



Children in Conflict with the Law in Lebanon: Legal Challenges and the Protection of Rights

Policy Briefing - September 2025

Introduction

Child protection in Lebanon, long marked by structural weaknesses, has been further undermined by successive crises -the 2019 economic collapse, the Beirut Port explosion in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the escalation of hostilities in 2024. These overlapping shocks have compounded vulnerabilities across an already fragile child protection system, eroding its capacity to both prevent and respond to risks. Today, across Lebanon, children face heightened exposure to violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect, while access to essential services such as education, health, and nutrition continues to deteriorate.

Among the most at risk are children in conflict with the law – juveniles who come into contact with the justice system because of alleged or actual offences. It is important here to distinguish between “children in contact with the law,” a broader category that includes any child who interacts with judicial authorities (as victims, witnesses, or for protection), and “children in conflict with the law,” a narrower group referring specifically to those accused or convicted of an offence. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (also known as the Beijing Rules) define a juvenile as a child or young person who may be dealt with differently from an adult under the law. While juvenile justice, as envisioned in these standards, forms part of broader social justice and must continuously evolve in line with progressive child protection and welfare policies.

In Lebanon, however, the justice system has struggled to uphold these principles, hindered by years of government paralysis and the ongoing economic crisis. A striking example is the Ministry of Justice's suspension of systematic data collection on children in conflict with the law since 2019, due to severe budgetary constraints. As a result, there is no updated national data on how many children are currently in conflict with the law, the nature of their alleged offenses, their age groups or nationalities, or the legal outcomes of their cases. This evidence gap makes it difficult to understand not only the scale of the issue but also the structural and socioeconomic factors driving children's involvement in the justice system, as well as the ways consecutive crises have shaped their lives and future trajectories.

The most recent Juvenile Justice Department figures, for the year 2019, recorded 2,312 children in contact with the law, of whom 1,686 were in conflict with the law. Most cases involved charges of theft, illegal entry into Lebanon, and drug-related offenses. Adolescents made up the vast majority of those in conflict: with 87% between 15 and 18 years old, 7% between 12 and 14, 5% between 8 and 11, and 1% under the age of 7. Legal outcomes revealed a heavy reliance at the time on punitive measures, with 28% sentenced to imprisonment, while others faced conditional releases, statements of commitment, or parental handover. However, with Lebanon's economic crisis deepening, driving many families into further poverty, desperation, and displacement, the number of children coming into conflict with the law is likely to have increased significantly since these figures were last collected in 2019.

Field evidence gathered by the IRC underscores that children's engagement in unlawful behavior is a consequence of poverty, lack of access to education, family breakdown, domestic violence, homelessness, or even forced recruitment. Furthermore, children in conflict with the law are frequently denied the protection, rehabilitation, and age-appropriate consideration they are entitled to. The convergence of these conditions; deepening poverty, overstretched institutions, and the absence of up-to-date data underscores the urgent need to examine systemic challenges facing children in conflict with the law, while strengthening child protection within the justice system.

With support from the Crisis and Support Center of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the IRC developed this policy brief to highlight existing gaps and provide concrete recommendations to ensure that children in conflict with the law in Lebanon are better protected and granted meaningful access to justice.

I. The IRC's Access to Justice Programming

Drawing on child protection and legal aid programming, the IRC implements a range of interventions in Lebanon for children in conflict with the law, both inside and outside detention facilities. Core services include child protection case management with tailored support and sustained follow-up, and specialized psychosocial support to help children manage trauma and stress. To strengthen family environments, the IRC provides positive parenting programs and enhances community awareness through sessions on child rights and legal procedures - helping to reduce stigma and improve legal literacy among children, caregivers, and community members.

In partnership with bar associations, the IRC also ensures access to justice through legal aid and counselling that seeks to guarantee fair representation in judicial proceedings.

To strengthen institutional responses, the IRC builds the capacity of justice actors - including judges, prosecutors, police, lawyers, and social workers - and works directly with the Internal Security Forces and the Beirut and Tripoli Bar Associations to improve referral pathways. The IRC also supports shelters, detention centers, and rehabilitation institutions to adopt child-friendly practices, enhance safety, and expand access to education, vocational training, and life skills that facilitate reintegration.

