

Technology-Enabled Social Inclusion: Data-Driven Models for Institutional Care and Child Rehabilitation under the Juvenile Justice Act (2015) in Punjab

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1. Introduction

Children represent the foundation of any society, and their well-being is essential for sustainable and inclusive social development. The quality of childhood experiences significantly shapes an individual's future, influencing not only personal growth but also the broader social and economic fabric of the nation. A nurturing environment during childhood ensures physical, emotional, cognitive and social development, thereby enabling children to become responsible and productive members of society.

Traditionally, the family has been regarded as the primary institution responsible for the care, protection and socialisation of children. It provides emotional security, social identity and cultural continuity. However, changing socio-economic conditions, poverty, migration, family disintegration and other structural constraints often weaken the capacity of families to fulfil these responsibilities. As a result, a significant number of children are left vulnerable to neglect, abandonment, abuse and exploitation. Such children are categorised as “children in need of care and protection,” requiring intervention from institutional and state mechanisms.

In this context, institutional care emerges as an important mechanism for safeguarding the rights and well-being of vulnerable children. In India, the **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015** provides a comprehensive legal framework for the care, protection, rehabilitation and social reintegration of such children. The Act emphasises the role of Child Care Institutions (CCIs), including Children's Homes, Shelter Homes and Special Homes, as spaces that ensure safety, development and rehabilitation.

In recent years, the growing penetration of emerging technologies has begun to reshape governance structures across sectors, including child welfare. Digital platforms, data management systems and monitoring tools have the potential to enhance transparency,

efficiency and accountability in institutional care. At the same time, technology can play a crucial role in promoting social inclusion by improving access to education, healthcare and welfare services for children in institutional settings. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the functioning of Children's Homes in Punjab and explores how emerging technologies can strengthen institutional care and contribute to the social inclusion of children in need of care and protection.

2. Conceptual and Legal Framework

The study of child welfare and institutional care is rooted in a broader sociological understanding of childhood, socialisation and social inclusion. Childhood is not merely a biological stage but a socially constructed phase during which individuals acquire norms, values and behavioural patterns necessary for integration into society. When children are deprived of supportive environments, their socialisation process is disrupted, leading to long-term consequences for both the individual and society. From a global perspective, child rights have been strongly articulated through international frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These frameworks recognise children as rights-bearing individuals entitled to protection, development and participation. Organisations such as UNICEF have played a crucial role in strengthening child protection systems and advocating for the rights of vulnerable children. In India, the constitutional framework reinforces these principles by guaranteeing fundamental rights and empowering the State to make special provisions for children. Institutions such as the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD) further contribute to the protection and promotion of child rights through policy guidance, training and monitoring. The **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015** serves as the cornerstone of child protection in India. It defines children in need of care and protection and outlines procedures for their rescue, care, treatment, development and rehabilitation. The Act mandates the establishment of Child Care Institutions and provides detailed guidelines for their functioning through the Model Rules, 2016. Children's Homes, as a key component of this framework, are designed to provide a safe and supportive environment where children receive care, education, vocational training and opportunities for rehabilitation. These institutions aim not only to protect children from harm but also to facilitate their reintegration into society.

3. Objectives and Methodology

The primary objective of the study is to examine the functioning of Children's Homes in Punjab and assess their role in the care, protection and rehabilitation of children in need of care and protection. The study also seeks to understand the socio-economic background of children, evaluate the implementation of institutional provisions and explore the potential of emerging technologies in enhancing institutional care and social inclusion. The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. It is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected from seven Children's Homes in Punjab, covering 245 child inmates and seven superintendents. The methods of data collection included structured interviews, focus group discussions and direct observation of institutional settings. Secondary data was collected from books, research studies, policy documents and official reports related to child welfare and institutional care. The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches enabled a comprehensive understanding of the functioning of Children's Homes and the experiences of children residing in them.

4. Institutional Profile and Socio-Economic Background

The institutional profile of Children's Homes in Punjab reveals that most of these institutions are located in urban areas. While urban locations provide better access to infrastructure and services, they also highlight a gap in the availability of institutional care in rural regions. This spatial imbalance may limit access for children from remote and underdeveloped areas. The socio-economic background of children residing in these homes reflects patterns of social inequality and marginalisation. A significant proportion of children belong to economically weaker sections and socially disadvantaged groups, particularly Scheduled Castes. Many children have experienced family disintegration, neglect or abandonment, which has led to their institutionalisation. Runaway children constitute a major category among the inmates, indicating the presence of underlying issues such as domestic conflict, abuse or economic hardship. The majority of children are enrolled in government schools, suggesting that institutional care provides access to basic education. However, challenges remain in ensuring continuity, quality and engagement in education.

