

Compared with Malaysia, Pakistan faces greater limitations in rehabilitation infrastructure and professional capacity. Juvenile offenders, particularly those involved in substance abuse, often lack access to structured treatment programmes, vocational training, and post-release assistance. The Malaysian experience highlights the importance of investing in rehabilitation centres, vocational education, addiction treatment services, and community support networks.

Comparative Analysis: Pakistan and South Africa

South Africa's juvenile justice system provides another significant example of a restorative justice-oriented approach. The country's juvenile justice framework is primarily based on the **Child Justice Act, 2008**, which promotes alternatives to imprisonment and emphasizes rehabilitation.

Major characteristics of the South African model include:

- diversion programmes; restorative justice conferences; community-based sentences; specialized child justice courts; assessment of children's social and psychological circumstances.

The South African approach demonstrates that restorative justice mechanisms can reduce dependence on imprisonment while improving rehabilitation outcomes and reducing repeat offending.

Pakistan's Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 also recognizes diversion and rehabilitation principles. However, practical implementation remains limited because of weak institutional capacity, insufficient training, and inadequate monitoring systems. Strengthening restorative justice practices in Pakistan could improve responses to juvenile offences, especially drug-related crimes where addressing underlying social and psychological causes is essential.

Lessons for Pakistan from International Experiences

Comparative analysis of international juvenile justice systems provides several important lessons for strengthening Pakistan's approach.

Expansion of Diversion Mechanisms

Successful juvenile justice systems attempt to avoid unnecessary involvement of children in formal criminal proceedings. Pakistan should expand diversion opportunities at both police and judicial levels.

Diversion programmes may include:

- counselling; addiction treatment; mediation; community service; educational support; family intervention; and supervised rehabilitation. For juveniles involved in drug abuse, diversion towards treatment programmes can produce better outcomes than imprisonment.

Development of Specialized Juvenile Institutions

International experiences demonstrate that effective juvenile justice requires specialized institutional structures.

Pakistan needs further development of:

- specialized juvenile courts;
- trained probation officers;
- child protection units;
- rehabilitation and treatment centres;

- psychological support services; and
- addiction counselling facilities.

These institutions should work through a coordinated approach involving justice, health, education, and social welfare sectors.

Promotion of Restorative Justice Approaches

Restorative justice provides an alternative model that focuses on repairing harm rather than simply punishing offenders. It encourages cooperation among offenders, victims, families, and communities.

For Pakistan, restorative approaches can help:

- reduce juvenile imprisonment;
- encourage accountability;
- improve rehabilitation;
- strengthen community participation; and
- reduce repeat offending.

Policy Recommendations for Strengthening the Juvenile Justice System in Pakistan

The analysis of Pakistan's juvenile justice framework indicates that significant legal progress has been achieved through the introduction of the **Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018**. However, the success of juvenile justice reforms depends not only on legislation but also on effective implementation, institutional coordination, professional capacity, and social support mechanisms.

A comprehensive juvenile justice system requires a shift from punishment-oriented approaches toward rehabilitation, prevention, and reintegration. This approach is particularly important in cases involving substance abuse because many young offenders require treatment, counselling, and social assistance alongside legal accountability.

The following policy recommendations are proposed to strengthen Pakistan's juvenile justice system.

Ensuring Effective Implementation of the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018

The most important priority is to improve the practical implementation of the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 across all provinces. Although the Act provides extensive legal protections, differences in administrative capacity and institutional resources have resulted in uneven enforcement.

The government should develop a coordinated national implementation framework involving:

- federal and provincial justice departments;
- police organizations;

- judiciary;
- prison and correctional authorities;
- social welfare departments;
- child protection institutions; and
- rehabilitation organizations.

A comprehensive monitoring system should be established to evaluate implementation progress. Regular reports should include information regarding juvenile arrests, drug-related offences, court proceedings, diversion practices, rehabilitation outcomes, and institutional performance.

Effective monitoring would help identify weaknesses and ensure that juvenile justice reforms produce meaningful improvements in practice.

Strengthening Police Training and Child-Sensitive Policing

Police reform is a critical component of juvenile justice improvement because law enforcement officers represent the first point of contact between young offenders and the justice system.

