



Education and justice

Learning to build just societies



GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT



Education
and justice

LEARNING TO BUILD JUST SOCIETIES

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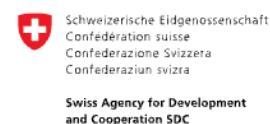
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Short summary

What are the links between education and justice?

Globally, 1.4 billion people lack access to justice because of barriers to remedies for their everyday legal problems. Social, climate and transitional justice issues have intensified along with growing income inequality. By one measure, the rule of law has been weakening in more than half of countries. Part of a series exploring education's interrelationships with other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this paper explores how justice can be achieved in, for and through education systems, advocating for a stronger emphasis on education in the quest to achieving people-centred, just societies.

With its moral and political purpose, education – formal, non-formal and informal – is the primary mechanism to address fundamental questions of fairness. It helps develop trust in justice institutions, is critical to peace building, reduces vulnerability to rights violations, and develops capabilities to meet legal needs. Education is also a key input in preventing crime. Conversely, weaknesses in the justice system and experiences of discrimination act as barriers to fulfilling the right to education.

Strong literacy skills are essential to navigate a legal system that, through its language, is often biased to better serve those with more education. But to build just societies, education systems also have to transform in terms of curricula and pedagogy. To develop competencies for living together and creating just societies, formal education needs to not only teach about peace, violence, human rights and gender equality but also to help students bring their own experiences into the classroom. To build agency and legal empowerment, initiatives in formal and non-formal education deserve more attention, including the work of community paralegals and other grassroots actors. Institutional actors – judges, prosecutors, lawyers, police and prison officers – need to meet people where they are: the principles of professional education and training systems should go beyond technical knowledge if justice systems are to become people-centred.



Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed

About Namati

Namati is the leading global organization dedicated to legal empowerment, which is about taking law out of books and courtrooms and combining it, instead, with the most precious asset communities have: their own people power. Namati convenes the Grassroots Justice Network (GJN), the world's largest community of legal empowerment practitioners.

The GJN is a global community of more than 18,000 members across 190 countries, bringing together people working to advance justice so they can connect, learn, and act together. GJN uses the legal empowerment approach to help communities know, use, and shape the law, and to achieve lasting change in the face of injustice.

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KEY MESSAGES

JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

The right to education is often violated.

- **There are 273 million children, adolescents and youth who are out of school.** Yet out-of-school rates are lower where the rule of law is stronger.
- **Lack of birth registration can be used to exclude children from education.** The births of one in five children under age 5 are unregistered globally and one in two in sub-Saharan Africa.
- **Many children live in conditions of extreme injustice.** There are 3.3 million children in forced labour and 9 million in forced marriage situations. Nearly half of the world's 12.4 million refugee children are out of school.
- **Children in detention are often forgotten.** Some 260,000 children are in detention globally; they are disproportionately from marginalized communities with limited access to education.

The ability to formally redress these injustices exists but there are major limitations.

- **The right to education is often not enforceable.** A review for the 2017/8 GEM Report showed that while the right to education was enshrined in 82% of national constitutions, it was only justiciable in 55% of countries.
- **Discrimination is widespread in education, but there are obstacles to recourse to justice.** In 36 countries, 34% of adults reported that race- and ethnicity-based discrimination was a problem. Yet in India, the University Grants Commission Equity Regulations were blocked by the Supreme Court in 2026, and in the United States, 90% of discrimination complaints were dismissed, when the Office for Civil Rights was weakened in 2025.

EDUCATION IN JUSTICE

Education is essential for building peaceful and tolerant societies.

- **Education is seen as fundamental for peace.** In a survey of 15 countries, education was ranked the second most important factor for peace. But of 2,257 peace agreements since 1990 involving more than 80 countries, only 2.5% mentioned the right to education.
- **Trust in institutions varies by education attainment.** In a survey of 27 European countries, trust in judges and the rule of law rose with more education.

Education reduces crime and helps break cycles of reoffending.

- **Early investment in education pays off.** Early exposure to the Head Start programme in disadvantaged areas of the U.S. state of North Carolina reduced adult conviction rates by 20%. A 10% rise in per pupil spending in an education district cut youth arrests by 7.1 per 1,000 arrests in the population of 15- to 19-year-olds.
- **Schooling steers youth away from crime.** In Sweden, each additional year of schooling decreased the likelihood of a conviction for a violent crime by 10%, for property crime by 14% and for other crimes by almost 6%.
- **Education plays a key role for rehabilitation.** Education in prisons reduces reoffending, yet one in four countries has no dedicated rehabilitation strategy.

Many people lack the tools to address their justice problems.

- **Solutions to everyday justice problems remain out of reach.** Around 1.4 billion people face barriers to obtaining just remedies for legal problems, while 4.5 billion people lack legal tools like identity documents, land or housing tenure and formal work arrangements.
- **Legal language can prevent understanding of rights and responsibilities.** Less than half of respondents in Europe agreed that local authorities provided legal information in simple formats. In sub-Saharan Africa, linguistic discrimination, low or no literacy skills and the technical language of courts limit access to justice for the poor.

What is taught and how it is taught matter for fostering justice.

- **Peace education is a tool for social reconciliation and transitional justice.** An analysis of 90 peace education interventions found significant improvements in conflict resolution skills. Colombia mandated peace education in all schools in 2014.
- **Legal education helps understand justice institutions, but few countries integrate it into the school curriculum.** Countries vary in requirements, learning objectives and practical knowledge expected from legal education. In Australia, the topic of civics and citizenship in grades 7 to 10 covers the rule of law, presumption of innocence, burden of proof, fair trial and legal representation.
- **A whole-school approach tackles relationships in the school and with the community based on participation, equity, dialogue and respect.** UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools approach has had a positive impact on inclusivity and attitudes toward diversity.
- **Tertiary education supports teaching about peace and human rights.** An analysis of 178 peace-oriented education programmes shows that lasting networks and connections contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding after participants return home.

Teachers need support to effectively teach about justice.

- **Teacher training is insufficient.** In 12 European countries, only 50% of teachers had received training on human rights. In Côte d'Ivoire, two thirds said they needed more training to teach conflict history.
- **Structural barriers compound teachers' difficulties.** An analysis of 556 secondary school textbooks showed that social movements were underemphasized in civics relative to history, suggesting they are seen more as part of a historical record than of contemporary citizenship. Content is usually emphasized over practice. Teachers from Switzerland to Uganda report lacking time to teach justice issues meaningfully.

Non-formal education is essential to empower citizens to know, use and shape the law.

- **Non-formal education interventions help disadvantaged populations.** A meta-analysis of 199 intervention evaluations found that almost half reported increased legal empowerment. Legal literacy interventions have helped women assert their economic, social and political rights from Bangladesh to Ghana and Guatemala.
- **Public awareness is key in post-conflict and transitional justice settings.** In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission public truth process included public education campaigns, such as televised broadcast hearings and radio summaries.
- **Legal professional institutions help support public legal education efforts.** Canadian law societies partnered to launch Ours to Protect, a national education campaign designed to raise awareness about the importance of the rule of law.

Justice systems need more and better-trained professionals.

- **There are not enough justice professionals, particularly in marginalized communities.** There are 2.6 times more judges and 2.3 times more prison officers per 100,000 people in high-income countries than in lower-middle-income countries. One in five countries report major lawyer shortages in rural areas.
- **Education matters for the quality of justice.** In 11 Latin American countries, Supreme Court judges with stronger academic qualifications produced judicial decisions of better quality.
- **Police and prison officers need training to implement people-centred legal approaches.** In Mexico, police officer procedural justice training focused on legitimacy was effective, especially if their managers were also trained. In Norway, a two-year prison officer academy focusing on rehabilitation training helped build trust and reduce recidivism.
- **Communities need capacity building to face crime.** In the United States, for every 10 additional crime- and community-focused non-profit organizations per 100,000 residents, murder rates reduced by 9%.
- **Support for community paralegals is vital: they play a key role in building people's ability to address injustice.** In India, Kenya and Myanmar, after working with paralegals, 84% of people reported deeper legal knowledge, while 90% felt more confident engaging with government officials.

There are not enough data to show the links between justice and education.

