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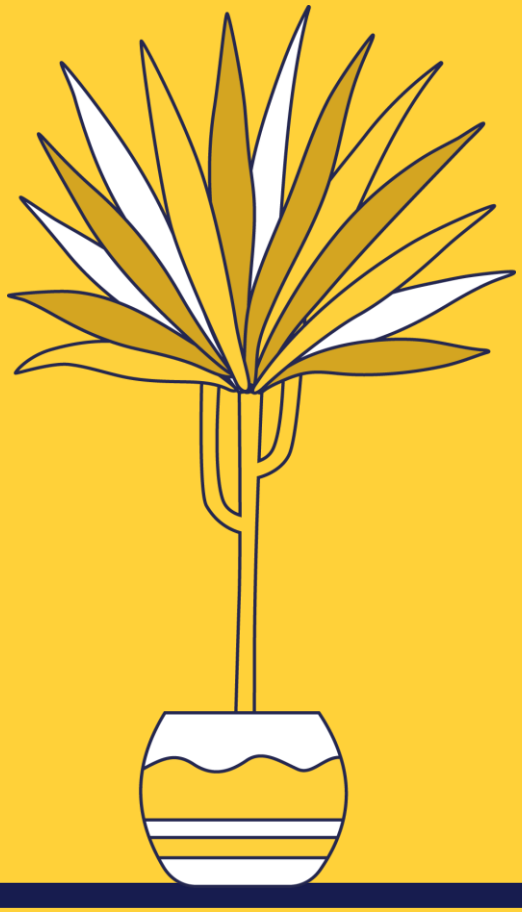
Child-focused, data-driven:

Learning from youth justice to improve family justice data



Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Report

This paper explores whether there are lessons that the family justice system could learn from the way that data is used in the youth justice system.

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Introduction

Good data is a vital part of a just and effective family justice system. In any organisation or system, the choices about what is measured reflect priorities; in Lord Darzi's words, 'What gets measured, get managed' (Darzi 2024). Reliable, meaningful data not only enables people to track progress against aims and objectives but also brings transparency to how the system operates. Data can highlight where things are working – and where improvements are needed – revealing patterns of inequality and areas needing urgent attention. Without robust data, it is impossible to fully understand the experiences of those who interact with the system or to hold it accountable for delivering fair and equitable outcomes.

The state of family justice data

The National Audit Office has highlighted significant problems with the availability and quality of data in the family justice system (NAO 2025). In 2024, the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) assessed the data in the family justice system through a data mapping exercise. Its report describes the family justice system's approach to data as fragmented, since there is no single organisation with oversight or ownership of all the data in the system (Ng-Knight, Upadhyay and Papaioannou 2024). NatCen's assessment revealed critical data gaps (e.g. a lack of pre-court information, limited data on the characteristics of children and their parents, and medium-term outcomes of decisions made in family courts). The report also noted issues with inconsistent data (e.g. domestic abuse is not systematically recorded in family court data, despite its prevalence and importance as a policy issue for the current government).

In response to the NatCen report, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory called for action to improve the data in the family justice system (Saied-Tessier 2024). The report recommended that the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) oversee a data improvement plan or data strategy, introduce stronger data governance, and create a culture of transparency, building on the President of the Family Division's initiative to improve the transparency of the family justice system. The NAO has similarly recommended that a data and evidence strategy should be developed by the MoJ, Department for Education (DfE), HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) and Cafcass, working through the Family Justice Board (NAO 2025).

Transparency in family courts

The President of the Family Division led a transparency review in 2019, culminating in a report recommending that family courts should allow accredited journalists and legal bloggers to attend and report on family court cases (President of the Family Division 2021). Subsequently, there was a successful pilot of the recommendations, initially in three areas (Cardiff, Leeds and Carlisle), which was then extended to almost half of the courts in England and Wales. The transparency provisions have applied to all courts in England and Wales since January 2025 (Judiciary 2025, 27 January).

Transparency is about opening up the courts to media coverage – but also having good quality data that can put any media story into some context.

Significant efforts have been made within the family justice system to enhance data quality and availability. Progress has been achieved through ongoing initiatives aimed at improving data. For example, ethnicity data recorded by Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru was, until recently, of insufficient quality to be meaningful, but due to a concerted effort to improve the recording of diversity data, ethnicity data has been used in research and analysis since 2016 (see, for example, Alrouh, Hargreaves et al. 2022). Similarly, the MoJ has adapted its case management system to allow for the recording of deprivation of liberty orders, which it published in July 2023. There has also been investment in Data First, a data-linking research programme funded by ADR UK and led by the MoJ, where accredited researchers can access anonymised Cafcass and HMCTS family court data.