Comprehensive professional training programmes should be introduced covering:

- child psychology and adolescent behaviour, communication techniques with juveniles, international child-rights standards, diversion procedures, prevention of custodial abuse, identification of drug dependency; and
- restorative justice practices.

Specialized juvenile police units should be established in major districts to ensure professional handling of cases involving children.

In drug-related cases, police officers should be trained to distinguish between young drug users requiring rehabilitation and individuals involved in organized drug trafficking. This distinction would allow more effective and humane responses.

Expanding Diversion and Restorative Justice Mechanisms

International experiences demonstrate that diversion programmes reduce unnecessary criminalization and improve rehabilitation outcomes. Pakistan should strengthen diversion mechanisms provided under the JJSA 2018 by developing practical procedures at police and judicial levels.

Possible diversion measures include:

- warnings and counselling, family mediation, community service, educational interventions, drug treatment programmes, psychological support; and restorative justice conferences.

Minor offences and cases involving vulnerable youth should not automatically result in formal criminal proceedings. Instead, rehabilitation-focused alternatives should be prioritized whenever public safety allows.

Improving Access to Legal Aid Services

Effective legal representation is a fundamental requirement of a fair juvenile justice system. Many juvenile offenders come from disadvantaged backgrounds and lack the financial resources necessary to obtain professional legal assistance.

Pakistan should strengthen state-funded legal aid systems by:

- increasing financial resources for juvenile legal assistance;
- establishing specialized juvenile defence lawyers;
- creating legal aid offices near juvenile courts;
- ensuring immediate access to lawyers after arrest; and
- monitoring the quality of legal representation.

Reforming Juvenile Detention Facilities

International standards emphasize that detention should be used only as a final option and for the shortest possible duration. Where detention is unavoidable, facilities must focus on rehabilitation and human development.

Reforms should include:

- separate accommodation for juveniles;
- educational programmes;
- vocational and technical training;
- healthcare facilities;
- psychological counselling;
- addiction treatment services;
- recreational activities; and
- protection from violence and exploitation.

Correctional institutions should not function merely as places of punishment. Their primary purpose should be preparing young people for successful reintegration into society.

Development of Comprehensive Rehabilitation Programmes

Rehabilitation should become the central pillar of Pakistan's juvenile justice policy. Effective rehabilitation requires addressing the social, educational, psychological, and economic factors contributing to juvenile offending.

Educational Rehabilitation

A significant number of juvenile offenders have experienced school dropout, educational exclusion, or limited learning opportunities. Providing education inside and outside correctional institutions can improve employment prospects and reduce future criminal involvement.

Vocational and Employment Training

Skill-development programmes should prepare juveniles for independent and productive lives after release. Vocational training can reduce economic pressures that often contribute to criminal behaviour.

Psychological and Addiction Support

Many juvenile offenders experience trauma, abuse, family conflict, poverty, and substance dependency. Professional counselling, mental health support, and addiction treatment programmes are necessary to address these underlying problems.

Family Reintegration

Family involvement plays an important role in successful rehabilitation. Families should participate in rehabilitation planning, counselling sessions, and post-release support programmes because positive family relationships reduce the likelihood of repeated offending.

Establishment of a National Juvenile Justice Database

Pakistan lacks a comprehensive and reliable database regarding juvenile offenders and rehabilitation outcomes. The absence of accurate information creates difficulties in policymaking, research, and evaluation.

A national juvenile justice database should collect information regarding:

- age and gender of offenders;
- nature of offences;
- involvement in substance abuse;
- socioeconomic background;
- educational status;
- court decisions;
- rehabilitation progress; and

- repeat offending rates.

Reliable data would allow policymakers to design targeted prevention strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of juvenile justice reforms.

Addressing the Root Causes of Juvenile Delinquency

Juvenile crime cannot be effectively controlled through criminal justice responses alone. Prevention requires addressing the broader social and economic conditions that contribute to youth involvement in crime and substance abuse.

Government policies should focus on:

- poverty reduction;
- improved access to quality education;
- prevention of drug abuse among youth;
- support for vulnerable families;
- reduction of child labour;
- employment opportunities for young people;
- mental health services; and
- community development programmes.