- **In justice statistics:** The Global Progress Report on SDG 16 highlights an inverse relationship between education level and experiences of discrimination, but fewer than half of all countries provide disaggregated data by education level.
- **In education statistics:** Learning assessments do not cover knowledge (e.g. on human rights) and competencies (e.g. for justice) except in a handful of richer countries.

JUSTICE AND EDUCATION

EDUCATION HAS A MORAL AND POLITICAL PURPOSE. IT HELPS CHILDREN AND YOUTH EXPERIENCE, UNDERSTAND AND NAVIGATE JUSTICE SYSTEMS TO SHAPE FAIRER SOCIETIES.



WE NEED TO LEARN ABOUT WHAT RIGHTS WE HAVE – THIS IS WHERE PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION COMES IN.



AND WE NEED TO LEARN ABOUT LAW, AND HOW TO USE IT, OR SHAPE IT.



JUSTICE INSTITUTIONS NEED TO BECOME MORE PEOPLE-CENTRED.



THE EDUCATION WE RECEIVE CAN TEACH US TOLERANCE, CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION IN BUILDING JUST SOCIETIES.



WHAT AND HOW WE LEARN IMPACTS OUR BELIEFS, ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS!

WHEN WE ALL KNOW OUR RIGHTS, AND HOW TO ACCESS THEM AND DEFEND THEM, WE WILL ALSO HELP SUPPORT THE RULE OF LAW.



Living in peaceful and just societies, with strong and trusted institutions to safeguard human rights, is a universal aspiration. Justice is central to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in particular Sustainable Development Goal 16. Relationships between people, communities and institutions are central to questions of justice. As a human institution, justice systems remain subject to the biased perceptions of the forces of law and order, which can disadvantage marginalized populations and reinforce societal inequality.

The rule of law underpins development, accountable government and respect for fundamental rights (Botero and Ponce, 2011). Yet, the rule of law has been in decline in most countries for the past decade (World Justice Project, 2025). There have been challenges in constraining the powers of government and ensuring its openness, as well as guaranteeing fundamental rights of freedom of opinion, assembly and expression. Accessibility to justice has been under strain. Lack of trust in justice system institutions, such as the police, prosecution and judiciary, is also common.

All over the world, people face everyday justice problems that relate, among others, to employment, housing, education, health and family life. In 4 out of 10 countries, at least half of adults experienced a legal problem in the two years prior to being surveyed. To address these problems, individuals seeking justice need to access formal justice institutions, such as courts and the police, but also a broader range of bodies, including service delivery institutions, regulatory and administrative agencies, and ombudsman offices.

Engaging these systems is challenging. An estimated 1.4 billion people struggle to obtain just remedies for legal problems due to low levels of legal capability, barriers to accessing appropriate help, and poor-quality justice and dispute resolution processes (World Justice Project, 2023a), while 4.5 billion people lack legal tools like identity documents, land or housing tenure, and formal work arrangements that can help them to claim their rights (World Justice Project, 2019).

People-centredness is required to meet the aspirational goal of justice, a notion put forth by the Justice Action Coalition (de Langen and Weston, 2023; Task Force on Justice, 2019). Justice systems must be equitable and reflect lived experiences and justice should not be narrowly defined in criminal or institutional terms. Legal empowerment – enabling individuals to understand,

use and shape the law to improve their lives – is a foundational principle (Chitalkar and Moy, 2026; OECD, 2025a). Legally empowered citizens work with institutions to improve performance and accountability. They also organize to address the structural causes of injustice and pursue systems change.

With its moral and political purpose (**Box 1**), education – formal, non-formal or informal – is the primary mechanism to address fundamental questions of fairness. It helps build understanding of legal rights and law enforcement institutions and prepares people to respond to injustice and abuse of power, empowering them with tools to demand access to justice, get appropriate legal aid and shape fairer societal rules. Education also develops the capacity of justice system professionals.

This report explores the interlinkages between education and justice. It examines the latest evidence and policy trends in formal and non-formal education efforts, including professional capacity development. It advocates for a systemic, people-centred and bottom-up learning-based approach, drawing on perspectives and data from the Grassroots Justice Network, several institutional actors in the justice community, and the education community. It concludes with recommendations for strengthening linkages between education and justice in policy, practice, monitoring and research.

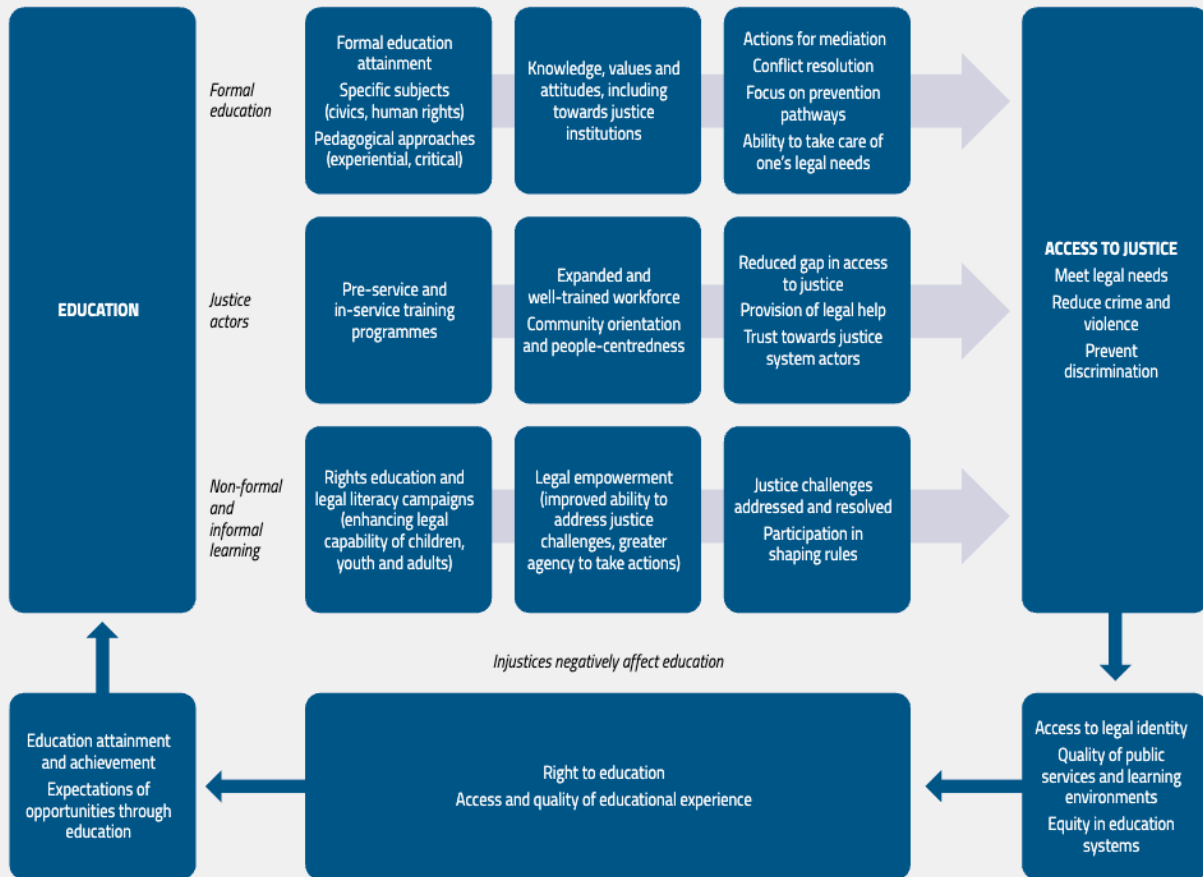
JUSTICE AND EDUCATION ARE INTERLINKED

Education increases knowledge of rights, institutions and what constitutes a just society, and thereby can shape values that support civic awareness, social responsibility and coexistence. Training in legal, civic and conflict mediation skills empowers individuals and helps them seek redress. At the same time, trained professionals – such as judges, lawyers, police officers and prison officers – who understand the social contract they serve and help meet people’s justice needs – are critical for the functioning of justice systems (**Figure 1**).

In turn, strong justice systems play a role in ensuring that the right to quality education is accessible for all, offering a robust accountability mechanism. They translate constitutional and international commitments into enforceable rights to education and protect them, influence whether education systems are discriminatory or inclusive, and tackle violence against students and teachers.

