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Towards a child-first family justice data strategy: Six key insights from youth justice

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Briefing

This briefing highlights principles and practices underpinning the collection and publication of data in the youth justice system. Based on a recent review of performance monitoring data and published datasets, it aims to help inspire better data and better outcomes for children and familes in the family justice system.

Recommended citation

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Saied-Tessier, A. and Gamboa, S. (2025). *Child-focused, data-driven: learning from youth justice to improve family justice data.* Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/child-focused-data-driven-learning-from-youth-justice-to-improve-family-justice-data

Disclaimer

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What is in this briefing?

Without good 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

Background

Why the focus on data?

Despite improvements over the last few years, professionals and practitioners working to improve services and outcomes for families and children in the family justice sytem are often doing so without access to some critical data.

Without timely, robust data, it is impossible to fully understand the experiences of those who interact with the system, how services are functioning, or to hold the system to account for delivering fair and equitable outcomes.

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory has called for action to improve the data in the family justice system, recommending the Ministry of Justice oversee a data improvement plan or data strategy, introduce stronger data governance and create a culture of transparency.[1]

The National Audit Office has recommended that a data and evidence strategy should be developed by the Ministry of Justice, Department for Education, HM Courts & Tribunals Service and Cafcass, working through the Family Justice Board.[2]

About this briefing

This briefing highlights the main findings of a study by Alma Economics, examining the youth justice system's approach to data collection, availability and improvement.

In order to review and share potential lessons, the team:

- reviewed the use of performance monitoring data at the national level in both the youth justice and family justice systems
- identified examples of data improvement, either through new data collection or by changing the way data is used by the youth justice system
- mapped key published datasets to highlight differences between family and youth justice statistics.

The researchers interviewed staff at the Youth Justice Board, carried out desk reviews and mapped 106 variables/measures in datasets against a framework developed by the President of the Family Division's Transparency Implementation Data Sub-Group. The full findings of their review are published in:

Saied-Tessier, A. and Gamboa, S. (2025). *Child-focused, data-driven: Learning from youth justice to improve family justice data.* Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/child-focused-data-driven-learning-from-youth-justice-to-improve-family-justice-data

[1] Saied-Tessier, A. (2024). *Improving families' lives through better data.* Briefing. Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/improving-lives-the-power-of-better-data-in-the-family-justice-system

[2] National Audit Office (NAO). (2025). *Improving family court services for children*. https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/improving-family-court-services-for-children/

The youth justice system has a data strategy that focuses more on children and families – before, during and after contact with the system

Six key points

1. The Youth Justice Board **publishes key performance indicators**, which it has improved over time.
2. Youth justice monitoring data clearly **focuses on the children** in the system.
3. The youth justice system takes a **values-driven approach to data.**

   The Youth Justice Board has five values (inclusivity, collaboration, integrity, accountability and boldness) and three strategic objectives (supporting the improvement of youth justice services in local communities, focusing on addressing persistent racial disparities and advancing the child-first approach).
4. There is a **strong culture of comparison.**

   Local youth offending teams compare their data to similar areas and use data to identify where investigations are needed. Such comparative data is not routinely available to local family justice boards.
5. There is a **focus on prevention.**

   The youth justice system has developed a consistent, fit-for-purpose assessment of children who are at risk of entering the system.
6. The youth justice system has a **clear set of data recording requirements**, which are **built into grant funding agreements**. Family justice data, collected across different agencies, is more inconsistent.

“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.”

Youth Justice Board staff member

Key performance indicators

Key performance indicators in the youth justice system have been revised to be more values-driven, centred on the child, and allow for transparency and comparison. The sector is investing in improving its data and these indicators are in the process of being embedded.

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 wellbeing
The number of children with a screened or identified need for an intervention to improve mental health or emotional wellbeing 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