5. Standards of Care and Institutional Functioning

Children's Homes are expected to adhere to the standards of care prescribed under the Juvenile Justice Act and Model Rules, which include provisions for physical, emotional and developmental needs of children. These standards encompass areas such as nutrition, healthcare, sanitation, education, vocational training, recreation and mental health support.

The findings of the study indicate that while these standards are generally followed, their implementation is uneven across institutions. Basic necessities such as clothing, bedding and toiletries are provided, but not always in adequate quantity or on time. Delays in funding and administrative constraints often affect the quality of service delivery. Healthcare and education facilities are available, but mental health support remains limited, despite its critical importance for children who have experienced trauma. Recreational and cultural activities are conducted in many institutions, contributing to the social and emotional development of children. Overall, Children's Homes provide a structured environment that ensures safety and basic care. At the same time, there is a need to strengthen infrastructure, improve resource allocation and enhance the quality of services.

6. Governance, Protection and Daily Functioning

The governance of Children's Homes in Punjab is structured within the legal framework provided by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which lays down clear guidelines for the care, protection and rehabilitation of children in need. These institutions function under the supervision of designated authorities and are subject to periodic inspections and monitoring to ensure compliance with prescribed standards. The administrative structure typically includes superintendents, caretakers, counsellors and support staff, each playing a specific role in maintaining the functioning of the institution.

The process of admission of children into Children's Homes is primarily carried out through the Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), which act as the competent authority in matters concerning children in need of care and protection. The CWCs assess the background, circumstances and immediate needs of each child before deciding on institutional placement. This process ensures that institutionalisation is not arbitrary but based on careful consideration of the child's best interests. In addition, efforts are made to maintain detailed records of each child, including personal history, health status, educational background and progress reports. Such documentation plays a crucial role in ensuring transparency, accountability and continuity of care.

In terms of protection, Children's Homes have adopted various measures to safeguard children from abuse, neglect and exploitation. The installation of CCTV cameras in key areas of the institution serves as an important surveillance mechanism, helping to monitor activities and prevent misconduct. The presence of security personnel further strengthens the protective environment, ensuring that unauthorised access is restricted and that children remain safe within the premises. Regular inspections by authorities and interaction with children also contribute to maintaining a secure institutional environment.

Grievance redressal mechanisms have been introduced to provide children with a platform to express their concerns and complaints. These include suggestion boxes, complaint registers and periodic interactions with visiting officials. In principle, these mechanisms are designed to empower children and uphold their rights within the institution. However, in practice, their effectiveness is often limited. Many children hesitate to voice their concerns due to fear of repercussions, lack of awareness about their rights or a general sense of dependency on institutional authorities. This highlights the need for more child-friendly, confidential and accessible grievance systems, along with regular sensitisation programmes to encourage children to express their views without fear.

The daily functioning of Children's Homes is organised around structured routines that aim to provide stability, discipline and a sense of normalcy in the lives of children. A typical day includes attending school or educational programmes, participating in vocational training and engaging in recreational and cultural activities. Education remains a central component, with children being enrolled in nearby schools or provided with in-house academic support. Vocational training programmes are also conducted to equip children with practical skills that can enhance their employability and independence in the future.

Recreational activities such as sports, cultural events and group interactions play an important role in fostering social skills, emotional well-being and a sense of community among children. Counselling services are provided to address psychological and emotional issues, particularly for children who have experienced trauma, abuse or neglect. However, the availability and quality of counselling services vary across institutions, often depending on the availability of trained professionals.

Overall, the governance and daily functioning of Children's Homes reflect a structured effort to balance care, discipline and development. While institutional mechanisms are in place

to ensure protection and well-being, there remains a need to strengthen implementation, enhance child participation and improve the quality of services. Integrating child-sensitive approaches and leveraging emerging technologies for monitoring and grievance redressal can further improve governance and make these institutions more responsive to the needs of children.

7. Rehabilitation and Aftercare

Rehabilitation constitutes the core objective of institutional care, as it goes beyond mere protection and seeks to prepare children for a stable and independent life after leaving institutional settings. Children's Homes are not intended to function as permanent residences; rather, they serve as transitional spaces where children are nurtured, guided and equipped with the necessary capabilities to reintegrate into society. In this regard, rehabilitation is understood as a multidimensional process involving educational, emotional, social and economic development.