FIGURE 1.

Education and justice systems can together help build a fairer society



Source: GEM Report team.

BOX 1.

The links between education and justice are far-reaching

Education has been recognized as a distinct sphere of justice (Walzer, 1983): an institution where questions of justice, rights and power are experienced, learned, negotiated and renewed. This interdependence includes justice in education (fairness within education systems), *for* education (education's role as a lever for justice in society) and *through* education (processes that transform society towards greater justice) (Table 1).

Philosophers have defined justice as a virtue that is nurtured through practice (Aristotle); through an emphasis on universal legal binding rights (Kant); and through meaningful membership in family, civil and political life (Hegel). Perceptions and realities of justice are situated in context, as they depend on religious, social and other norms.

Theories of justice emphasize different understandings and roles. For example, conservative justice aims to maintain respect for established expectations and traditions, while transformational justice focuses on the need for change. Criminal justice focuses on the investigation, prosecution and punishment of individuals, while civil justice focuses on resolving disputes and compensating victims of wrongful actions (Daly, 2025; Solum, 2004).

Continued on the next page

Three paradigms of justice are viewed as critical in informing the development of social justice (Fraser, 2008). Distributive justice relates to the economic, political and social distribution of benefits and burdens to society (Rawls, 1968). Recognitive justice focuses on the relational dimension and highlights the importance of respect of identity and difference (Benhabib, 2002; Honneth, 2015). Representative justice focuses on political inclusion and voice, i.e. ensuring the development of a minimum set of capabilities to participate in political, social and economic life, or what people are capable of being and doing (Nussbaum, 2009; Sen, 1987).

TABLE 1.
Justice in, for and through education

Achieving...	Requires...	Distributive justice: Who gets what?	Recognitive justice: Who is respected?	Representative justice: Who gets to decide?
Justice in education	Fairness within education systems (content, access, institutional practice)	Achieve equitable funding, resources and support	Foster belonging, inclusive curriculum, anti-racist and anti-sexist school cultures; mutual recognition and respect	Enable real opportunities and meaningful participation
Justice for education	Education as a universal right and a public good	Achieve fair taxation, infrastructure, access to services, decent pay	Value education and teachers; resist narratives that undervalue groups, guarantee the right to education, prevent discrimination and exclusion	Promote accountable governance; inclusive framing of who education serves and who participates in education system development
Justice through education	Agency to help tackle all types of injustice	Enable capabilities and life chances for all	Empower and recognize, value identity, and counter stereotypes and long-standing histories of injustice and discrimination	Promote civic voice, agency, ability to understand and assert legal rights, think critically and shape the rules

Source: GEM Report team based on Strand (2026).

A stronger emphasis on the recognitive and representational dimensions of justice requires schools and learning environments that are inclusive of diverse cultures, ethnicities, abilities and identities. It also requires putting the experiences of students at the centre, especially their lived experience of injustice. In turn, this requires bringing to education a substantive dimension (demonstrating the power of education to make a difference) and a political dimension (understanding who is entitled to justice, who justifies, by what means, and on what grounds) to critically examine justice in education (Strand, 2026). A fair education system should support learners to make sense of injustice around them and contribute new knowledge and actions to counter it (Balarin and Milligan, 2024).

Beyond social justice, environmental justice (justice for all living beings, focusing on the impact of climate change and loss of biodiversity), transitional justice (processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses) and epistemic justice (equality in the 'consumption, recognition and production of knowledges') are all critical aims of education (Milligan et al., 2026).

These different paradigms must be bridged and placed in context to inform education policy and practice and orient them towards individual rights and dignity. Schools can become microcosms in which young people learn to cooperate, communicate with each other, experience justice and solve problems (Noddings, 2013; Nussbaum, 2009). Dialogue-based and emancipatory education pedagogy can help develop critical awareness, activate agency and overcome structural inequality, power abuse and systematic oppression (Freire, 2021).

Source: Strand (2026).

National policies and international frameworks acknowledge the interrelationship between education and justice. National priorities for improving justice outcomes are reflected in voluntary national reviews submitted by countries as part of the SDG follow-up process. An analysis conducted for this report of reviews submitted by more than 200 countries shows that they mainly focus on legal aid, better access to justice services, protection of vulnerable groups, and other reforms to further the rule of law. They also cover oversight and complaint mechanisms, links between formal and informal community justice mechanisms, digitalization, administrative modernization and capacity building.

Education appears in a few cases as a cross-cutting tool. Training can support the implementation of access to justice, with frequent mention of the need to train judges and prosecutors, for example, to deliver child-friendly justice, and to police and prison services on human rights training. There are some references to the need to understand people's rights and help them seek justice. When formal education is discussed, it is usually in the context of teaching about non-discrimination, awareness of rights and rejection of violence. In some cases, whole-of-government coordination features in child protection and violence prevention frameworks which explicitly refer to education authorities working alongside the justice, interior, health and social sectors, framing schools as part of a protective ecosystem.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) developed a People-Centred Justice Framework which highlighted the importance of strengthening people's capabilities for justice through national education systems, general literacy and numeracy, and community-focused legal education and information (OECD, 2021). Through viewing legal understanding as a life skill, with lifelong opportunities for all to develop and improve their capabilities, education systems can provide ongoing, age-appropriate education on key elements of laws, rights and responsibilities, and the justice sector. People-centred justice requires that individuals have the education, support and capabilities to make informed decisions about their options and actions to resolve their justice problems and participate in justice processes (OECD, 2025a).

JUSTICE SYSTEMS HAVE THE POWER TO AFFECT EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Justice systems can support the achievement of quality education that is accessible to all. They can also support youth and adults in conflict with the law to reintegrate through education.

The right to education is not guaranteed in practice

The right to education for all, without discrimination, is legally guaranteed by human rights instruments with which ratifying countries have to comply. The 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education is the first legally binding international instrument dedicated to the right to education and has been ratified by 111 countries (UNESCO, 2026a). Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966, is the most comprehensive article on the right to education. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights elaborated a framework for the realization of all human rights, obligating states to respect, protect and fulfil the right to education, making education available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable (UNESCO, 2025b). The number of countries that specify 12 years of compulsory education has increased from 44 in 1998 to 69 in 2023 (UNESCO, 2026c). The 2017/8 *Global Education Monitoring Report* found that while 82% of national constitutions contained a provision on the right to education, the right was justiciable in only 55% of countries, i.e. that the matter is capable of being decided by a court. Of the countries that have incorporated the right to education, at least 80 had adjudicated a violation (UNESCO, 2017b).

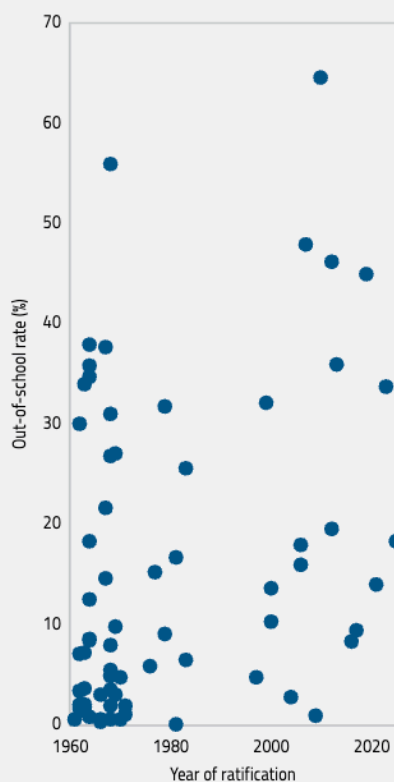
Having said that, over 273 million children, adolescents and youth, or one in six, were out of school in 2024. Among those of primary school age today, it is estimated that just over one in two achieve minimum proficiency in reading, undermining their potential to understand legal documents and protect their rights. At least one in two adult women in 18 sub-Saharan African countries cannot even read (UNESCO, 2026b). Ratifying the Convention against Discrimination in Education earlier than other countries is not associated with progress in universalizing access to education, for example, as represented by the out-of-school rate of adolescents of lower secondary age (Figure 2a). But the out-of-school rate is correlated with measures of the rule of law (World Justice Project, 2025) (Figure 2b) and of equal treatment and the absence of discrimination (Figure 2c).

