Juvenile Justice in Karnataka: Empirical Insights into Offences, Rehabilitation, And District-Level Implementation

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Abstract- This study is an empirical investigation into the juvenile justice administration in five districts: Davangere, Shivamogga, Dharwad-Haveri, Chitradurga, and Ballari. The data was collected from 113 juveniles through structured interviews and institutional observations. Secondary data was collected in order to understand the typology of offense, bail and custody outcomes, dispositional directions, and the socioeconomic backgrounds. The study revealed that the male adolescents aged between 16 and 18 were predominantly involved in the offences. There was a significant correlation between educational disengagement, non-support of parents, and economical vulnerability with that of offenses. The study also revealed that there was disparity in the rehabilitative outcomes at the district level in contrast to the directives of the application of Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children Act 2015), though bail was granted in almost half the cases. The observations revealed the importance of adequate infrastructure, staffing and inter-agency coordination in order to effectively implement the directives. The study also revealed that the districts with centralized juvenile justice boards and active district child protection units had better adherence to the statutory requirements for rehabilitative practices. However, districts with shared jurisdictions and proximity to intimidating law enforcement settings have challenges. The study advocates bridge schooling for the drop-o[1]ut children, gender-sensitive custodial infrastructure, structured diversion programs, and family-focused integration strategies. The study also advocates the essentiality of the standardized protocols, capacity building and real-time data systems in order to enforce the juvenile justice delivery. With the contextual insights and the statistical analysis, this paper contributes the imminent steps to be initiated by the policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders of child protection, whereby an effective mechanism is built to ensure an equitable, rehabilitative and rights-based juvenile system.

Key Words: Juvenile Justice, Karnataka, Petty Offences, Rehabilitation, District-Level Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

India's juvenile justice framework has evolved significantly, culminating in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 ("JJ Act"), which shifted the focus from punishment to rehabilitation and child-centric care.[2] The Act aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and embeds principles of restorative justice and non-discrimination.[3]

Despite its progressive design, implementation remains uneven. Studies cite gaps in infrastructure, staffing, and coordination among Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs), Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), and District Child Protection Units (DCPUs).[4] These challenges are acute at the district level, where operational efficiency varies widely.[5]

This study examines juvenile justice practices in five districts of central Karnataka—Davangere, Chitradurga, Shivamogga, Ballari, and Dharwad-Haveri—selected for their socio-economic diversity and presence of functioning JJBs and Observation Homes. It aims to (i) profile juveniles in institutional care, (ii) assess dispositional outcomes and bail practices, and (iii) identify systemic gaps to inform district- sensitive policy reforms. By combining interviews, institutional records, and field

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

India's juvenile justice system has evolved from colonial statutes like the Apprentices Act of 1850

and the Reformatory Schools Act of 1897 to the JJ Act, which emphasizes rehabilitation over punishment.[6] The Act introduced provisions to try juveniles aged 16–18 as adults in heinous crimes, following public outcry after the Nirbhaya case.[7]

Despite reforms, challenges persist. Overcrowded juvenile homes, lack of trained personnel, and systemic bias against marginalized communities hinder effective rehabilitation.[8] Comparative studies show that countries like Germany and the UK prioritize diversion and community-based interventions, while the U.S. permits adult trials for juveniles as young as 13.[9]

Evidence-based models such as Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy have shown success abroad, but India's adoption remains limited.[10] Formal system processing often increases delinquency,[11] while diagnostic tools, individualized case management, and the SPEP framework are recommended to improve outcomes.[12]

Mental health remains a critical gap.[13] Judicial interpretations like *Salil Bali v. Union of India*[14] and

observations, the study contributes to district- level criminological research and advocates for context-aware, coordinated, and rehabilitative justice delivery *Dr. Subramanian Swamy v. Raju*[15] uphold reformative principles but raise concerns over discretionary assessments.[16]

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine juvenile justice administration across five districts in central Karnataka. The methodology was carefully structured to ensure empirical rigor, ethical compliance, and contextual sensitivity, in alignment with the principles of child rights and participatory research.