Through ongoing consultations with children and caregivers, the IRC identifies emerging protection risks to inform critical needs, such as expanded psychological, financial, and legal support, legislative reforms, shorter detention periods, protection during questioning, and stronger post-release reintegration services. By combining service delivery, system-strengthening, and evidence-based advocacy, the IRC ensures that lessons learned from its programming directly inform the analysis and recommendations in this brief.

II. Methodology:

To better understand the challenges within the legal process that affect children's protection and rights, the IRC, with support from the Crisis and Support Center of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, employed a mixed qualitative approach. The research combined:

- Focus group discussions with children and their caregivers to capture lived experiences.
- Key informant interviews with practitioners and experts to gather technical insights.
- A policy dialogue event bringing together judges, lawyers, Internal Security Forces, social workers, representatives from the ministries of Justice and Social Affairs, and juvenile justice professionals to examine systemic barriers.
- A validation workshop with the key stakeholders to review and verify findings of the policy brief, ensuring accuracy and relevance.

These consultations, complemented by expert discussions, form the evidence base of this policy brief and underpin its analysis of legal processes and their impact on children's access to rights and protection.

III. The Legal Framework in Lebanon:

Children who come into contact with the law are entitled to special protections under the international standards. Key frameworks include Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules, 1985), the Riyadh Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (1990), and the Havana Rules on the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Liberty (1990). Collectively, these frameworks emphasize restorative justice approaches that prioritise protection, support, and rehabilitation over punitive measures.

Lebanon first addressed juvenile justice through Legislative Decree No. 119 (1983). While progressive for its time, the decree did not reflect evolving child rights principles, particularly the best interests of the child and the shift towards restorative rather than punitive justice.

A significant reform came with the adoption of Law No. 422 (2002), which remains the cornerstone of Lebanon's juvenile justice system. Law 422 reframed children in conflict with the law as individuals in need of protection rather than punishment, bringing Lebanon into closer alignment with its international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It introduced clear procedures on detention and juvenile justice, promoted alternative measures to incarceration, and emphasized rehabilitation and reintegration as guiding principles.

Today, Law 422/2002 continues to serve as the primary legal foundation for protecting children in conflict with the law in Lebanon. It applies to all children suspected, prosecuted, or convicted of committing acts classified as crimes, and enshrines the principles of the child's best interests, proportionality, and access to alternative measures that support reintegration rather than exclusion.

IV. Key Provisions of Law 422 (2002) on Juvenile Justice in Lebanon

Minimum Age (Articles 3 and 6)

- Law 422 sets the minimum age of criminal responsibility at seven years. Any child under this age cannot be prosecuted for an offense.
- The law permits pretrial detention from the age of twelve years, with stricter measures such as reduced penalties or placement in a reformatory allowed depending on the severity of the felony.

Principle of the Best Interests of the Child (Article 2)

- The law embeds the principle of the best interests of the child. It grants juvenile judges wide discretionary powers to apply measures that support rehabilitation, reintegration, and protection, rather than focusing on punishment. Judges are expected to select responses that safeguard dignity and development.

Protective and Alternative Measures (Articles 5 and 25)

- Article 5 lays out a hierarchy of measures for children in conflict with the law. These begin with non-custodial and reformatory responses such as reprimand, probation, supervised freedom, community service, or rehabilitation programs. Custodial measures, including placement in reformatories or disciplinary centers, are allowed only when deemed necessary by the judge.
- Article 25 extends the scope of the law to include children considered at risk (such as those exposed to abuse, neglect, or exploitation), empowering judges to intervene protectively even if the child has not committed an offense.

Safeguards During Proceedings (Articles 6, 31, and 32)

- Article 6 requires the presence of a social worker during interrogations and hearings to ensure that the child's rights and well-being are respected.
- Article 31 upholds the confidentiality of proceedings and prohibits any form of abuse or harm during legal processes.
- Article 32 states that the juvenile may not be interrogated except in the presence of a social worker, and a doctor shall be called upon when necessary.
- Additional provisions require the separation of children from adults in detention facilities to protect them from further harm.