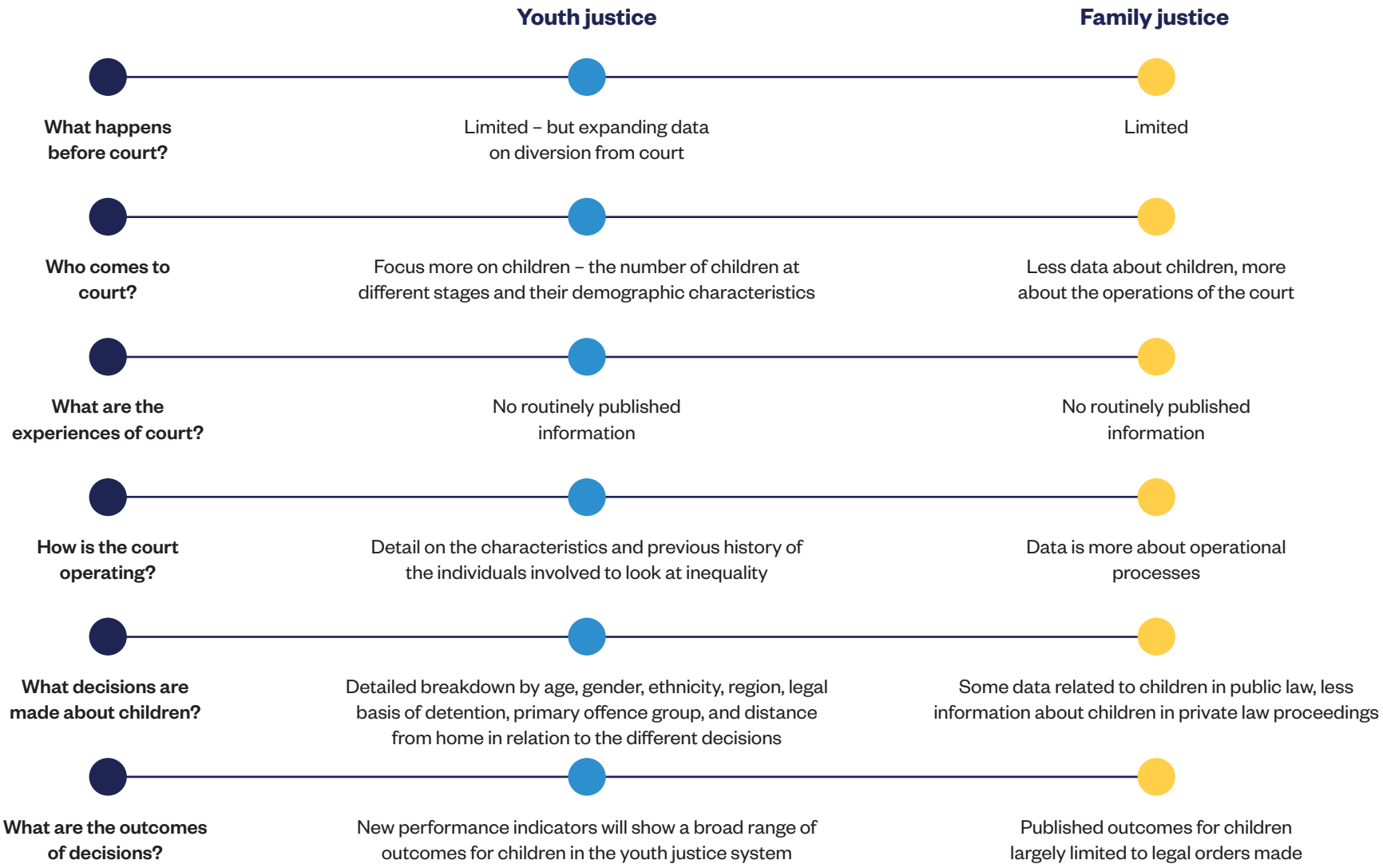
KPI 7: Wider services
The proportion of children connected to/supported by wider care and support services at the end of their order

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 the 10 to 17-year-old population

KPI 10: Victims
The number of victims engaged in restorative justice opportunities as a proportion of the total number of victims who agree to be contacted

Comparing published data



We need to develop a shared vision, values and goals in pursuit of a data improvement plan that better serves children and their families

Recommendations

The data we collect and publish in the family justice system needs to be values-led, focusing more on the experiences and outcomes of children and families

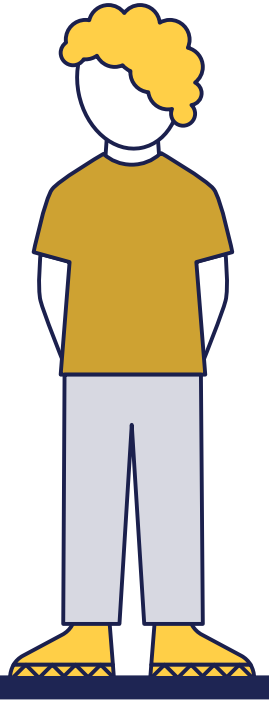
The data we have currently focuses more on efficiencies.