Drug prevention initiatives should be introduced in schools, universities, and communities to reduce early exposure to substance abuse.

Preventive strategies are not only more humane but also more economically effective than relying primarily on imprisonment. A society that invests in education, employment, family support, and rehabilitation can significantly reduce juvenile crime and improve the future prospects of young people.

CONCLUSION

The existing literature indicates that drug abuse and juvenile delinquency are closely interconnected social problems influenced by multiple socioeconomic, psychological, family, and institutional factors. Substance addiction increases the likelihood of criminal behaviour, while involvement in criminal environments simultaneously heightens the risk of continued drug use. Although Pakistan has introduced important legislative reforms through the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018, and strengthened anti-narcotics policies, substantial implementation challenges remain.

Persistent institutional weaknesses—including inconsistent policing practices, limited legal aid, insufficient rehabilitation facilities, shortages of trained professionals, weak inter-agency coordination, and inadequate community reintegration programmes—continue to reduce the effectiveness of current interventions. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy involving law enforcement agencies, healthcare institutions, educational organizations, rehabilitation centres, families, civil society

organizations, and policymakers. A coordinated, evidence-based approach that prioritizes prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration offers the greatest potential for reducing substance abuse, preventing juvenile crime, and improving the long-term well-being of Pakistan's youth.

The Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018 represents a significant milestone in Pakistan's legal history, introducing a transformative approach toward the treatment of children in conflict with the law. The Act seeks to align Pakistan's criminal justice practices with constitutional principles and international child rights standards by recognizing juveniles as a distinct legal category requiring protection, rehabilitation, and respectful treatment. Unlike previous punitive approaches that largely followed adult-oriented criminal procedures, the JJSA 2018 adopts a child-centred philosophy based on rehabilitation and restorative justice. Its provisions relating to diversion, child-sensitive judicial procedures, prohibition of severe punishments, access to legal assistance, and the use of detention as a measure of last resort demonstrate a fundamental shift from punishment-oriented practices toward corrective and reintegrative mechanisms.

However, the effectiveness of the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 remains constrained by persistent implementation challenges. Although the legislative framework provides comprehensive protections for juvenile offenders, institutional weaknesses, limited awareness among justice-sector stakeholders, inadequate infrastructure, and inconsistent enforcement continue to restrict the achievement of its objectives. Issues such as delays in determining juvenile age, limited application of diversion mechanisms, insufficiently equipped juvenile courts, and continued reliance on detention expose many children to prolonged involvement with the criminal justice system. These challenges highlight that legislative reform alone cannot guarantee meaningful change without corresponding institutional development and administrative commitment.

The judiciary has played an important role in strengthening the protective objectives of the JJSA 2018 by emphasizing compliance with juvenile safeguards and recognizing the special vulnerability of children within criminal proceedings. Nevertheless, judicial interventions alone cannot address the broader structural weaknesses of the juvenile justice system. Court-based remedies are often reactive and limited to individual cases, whereas sustainable reform requires long-term commitment from executive institutions, improved administrative coordination, and strengthened support mechanisms. Effective implementation depends on well-trained police officers, functional probation services, accessible legal aid systems, and adequate rehabilitation facilities.

The analysis further demonstrates that juvenile justice reform cannot be separated from the broader socio-economic conditions that contribute to juvenile offending. Many children who come into conflict with the law are affected by poverty, educational deprivation, family instability, social exclusion, and exposure to violence. A justice system that focuses only on legal procedures without addressing these underlying factors is unlikely to prevent repeat offending or promote genuine rehabilitation. Therefore, an effective juvenile justice model requires an integrated approach combining legal protection with education, mental health support, family assistance, social welfare interventions, and community-based rehabilitation programs.

In conclusion, the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 provides a strong legal and normative foundation for establishing a child-centred justice system in Pakistan. However, the successful realization of its objectives depends on sustained institutional reforms, effective enforcement mechanisms, professional capacity building, and a continued commitment to children's rights. Treating juveniles as individuals requiring guidance, protection, and opportunities for positive development rather than merely as offenders is essential for building a justice system based on dignity, equality, rehabilitation, and long-term social security. Only by translating legislative intentions into practical realities can Pakistan develop a juvenile justice framework that genuinely serves the best interests of children while contributing to safer communities.