Judicial Authority and Enforcement (Article 26)

- Article 26 gives juvenile judges the authority to impose protective measures, adjust them over time, or revoke them depending on the child's progress in rehabilitation.
- The law permits the imposition of a coercive fine if caregivers fail to comply with non-custodial measures.

V. Key Legal and Implementation Gaps

On May 30, 2025, the IRC convened judges, lawyers, Internal Security Forces, social workers, and juvenile justice professionals to assess the gaps between Lebanon's legal framework and its practical implementation, particularly considering the country's financial collapse and its severe impact on communities, institutions, and service delivery. This dialogue was complemented by key informant interviews (KIIs) with juvenile and public prosecution judges, social workers, and in consultation with children and their caregivers. The findings, outlined below, reveal persistent challenges at the legal, institutional, and resource levels.

A. Gaps in the Legal Framework and Implementation:

1. Low Age of Criminal Responsibility and Detention

Law 422 sets the minimum age of criminal responsibility at 7 years and permits pretrial detention from age 12. Both thresholds are considered by juvenile judges as too low and inconsistent with child development principles. International standards, including the CRC, set 12 as the minimum age for criminal responsibility, and encourage progressive increases, stressing that detention should only be used as a measure of last resort for the shortest possible time. Lebanon's provisions, and the absence of detention facilities designed for children, expose very young children to prosecution and detention contrary to the development and restorative justice principles.

2. Non-Compliance with Legal Deadlines:

Delays in judicial procedures often result in prolonged detention without legal justification, and in some cases without the issuance of an arrest warrant. These delays are frequently due to technical or administrative issues that delay the child's appearance before a judge, in turn prolonging their detention. Such procedural lapses violate due process guarantees under CRC Article 40, which requires prompt access to a judge and trial without delay. This results in often harmful repercussions on the child's psychological well-being.



Detention goes on for too long without knowing the sentence, and that breaks us as parents. One of the hardest things is not understanding what is happening with your child.

Maha*, mother of a child in conflict with the law

3. Violations During Pretrial Detention:

Despite being a measure of last resort, pretrial detention is frequently used. Alternatives such as learning measures or supervised release remain underdeveloped, and legal representation is not mandatory during detention and questioning. As a result, many children face questioning and proceedings without a lawyer, undermining their right to a fair trial. In some cases, children are detained in the same facilities as adults, exposing them to heightened protection risks. International standards, including the Beijing Rules and CRC Article 37 prohibit unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, mandate separation from adults, and guarantee prompt access to legal assistance. The Beijing Rules also stress that detention must be exceptional, strictly necessary, and for the shortest time possible. Lebanon's current practice often falls short of these standards and undermines the rehabilitative purpose of juvenile justice.

4. Violations During Investigation:

Article 6 of Law 422 requires a social worker to be present during interrogations to ensure the child's well-being and rights are respected, yet this safeguard is often ignored. Guarantees of confidentiality are also inconsistently upheld, leaving children vulnerable to stigma, intimidation, or secondary victimization. Another critical gap is a lack of access to medical assistance when required, often resulting from financial constraints, undermining children's right to adequate protection and care as stated under Article 32. These practices are not only inconsistent with Lebanese law but also contravene international standards, including CRC Article's 31 and 40 and General Comment No. 24, which stress the importance of professional support persons, such as social workers, in all interactions with law enforcement, and the need for privacy protections during investigations.

5. Weak Enforcement of Juvenile Judge's Measures

Under Article 26 of Law 422, juvenile judges can impose protective or non-custodial measures such as supervised freedom or rehabilitation. In practice, these measures are rarely enacted. Caregivers may fail to comply with conditions set by the judge, and the only available sanction - a coercive fine – is often ineffective or seldom applied. As a result, children are often left without the protection intended by the law, despite international standards emphasizing that protective measures must be binding, enforceable, and supported by effective monitoring mechanisms. The Beijing Rules call for clear enforcement of dispositions that serve the child's best interests, while Article 19 of the CRC obliges states to protect children from neglect and abuse through effective

administrative and judicial measures. Lebanon's reliance on unenforceable fines falls short of these obligations and undermines the credibility of juvenile justice decisions.