Sampling Strategy

Given the limited and defined population of institutionalized juveniles in the selected districts, a census method was employed. This approach ensured[2] that every child present in the government- run Observation Homes and Special Homes during the field visits was included in the study. The decision to use census sampling was informed by the need to eliminate selection bias and to capture the full spectrum of juvenile profiles and experiences.[17]

Formal permissions were obtained from the Directorate of Social Defense, Karnataka, and institutional heads prior to data collection. The researcher adhered to the ethical guidelines prescribed under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, particularly those related to privacy, consent, and non-disclosure of identities.[18]

Data Collection Tools

The study utilized a combination of structured instruments and observational techniques to gather data. These tools were designed to capture both the quantitative dimensions (e.g., age, gender, offence type) and qualitative aspects (e.g., institutional experience, peer dynamics) of juvenile justice administration.

Structured Interview Schedule

The primary instrument was a structured interview schedule, developed to collect comprehensive data from juveniles residing in institutional care. The schedule included both closed-ended and open- ended questions covering personal history, educational background, family environment, nature of alleged offence, peer pressure, and rehabilitation experiences.[19]

To enhance clarity and cultural relevance, the schedule was piloted in select districts and revised based on feedback from institutional staff and respondents. It was administered in both Kannada and English, depending on the respondent's comfort level. Interviews were conducted in the presence of designated staff members, ensuring compliance with institutional protocols and safeguarding the dignity of the children.

Observation Method

In addition to interviews, the researcher employed non-participant observation to document institutional routines, staff conduct, peer interactions, and physical infrastructure. Observational notes were maintained to capture non-verbal cues, informal conversations, and contextual details that might not surface during structured interviews.[20] This method enriched

the qualitative dimension of the study and provided triangulation for the interview data.

Informal Staff Conversations

Informal discussions were held with probation officers, superintendents, counsellors, social workers, and clerical staff. These conversations offered valuable insights into case management procedures, institution[3]al challenges, and district- level variations in juvenile justice delivery. While not formally recorded, these interactions helped contextualize the responses of juveniles and interpret systemic patterns.

Secondary Sources

Secondary data sources included administrative documents, government notifications, institutional records, and annual reports from the Directorate of Social Defense. These materials were used to validate field observations and to construct district profiles.[21] The researcher also referred to the District Census Handbooks, MSME profiles, and official portals to gather socio-economic data relevant to each district.[22]

Pilot Study

Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted across the five selected districts to assess the operational landscape of juvenile justice institutions and to refine the research tools. Field visits were made to the designated Observation Homes and Juvenile Justice Boards, and informal discussions were held with institutional staff.

The pilot study revealed significant variation in infrastructure, accessibility, and procedural adherence. For instance, in Dharwad-Haveri, a single JJB serves both districts, with sittings held in Dharwad city. This arrangement posed logistical challenges for children from remote taluks such as Savanur and Hirekerur. In Ballari, the Board's proximity to the SP Office facilitated coordination with law enforcement but raised concerns about the child-friendly nature of the environment.[23]

These insights were instrumental in refining the sampling strategy, validating the interview schedule, and identifying operational gaps that warranted further investigation during the main study.

Ethical Safeguards

The study was conducted in strict adherence to ethical norms governing research with children. The following safeguards were implemented:

- Supervised Interaction: All interviews were conducted under the supervision of institutional staff.
- Anonymization: No personally identifiable information was recorded or disclosed.
- No Visual Documentation: Photography and audio/video recording were strictly prohibited.
- Confidentiality: All data were stored securely and used solely for academic and policy research.
- Voluntary Participation: Respondents were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw at any time.

These safeguards ensured that the research upheld the dignity, privacy, and rights of juveniles in conflict with law, in accordance with the UNCRC and national ethical standards.[24]

District Profiles and Institutional Landscape

This study covers five districts in central Karnataka—Davangere, Chitradurga, Shivamogga, Ballari, and Dharwad-Haveri—selected for their geographic diversity, socio-economic variation, and presence of functioning Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs) and Observation Homes, as mandated under Section 4 of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.[25]

- Davangere: A commercial and educational hub with a literacy rate of 76.5%.[26] The JJB is co- located with the DCPU, enabling coordination.

  The Observation Home housed 22 juveniles and showed regular sittings and adequate infrastructure.

- Chitradurga: Predominantly agrarian with emerging wind energy projects.[27] The JJB near the Collector's office faces staffing constraints. The Observation Home (21 juveniles) lacked trained counsellors and recreational facilities.