FIGURE 2.

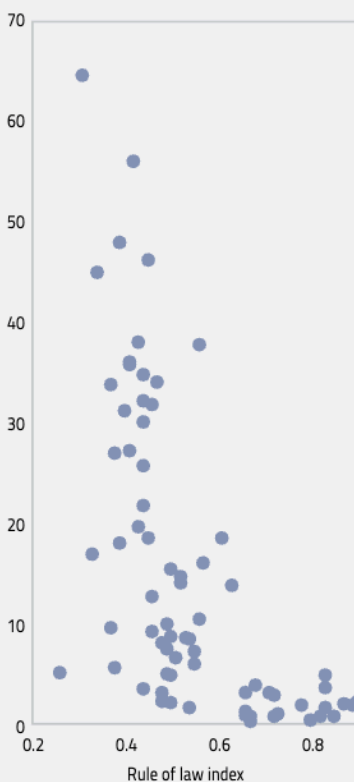
Countries with a stronger rule of law have lower out-of-school rates

Out-of-school rate of adolescents of lower secondary school age and law-related indicators, 2023

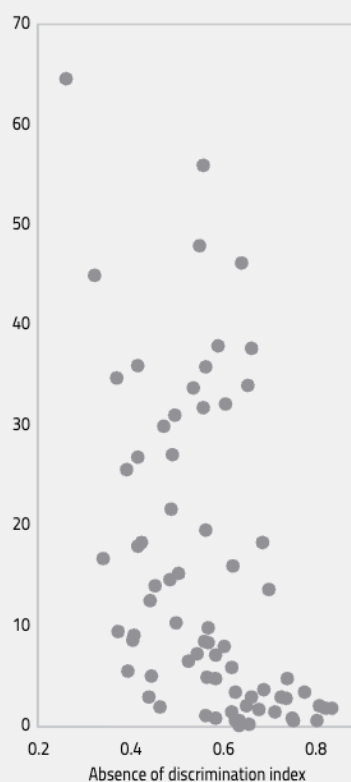
a. Year of ratification of 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education



b. World Justice Project rule of law index



c. World Justice Project rights score on equal treatment and absence of discrimination



Notes: The World Justice Project rule of law index is composed of eight factors (constraints on government, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental rights, order and security, regulatory enforcement, civil justice, and criminal justice), while the rights score on equal treatment and absence of discrimination is the average response to questions on discrimination relating to socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, religion, foreign nationality and sexual orientation.

Sources: UIS and GEM Report (out-of-school rate), UNESCO (year of ratification) and World Justice Project (rule of law and discrimination).

Lacking identity documents, land or housing tenure limits access to justice (Task Force on Justice, 2019) and to education. Globally, 150 million children under 5, or around 2 in 10, do not have a birth registration, with the rates rising to 22% in Central and Southern Asia, 49% in sub-Saharan Africa and 74% in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) (UNICEF, 2024b). Lack of documentation can impact transition to secondary school. In Cameroon, children need a birth certificate to take part in the primary school leaving examination (Lo et al., 2024).

At least 4.4 million people in 101 countries are stateless or lack national identity (UNHCR, 2025b). A lack of gender equality in nationality laws in 24 countries denies women the ability to pass on their citizenship rights to their children

(Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights, 2024). Stateless children are particularly vulnerable to losing access to public education at the transition into secondary school (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 2025). In the Dominican Republic, while birth registration does not impact entering schooling, it became a critical obstacle in graduating from primary school among children of Haitian origin (Corbacho et al., 2012). In Mayotte, an overseas territory of France, municipalities demand more documents than required by the education code, delaying entry into school and adding expenditures to migrant families of Comorian origin who live in informal settlements (Human Rights Watch, 2025a).

Children living in extreme conditions of injustice, such as modern slavery or fragile contexts, also face barriers to

education. Globally, it has been estimated that 3.3 million children lived in situations of forced labour in 2021 and 9 million children in forced marriage (ILO et al., 2022), while nearly half of 12.4 million school-age refugee children were out of school in 2025 (UNHCR, 2025a). Attacks on students, schools and teachers result in deaths and injuries, destruction of school infrastructure, the flight of teachers due to unsafe environments, and decline in attendance (GCPEA, 2025). In 2026, a rocket attack on a girls' primary school in Minab, Islamic Republic of Iran, killed 168 people, mostly students aged 7 to 12 (GCPEA, 2026).

Race- and ethnicity-based discrimination is another major obstacle. Across 36 countries in 2024, an average of 35% of adults reported that such discrimination was a big problem in their country (Wike et al., 2025); in Colombia, France, Kenya, Peru and Sri Lanka, at least 6 in 10 adults perceived that (Figure 3). Some 63% of over 400,000 young people said that discrimination was common in their schools, communities or workplaces (UNICEF, 2022).

Discriminatory practices against marginalized groups have been contested in courts. Roma children are historically disadvantaged in Europe. In Czechia, Greece and Hungary, litigation has led to judicial rulings that have brought significant changes in policy and practice (Zimová, 2016). In Denmark, growing up in ethnically segregated urban neighbourhoods

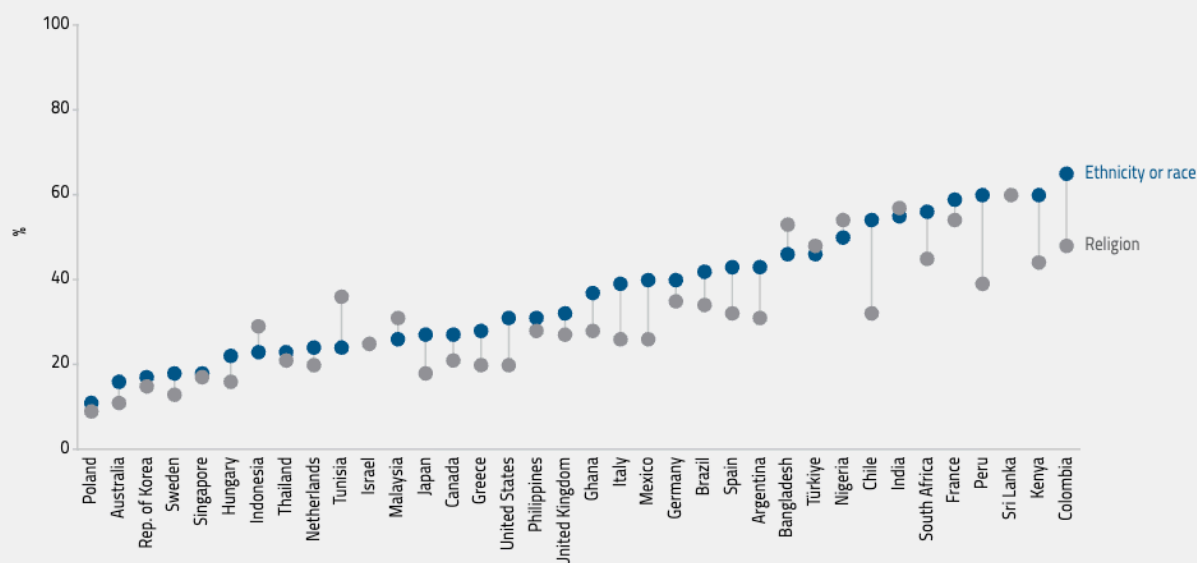
labelled as ghettos (Seemann, 2021) lowers educational attainment (Lund et al., 2025). The Court of Justice of the European Union argued that provisions of a proposed policy known as the 'ghetto package' violated the EU Race Equality Directive principles (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2025).

In India, caste-based discrimination and exclusion persist in education, despite constitutional guarantees and legislation. Dalit students experience stereotypes and subtle and overt discrimination, which reinforce stigma and social exclusion in higher education institutions (Kumar, 2025). In 2026, 10 years following the highly publicized suicide of a Dalit PhD student and activist after his suspension for campus protests, the University Grants Commission Equity Regulations were accepted, which also cover caste discrimination. However, the Supreme Court blocked them following protests by students from higher castes (Kuthar, 2026). In the United Kingdom, Black students are more likely to be excluded or suspended from school and to be educated in alternative schools, such as pupil referral units. A study of the experiences of racial discrimination and other adverse childhood challenges showed that these impacted their mental wellbeing (Stoll et al., 2025). In the United States, 4% of 12- to 18-year-old students recalled being called a hate-related word referring to their race. Some 26% of Black students and 15% of Hispanic students reported that they thought their bullying was related to their race (Irwin et al., 2024).