6. Limited Alternatives to Detention:

Although Article 5 of Law 422 outlines a hierarchy of responses, beginning with non-custodial measures such as reprimand, probation, supervised freedom, community service, and rehabilitation, experts confirm that juvenile judges often default to detention. Barriers to alternative measures include limited awareness or training on these measures, lack of effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient availability of alternative programs that judges can rely on within a supportive institutional environment. This perpetuates a punitive rather than rehabilitative approach, contrary to Article 37(b) of the CRC, which requires states to use detention only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period.

B. Institutional Roles and Responsibilities:

1. Overlapping Roles of Juvenile Delegates:

Children may be assigned multiple juvenile delegates for separate cases (protection vs legal offense, resulting in conflicting approaches and inconsistent support. In some cases, the same child may attend investigation or hearing sessions accompanied by different social workers, which undermines the continuity of follow-up and the psychological and social support that are essential throughout legal proceedings. International standards, including the Beijing Rules and Article 3 CRC, emphasize consistency in interventions and decisions that reflect the best interests of the child.

2. Weak Coordination Among Stakeholders:

The absence of a mapping of resources and poor communication among the relevant stakeholders can lead to overlapping responsibilities and gaps in service delivery. NGOs and social workers play complementary roles; with NGOs providing legal representation, while social workers support on case follow up and coordination. Without consistent coordination children in conflict with the law often face fragmented support.

The Ministries of Justice, Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, and Ministry of Social Affairs also all share responsibilities for addressing the needs of children at risk or in conflict with the law but lack a structured coordination mechanism. Extensive coordination between the Ministry of Justice, particularly the Juvenile Justice Division and the Ministry of Social Affairs, is critical for working effectively with NGOs that provide child protection and legal services. This collaboration allows judges to identify which services are most suitable for each child's needs and to assign alternative measures with greater confidence. Coordination between the Ministries of Justice and Ministry of Interior and Municipalities is also critical, particularly concerning detention centers, to ensure that detention conditions meet appropriate standards for children and comply with child protection principles. The CRC (Articles 4 and 40) obliges states to establish coordinated child protection systems, and the Havana Rules stress the need for inter-agency cooperation.

As a result, Lebanon's lack of systemic coordination undermines both protection and justice outcomes.

3. High Staff Turnover in the Internal Security Forces:

Frequent staff transfers within the Internal Security Forces disrupt child rights and child protection capacity-building efforts, as trained officers are replaced by untrained personnel in detention centers and prisons. The Beijing Rules call for specialized training of all personnel who deal with children. In Lebanon, the lack of continuity due to frequent staff transfers undermines compliance with these standards

4. Lack of Dedicated Full-Time Juvenile Judges:

Juvenile judges in Lebanon are often not fully dedicated to juvenile cases, as they simultaneously hold other judicial posts. This reduces the time and focus available for child-sensitive proceedings and delays case handling. International standards, including CRC General Comment No. 24, call for specialized juvenile courts with dedicated judges. Lebanon's reliance on part-time judicial assignments weakens the effectiveness and timeliness of decisions.

C. Resource Constraints and Underfunding:

1. Lack of Dedicated Budgets for Rehabilitation Programs:

Government ministries lack dedicated budgets for non-custodial alternatives to detention, such as community supervision or learning measures. As a result, detention remains the default approach, contradicting CRC Article 37(b) and the Havana Rules which prioritize non-custodial measures.

2. Weak Institutional Infrastructure:

Child protection Units within the Ministries of Justice and Social Affairs face limited staff capacity and resource shortages, impeding their ability to provide effective services and fulfil child protection mandates. The CRC (Article 4) requires states to allocate resources to implement child rights.