- Shivamogga: Known for biodiversity and agro-processing, with a literacy rate of 78.04%.[28] The centrally located JJB and child-friendly Observation Home (23 juveniles) were functional, though psychological services were limited.
- Ballari: A mining-intensive district with industrial growth and environmental challenges.[29] The JJB's proximity to the SP Office raised concerns about child-friendly access. The Observation Home (22 juveniles) faced overcrowding and counselling gaps.
- Dharwad-Haveri: Though administratively separate, they share a JJB in Dharwad. The arrangement poses logistical issues for Haveri juveniles.[30] The Dharwad Observation Home (25 juveniles) was moderately equipped but understaffed.

Across districts, JJBs varied in infrastructure, staffing, and procedural adherence. These jurisdictional arrangements have direct implications for accessibility, case management, and rehabilitative outcomes. Districts with centralized Boards and co-located DCPUs (e.g., Davangere) showed better coordination, while shared or remote arrangements (e.g., Dharwad-Haveri) posed challenges for timely and child-sensitive adjudication.[31]

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Table 1.0

Sl. No.	District(s)	Jurisdiction of Board	Place of Sitting / Designated Court
1	Davangere	Entire Davangere District	JMFC Court Complex, MCC 'B' Block, Davangere
2	Chitradurga	Entire Chitradurga District	Principal Civil Judge & JMFC Court, Near DC Office, Chitradurga
3	Shivamogga	Entire Shivamogga District	District Court Complex, Gopi Circle, Shivamogga
4	Dharwad & Haveri	Entire Dharwad and Haveri Districts	II Addl. Civil Judge & JMFC Court, District Court Complex, Dharwad
5	Ballari	Entire Ballari District	Principal Civil Judge & JMFC Court, Opp. SP Office, Ballari

Empirical Findings

This section presents the core empirical findings of the study, based on data collected from 113 juveniles in conflict with law across five districts in central Karnataka. The analysis covers demographic characteristics, offence typology, bail and custody outcomes, dispositional directions, educational background, and socioeconomic status. These findings are interpreted using descriptive statistics and contextual insights gathered during field visits.

Demographic Characteristics

Age Distribution

The age-wise distribution of respondents reveals a concentration in the 16–18 years bracket, which accounts for 50.4% of the sample (n=57). The 11–15 years group comprises 37.2% (n=42), while the youngest group, aged 6–10 years, represents 12.4% (n=14). This pattern aligns with national NCRB data, which consistently shows older adolescents as the most represented group in juvenile IPC cases.[32]

The predominance of the 16–18 age group suggests that late adolescence is a critical period for intervention. This stage is marked by increased exposure to peer influence, socio-economic pressures, and legal vulnerability.[33] The presence of children as young as six highlights the need for early detection and preventive measures, particularly in cases involving neglect or abuse.

Gender Distribution

Male juveniles constitute over 90% of the sample, with uniform female representation across districts (2 per district). This gender disparity reflects broader national trends, where male juveniles are overrepresented in formal justice proceedings.[34] The reasons include greater visibility in public spaces, peer group dynamics, and gendered patterns of risk exposure.

While the number of female respondents is low, their inclusion is significant. Female juveniles often face distinct vulnerabilities, including sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, and stigma.[35] Their cases require gender-sensitive handling, including access to female counsellors, safe custodial environments, and trauma-informed care.

District-Wise Distribution

The sample is evenly distributed across districts:

Davangere (22), Chitradurga (21), Shivamogga (23), Ballari (22), and Dharwad-Haveri (25). The mean number of respondents per district is 22.6, with a standard deviation of 1.5, indicating statistical balance. This distribution enables equitable comparative analysis of juvenile justice practices across central Karnataka.

Offence Typology

Offences were classified into three categories— petty, serious, and heinous—based on statutory definitions under Sections 2(45), 2(54), and 2(33) of the JJ Act.[36]

- Petty Offences: These include theft, mischief, and trespass, and account for 53.1% of the total cases (n=60).
- Serious Offences: Assault, property damage, and drug-related offences fall under this category, comprising 31% (n=35).
- Heinous Offences: Sexual offences and grievous assault are classified as heinous, representing 15.9% (n=18).

The mean number of petty offences per district is 12.0 (SD = 2.83), indicating moderate variation. Serious offences average 7.0 per district (SD = 0.89), while heinous offences average 3.6 (SD = 0.80), suggesting relative consistency. These figures underscore the predominance of low- severity infractions, which typically warrant diversionary or community-based responses.