FIGURE 3.

Perceptions of discrimination vary but are high

Percentage of respondents who said that ethnicity-, race- or religion-based discrimination was a big problem in their country, by source, 2024



Note: The average sample size is about 1,000 adults, except in Australia, India and Sri Lanka, where it was over 2,000.

Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2024 Global Attitudes Survey.

Litigation has led to a range of improvements globally. In Colombia, the Constitutional Court found that the Education Act, which allowed school fees, was unconstitutional, leading to a national decree establishing free primary and secondary education. In Indonesia, the Constitutional Court ordered the government to increase the national budget for education in line with the 20% stipulated in the constitution and the Law on National Education (Right to Education Project, 2017).

In the United States, school funding litigation has been extensively used as a tool to improve the equity and adequacy of educational opportunities. Initially, the focus was on reducing variation in educational spending across districts but over time litigation shifted to whether districts had adequate funding to meet state constitutional obligations. An analysis of court-ordered finance reforms between 1989 and 2010 found that seven years after reform, the highest poverty quartile experienced a 12% increase in per pupil spending and an increase in graduation rates by between 7 and 12 percentage points (Candelaria and Shores, 2019). In the same period, finance reforms also raised achievement in the lowest income districts by about 0.1 of a standard deviation, closing about one fifth of the gap with high-income districts (Lafortune et al., 2016). However, a more recent analysis of 205 school finance cases litigated in 48 of the 50 states between 1968 and 2021 found that states obliged to increase spending did so in the short but not in the long term (Hanushek and Joyce-Wirtz, 2023).

Civil society actors often provide the legal and technical support required. In Buenos Aires, Argentina, the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ) filed a legal action on the rejection of children and adolescents with disabilities in private schools and secured a court agreement to implement measures to end these discriminatory practices. In 2022, the Administrative and Tax Court of the city ordered the government to implement a public policy to reverse the discrimination. An agreement was reached in 2024, after several rounds of negotiation, to guide schools, support families during the registration process, and monitor the effectiveness of the actions (ACIJ, 2024).

In the South African province of Limpopo, the High Court ordered the provincial government to provide an accurate and detailed list of schools using pit toilets and to provide a plan to ensure safe and dignified sanitation to all schools. The public interest law centre Section27 was expected to

receive progress reports every six months, and created a tool to record progress made by the Department of Education in improving toilets since the High Court order in 2022, allowing for public monitoring of the progress (Section27 and Centre for Child Law, 2025). Through the #EndTheBookFamine campaign, BLIND SA and Section27 took the government to court to challenge the Copyright Act of 1978 and improve book supply for blind or visually impaired people. A judgment confirmed that limiting access to reading materials in accessible formats was unconstitutional and the act was amended in 2025 (Section27, 2025).

Legal interventions have also tried to reduce stratification with mixed results. In Chile, the 2015 Inclusion Law established free education in all schools and eliminated discrimination in student selection, prohibiting profit making and family copayments in any publicly funded school. The socioeconomic gap in accessing quality schooling was reduced. However, parents have actively litigated against the law, arguing that it violates their constitutional rights to choose their children's education (Carrasco, 2025; Cummings et al., 2025). In India, the 2009 Right to Education Act entitled all children between 6 and 14 years to free and compulsory education. In 2012, the Supreme Court of India upheld the constitutionality of Section 12(1)(c) of the Act, which required all schools to accept 25% of their student intake from disadvantaged groups. However, in 2014, the Court held that the Act could not require private minority schools to meet this quota. Analysis utilizing state-level variation found that access had expanded for some marginalized groups, but its impacts on segregation were weak or non-existent (Edara, 2025).

In the United States, enforcement of federal and state laws and policies is limiting public education content that builds on critical race theory, which aimed to help learners understand the foundations and maintenance of racism in the legal system throughout history. This has impacted how race can be discussed in primary, secondary and tertiary education in history subjects and through book bans (Ray and Gibbons, 2021). In 2025 at the Office for Civil Rights within the Department of Education, which enforces civil rights law and the prohibition of discrimination at the federal level, about half of the institution's staff were placed on leave and 7 of its 12 regional offices were closed. Roughly 90% of the over 7,000 resolved discrimination complaints brought to the Office between March and September were dismissed without full investigation (U.S. GAO, 2026).

Civil society organizations working to fulfil the right to education for the marginalized

Celeste Fernandez, ACIJ, Argentina

Over a decade ago, the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia, ACIJ) began working with communities in informal settlements in Buenos Aires where there were concentrated, multiple forms of human rights violations. Our legal work on education emerged from this broader human rights advocacy. Children living in informal settlements in Buenos Aires lack safe and reliable transportation. ACIJ supported a legal challenge that resulted in a court order requiring the city government to ensure transport access so children could reach their schools. In another case, ACIJ demonstrated that schools in the wealthier northern districts had significantly more places available than schools in the poorer southern areas. Our education work has now expanded to include disability rights, tackled by a dedicated team focused on the rights of persons with disabilities and inclusive education.

A defining feature of our work is our emphasis on community participation and legal empowerment. We work with communities to identify their priorities, help them demystify public budgets and have supported participatory data collection. Understanding how public funds are allocated often empowers communities to demand accountability and equitable spending. Community members have documented living conditions in informal settlements, producing evidence that challenged government claims about service provision.

Despite these successes, human rights organizations like ours face declining legitimacy and shrinking space for advocacy today. Government narratives often question the role of civil society and frame social spending as excessive or inefficient. As we rethink our strategies, we are connecting more deeply with communities and focusing even more on initiatives that produce tangible improvements in people's lives. We have to acknowledge that many marginalized communities feel that participation has not meaningfully improved their conditions, which can lead to disengagement – particularly among younger generations.

We need to engage in difficult public debates, including discussions about the effectiveness and efficiency of public institutions. Avoiding these debates in the past has sometimes allowed opponents to frame the conversation in ways that undermine public institutions entirely. Civil society must therefore address these issues directly while advocating for stronger, equitable public systems. We need new alliances and broader coalitions – collaboration with universities, grass-roots organizations and the private sector is increasingly necessary. Dialogue across political differences is also essential for rebuilding trust in democratic processes.

Ultimately, democracy is dependent on active citizenship. We realize that education systems play a critical role in shaping democratic cultures and empowering citizens to participate meaningfully in public life. Looking ahead, we are exploring initiatives to strengthen democratic participation and civic engagement, including projects in schools that aim to foster deliberation and develop new generations of leaders.

Parental views vary substantially regarding what children should be learning about race, gender and other issues. In the Canadian province of Ontario, a parent challenged the education district, demanding his child be withdrawn from all lessons that were 'false teaching'; the request was declined on the basis that isolation was antithetical to the competing legislative mandate and values favouring inclusivity, equality and multiculturalism (Child Rights International Network, 2016).

In 2024, a survey in the United States showed that 54% of parents agreed that one should be able to opt out of teaching on sexual orientation or gender identity (Pew Research Center, 2024). In 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that parents have to be provided an opt-out option for inclusive learning related to sexual orientation and gender identity, arguing it infringes on parents' rights to the free exercise of their religion. Given limited resources, the decision may lead schools to amend curricula and remove materials that are deemed sensitive on religious grounds (Kim et al., 2025).

Conflict with the law limits education possibilities

Children in conflict with the law because they are accused of or convicted of a criminal offence are guaranteed the protection of their rights. But they are often found in police custody, detention centres, prisons and other custodial settings, in violation of treaties, norms and standards. Globally, an estimated 259,000 of 5- to 17-year-old children were in detention in 2024, which corresponds to 15 per 100,000 children, reaching 25 in Latin America and the Caribbean and 34 in Northern America (UNICEF, 2025a).