Professionals and families need to help shape the data that gets collected

For data to drive real change, it must reflect what professionals and families need to know and be accessible.

We need to close some critical data gaps

- We need to understand what works in terms of preventing the need for children and families to enter the family justice system.
- We need better data on ethnicity, disability and other characteristics in order to ensure meaningful insights into fairness and equality.
- We need to track 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.
- We need to measure 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.



References

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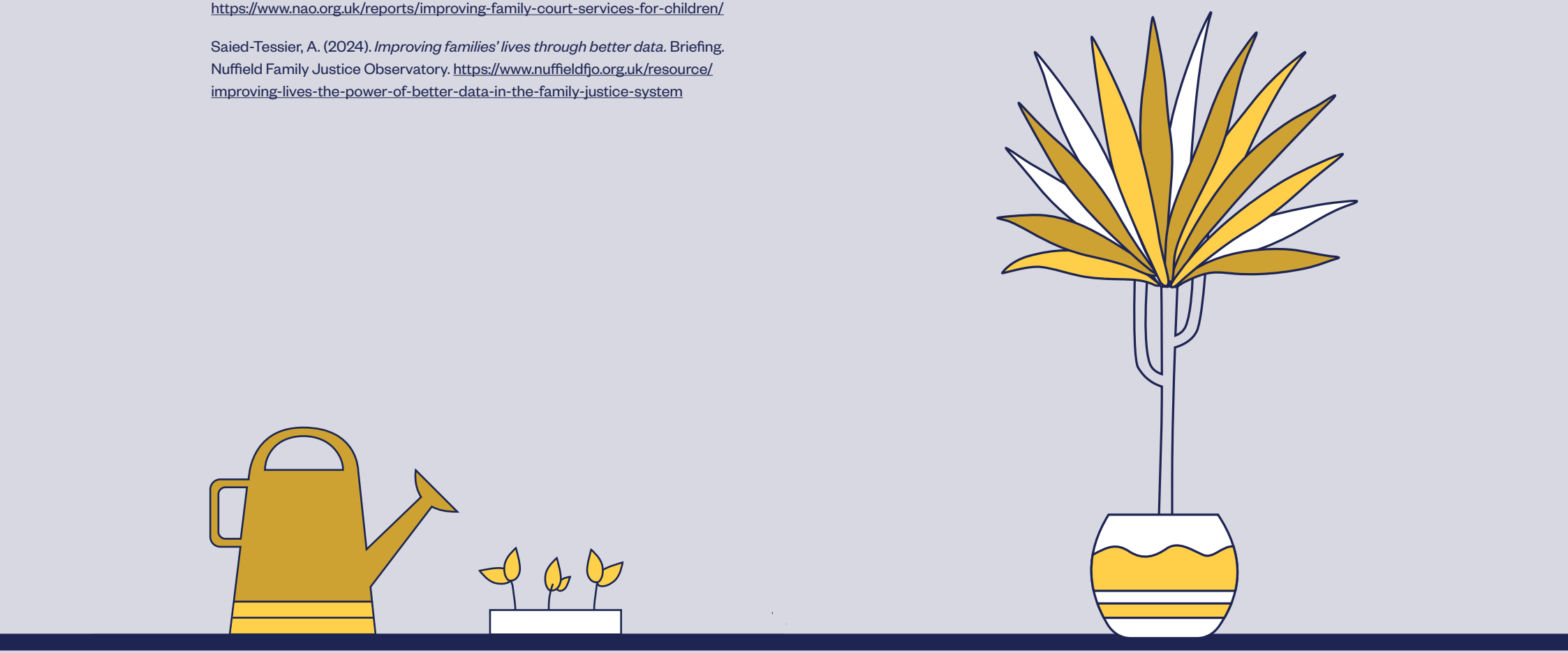

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

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.

Alma Economics

Alma Economics combines unparalleled analytical expertise with the ability to communicate complex ideas clearly.

We are a team of economists, social researchers, data scientists, developers and creatives working together on critical issues facing our society today. Our work spans multiple policy areas, including education, health and social care, housing and homelessness, the environment, public finance, and international development, among others. Our diverse staff combine decades of experience in economic and social research at the highest levels with the ability to develop state-of-the-art tech tools and powerful communications. We work with some of the most forward-thinking organisations in the voluntary, public, and private sectors. Our clients include most UK government departments, Welsh Government, Scottish Government, councils across the UK, and several leading charities.

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