Bail and Custody Outcomes

Under Section 12 of the JJ Act, bail should be granted unless there are reasonable grounds to believe that release would expose the child to danger or criminal association.[37] The study found:

- Released on Bail: 57 juveniles (50.4%)
- Bail Rejected: 21 juveniles (18.6%)
- Remained in Custody: 35 juveniles (30.9%)

The mean number of bail cases per district is 11.4 (SD = 1.36), indicating uniformity. Custody cases show slightly higher variation (mean = 7.0, SD = 1.14), possibly reflecting differences in board discretion, case severity, or availability of fit institutions.[6]

District-level analysis reveals that Davangere recorded the highest number of custody cases (n=9), while Shivamogga had the lowest (n=4). Ballari showed a balanced distribution across all three categories, suggesting procedural consistency.

Dispositional Directions

Following inquiry under Sections 18 and 19 of the JJ Act, JJBs issued dispositional directions in 112 cases. These fell into three categories:

- Directed to Go Home: 55 cases (49.1%)
- Counselling/Community Service: 37 cases (33.0%)
- Sent to Special Home: 20 cases (17.9%)

District-level variation was evident. Ballari had the highest rate of custodial orders (30%), while Chitradurga and Davangere leaned more heavily on family-based reintegration. The high uptake of counselling and community service in Dharwad-Haveri points to active NGO partnerships and DCPU facilitation.

These patterns reflect the rehabilitative ethos of the JJ Act, which favors non-custodial outcomes. However, disparities across districts suggest the need for standardized decision-making protocols and stronger institutional coordination.[38]

Educational Background

The educational status of juveniles was categorized as follows:

- Class 1–5: 37 juveniles (32.7%)
- Class 6–7: 30 juveniles (26.5%)
- Class 8–10: 25 juveniles (22.1%)
- Class 11–12: 6 juveniles (5.3%)
- No Response: 5 juveniles (4.4%)

The data challenges the notion that lack of education is the primary driver of juvenile offending. Most respondents had completed middle or secondary schooling, indicating that delinquency may stem from deeper systemic issues such as academic disengagement, peer pressure, and socio-economic stress.

Dropout reasons included:

- Parental Non-Support: 42 cases (40.8%)

- Lack of Interest: 23 cases (21.2%)
- School Conflict: 18 cases (15.9%)
- Poor Academic Performance: 13 cases (11.5%)
- Other Reasons: 7 cases (6.2%)

These findings underscore the need for school- based interventions, mentorship programs, and inclusive education policies.[39]

Socioeconomic Status

Household income data revealed:

- Below ₹50,000/year: 108 juveniles (63.5%)
- ₹50,000–₹1 lakh/year: 72 juveniles (24.6%)
- Above ₹1 lakh/year: 34 juveniles (11.9%)

The strong correlation between economic deprivation and juvenile conflict with law is evident. Ballari and Shivamogga reported the highest figures in the lowest income category. The data supports the argument that poverty-sensitive interventions—such as family financial assistance and community-based diversion programs—are essential for effective juvenile justice.[40]

IV. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings presented in the previous section offer a nuanced understanding of juvenile

justice administration across five districts in central Karnataka. This discussion interprets those findings through theoretical lenses, comparative insights, and policy frameworks. It highlights systemic strengths, identifies gaps, and proposes directions for reform.

Age and Developmental Vulnerability

The predominance of juveniles aged 16–18 in the sample (50.4%) aligns with national NCRB trends and global research indicating that late[7] adolescence is a high-risk period for delinquent behavior.[41] This age group is developmentally characterized by identity formation, peer influence, and increased autonomy, often without corresponding emotional maturity.[42] Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory situates these adolescents within nested environments—family, school, peer groups, and community—each influencing behavior.[43]

The presence of juveniles as young as six years old, though minimal, raises serious concerns about early exposure to neglect, abuse, or criminal environments. These cases demand early intervention strategies, including school-based screening, family support services, and community outreach.

Gender Disparity and Hidden Vulnerabilities

The overwhelming male representation (over 90%) reflects entrenched gendered patterns in juvenile offending.[44] Males are more likely to be visible in public spaces, engage in peer-led risk behaviors, and be apprehended by law enforcement. However, the uniform female representation across districts suggests possible underreporting or concealment of female juvenile involvement, particularly in relational or domestic offences. Female juveniles often face distinct vulnerabilities—sexual exploitation, trafficking, and familial abuse—that may not manifest in formal justice proceedings.[45] Their minimal representation in institutional settings may reflect systemic biases in detection, diversion, or stigma. This calls for gender-sensitive programming, including female counsellors, trauma-informed care, and safe custodial environments.