Children in conflict with the law are more likely to belong to racial and ethnic minorities (Penal Reform International, 2025) and to have worse education outcomes. In the United States, attending schools with higher suspension rates leads to increased arrest and incarceration rates (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2024). In the state of Georgia, Black children accounted for 38% of students but over half of school suspensions, expulsions and assignments to

disciplinary alternative schools. In 2022/3, only 5% of incarcerated children who were educated in detention facilities tested as proficient in end-of-grade assessments, and 30% dropped out of school (Davis, 2024a). In the state of Florida, which has the highest number of incarcerated children, less than half of incarcerated grade 12 students graduated with a secondary school diploma within a year (Davis, 2024b). The number of children in deportation facilities held against their will has increased by six times since late 2023, leading to human rights violations including education deprivation (Flagg and Hefernann, 2026).

Restorative justice requires conditions that help prisoners reimagine their future. Prison staff need to shift to support prisoner rehabilitation and programmes are needed to improve education or vocational training to ease reintegration. In 2024, three quarters of 62 countries reported having some form of dedicated rehabilitation strategy, model or regulatory framework (UNODC, 2025). Globally, education is highlighted as a tool for rehabilitation through the promotion of vocational and skills training (UNESCO, 2021a).

In Estonia, juvenile offender rehabilitation focuses on individualized, interprofessional and restorative approaches to reduce recidivism, with programmes covering behavioural therapy, family support, mentorship and community service (Estonia Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs, 2024). In Ireland, a child-centred approach was developed after the Youth Justice Action Plan was adopted, which included the start of a detention campus focused on rehabilitation, education and care rather than punishment (Kilkelly and Bergin, 2021). In Georgia, the Availability of Education for the Accused and Convicted Persons Programme provides juvenile convicts with the opportunity to study subjects under the national curriculum and participate in graduation ceremonies and national examinations (Georgia Government, 2020, 2024). In the United Kingdom, a review of youth justice highlighted that young offenders should serve their sentences in secure schools instead of youth prisons, drawing on educational and behavioural expertise to rehabilitate and give children the skills to thrive upon release (Taylor, 2016). Analysis of children and young people in custodial settings found that the setting itself was a barrier to re-engagement with education (Shafi, 2020).

In Burkina Faso, the Centre for Education and Social Reintegration provides training and engages with children

on human rights. A new code of ethics and child protection policy was instituted in 2021, refocusing the mission on education and social integration. A children's committee was set up to enable their right to participation (Burkina Faso Government 2023; IBCR, 2022). In Mauritius, most prisons have educational centres and libraries. The Mauritius Institute of Training and Development offers accredited courses in three prisons (Mauritius Government, 2024). Analysis of an open and distance learning programme in a correction facility found that completing the degree enabled former detainees to secure employment (Gungea, 2025). Latin American countries, including Argentina, Mexico and Peru have developed legal bases for prison education (UNESCO, 2020b). In Malaysia, integrated rehabilitation efforts and a vocational skills certificate programme are offered in collaboration with higher education institutions (Malaysia Government, 2025), although essential education resources and structured frameworks to facilitate inmates' learning remain a challenge (Rusli et al., 2024).

Commitments to prison education have generally not been strongly embraced by national penal policymakers (UNESCO, 2021). Analysis of education policies in the 10 countries with the largest prison populations (United States, China, Brazil, India, the Russian Federation, Thailand, Türkiye, Indonesia, Mexico and the Islamic Republic of Iran) highlights that the right to education is still to be ensured, due to challenges of overpopulation, living conditions and varying educational objectives (Barros Filho et al., 2023). In India, assessments from the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights found that nearly 40% of penal institutions lacked any formal educational provision, while another 20% relied on untrained volunteers or part-time staff without pedagogical qualifications (Usha and Chaudhary, 2025). In Indonesia, a review of juvenile correction facilities showed that only 68% had access to education (Prayitno et al., 2023).

Education in prison settings has a positive impact on recidivism and, in some cases, a positive impact on employment (Ellison et al., 2017; Magee, 2021; UNESCO, 2021a). In the United States, adult inmates who participated in correctional education had a 43% lower odds of recidivism compared to other inmates (Davis et al., 2014). However, systematic analysis has found that the impact on employment and re-offending are inconclusive or diminished after controlling for pre-prison employment (Newton et al., 2018; Nur and Nguyen, 2023).

Encouraging restorative engagement of youth and adults who have seen a life of crime

Caroline Njambi Njanja, *Crime Si Poa, Kenya*

Crime Si Poa (CSP) works at the intersection of prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration, focusing on youth and underserved communities across Kenya. The organization operates through the two main pillars of prevention and reintegration and of legal support services. While the first focuses on reducing crime and supporting individuals returning to society, the second empowers communities through legal awareness, paralegal training and access to free legal aid, enabling individuals to better understand and navigate the justice system.

The communities we serve are often highly vulnerable, with many young people exposed to poverty, unemployment, limited education and systemic inequalities. These conditions can lead to criminalization, sometimes for minor infractions such as loitering, particularly in environments where corruption and limited opportunities persist. In response, we place strong emphasis on prevention, working closely with schools as key entry points. Through partnerships with over 40 schools, we have supported the establishment of clubs that provide life skills, raise awareness about crime and its consequences, and keep students constructively engaged. These efforts are complemented by initiatives to keep children in school, including connecting families to bursaries and reinforcing parental accountability.

Legal empowerment is central to our work with communities, schools and prisons. We equip individuals with knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, as well as practical guidance on what to do if arrested and how to navigate legal processes. This work is delivered through trained community paralegals, with over 200 individuals trained to date, as well as through digital platforms such as webinars and online content. For children in conflict with the law, we promote diversion and alternative measures to prevent unnecessary entry into the formal justice system, while also providing legal representation when needed.

One of our innovative initiatives is the training of incarcerated individuals as paralegals. Through intensive training led by legal professionals, participants gain the skills to represent themselves and assist others, leading to the establishment of legal support centres within prisons and communities. To date, CSP has set up multiple such centres, creating spaces where individuals can access free legal assistance.

This approach has produced tangible outcomes, including successful case resolutions and reduced sentences. It has also enabled formerly incarcerated individuals to reintegrate into society with dignity, often becoming advocates and educators within their communities. In one notable case, a former inmate trained as a paralegal now works to raise awareness about sexual and gender-based violence, using his experience to educate and prevent harm. Individuals returning to their communities with legal training are often received positively, as their knowledge is valued and their contributions recognized. Many are able to build livelihoods and continue providing legal support to others.

At the same time, CSP underscores the importance of education in all its forms. In addition to supporting access to formal education and vocational training in prisons, legal literacy is a critical but an often-overlooked component. Many individuals come into conflict with the law simply because they do not understand it, reinforcing the need to expand legal education to schools, universities and communities using both traditional and digital approaches.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain. Resource constraints continue to limit the reach of both civil society and justice institutions, while prisons often lack the digital tools needed to facilitate efficient legal processes. Delays and inefficiencies in the justice system further complicate access to justice and broader socioeconomic issues frequently intersect with legal challenges. Nevertheless, CSP's impact is evident, with thousands of community members reached through legal education and dozens supported directly with legal services. Interest in CSP's model is increasing, both within Kenya and regionally, with plans underway to expand to neighbouring countries.

Our vision is to ensure that more people understand the law, can exercise their rights and avoid unnecessary conflict with the justice system. We know that when education is practical, accessible and rooted in lived realities, it becomes a powerful tool for advancing justice, dignity and lasting social change.

In Ghana, prisons lack resources, equipment and skilled trainers, which undermines the potential of vocational training to achieve rehabilitation (Boateng et al., 2025). In Malawi, education availability is inadequate in prisoner rehabilitation centres (Kajawo and Johnson, 2023). Adult male prisoners in Zambia reported that correctional facility

education was relevant for post-release employment needs but not for broader rehabilitation needs (Kakupa and Mulenga, 2021). In Zimbabwe, correctional institutions provide various academic programmes, but lack rehabilitation officers, proper funding and books, and suffer from prison officers' negative attitudes (Davira et al., 2025).

EDUCATION IS KEY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF JUST AND PEACEFUL SOCIETIES

Education influences trust in justice institutions, perceptions of peace and security needs, crime and violence prevention, and enhances legal capacity.

Education influences trust and peace

Higher levels of education attainment are correlated with lower prevalence of conflict and a higher probability of peace (Institute for Economics & Peace and Global Partnership for Education, 2024). They are also positively associated with the intensity of non-violent protests and negatively associated with violent protests (Sawyer and Koratayev, 2022).