Strengthening Pakistan's juvenile justice system requires a fundamental shift from a predominantly punitive framework toward a rehabilitation-focused and preventive model. Although the Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018 provides a comprehensive legal foundation for protecting children in conflict with the law, its effectiveness depends largely on practical implementation, institutional capacity, professional expertise, and sustained financial investment. Legal reforms alone cannot achieve meaningful outcomes without strengthening the institutions responsible for policing, adjudication, probation, rehabilitation, and social reintegration.

A comprehensive strategy addressing the multiple dimensions of juvenile offending—including poverty, drug abuse, educational exclusion, family instability, and social vulnerability—is essential for reducing repeat offending and promoting positive development among young offenders. By integrating criminal justice reforms with child protection policies, educational opportunities, psychological support, and community-based rehabilitation initiatives, Pakistan can move toward a more effective and rights-based juvenile justice system.

Similarly, the effectiveness of law enforcement institutions has become an important area of research within criminology and policing studies over the past several decades. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates that public perceptions of police performance—including assessments of effectiveness, fairness, trustworthiness, and responsiveness—significantly influence crime control outcomes, institutional legitimacy, and public cooperation with law enforcement agencies. The relationship between citizens and police is therefore not determined solely by crime statistics or enforcement activities but also by how communities experience and evaluate policing practices.

Concept of Crime Control and Law Enforcement Effectiveness

Crime control represents a central concept within criminology and refers to the various formal and informal strategies through which societies attempt to prevent, reduce, and manage criminal activities. While traditional understandings of law enforcement effectiveness have often focused on measurable outcomes such as crime reduction, arrest rates, and successful investigations, contemporary criminological research suggests that effectiveness is a broader and multidimensional concept. It includes not only objective indicators of police performance but also subjective evaluations based on citizens' perceptions of police fairness, legitimacy, accessibility, and responsiveness.

A significant distinction in policing research exists between actual effectiveness and perceived effectiveness. Objective effectiveness relates to measurable institutional outcomes, whereas perceived effectiveness reflects the extent to which communities believe that law enforcement agencies are capable of maintaining public safety and addressing crime-related concerns. These perceptions are particularly important because public confidence influences cooperation with police, willingness to report crimes, and the overall legitimacy of criminal justice institutions.

The understanding of crime control has evolved significantly over time. Earlier policing models were primarily based on deterrence strategies, including increased police presence, surveillance, and rapid response mechanisms. However, scholars later highlighted the limitations of purely reactive approaches and emphasized more preventive strategies, such as community policing, intelligence-led policing, and problem-oriented policing. These approaches recognize that sustainable crime reduction requires cooperation between law enforcement agencies and communities.

In developing countries such as Pakistan, policing structures have historically been influenced by colonial administrative traditions that emphasized authority, control, and enforcement rather than partnership with communities. Consequently, the transition toward modern, community-focused, and intelligence-based

policing has been gradual and uneven. Understanding youth perceptions of the Crime Control Department (CCD) therefore requires examining how young citizens interpret police effectiveness within this wider context of changing approaches to crime management.

Youth Perception of Policing and Criminal Justice Institutions

Youth perceptions of policing have become an important area of investigation within criminology and police-community relations research. Young people represent a significant social group in relation to law enforcement because they are frequently exposed to crime risks, may become victims of criminal activities, and often interact with preventive policing initiatives. Their perceptions provide valuable insights into how effectively police institutions are functioning from the perspective of the community.

Research indicates that public evaluation of police performance is closely connected with issues of trust, procedural fairness, and institutional legitimacy. When young citizens perceive law enforcement agencies as fair, transparent, and responsive, they are more likely to cooperate with police investigations, provide information, and support crime prevention efforts. Conversely, negative experiences or perceptions of unfair treatment may weaken public confidence and reduce cooperation between communities and law enforcement institutions.