Nevertheless, the family justice system still lags behind other parts of the justice system, and well behind other parts of the public sector, with respect to its data (Saied-Tessier 2024). One of the reasons often cited is the diffuse nature of the family justice system. Lord Norgrove noted in the 2011 Family Justice Review, ‘Family justice does not operate as a coherent, managed system. In fact, in many ways, it is not a system at all’ (MoJ 2011. p. 44). As the NatCen report noted, the family justice system’s approach to collecting and sharing data is fragmented because it is decentralised and relies on information provided by different agencies, including local authorities, Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru (Ng-Knight, Upadhyay and Papaioannou 2024). The system also has a legacy of paper-based records that persisted for longer than other public services (Pope, Freeguard and Metcalfe 2023).

However, change is possible with time, effort and resources. By looking at how other systems have improved their data, it is possible to identify examples where systems have gone from acknowledging data shortcomings to actioning improvements. For example, Lord Darzi’s 2024 Investigation of the National Health Service in England noted that there was almost no centrally held data for mental health until 2016, or for community services until 2021 (Darzi 2024).

The aim of this report is to encourage family justice professionals to learn from good practice and innovation in the youth justice system, to know that challenging new data collection is possible, and can achieve positive outcomes for children and their families.

Comparing data in youth justice and family justice

The youth justice system provides a helpful comparison to the family justice system when examining approaches to data and data availability. Both systems are focused on the welfare of children. Indeed, the needs of children in the youth justice system and the family justice system overlap.

The youth justice system takes a child-first approach. It also provides a helpful comparison to the family justice system because it has explicitly set out its approach to improving data. The Youth Justice Board Strategy 2024–27 articulates that it uses data to 'identify opportunities to improve and innovate' (YJB 2024a).

A child-first approach

'Child-first' is a principle for the whole youth justice sector, including the approach to collecting data. It means that all youth justice services:

- prioritise the best interests of children, recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights, and potential – all work is child-focused, developmentally informed, acknowledges structural barriers, and meets responsibilities towards children
- promote children's individual strengths and capacities to develop their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance, leading to safer communities and fewer victims – all work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society
- encourage children's active participation, engagement, and wider social inclusion – all work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers
- promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using pre-emptive prevention, diversion, and minimal intervention – all work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system.

However, although there is value in comparing the two systems, there are differences between them regarding data collecting powers. The Youth Justice Board administers a grant to all youth offending teams and can stipulate data returns as a requirement to receive funding. It therefore has a direct lever to change data collection.

While the grant funding is not present in the family justice system, it has governance structures in place to request changes to data collection. For example, the Family Justice Board includes ministers from the MoJ and the DfE, the chief executives of Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru, as well as senior representatives from local government children's services. This group has the authority to request changes to data collection.

Our approach

To compare data in the youth justice and family justice systems, we looked at three areas.

- The use of **performance monitoring data** at the national level. Information was gathered from interviews with staff at the Youth Justice Board and published reports, such as the Youth Justice Board Strategy. This was supplemented with the authors' existing knowledge about data in the family justice system.
- Identifying **examples of data improvement,** either through new data collection or by changing the way data is used by the youth justice system. The examples were identified through interviews with staff at the Youth Justice Board, supplemented with a review of relevant published documents.
- Mapping **key published datasets** to highlight differences between family and youth justice statistics. For the data mapping stage, our team mapped the variables captured in the main published datasets for family and youth justice. The mapping exercise was not comprehensive – but adopted a similar approach to that used by the National Centre for Social Research (Ng-Knight, Upadhyay and Papaioannou 2024). Each variable was categorised against a framework that was developed by the President of the Family Division's Transparency Implementation Data Sub-Group, adapting the framework slightly so it could fit with both family and youth justice statistics. We mapped 106 variables/measures in datasets from both the family justice system and the youth justice system.

Performance monitoring data

Performance monitoring in both justice systems concerns the data used by professionals to inform them about where practice is working, and for which children, to highlight areas for improvement or practice to share. Here, we consider how performance monitoring data is used by the Family Justice Board and the Youth Justice Board to monitor and interrogate system performance. We also considered the data used by local family justice boards, which support the Family Justice Board to improve performance locally.