One of the primary components of rehabilitation is education, which plays a crucial role in shaping the future prospects of children. Children residing in institutional care are generally enrolled in formal schooling, primarily in government schools, while additional academic support is often provided within the institution. Education not only enhances knowledge and skills but also instils confidence and a sense of self-worth among children. However, the continuity and quality of education sometimes remain a concern due to irregular attendance, learning gaps and limited individual attention.

Along with formal education, vocational training programmes are introduced to equip children with employable skills. These programmes include training in trades such as tailoring, computer literacy, handicrafts and other skill-based activities that can facilitate future employment opportunities. Such skill development initiatives are particularly important for older children who may soon transition out of institutional care and require immediate means of livelihood.

Life skills education is another significant aspect of rehabilitation. Children are trained in basic competencies such as communication, decision-making, problem-solving and interpersonal relationships. These skills are essential for navigating the challenges of independent living and for building meaningful social relationships. Counselling services

further support the rehabilitation process by addressing the emotional and psychological needs of children, many of whom have experienced trauma, neglect or abuse prior to their institutionalisation.

Aftercare programmes play a critical role in ensuring the continuity of support once children leave institutional care, typically upon attaining the age of eighteen. These programmes are particularly important for children who lack family support or stable social networks. The transition from institutional life to independent living can be abrupt and challenging, making structured aftercare interventions essential.

As per the provisions under the Juvenile Justice framework, aftercare services include the provision of community-based group housing, financial assistance in the form of stipends, access to vocational training and support in securing employment. Counselling and mentorship are also provided to help young adults adjust to life outside institutional settings. In some cases, arrangements are made for loans and subsidies to encourage self-employment and entrepreneurship.

In the context of Punjab, the availability of aftercare facilities remains limited, with only a few designated homes catering to young adults transitioning out of Children's Homes. This limited infrastructure restricts access to aftercare services and leaves many individuals without adequate support during a critical phase of their lives. As a result, some children face difficulties in securing stable employment, housing and social integration, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and marginalisation.

Moreover, the effectiveness of aftercare programmes is often constrained by inadequate funding, lack of trained personnel and weak follow-up mechanisms. There is limited tracking of children once they leave institutional care, which makes it difficult to assess long-term outcomes and provide continued support where needed. This gap highlights the need for a more robust and comprehensive aftercare system that ensures sustained engagement with beneficiaries.

In this context, the integration of emerging technologies can significantly strengthen rehabilitation and aftercare processes. Digital tracking systems can help monitor the progress of children even after they exit institutional care, ensuring continuity of support. Online skill development platforms can expand access to vocational training, while digital job portals can

facilitate employment opportunities. Technology-enabled counselling services, such as tele-counselling, can provide ongoing psychological support, particularly for those residing in remote areas.

Overall, rehabilitation and aftercare represent crucial components of child welfare that determine the long-term success of institutional care. While Children's Homes in Punjab make considerable efforts to prepare children for independent living, the limitations in aftercare services underscore the need for greater policy attention, resource allocation and innovative approaches. Strengthening these aspects is essential to ensure that children not only transition out of institutional care but also successfully integrate into society as confident and self-reliant individuals.

8. Emerging Technologies and Social Inclusion

The integration of emerging technologies into child welfare systems represents a significant shift in the way institutional care is conceptualised and delivered. In recent years, governance structures across sectors have increasingly adopted digital tools to enhance efficiency, transparency and accountability, and the domain of child protection is no exception. Within the context of Children's Homes, technology has the potential to transform traditional modes of administration into more responsive, data-driven and child-centric systems.

One of the most important contributions of technology lies in improving transparency and administrative efficiency. Digital record-keeping systems enable institutions to maintain comprehensive and up-to-date profiles of each child, including personal details, health records, educational progress and rehabilitation plans. Unlike manual documentation, digital systems reduce the risk of data loss, duplication and manipulation, thereby strengthening accountability. In addition, real-time data sharing between institutions, Child Welfare Committees and government departments facilitates better coordination and informed decision-making.

Child tracking systems, in particular, have emerged as a crucial technological intervention in the field of child welfare. These systems allow for continuous monitoring of children's movement, status and progress within and beyond institutional settings. They help ensure that children are not lost within the system and that their transition from one stage of care to another is properly documented and supervised. Such platforms also enable authorities to identify gaps in service delivery and take timely corrective measures.