A survey of over 100,000 people in 15 countries found that, in terms of government spending, they assigned top priority to dealing with the reasons behind a conflict and secondly to teaching peace and conflict resolution in schools (International Alert et al., 2018). In Ethiopia, a survey of 6,700 adults regarding measures to enhance security found that the most frequently mentioned strategies were reducing poverty (55%), providing education to youth (53%), improving the capacity of the police (38%) and army (33%) and delivering essential services (34%) (Pham et al., 2023).

When spending is framed as a trade-off, people with more education are often more resistant to shifting

money from social programmes to defence. Education is generally linked to less support for unilateral intervention, although context and proximity to conflict may influence these associations. A survey in Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan and Türkiye found no statistically significant association between education attainment and the belief that war is necessary for obtaining justice (Shafiq and Ross, 2010).

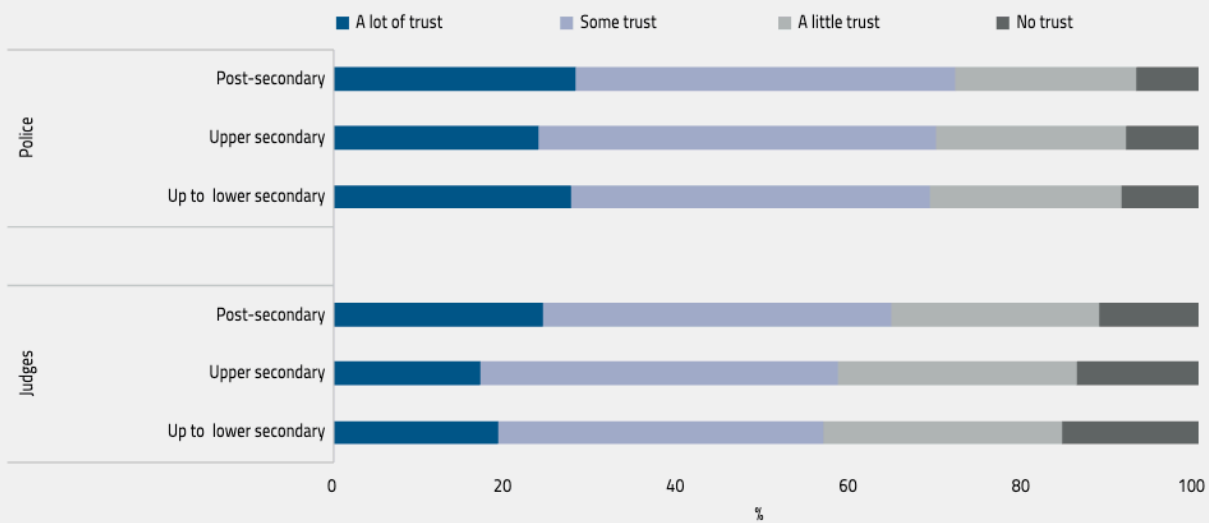
Peace agreements codify the terms of settlement between some or all of the parties in conflict (Badanjak et al., 2025). However, analysis of 2,257 peace agreements signed since 1990 involving more than 80 countries showed that only 190 agreements (8.4%) mentioned some socioeconomic rights, of which 57 agreements (2.5%) explicitly mentioned the right to education (Bell et al., 2026; Bell and Badanjak, 2019).

Trust in institutions varies by education attainment. A survey of 64,000 people in Europe found that mistrust of judges, magistrates and police was slightly lower among individuals with post-secondary education than among those with less education. In 15 of the 27 countries, respondents with primary or lower secondary education had the least amount of trust in judges (Figure 4). Perceptions of fairness hinge on how people are treated in everyday interactions. Accessible and responsive processes are central to legitimacy (OECD, 2025a). Those with more education are more likely to believe that legal and justice systems will work in their best interest (Bartholomaeus, 2025).

FIGURE 4.

Trust in justice institutions varies slightly by education level

Percentage of respondents who reported trust in judges/magistrates and police, by education level, Europe, 2024



Source: EUROVOICES survey, World Justice Project.

Education improves legal capabilities

Legal capability – including knowing where to get advice and information, obtaining appropriate expert help, and having confidence in achieving a fair outcome – shapes people’s ability to resolve justice problems and access remedies (World Justice Project, 2019). In at least 70% of countries, people living in poverty experience more legal problems than people not living in poverty. In nearly all countries, people living in poverty are more likely to lack proof of housing or land tenure ((World Justice Project, 2023b). Overall, in the average country 59% of those with primary, 63% of those with secondary and 65% of those with post-secondary education know where to get information or advice to help resolve their legal problems (Figure 5).

Less educated people are more likely to lack awareness of their rights and knowledge of legal proceedings. In the Australian state of Victoria, a survey testing knowledge of legal rights across a range of civil law areas of relevance to everyday life showed that practical legal

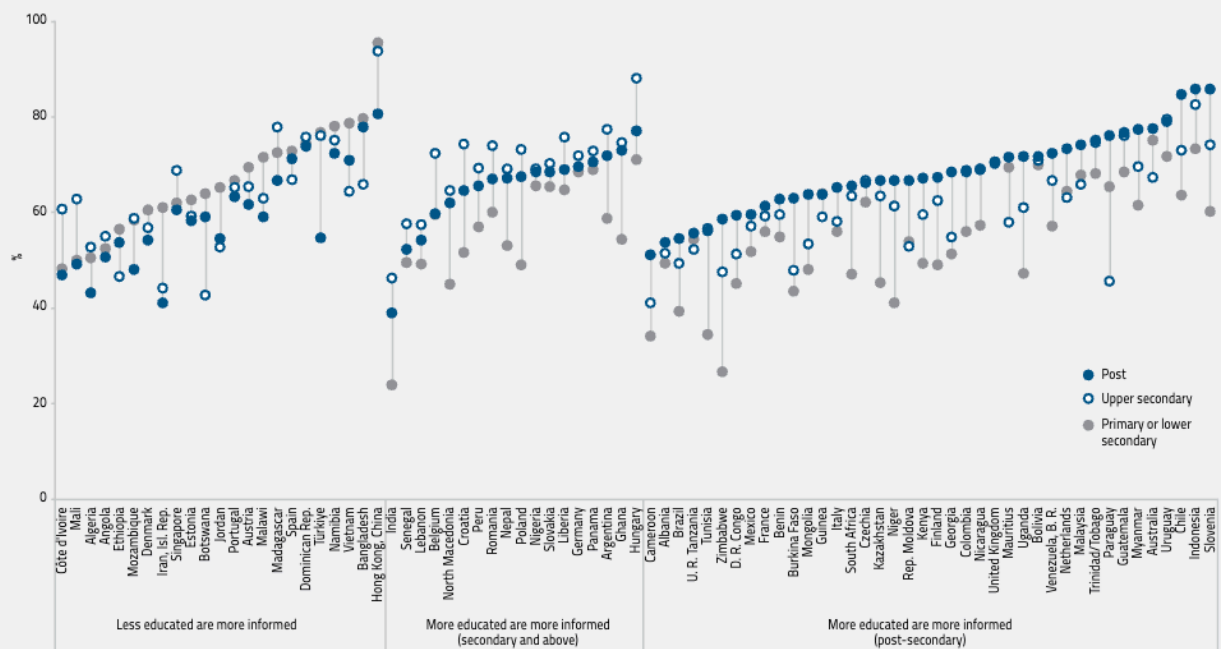
literacy (i.e. asking questions related to tasks ranging from reading brochures to raising problems) was lowest among non-native English speakers and those with the lowest educational qualifications (Balmer et al., 2024). In Bangladesh, illiterate women in the disadvantaged river island, or char, areas are less able to understand their rights and to be able to navigate the legal system (Ahmmed, 2023). In Indonesia, more educated respondents and those who had participated in formal or informal legal education interventions had higher legal awareness (Febrianty et al., 2025).

In Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, linguistic discrimination, lack of literacy skills and the technical language of the courts limit access to justice for children, women, the poor and the illiterate (Kondowe and Svongoro, 2025). In Nigeria, of the surveyed respondents in 2025, 13% believe that people abandon legal approaches because legal processes are too complex and hard to understand (Hiil, 2025).