The Family Justice Board and Youth Justice Board both have a monitoring and oversight role to assess the performance of each system and identify where there are areas for improvement or good practice to share. However, there are also important differences between the two. For example, the Youth Justice Board members are independent experts appointed by the Secretary of State for Justice, while the Family Justice Board are senior professionals working in the family justice system.

Governance structures

The way performance is monitored in family and youth justice systems differs, so below we briefly describe the broad governance structures overseeing performance across both systems.

Youth Justice Board

The Youth Justice Board supervises the youth justice system in England and Wales. The Board comprises a chair and independent board members appointed by the Secretary of State for Justice. The Board holds regular meetings to address objectives, performance and other pressing topics. Its legal obligations are:

- monitoring the youth justice system
- promoting best practice for youth offences prevention
- ensuring youth voices are heard and they have sufficient support and advice
- allocating grants for the provision of services within the youth justice system
- commissioning research that focuses on a fair and just treatment for children.

The Youth Justice Board publishes annual Youth Justice Statistics.[1] In addition, it publishes reports evaluating other crucial elements of the treatment and outcomes of the children and families involved in court proceedings.

[1] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/youth-justice-statistics

The Youth Justice Board and youth offending teams review performance once a quarter, which involves analysing data, alongside other intelligence, to understand whether there are local and/or national areas of concern or good practice and to inform improvement activities. Youth offending teams share their local data with the Youth Justice Board, which then cleans, analyses and interprets the data alongside other information, and reports back to each youth offending team, so they can understand trends and their own local performance. These reports can also highlight where local teams require support from the Youth Justice Board.

Each youth offending team is required to write an annual youth justice plan explaining what their local data is showing and setting out in a public document what actions they are taking to improve.

Family Justice Board

The Family Justice Board is a public body in the UK that seeks to improve the performance and overall coordination of the services offered by the family justice system. It was created in 2012 following the Family Justice Review (2011) to improve the family justice system. The Board comprises key members of governmental departments, associations and relevant bodies. It meets quarterly to discuss overall performance and planning. Sub-groups meet regularly to support activities such as the Family Justice Council and the Family Justice Young People's Board. The Board's main responsibilities include:

- optimising the execution of public law cases by reducing delays
- reducing the number of private law cases in courts by encouraging out-of-court alternatives, such as mediation
- ensuring active and engaged collaboration among family justice system stakeholders
- ongoing monitoring and identifying how to improve system performance using data collection and analysis
- ensuring children's voices are heard and addressed.

The Family Justice Board publishes high-level minutes but does not publish the data informing its discussions. The Family Justice Board works internally with the rest of the family justice system to drive improvement.

Local family justice boards

Local family justice boards are regional bodies that support the family justice system to accomplish its goals. There are 44 such boards across England and Wales, responsible for the oversight of the family justice operation within their local areas. These boards include members from local authorities, Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru and regional agencies, along with lawyers and other relevant workers. Each board has a lead designated family judge (DFJ). The role of the local family justice board is to:

- promote improvements in the family justice system at the local level and oversee performance
- coordinate and bring together relevant stakeholders
- promote best practice
- identify bottlenecks that disrupt efficient operation of local stakeholders

- ensure the family justice system is receptive of the needs of the families and children within their local areas.

The way the boards operate will vary locally. A local family justice board may conduct quarterly meetings to address the relevant issues pertaining to the family justice system nationally and locally, along with support from other relevant sub-groups that meet on a monthly basis.

Local family justice boards have access to a data dashboard, updated by the MoJ, containing performance information for public and private law.

Key differences in performance monitoring data

This section considers the differences in performance monitoring data between the family and youth justice systems.

1. Youth justice performance monitoring data is published

The first notable difference concerns the data shared with the public. The Youth Justice Board publishes a list of data it uses to guide assessments about performance. Key annual statistics include:

- the number of first-time entrants to the system
- reoffending, captured through two measures
  - a reoffending binary rate, which shows the percentage of young people in the cohort who have reoffended[2]
  - the frequency rate, which is the average number of offences committed by children who have reoffended
- the number of children in custody.

Monitoring these measures at a national and local level is a clear starting point for reviewing performance. They are targeted at two points: new children entering the system and outcomes for children (in terms of how many children end up in custody and, in the longer term, through reoffending).

By way of contrast, the Family Justice Board does not publish the key measures it uses to assess the performance of the system.