Therefore, examining youth perceptions is not only significant for academic understanding but also essential for improving policing strategies, strengthening community relationships, and enhancing the legitimacy of criminal justice institutions.

Factors Influencing Youth Perceptions of Law Enforcement

Youth attitudes toward law enforcement are shaped by a complex combination of personal experiences, social circumstances, institutional interactions, and broader cultural influences. Criminological studies suggest that perceptions of police effectiveness are influenced by factors such as direct contact with police, neighborhood security conditions, socioeconomic background, media exposure, and community narratives about law enforcement.

In the contemporary digital environment, media and particularly social media platforms have become powerful sources shaping young people's understanding of crime and policing. Online information, news coverage, and social media discussions can influence perceptions of crime risks, police behaviour, and institutional credibility. Research has demonstrated that patterns of media consumption may affect fear of crime and perceptions of neighbourhood safety, particularly among younger populations (Intravia et al., 2017).

Beyond media influence, personal experiences with law enforcement remain one of the strongest predictors of public attitudes. Positive interactions involving fairness, respect, and assistance can strengthen trust, while experiences involving discrimination, excessive force, or lack of responsiveness may negatively affect institutional legitimacy.

Evolution of Juvenile Justice and Child-Centered Legal Protection in Pakistan

The manner in which a legal system treats children in conflict with the law reflects its commitment to human rights, social justice, and constitutional principles. Modern juvenile justice systems are based on the recognition that children differ from adults in terms of psychological development, emotional maturity, and social circumstances. Therefore, juvenile justice emphasizes rehabilitation, education, and reintegration rather than punishment alone.

Historically, Pakistan's criminal justice system often treated juvenile offenders through procedures similar to those applied to adults. This approach exposed many young offenders to imprisonment, stigmatization, and limited opportunities for reform. Such punitive practices failed to address the social and developmental factors contributing to juvenile offending and, in some cases, reinforced patterns of marginalization and repeated criminal behaviour.

The enactment of the Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018 represented a major legislative transformation aimed at correcting these shortcomings. The Act introduced a rights-based and child-sensitive framework emphasizing protection, rehabilitation, and dignity. It reflected Pakistan's commitment to aligning domestic juvenile justice practices with constitutional guarantees and international child rights standards.

Before the introduction of the JJSA 2018, juvenile protection mechanisms remained inconsistent and largely dependent on institutional discretion rather than strong legal safeguards. Major concerns included uncertainty regarding age determination, prolonged pre-trial detention, inadequate access to legal representation, and the placement of juveniles in environments unsuitable for their age and developmental needs. The 2018 Act attempted to address these challenges by introducing stronger procedural protections, diversion mechanisms, legal assistance, specialized juvenile courts, and rehabilitation-oriented measures.

Juvenile Justice System in Pakistan: Historical Development and Scholarly Perspectives

Extensive academic attention has been devoted to juvenile justice systems, particularly in societies attempting to balance criminal responsibility with the protection, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of children in conflict with the law. The existing literature consistently emphasizes that juveniles should not be treated as miniature adults because their cognitive, emotional, and psychological development differs significantly from that of mature offenders. Drawing upon developmental psychology, social welfare perspectives, and international human rights principles, scholars argue that punitive responses toward juvenile offending are often ineffective and may reinforce criminal behaviour rather than prevent it. Consequently, contemporary juvenile justice models increasingly emphasize rehabilitation, restorative justice, education, and reintegration instead of retributive punishment.

The theoretical foundation of modern juvenile justice is based on the assumption that childhood and adolescence represent critical developmental stages requiring specialized legal protection. Researchers argue that criminal behaviour among juveniles is frequently associated with broader social conditions, including poverty, family instability, educational deprivation, peer influence, substance abuse, and exposure to violence. Therefore, effective juvenile justice systems should address the underlying causes of offending rather than focusing exclusively on punishment. Rehabilitation-oriented approaches seek to transform young offenders through education, psychological support, skill development, and community-based interventions.