Offence Patterns and Diversion Potential

The dominance of petty offences (53.1%) underscores the need for diversionary mechanisms and restorative justice models.[46] These offences—typically non-violent and low-severity—are best addressed through community service, counselling, and family reintegration. The JJ Act encourages such approaches, but implementation remains uneven.

Serious and heinous offences, though fewer, require specialized handling. Psychological assessment, legal aid, and individualized care plans are essential. The consistency in serious and heinous offence distribution across districts (low SD values) suggests systemic patterns rather than isolated incidents. This reinforces the need for standardized protocols and trained personnel.[47]

Bail Practices and Custodial Trends

The finding that 50.4% of juveniles were released on bail reflects adherence to Section 12 of the JJ Act, which mandates non-detention unless risks

are evident.[48] However, the fact that 30.9% remained in custody indicates institutional constraints, board discretion, or lack of non- custodial alternatives.

District-level variation in custody rates—highest in Davangere, lowest in Shivamogga—points to differences in infrastructure, board philosophy, and NGO support. Shivamogga's lower custody rate may be attributed to better diversion infrastructure and active DCPU engagement. These disparities highlight the need for bail monitoring mechanisms and expansion of community-based alternatives.[49]

Dispositional Directions and Rehabilitative Ethos

The dispositional data shows that 49.1% of juveniles were sent home, 33% received counselling/community service, and 17.9% were placed in special homes. These figures suggest that JJBs are largely aligned with the rehabilitative principles of the JJ Act.[50] However, district-level disparities—such as Ballari's higher custodial orders—indicate inconsistent application of these principles.[8]

The high uptake of counselling and community service in Dharwad-Haveri reflects the value of NGO partnerships and DCPU facilitation. These models should be replicated in other districts. Moreover, the continued use of special homes underscores the need for strengthening custodial rehabilitation infrastructure and ensuring post- release support.[51]

Educational Disengagement and Dropout Dynamics

Contrary to popular belief, most juveniles in the study had completed middle or secondary schooling. This challenges the assumption that lack of education is the primary driver of delinquency. Instead, the data points to academic disengagement, parental neglect, and peer conflict as key factors.

Parental non-support emerged as the leading reason for dropout (40.8%), followed by lack of interest and school conflict. These findings align with studies from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, which link juvenile offending to familial instability and school alienation.[52] Interventions must therefore focus on mentorship, bridge schooling, and psychosocial support.

Economic Vulnerability and Structural Risk

The socioeconomic data reveals that 63.5% of juveniles came from households earning below ₹50,000 annually. This confirms the established link between poverty and juvenile conflict with law.[53] Economic deprivation contributes to school dropout, peer association, and exposure to criminal environments.

Districts like Ballari and Shivamogga, with higher figures in the lowest income category, require poverty-sensitive interventions. These include family financial assistance, vocational training, and inclusive rehabilitation programs. The underrepresentation of juveniles from higher-income households may reflect systemic biases in detection and diversion.[9]

Institutional Infrastructure and District- Level Variation

The study found significant disparities in institutional infrastructure across districts. Davangere and Shivamogga had relatively streamlined operations due to proximity to DCPUs and central court complexes. In contrast, Dharwad-Haveri's shared JJB posed logistical challenges, and Ballari's proximity to the SP Office raised concerns about child-friendly environments.

These findings underscore the importance of district-sensitive planning. Infrastructure investment, staff training, and inter-agency coordination are critical for effective juvenile justice delivery. The pilot study insights reinforce the need for localized assessments and adaptive strategies.[54]

Policy Implications

The findings and discussion presented in this study underscore the urgent need for district-sensitive, rights-based reforms in juvenile justice administration. While the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 ("JJ Act") provides a robust legal framework, its effective implementation requires coordinated action across institutional, infrastructural, and community levels. This section outlines key policy recommendations derived from the empirical evidence and theoretical insights.

Strengthening Diversion and Restorative Justice Mechanisms

Given that over half of the juveniles in the study

were involved in petty offences, there is a compelling case for expanding diversionary programs.[55] These include community service, peer mediation, and restorative conferencing, which have shown success in reducing recidivism and promoting reintegration.[56]

Districts should establish formal diversion protocols, supported by trained facilitators and community stakeholders. The JJ Act permits such alternatives under Section 18, but operational clarity and funding support are lacking.[57] NGOs and civil society organizations can play a critical role in designing and implementing these programs, especially in districts with limited state capacity.