2. Youth justice data has a stronger focus on children

The Youth Justice Board's monitoring data clearly focuses on the children in the system (see 'Examples of data driving change' chapter for a discussion about the new set of key performance indicators (KPIs)). This is in contrast to the family justice system, where published information about family courts is more focused on the efficiency of the courts, rather than the experiences of children and families. The two are, of course, related. Some efficiency measures (e.g. case duration) affect the

[2] The rate is a binary rate as it is based on a binary outcome – whether or not young people have reoffended.

experiences of children and families. However, data in the family justice system is less focused directly on children's outcomes than data in the youth justice system.

3. Youth justice has a values-driven approach to data

Conversations with Youth Justice Board staff highlighted that there were clear values and aims driving the decisions about why data is collected. These include the child-first approach. In addition, the Youth Justice Board has five values and three strategic objectives, each of which requires data to monitor its achievement (YJB 2024a, YJB 2024b).

The values and objectives that underpin data collection provide a framework for selecting what performance data needs to be captured and analysed. For example, the aim that children do not enter the formal criminal justice system is clear, encouraging data collection around diversion and prevention. Another example relates to inequalities; all professionals in the system know they want to address racial disparities, so the data measures disproportionality across all points in the system (i.e. including divisionary outcomes, staff and court outcomes). Having a clarity of purpose behind any data collection will be important for professionals in the family justice system to understand the value of time taken to measure, analyse and report different indicators.

Youth Justice Board

Values

- **Inclusive** – challenging discrimination and promoting inclusivity and equity as well as eliminating bias within the YJB and the youth justice system.
- **Collaborative** – for example, encouraging partnership working to meet the needs of the children, victims and their communities.
- **Integrity** – fulfilling duties responsibly.
- **Accountable** – in actions and performance to support sector improvement.
- **Bold** – including boldly championing the voice of the child.

(YJB n.d.)

Strategic objectives

- Supporting improvement of youth justice services in local communities (performance is monitored through KPIs).
- Focusing on addressing persistent racial disparities across the youth justice system (performance is monitored by publishing regular statistics about disparities to identify them and take targeted action to reduce inequalities).
- Influencing development of policy and practice to advance adoption of 'child-first' throughout the youth justice system (performance is monitored using measures of positive child outcomes, using a consistent approach for all organisations in the youth justice system).

(YJB 2024a)

4. Youth offending teams have an established culture of learning from others

Another difference is the youth justice system's culture of comparison. Youth Justice Board staff explained that there is a culture of local youth offending teams comparing their data to similar areas and using the data to identify where investigations are needed. This process works both in understanding where there are performance issues and in identifying positive performance. The Youth Justice Board then share these examples of good practice to be able to apply them to different local contexts. Data is not the full picture in performance assessment – it is complemented by inspections and frontline staff's knowledge of what is happening on the ground. This culture of learning from comparison is also not about ranking – professionals understand each area has its own local context.

The family justice system does not routinely use the concept of a demographically similar local area – statistical neighbours to compare themselves to similar areas. Prior to the local family justice board data dashboard, which was rolled out in 2023, boards could only see data for other boards in their region, and, to our knowledge, the concept of similar local family justice boards has not been defined statistically. The relatively new data dashboards do allow local family justice board members to see how boards across England and Wales are performing but, in practice, without having statistical neighbours or indicators that lead themselves to comparison (e.g. rates), identifying relevant areas for helpful comparison could be challenging.

5. Consistency of data in the youth justice system

The final difference is around data consistency. While there are issues with data quality in the youth justice system, there is a clear set of data recording requirements and the requirements of grant funding to get the data right. The family justice system core datasets (e.g. Cafcass's Child-First dataset and HMCTS Family Man datasets) do have guidance about completing data returns. However, to address the issue around inconsistencies identified by the NatCen report, there could be agreements about consistently recording measures known to be important to the system, such as domestic abuse allegations and evidence of the child's voice in proceedings (Ng-Knight, Upadhyay and Papaioannou 2024).

Examples of data driving change

The family justice system is making progress in improving data collection and quality. Lessons from how new data is developed and used in the youth justice system can help inform these efforts.

This section outlines two examples of the way data has been used to drive change in the youth justice system:

- the use of KPIs
- the development of a prevention and diversion assessment tool.

New key performance indicators

While the main measures of first-time entrants, reoffending and the number of children in custody are used by the youth justice system to understand and improve performance, it was felt that they did not fully capture the complexity of the picture for children in the youth justice system. In 2023, the MoJ set out to design a new, broader set of KPIs, in consultation with the Youth Justice Board and youth offending teams, inspectorates, and other public sector organisations, such as DfE and the NHS. Part of the consultation was about understanding what is already measured in different parts of the public sector to avoid duplicating data collection and guidance, such as around mental health and emotional well-being.