Within the Pakistani context, scholars have extensively criticized the absence of a comprehensive juvenile justice framework before the enactment of the Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018. Historical studies indicate that children accused of crimes were often processed through adult criminal justice institutions, exposing them to procedures and punishments inconsistent with their age and vulnerability. Common challenges included inaccurate age determination, prolonged pre-trial detention, inadequate legal representation, limited rehabilitation opportunities, and exposure to adult prisoners. The literature characterizes the pre-2018 juvenile justice system as fragmented, inconsistent, and dependent largely on judicial discretion rather than clearly established child-sensitive legal standards.

The development of juvenile justice reform in Pakistan has also been influenced by international child rights commitments. Scholars highlight that Pakistan's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) require the state to ensure that children in conflict with the law receive special protection, fair treatment, and opportunities for rehabilitation. International standards emphasize several fundamental principles, including the best interests of the child, detention as a measure of last resort, access to legal assistance, diversion from formal criminal proceedings, and reintegration into society. Comparative research suggests that the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 represents an important attempt to align Pakistan's domestic legal framework with international child rights standards.

However, researchers caution that legislative reform alone cannot guarantee effective juvenile justice outcomes. In countries with limited institutional capacity, the implementation of progressive laws often remains challenging. Pakistan's experience demonstrates a significant gap between legal provisions and practical realities. Although the JJSA 2018 introduced important reforms, including diversion mechanisms, juvenile courts, legal aid provisions, confidentiality protections, and rehabilitation measures, many of these mechanisms depend on institutional resources that remain insufficient.

A major theme in recent literature concerns the practical implementation challenges of the JJSA 2018. Scholars acknowledge the progressive nature of the Act but highlight weaknesses in supporting institutions, including inadequate numbers of trained probation officers, limited rehabilitation facilities, insufficient social welfare involvement, and weak community-based programs. Without these supporting structures, the rehabilitative objectives of juvenile justice remain difficult to achieve.

Another important area of scholarly discussion relates to judicial interpretation and institutional responsibility. Legal researchers have examined how courts have applied juvenile justice principles concerning age determination, bail, detention, and procedural safeguards. Judicial interventions have played an important role in strengthening children's protections; however, scholars argue that courts alone cannot resolve systemic weaknesses. Effective juvenile justice requires coordinated efforts among police departments, prosecutors, judiciary, probation services, correctional institutions, and child protection agencies.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that Pakistan has made considerable progress in shifting from a punitive model toward a rights-based and rehabilitation-focused juvenile justice framework. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these reforms depends on strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring consistent implementation, expanding rehabilitation services, and addressing the socio-economic conditions that contribute to juvenile offending.

Age Determination, Diversion, and Institutional Reform in Pakistan's Juvenile Justice System

One of the most significant weaknesses affecting the protection of juvenile rights in Pakistan is the problem of age determination. The effectiveness of the Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018 largely depends on the timely and accurate identification of children in conflict with the law. However, inadequate birth registration systems, incomplete official documentation, and inconsistencies in record-keeping frequently create disputes regarding the age of accused persons. These challenges may result in juveniles being treated as adults during critical stages of the criminal justice process, including arrest, police investigation, remand proceedings, and initial detention.

Age determination is not merely an administrative procedure; it directly influences the protection of fundamental rights. When children are incorrectly classified as adults, they may face adult criminal procedures, exposure to inappropriate custodial environments, harsh interrogation practices, and psychological trauma. Although judicial recognition of the principle that uncertainty regarding age should

benefit the child has increased, inconsistent application at lower institutional levels continues to weaken juvenile safeguards. Strengthening documentation systems, ensuring early verification of age, and developing standardized procedures for age assessment are therefore essential for effective implementation of juvenile justice protections.

Another major challenge identified in the literature is the limited application of diversion mechanisms. The philosophy of juvenile justice recognizes that formal criminal proceedings should be avoided whenever possible, particularly for minor offenses and vulnerable children. Diversion aims to prevent unnecessary exposure of juveniles to criminal courts and detention facilities, as early involvement with punitive justice systems may contribute to stigmatization, disrupt social development, and increase the likelihood of future offending.