3. Limited Inter-Ministerial Coordination for Child Protection Issues:

Without dedicated financial support, ministries are unable to establish and maintain effective coordination mechanisms among stakeholders. This leads to fragmented efforts and a lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities. International standards emphasize institutionalized coordination as essential to ensure accountability across agencies.

4. Lack of Sustainability in Training and Capacity Building on Child Protection:

Budgetary gaps prevent continuous training and professional development for judges, security officers, and social delegates. This weakens their ability to engage effectively with vulnerable children, including stateless children, refugees, and children with disabilities. The Beijing Rules stress the need for continuous training, a standard Lebanon has not met due to chronic underinvestment



The judge didn't explain anything; they just spoke quickly, and I didn't understand what was happening.

Adam*, Child in conflict with the law

VI. Recommendations:

A coordinated national effort involving public institutions, civil society, and donors is urgently needed to strengthen the implementation of Law 422 and bring Lebanon's juvenile justice system in line with international child rights standards. This requires adopting alternatives to detention, securing sustainable funding, enhancing institutional capacity, and enforcing accountability. Protecting children in conflict with the law is both a legal obligation and a humanitarian responsibility – one that contributes to building a more just and inclusive society.

The following recommendations aim to close legal, institutional, and procedural gaps, while promoting a coordinated, child-centered approach:

1. Strengthen Coordination and Governance:

- **Empower the Higher Council for Childhood** (Ministry of Social Affairs) to coordinate across the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (including the General Directorate of the Internal Security Forces), the Bar Associations of Tripoli and Beirut, international organizations, and local NGOs working with children in conflict with the law.
- **Develop a national protocol and service map** to clarify roles, responsibilities, and available services. Ensure the protocol includes coherent referral pathways, identifies service gaps, and integrates child safeguarding, accountability mechanisms, and inclusive approaches for at-risk children.
- **Advocate for increased funding and resources** to ensure comprehensive data on children in conflict with the law, expand service delivery, improve detention infrastructure, and expand restorative and diversion justice programs. Emphasize multi-year child-sensitive, budgeting, investments and integration within national systems to ensure continuity and scalability.

2. Advance Legal Reform:

Engage key parliamentary committees (Woman and Child and Human rights) and justice sector stakeholders to strengthen the legislative framework and its implementation by:

- **Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility** to 12 and the minimum age of detention to 14, in line with international child rights standards and obligations.

- **Activating Article 2 of Law 422** to institutionalize diversion and reconciliation as standard alternatives to detention, including clear protocols and guidance for public prosecutors.

3. Ensure Enforcement and Accountability:

- **Introduce stronger monitoring and oversight mechanisms**, and strengthen partnerships with civil society, to guarantee compliance with procedural safeguards during investigation and detention.
- **Revise juvenile judges' authority** to enable them to directly instruct law enforcement to execute their decisions. Non-compliance - particularly in protection cases – should be treated as a criminal offense subject to legal accountability rather than a coercive fine.
- **Mandate independent monitoring bodies**, including national human rights institutions and child rights civil society actors, to conduct regular inspections of detention facilities and review juvenile court practices, with the authority to recommend corrective action. Ensure child-friendly complaint mechanisms are accessible to detained children and establish a clear referral pathway.

4. Increase Sustainable Investment in Institutional Capacity

- **Appoint dedicated juvenile judges in all courts** to guarantee timely, child-sensitive, and rights-based decisions, reduce case backlogs, and ensure consistent application of juvenile law in line with international standards.
- **Support capacity strengthening for judiciary, including public prosecutors and investigation judges** in juvenile justice to ensure child-sensitive application of legal reforms and procedural safeguards, improve case handling and uphold the best interests of the child.
- **Institutionalize regular capacity strengthening for law enforcement actors** on juvenile justice, child-sensitive interviewing, and investigation techniques aligned with international standards.
- **Expand the role of civil society actors** in providing sustained case management and follow-up, including legal aid, psychosocial support, and reintegration services, and develop community-based programs that identify at-risk children early and offer tailored support through schools, social services, and local organizations. This includes strengthening child protection case management, school reintegration, livelihood support for families, and safe spaces for adolescents.

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participation of _____



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