The new set of KPIs was agreed, and the Youth Justice Board worked with local youth offending teams to begin measurement (YJB and MoJ 2024).

Figure 1: New youth justice system KPIs

KPI 1 – Accommodation	The proportion of children in suitable accommodation at the end of their intervention programme/order.
KPI 2 – Education, training, and employment (ETE)	The proportion of children in suitable ETE at the end of their intervention programme/order.
KPI 3 – Special educational needs or disability (SEND)/Additional learning needs (ALN)	The number of children with a formal plan in place as a proportion of children with an identified SEND need (or ALN in Wales).
KPI 4 – Mental health and emotional well-being	The number of children with a screened or identified need for an intervention to improve mental health or emotional well-being at the end of their order as a proportion of children with an order ending in the period.
KPI 5 – Substance misuse	The number of children with a screened or identified need for intervention/treatment to address substance misuse at the end of their order as a proportion of the number of children with an order ending in the period.
KPI 6 – Out-of-court disposals	The number of children who completed intervention programmes in the period as a proportion of the number of children with an out-of-court disposal ending in the period.
KPI 7 – Wider services	The proportion of children connected to/supported by wider care and support services at the end of their order.
KPI 8 – Management board	The number of senior partners attending management boards (out of 5).
KPI 9 – Serious violence	The number of proven serious violence offences as a proportion of 10 to 17-year-olds.
KPI 10 – Victims	The number of victims engaged in restorative justice opportunities as a proportion of the total number of victims who consent to be contacted.

Source: YJB and MoJ 2024

The first data return was in November 2023 and, since then, the Youth Justice Board has been working closely with local services to quality assure data returns, particularly around consistency of what is being measured, aiming to avoid different interpretations of the indicators. Services and local practice vary substantially across areas. For example, some local authorities will have a mental health nurse in the youth offending team who can support the data on mental health indicators, while

others will not have relevant professionals in the service and require more support in completing this data return.

A first set of measures will be published in 2025 in a quality methodology information paper that sets out the limitations of the data and mitigation plans for improving it. The published data from 2025–26 will be considered the baseline from which future years' performance will be assessed, alongside the four key annual statistics measures that will continue to be monitored (see Point 1 under 'Key differences in performance monitoring data').

While the development of the new KPIs has been challenging and taken time, it leaves the system with a more holistic, child-first set of measures to understand the needs of the children in the youth justice system to be able to appropriately support them and victims.

The process of developing the new KPIs has led to important learning about enabling factors. One enabler has been the feedback loop between the Youth Justice Board and local services to get a shared understanding of the data requirements. There has been substantial engagement, for example, in data refinement workshops/webinars and conversations about how data officers who complete the data returns interpret guidance. Another enabler is the data governance group held monthly by the Youth Justice Board analysts and service representatives. This group is a bridge between data requests and the realities of frontline systems. The exercise could have been improved if the new KPIs had been piloted before full data collection started.

The Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool

This tool demonstrates how the youth justice system has filled an information gap, working with local teams, case management providers and other stakeholders (such as academics and HM Inspectorates of Prisons) to develop a consistent, fit-for-purpose assessment of children who are at risk but not formally in the youth justice system.

The original assessment tool used by youth offending teams, AssetPlus, did not meet the needs of children and young people who are at risk of entering the system or who have committed an offence but receive an alternative outcome that avoids a criminal record.

Existing diversion/prevention assessments used by local youth offending teams were reviewed and consolidated into the new Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool, ensuring it meets a range of needs, including being trauma-informed, child-first, proportionate and sufficiently considerate of safety for the child and public. The tool also had to be easy to understand, as it is shared with the child and their family. The tool collects core information about children (including sex, preferred pronoun, self-identified ethnicity), details about a child's life circumstances (including a genogram), as well as information about their plan (see YJB 2024b for a full list of information included). More details about the assessment, including how it differs from AssetPlus, are outlined in the Youth Justice Board's 2024 strategy (YJB 2024a).

The new tool seeks to build on previous data collection by providing consistent information about children not formally in the youth justice system. Information from the new Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool will inform the new KPIs (e.g. KPI 6) and feed into Youth Justice Board's quarterly reports.