In the sphere of education, digital technologies offer new opportunities for enhancing learning outcomes among children in institutional care. Access to online learning platforms, smart classrooms and digital educational content can help bridge learning gaps and provide exposure to diverse knowledge resources. For children who may have experienced disruptions in their education, such tools can offer flexible and personalised learning pathways. Moreover, digital literacy itself becomes an essential skill, equipping children to participate effectively in an increasingly technology-driven society.

Healthcare delivery within Children's Homes can also be strengthened through technological interventions such as telemedicine and digital health records. Telemedicine enables children to access medical consultations without the need for physical travel, which is particularly beneficial in institutions located in areas with limited healthcare facilities. Digital health monitoring systems can ensure timely diagnosis, treatment and follow-up, thereby improving overall health outcomes.

Another critical area where technology can play a transformative role is grievance redressal and child protection. Traditional mechanisms such as suggestion or complaint boxes often fail to provide a sense of confidentiality and security to children. In contrast, technology-enabled platforms—such as mobile applications, helplines and online reporting systems—can offer safe, anonymous and accessible channels for children to report abuse, neglect or dissatisfaction. These systems can empower children by giving them a voice and ensuring that their concerns are addressed promptly and effectively.

From the perspective of social inclusion, emerging technologies act as powerful tools for bridging structural inequalities. Children in institutional care often face social exclusion due to their socio-economic background, lack of family support and limited access to resources. Technology can help overcome these barriers by connecting them to educational opportunities, skill development programmes and employment platforms. For instance, online vocational training and digital job portals can enhance employability and facilitate smoother transitions into independent living.

However, the potential of technology to promote social inclusion is not without challenges. The digital divide remains a significant barrier, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Limited access to digital infrastructure, such as computers, internet connectivity and smart devices, restricts the effective implementation of technological interventions.

Additionally, both children and institutional staff may lack the necessary digital literacy skills to utilise these tools effectively.

Institutional readiness is another important factor. The successful integration of technology requires not only infrastructure but also trained personnel, supportive policies and continuous monitoring. Without adequate capacity building and financial investment, technological initiatives may remain underutilised or ineffective.

Furthermore, ethical considerations must be taken into account while integrating technology into child welfare systems. Issues related to data privacy, confidentiality and informed consent are particularly important when dealing with vulnerable populations such as children. Safeguards must be put in place to ensure that technological tools are used responsibly and do not inadvertently expose children to new forms of risk.

In conclusion, emerging technologies hold immense potential for strengthening institutional care and promoting social inclusion among children in need of care and protection. They can enhance governance, improve service delivery and create new pathways for empowerment and integration. However, to fully realise these benefits, it is essential to address challenges related to infrastructure, digital literacy and ethical governance. A balanced and inclusive approach that combines technological innovation with human sensitivity can significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of child welfare systems.

9. Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings of the present study reveal a critical gap between the progressive legal framework governing child welfare and its implementation at the ground level. While the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 provides a comprehensive structure for the care, protection and rehabilitation of children, its effectiveness is often constrained by practical and structural challenges. Issues such as inadequate financial resources, shortage of trained personnel, infrastructural limitations and weak monitoring mechanisms continue to affect the quality and consistency of institutional care across Children's Homes.

One of the major concerns emerging from the study is the uneven implementation of prescribed standards of care. Although policies clearly outline provisions related to education, healthcare, nutrition, counselling and rehabilitation, their execution varies significantly across institutions. This inconsistency points towards gaps in administrative capacity and highlights

the need for stronger institutional support systems. Regular inspections and monitoring mechanisms exist in principle, but their effectiveness is often diluted due to lack of coordination, insufficient manpower and bureaucratic delays.

In this context, the integration of emerging technologies offers a promising pathway for addressing some of these systemic challenges. Digital governance tools can enhance transparency by ensuring real-time monitoring of institutional functioning and service delivery. For instance, digitised record-keeping and child tracking systems can improve accountability, reduce administrative inefficiencies and enable better coordination among stakeholders. However, the successful implementation of such technological interventions requires careful planning, adequate financial investment and sustained capacity building.

Policy interventions must therefore prioritise the development of digital infrastructure within child care institutions. This includes the provision of reliable internet connectivity, digital devices and appropriate software systems. Equally important is the training of institutional staff to effectively utilise these technologies. Without adequate digital literacy and technical competence, even well-designed technological systems may fail to achieve their intended outcomes. In addition, clear guidelines must be established to ensure the ethical use of technology, particularly with regard to data privacy, confidentiality and the protection of children's rights.