Gender-Sensitive Programming and Infrastructure

The minimal representation of female juveniles in institutional settings should not obscure their distinct vulnerabilities.[58] Custodial environments must be equipped with gender-sensitive infrastructure, including separate dormitories, female staff, and access to trauma-informed counselling.

Policy guidelines should mandate gender audits of Observation Homes and Special Homes. Additionally, training modules for JJB members and institutional staff should include gender sensitivity, child protection norms, and psychosocial care.[59] The Ministry of Women and Child Development can collaborate with NCPCR and state commissions to monitor compliance.

Educational Reintegration and Bridge Schooling

The high dropout rate among juveniles, particularly due to parental non-support and school conflict, calls for targeted educational interventions.[60] Bridge schooling programs, vocational training, and mentorship initiatives should be integrated into rehabilitation plans.

District Child Protection Units (DCPUs) should coordinate with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and local education departments to ensure re-enrollment and academic continuity.[61] Special educators and career counsellors must be appointed in Observation Homes to support learning and skill development.

Family-Centric Support and Reintegration

Family instability—manifested in single-parent households, neglect, and economic hardship—is a recurring theme in juvenile offending.[62] Reintegration strategies must therefore include family counselling, financial assistance, and parenting workshops.

The Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) provides for such interventions, but implementation remains patchy.[63] District-level convergence between DCPUs, social welfare departments, and Panchayati Raj institutions can enhance outreach and sustainability. Community-based foster care and sponsorship programs should also be explored.

Infrastructure Investment and Institutional Capacity Building

Disparities in institutional infrastructure—such as shared JJBs, proximity to intimidating law enforcement offices, and lack of child-friendly spaces—undermine the rehabilitative mandate of the JJ Act.[64] The state government must prioritize infrastructure upgrades, including dedicated JJB buildings, well-equipped Observation Homes, and mobile counselling units.

Capacity building is equally critical. Regular training for JJB members, probation officers, and institutional staff should be mandated, covering legal procedures, child psychology, and restorative practices.[65] Monitori[10]ng and evaluation frameworks must be established to assess institutional performance and ensure accountability.

Data Systems and Monitoring Mechanisms

The absence of real-time data systems hampers policy planning and oversight.[66] Districts should adopt digital case management platforms that track juvenile profiles, offence history, dispositional outcomes, and rehabilitation progress. These systems can be integrated with state-level dashboards for monitoring and evaluation.

Periodic audits by independent bodies, including child rights commissions and academic institutions, can enhance transparency. Feedback mechanisms involving juveniles and their families should be institutionalized to ensure participatory governance.[67]

V. CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive, district-level analysis of juvenile justice administration in

central Karnataka, integrating empirical data, institutional observations, and theoretical insights. By examining the profiles, offence patterns, and rehabilitative outcomes of 113 juveniles in conflict with law across five districts— Davangere, Chitradurga, Shivamogga, Ballari, and Dharwad-Haveri—it reveals both systemic strengths and critical gaps in the implementation of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.The findings affirm that juvenile offending is shaped by a confluence of age, gender, economic status, educational background, and family structure. Petty offences dominate the caseload, suggesting that most juveniles are not hardened offenders but vulnerable youth requiring support. Bail practices and dispositional directions reflect partial adherence to the rehabilitative ethos of the JJ Act, though district-level disparities persist. Educational disengagement and economic deprivation emerge as significant correlates, underscoring the need for integrated, poverty- sensitive interventions.

Institutional observations highlight the importance of infrastructure, staffing, and inter-agency coordination. Districts with centralized boards and active DCPUs (e.g., Davangere, Shivamogga) demonstrate better outcomes, while shared or remote arrangements (e.g., Dharwad- Haveri) pose logistical challenges. The study also emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive programming, especially for female juveniles who face distinct vulnerabilities. Policy recommendations include expanding diversion and restorative justice mechanisms, strengthening educational and family reintegration strategies, investing in infrastructure and capacity building, and establishing robust data systems for monitoring and evaluation. These reforms must be tailored to district-specific contexts, supported by stakeholder training, and grounded in child rights principles.

In conclusion, juvenile justice in India must move beyond statutory compliance to embrace contextual sensitivity, participatory governance, and sustained investment in rehabilitative infrastructure. This study contributes to that vision by offering actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers committed to building a more equitable and child-friendly justice system.

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