The information from the new tool enables local teams and the Youth Justice Board to have oversight of this cohort of children. The information provides a better understanding for professionals managing youth offending teams about the needs of these children and the services they are receiving, so they can track diversionary and preventative activities. Finally, the tool can also support professionals to identify where the joining up of different services would be helpful.

Ongoing data improvement work

As in the family justice system, data improvement work in the youth justice system is ongoing.

For example, the Youth Justice Board is changing how quarterly reports to youth offending teams are shared, moving from a large Excel workbook to a more visual dashboard, designed to be simpler and intuitive to interrogate. The dashboard is being designed with engagement from Youth Justice Board operations teams and local service providers to ensure it is fit for purpose.

There is also ongoing work to ensure that the measures included in quarterly performance reporting sufficiently follow a child-first approach.

An opportunity in the medium term, for both the youth and family justice systems, is to be able to better link children across different administrative datasets. When asked about areas for improvement, Youth Justice Board staff noted that tracking children over time and across systems is difficult in youth justice, and that having a consistent child identifier would help provide a more complete picture of a child across different public sector systems (e.g. health, education and justice). DfE is piloting a consistent child identifier to 'better join relevant data and identify children who will benefit from additional support' (The Education Hub 2024).

Comparing key published datasets

While the data accessible to professionals helps to improve practice, published statistics also play a crucial role in upholding the principle of open justice. Additionally, public support for improved data can serve as a catalyst for positive change.

The purpose of the data mapping exercise was to identify key differences in the data being published by the family and youth justice systems. The research team considered the main data publications for both family and youth justice (see Appendix A for a list of the datasets included). Variables were structured and measured using the framework of the President of the Family Division's Transparency Implementation Data Sub-Group:

- What has happened to a child/family before they come to court?
- Who comes to court?
- What are their experiences of court?
- How is the court operating?
- What decisions are being made about children?
- What are the immediate and longer-term outcomes of those decisions?

The comparison exercise highlighted areas for improvement regarding published data in the family justice system, seeking ultimately to improve experiences and outcomes for the families and children involved in family court proceedings.

Before court

In both youth and family justice, there will be assessments about children and young people and/or their families before they come to court, but there is no published data recording the services offered to or take-up by children and families in either system.

Children's social care data shows families' primary need as assessed by children's services (for example, whether a child has a disability or has experienced abuse or neglect), but families' needs or access to services are not recorded on their entry to the family justice system. No data is published on early indicators of entry into private law proceedings.

In the youth justice system there is data about early indicators of risk factors of entering the system, such as stop-and-searches performed by the police. This data is available broken down by various demographic characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity and local area.

Who comes to court

Family justice data includes the number of children involved in applications and orders disaggregated by age and type of order. In contrast, the youth justice system disaggregates data on the children in the system by ethnicity, age and gender, allowing for analysis about the differences in the system across different demographic characteristics. For example, it allows for comparisons between the proportions of children in the youth justice system from different ethnic groups at each stage of the system, from first time entrants to children in custody.

We know there are differences in legal decisions made in public law according to the ethnicity of the child and parent (Edney et al. 2023, Alrouh, Hargreaves et al. 2022), and there are reasons that this may affect experiences of families in public and private law proceedings (Nuffield FJO 2023), but the system does not collect the data it needs to understand where this occurs, making understanding inequality challenging.

As with performance monitoring data, the youth justice system publishes data that focuses more on children – from the number of children in different stages of the system to their demographic characteristics – while the family justice system has more measures about the operation of the courts.

The youth justice system also presents data on the number of first-time entrants into the system (a marker of new entrants to the system) and the number of children in youth custody (a marker of the number for whom interventions and services were not effective in avoiding custody). Conversely, the family justice system does not distinguish families who are first-time entrants into family courts from those who return to court multiple times in either public or private law. This information could be useful in learning about who the current services are working for and where different interventions may be needed.

Finally, the youth justice system also presents a comparison with the adult justice system. In contrast, the family justice system does not distinguish between parents who are under or over 18.

Experiences of proceedings

Knowing and understanding the experiences of children and families during court proceedings would help ensure the provision of adequate support, information and advice. Research shows experiences of court can be overwhelmingly negative for children (Roe 2021) and parents (Moorhead et al. 2014). There is an absence of routinely published information about the experiences of children and their families in both the family justice system and the youth justice system, though ad hoc research exists for both.