Although the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 formally introduces diversion mechanisms, their practical implementation remains limited due to inadequate institutional capacity, insufficient training, and weak coordination among police, prosecutors, probation officers, and social welfare departments. For diversion to become an effective component of juvenile justice, it must be institutionalized through clear procedures, professional training, and functional rehabilitation services. Police officers and justice-sector officials require specialized training regarding eligibility criteria, referral procedures, restorative approaches, and child-sensitive decision-making.

Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Juvenile Justice Reform

The successful implementation of the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 requires reforms that extend beyond legislative provisions and address institutional, administrative, and social challenges. A comprehensive reform strategy should focus on strengthening child protection mechanisms, improving institutional capacity, and promoting rehabilitation-oriented justice.

1. Improving Early Identification and Age Determination

The first priority should be establishing an effective age determination mechanism. Law enforcement agencies should be required to verify the age of accused persons immediately after arrest rather than delaying the process until later judicial stages. Standardized guidelines should be developed for documentary verification, medical assessment where necessary, and application of the benefit-of-doubt principle in favour of juvenility. Proper training of police officers, judicial personnel, and social welfare officials is essential to ensure consistent implementation.

2. Institutionalizing Diversion Mechanisms

Diversion should become a central element of Pakistan's juvenile justice system rather than an optional alternative. Effective diversion requires collaboration among police, courts, probation services, and community organizations. Programs such as counselling, family mediation, community service, educational support, and restorative justice initiatives should be expanded. Without adequate institutional support, diversion risks remaining a legal concept rather than a practical mechanism for reducing juvenile involvement in formal criminal proceedings.

3. Strengthening Juvenile Courts and Judicial Capacity

Specialized juvenile courts should be expanded and strengthened throughout Pakistan. These courts should operate with trained judges, child-friendly procedures, probation officers, psychologists, and legal aid representatives. Judicial training should emphasize child psychology, rehabilitation principles, restorative

justice, and the best interests of the child. Where separate juvenile courts cannot immediately be established, specialized juvenile benches with trained judges should be introduced to ensure minimum standards of child-sensitive justice.

4. Reforming Juvenile Detention and Rehabilitation Facilities

Detention should remain a measure of last resort and should only be applied when necessary. Where detention is unavoidable, juvenile facilities must focus on education, vocational training, psychological counselling, healthcare, and social reintegration. Juveniles should never be exposed to adult prison environments because such conditions may increase vulnerability, psychological harm, and criminal influence. Expanding rehabilitation centres and improving existing correctional facilities are necessary steps toward achieving the objectives of the JJSA 2018.

5. Expanding Access to Legal Aid

Legal assistance for juveniles must move beyond formal recognition toward effective implementation. Many children in conflict with the law belong to economically disadvantaged backgrounds and cannot afford private legal representation. Specialized juvenile defence lawyers should be developed through cooperation between legal aid organizations, bar associations, and government institutions. Early access to legal assistance can prevent procedural violations, protect children's rights, and improve the fairness of judicial outcomes.

6. Enhancing Institutional Coordination and Accountability

Juvenile justice involves multiple institutions, including police departments, prosecution services, courts, probation authorities, prisons, social welfare agencies, and child protection organizations. Weak coordination among these institutions often results in delays, fragmented procedures, and ineffective rehabilitation. A coordinated national framework should establish information-sharing mechanisms, monitoring systems, and accountability structures to evaluate implementation of juvenile justice reforms.

A national juvenile justice database should also be developed to collect reliable information regarding juvenile arrests, court decisions, rehabilitation outcomes, and recidivism rates. Evidence-based policymaking requires accurate data to identify weaknesses and measure the effectiveness of reforms.

7. Integrating Juvenile Justice with Social Welfare Policies

Juvenile offending cannot be addressed solely through criminal justice interventions. Many children enter the justice system due to structural factors such as poverty, educational exclusion, family instability, substance abuse, and social marginalization. Therefore, juvenile justice reform should be integrated with broader child protection and social development policies.

Preventive strategies focusing on education, mental health services, family support, employment opportunities, and community-based interventions can reduce juvenile crime and strengthen long-term rehabilitation outcomes. The future success of Pakistan's juvenile justice system depends on recognizing children in conflict with the law not only as offenders but also as individuals requiring protection, guidance, and opportunities for positive development.

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