Another important policy implication emerging from the study is the need to re-evaluate the role of institutionalisation within the broader child welfare framework. While Children's Homes play a crucial role in providing immediate care and protection, long-term institutionalisation may not always be in the best interest of the child. Research and policy discourse increasingly emphasise the importance of family-based and community-based care as more sustainable and child-friendly alternatives. Strengthening mechanisms for family reintegration, foster care and adoption can help reduce the dependence on institutional care and promote more inclusive forms of social support.

At the same time, it is essential to ensure that children who remain in institutional care receive holistic and high-quality services that support their overall development. This requires not only adequate funding but also a multidisciplinary approach involving educators, counsellors, healthcare professionals and social workers. Investment in human resources is

therefore a key priority, as trained and sensitised personnel are central to the effective functioning of child care institutions.

The study also underscores the importance of a collaborative and participatory approach to child welfare. The State alone cannot address the complex needs of children in need of care and protection. Non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations and civil society actors play a vital role in supplementing state efforts, providing innovative solutions and ensuring grassroots-level engagement. Partnerships between government and non-governmental actors can enhance resource mobilisation, improve service delivery and foster a more inclusive and responsive child protection system.

Furthermore, there is a need to strengthen follow-up mechanisms and long-term monitoring of children after they leave institutional care. The absence of systematic tracking often results in a lack of information about the outcomes of rehabilitation efforts. Integrating technology-based monitoring systems and establishing support networks for aftercare can help ensure continuity of care and reduce the risk of social exclusion.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights that while the policy framework for child welfare in India is robust and well-intentioned, its impact is limited by gaps in implementation and resource constraints. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach that combines policy reform, institutional strengthening, technological innovation and community participation. By aligning these elements, it is possible to create a more effective, inclusive and child-centric system that not only protects vulnerable children but also empowers them to lead dignified and fulfilling lives.

10. Conclusion

Institutional care continues to occupy a significant position within the broader framework of child protection, particularly for children who are deprived of family-based support and are exposed to conditions of vulnerability, neglect or exploitation. The findings of the present study reaffirm that Children's Homes in Punjab play a vital role in providing safety, shelter and essential services that contribute to the physical, emotional and social development of children in need of care and protection. These institutions act not only as protective spaces but also as environments where children can rebuild their lives, develop a sense of belongingness and prepare for future integration into society.

At the same time, the study brings to light several structural and functional challenges that limit the effectiveness of institutional care. Gaps in infrastructure, inconsistencies in service delivery, shortage of trained personnel and limitations in monitoring mechanisms continue to affect the quality of care provided to children. While the legal framework under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 is comprehensive and progressive, its implementation requires greater attention, resource allocation and administrative commitment to ensure that the intended benefits reach every child.

In this evolving context, emerging technologies present new and promising avenues for strengthening child welfare systems. The integration of digital tools into institutional care has the potential to enhance transparency, improve governance and ensure more efficient delivery of services. Technologies such as digital record systems, child tracking mechanisms, online learning platforms and tele-health services can significantly contribute to improving the quality of care and expanding access to essential resources. Moreover, technology can play a transformative role in promoting social inclusion by bridging gaps in education, healthcare and employment opportunities for children transitioning out of institutional care.

However, the adoption of technology must be approached with caution and responsibility. The benefits of technological interventions can only be realised when supported by adequate infrastructure, digital literacy and institutional readiness. Equally important are ethical considerations related to data privacy, confidentiality and the protection of children's rights. Technology, therefore, should not be viewed as a standalone solution but as a complementary tool that strengthens existing institutional frameworks.

The study also underscores the importance of adopting a holistic and child-centric approach to welfare. Institutional care should be integrated with broader strategies that emphasise prevention, family strengthening and community-based alternatives. Promoting family reintegration, foster care and aftercare support systems can ensure more sustainable and inclusive outcomes for children. In this regard, collaboration among government agencies, non-governmental organisations and civil society becomes essential for building a comprehensive and responsive child protection system.

Ultimately, ensuring the well-being of children in need of care and protection requires a balanced approach that combines strong legal provisions, effective institutional mechanisms and innovative technological solutions. Such an approach must be grounded in the principles

of equity, dignity and inclusion, recognising every child as a valuable member of society. By addressing existing challenges and leveraging emerging opportunities, it is possible to create a more just, inclusive and humane system of care that enables children not only to survive but to thrive and realise their full potential.

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