Children’s voices can play a crucial role in court proceedings. Publishing measures of child participation could be an important step in encouraging professionals to improve children’s involvement in proceedings. There is nuance regarding the quality of participation. For example, a study of five youth courts and associated youth offending services found that only vague interactions took place between court professionals and children, such as to confirm names and address (Robin-

D'Cruz 2020). Nonetheless, publishing the number of children participating would represent a positive starting point.

How courts are operating

The family justice system publishes more data about its operational processes than the youth justice system. It provides data about court processes, such as the number of cases starting (by type of case (e.g. private or public law), the number of orders and disposals, the average case duration, and the number of applicants and respondents (for open cases)).

The youth justice system also provides data on the number of cases started and completed (e.g. the number of sanctions and sentences), along with the average case duration. Furthermore, data on specific characteristics of the individuals involved in the court proceedings are also presented as the number and percentage of offenders sentenced by court type and previous criminal history, and the children proceeded against magistrate's courts by type of offence.

Decisions made about children

There is published information about the number of orders made in the family justice system in the Ministry of Justice family court quarterly statistics (both public and private law).[3] In terms of more detailed information about children and their legal outcomes, the statistics on looked-after children show information at a national level about the children who started to be looked after during the year by gender, age on starting, category of need, ethnicity, legal status, unaccompanied asylum-seeking child status, previous permanence and placement type.[4] At a local level, the DfE published the number of children who started to be looked after during the year by age group, category of need, gender, legal status, numbers taken into care and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.[5] While there is data about children in public law, less information is published about children involved in private law proceedings and decisions made about these children. Cafcass does publish data on the number of private law cases and the number of children involved in these cases at a national and, more recently, at DFJ level, which is a welcome addition to its routine data publications.

The youth justice system provides data on children receiving different decisions (as cautions, sentences, legal basis of episodes, and those found guilty and placed in custodial remand while children are waiting a final decision to be made by the courts). Statistics also show the number of children in youth custody – that is, the number of placements in secure estate for children and young people as secure children's homes, secure training centres and young offender institutions. The data

[3] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/family-court-statistics-quarterly

[4] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children

[5] There are many other datasets included in the Children Looked After in England Statistics about the total numbers of children in care, children leaving care, care leavers and placement stability.

includes a detailed breakdown by age, gender, ethnicity, region, legal basis of detention, primary offence group and distance from home bands.

Outcomes of decisions

Published outcomes for children in the family justice system are largely limited to legal outcomes. However, some information about broader outcomes is available for children in care. For example, records of educational outcomes, a measure of emotional well-being (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) score), and some health information are also available for the children in care.

The Youth Justice Board is working on a new set of KPIs to show a broad range of outcomes for children in the youth justice system (see previous chapter).

A final key difference in published statistics between the family and youth justice systems is about monitoring who returns to court. The youth justice system routinely publishes the number of reoffenders and the type of reoffences committed by children and young people. This allows for an analysis of trends in the numbers of children reoffending (both nationally and locally), which can shed light on the quality and effectiveness of services provided by the system, and whether those services need to be adapted to reduce the number of reoffenders. This type of analysis cannot be done in the family justice system as there is an absence of data that routinely captures people returning to family court in both public and private law, despite the research showing that recurrence is common in public law (Alrouh, Abouelenin et al. 2022) and private law proceedings (Halliday et al. 2017).

Ease of interpreting published data

Both the family justice and youth justice systems have visualisation tools that help interpret the data.

The family justice system's Family Court Statistics Data Visualisation Tool includes information about private law applications (including data relating to divorce).[6] The data is disaggregated by order type, alongside regional and DFJ area-level.

The youth justice system has dashboards that present a broader range of information. These include the dashboard for children cautioned or sentenced, which shows numerous variables, including first-time entrants, arrests, offences, cautions and court sentences. The data presented is based on quarterly case-level information, disaggregated by region, gender, age group, ethnicity and other relevant categories, such as the youth justice service area.

The data presented in both the youth and family justice systems allows for easy interpretation. However, the youth justice dashboards enable further analysis, as they allow for detailed breakdowns across various metrics and demographic groups. They also cover the whole youth justice system, while the family justice visualisation tool only covers private law.

[6] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-court-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024/family-court-data-visualisation-tools

Conclusions and recommendations

The family justice system needs to move beyond acknowledging data gaps and take decisive action to improve data collection and use because good data can drive better experiences and outcomes for children and their families.

As the NAO report recently highlighted, data is essential for organising system operations, identifying problems and understanding the outcomes of the family justice system (NAO 2025). Publishing data also upholds the principle of open justice. While data alone cannot tell the full story, measuring the right things is fundamental to meaningful reform. By prioritising better data, the family justice system can become more effective, transparent, and responsive to the children and families it serves.

There are real challenges in achieving positive change. Professionals in the system are working under significant pressure, often facing time and resource constraints. This is also the case with professionals in the youth justice system, which is why this report has presented examples of data improvement and data use from that sector – to spark ideas among family justice professionals as to what data could be useful for them and the public to consider.

Establishing a data-driven culture across the family justice system is vital. It was clear from our study that data use is embedded in the youth justice system, made easier by the fact that it has systems in place to directly adapt data collection to its needs (via the grant agreement and relationships with case management suppliers). In addition, the system works together to measure concepts consistently, and there is regular dialogue between local and central teams to continually check consistency standards. Services in youth justice can see the value in recording data and how it is part of a bigger picture of adhering to values and objectives to identify good practice and areas for improvement.

The comparative approach in this report has led to the following recommendations aimed at strengthening data practices within the family justice system, ensuring that, despite existing pressures, data becomes a tool for positive change rather than an additional burden. These recommendations build on those set out in Improving Lives – The Power of Better Data in the Family Justice System (Saied-Tessier 2024).

Recommendation 1: A data strategy anchored by a shared vision, values and goals

A data strategy for the family justice system, underpinned by a vision, values and goals, where each goal is linked to core measures that are updated regularly, would align all parts of the family justice system. This strategy could lead to a more data-driven culture across all areas. Such a strategy could make plans to deal with persistent data issues, particularly around improving consistency and filling key

gaps. Issues such as domestic abuse, children's voices, ethnic disparities and returning to court are less likely to be managed if they are not routinely measured and reported.

> "One of the strengths of the youth justice system and how we use the data is that ultimately it's about children, victims, and communities."
>
> Interview with a Youth Justice Board member of staff

See Appendix B for an example of a values-driven family justice system strategy from Ireland.

Recommendation 2: Monitoring data should focus on children and families, and be seen by the public

What matters in the family justice system is that the children and families going through the system get the support they need – including avoiding the need to go to court if appropriate – have their voices heard, are treated fairly, and get timely decisions allowing them to move forward. The Family Justice Board and local family justice boards need clear data to enable them to assess the extent to which this happens for different people in different areas. They should publish the measures they use so the public can see how well the system is working and where it needs to improve.

Recommendation 3: Let professionals and families shape the data that matters

For data to drive real change, it must reflect what professionals and families actually need to know. Those on the front line should have a say in what is measured and a way to give feedback on what is practical to measure, as well as identify gaps and improve consistency. A clear feedback loop between those using the data and those collecting it will ensure the right information is gathered to improve performance and decision making.

Recommendation 4: Close critical data gaps

A focused effort is needed to address key data gaps in the family justice system. Prioritising gaps to fill should form part of any work towards a data strategy. Lessons from the youth justice system show that the following aspects would be particularly important to capture consistently in monitoring data:

- prevention from family courts – understanding what works in public law prevention and private law diversion, such as mediation to keep families out of court when appropriate
- demographic data for equity analysis – expanding data collection on ethnicity, disability, and other characteristics to ensure meaningful insights into fairness and equality
- repeat court cases – identifying patterns of returning to court as a measure of what is working with a view to improving long-term outcomes in both public and private law

- real-life outcomes – ensuring data captures medium to long-term outcomes on children and adults after going through family courts, exploring the potential to link family court data to education and health data.

A structured approach to filling these gaps is essential for building a fairer, evidence-driven family justice system.

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Appendix A: Datasets and dashboards included in the data mapping exercise

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Appendix B: Example of a values-driven family justice system in Ireland

In Ireland, the strategy for the family justice system is underpinned by a vision, a set of values and goals (Department of Justice [Ireland] 2022). The vision is for a ’coordinated, consistent, and user-focused family justice system, which helps children and families obtain earlier, appropriate resolutions in a simpler, fairer, more effective way’. The core values are collaboration, engagement, and being user-focused and evidence-led.

The goals relate to:

- supporting children
- services and supports
- information and awareness
- alternative dispute resolution
- people development
- data and information management
- digitalisation
- facilities and infrastructure
- legislative reform.

The strategy commits to publishing an annual report with updates on progress in achieving the goals.

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics. Nuffield FJO funded the development of this briefing paper. Any views expressed are not necessarily those of Nuffield FJO or the Nuffield Foundation.

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