FIGURE 5.

In most countries, more educated people are more likely to know where to get information or advice for legal needs

Percentage of adults who knew where to get information or advice for legal problems, by education level, selected countries, 2018 or latest



Note: Respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I knew where to get good information and advice about resolving the problem' among those who had at least one non-trivial justice problem in the previous two years.
Source: World Justice Project Global Legal Needs Survey.

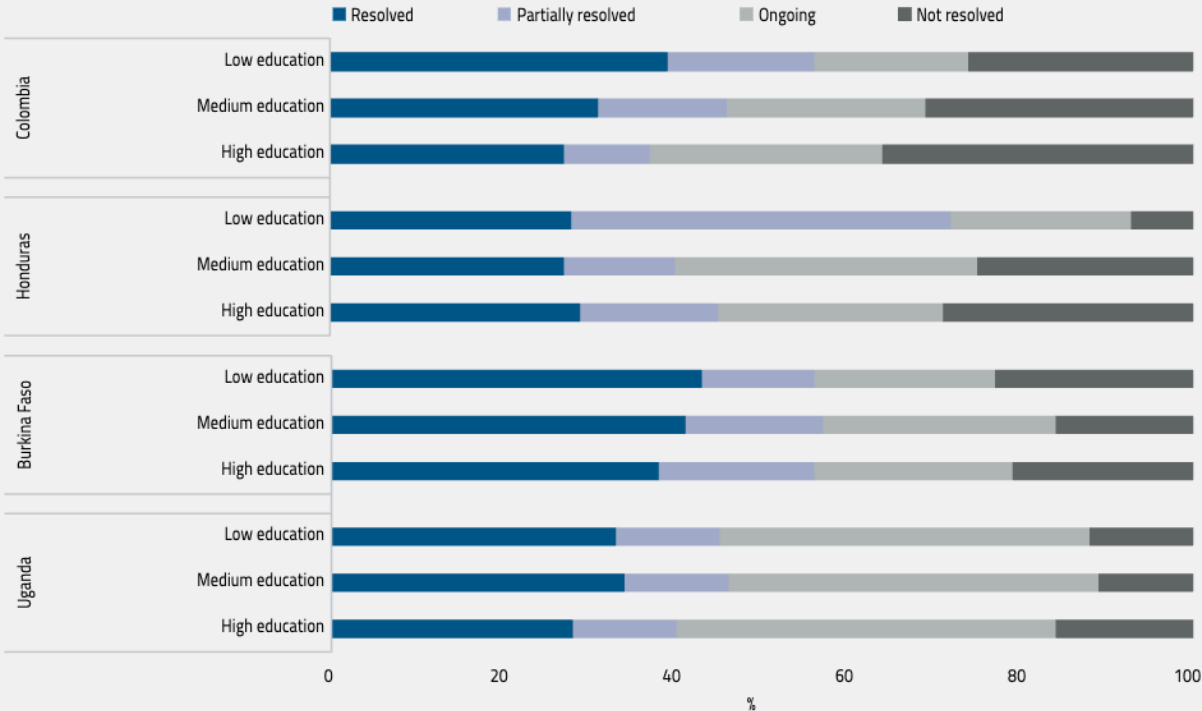
In the United Kingdom, results of two rounds of the Civil and Social Justice Panel Survey in 2010 and 2012 showed that 59% of respondents had some knowledge of rights in three areas of law tested – and only 34% in the case of common consumer law. Respondents from vulnerable groups such as less skilled workers and older people improved their knowledge less between the two rounds. (Wintersteiger, 2015). A legal needs survey of over 28,000 people in England and Wales found that knowledge about the legal system, legal rights and legal responsibilities made it more likely to seek professional advice, which in turn improves their perception of getting a better outcome (Legal Service Board, 2020).

Traditional justice systems, which are more frequently turned to by marginalized people due to ease of access and familiarity, are also challenged as they are being integrated into formal national systems. In Ethiopia, traditional social courts operated by village elders are institutionalized into the federal judicial structure at the grass-roots level. However, many of the elders serving as judges lack reading and writing fluency, knowledge of the law and adequate

training (Deresso, 2023). In Somalia, the customary justice system, Xeer, plays a central role in dispute resolution but has faced substantial criticisms concerning its lack of alignment with international human rights standards, especially linked to women’s exclusion from participation. An analysis of 408 elders found that 36% had never attended primary school, with most having completed Qur’anic or madrasa education. Only 31% supported allowing women to speak and give evidence in hearings (Peterson and Zaki, 2023).

In Colombia and Honduras, but not in Burkina Faso and Uganda, more educated adults are more likely to have resolved or partially resolved legal problems than the less educated (Figure 6). In Honduras, more educated internally displaced people were more likely to engage with local authorities or private lawyers to deal with their legal situation, while those with less education were more likely to talk directly with the other party to resolve their legal problem (Hiil, 2024).

FIGURE 6.
In Latin America, but not in sub-Saharan Africa, more educated people are more likely to resolve their legal problems
Resolution status of legal problems, by education level, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Honduras and Uganda, 2023–2024



Note: The education level categories may not be comparable across countries.
Source: Hague Institute for Innovation of Law dashboard based on Justice Needs and Satisfaction surveys.

Education lowers crime rates

Education is a strong protective factor against encountering crime and violence in life. Positive school experiences and learning achievement have lifelong protective effects against antisocial and criminal behaviours. Conversely, early school problems and low achievement are strong risk factors. Early interventions are effective in reducing crime. In the US state of North Carolina, exposure to the early childhood Head Start programme led to a reduction in adult conviction rates by 1.3 percentage points in high poverty areas, a reduction of about 20% (Anders et al., 2023).

Access to education can provide youth with viable work opportunities, limiting their time to engage in crime in challenging contexts. A comprehensive research review of connections between crime and education shows that education policies have served as effective crime prevention tools in many settings around the world (Machin and Sandi, 2025).

High-quality data from Scandinavia offer rich insights. In Denmark, analysis of twins born between 1965 and 1982 in Denmark showed that completing upper secondary education significantly lowered the probability of conviction for property and violent crimes among men. Education lowers crime earlier in life for children of less educated parents (Bennett, 2018). In Finland, admission to secondary school had a sizeable negative effect on the propensity to commit crime for boys. The effects are largest during the first five years after admission, resulting in a reduction of the probability of ever committing crime (Huttunen et al., 2023). In Sweden, each additional year of schooling decreased the likelihood of a conviction for a violent crime by 10%, for property crime by 14% and for other crimes by almost 6% (Hjalmarsson et al., 2015). A large-scale reform in Sweden to extend vocational upper secondary education programmes from two to three years led to a reduction in property crime. The effect is mainly concentrated in the third year after enrolment, suggesting that being in school reduces the opportunities and inclinations to commit crime (Åslund et al., 2018). A panel data analysis of 287 municipalities from 1998 to 2010 showed that an opportunity to attend post-secondary education led to lower unemployment or inactivity rates and lower inclination to commit crimes (Nordin, 2018).

In the United States, a 10% rise in real per-pupil spending was associated with 7.1 fewer arrests per 1,000 in the population aged 15 to 19, equivalent to an estimated 16% return in school spending due to the avoided costs of deterred crimes (Noghanibehambari, 2022). Analysis

of state-level reform efforts to reduce dropout between 1980 and 2010 show that in the short term, being in school incapacitates children from committing crime, and also has a sustained crime-reducing effect (Bell et al., 2022). In the state of Louisiana, a test-based promotion policy to grade 9 shows that having to repeat 8th grade increases the likelihood of being convicted of a crime by age 25 (Eren et al., 2022). Quasi-experimental variation in public school funding in the state of Michigan found that students who were in primary schools with more funding were less likely to be arrested in adulthood (Baron et al., 2024). College expansion between 1974 and 2019 was associated with lower arrest rates among individuals aged 18 to 22. An additional two-year and four-year college in the county of residence was associated with 7% and 13% reductions in property crime rates, respectively, for this age group (Noghanibehambari and Tavassoli, 2022).

FORMAL EDUCATION CAN HELP BUILD INCLUSIVE AND JUST SOCIETIES

Formal education can build knowledge, values and attitudes, for example on human rights, empathy and peaceful coexistence. It can also provide learning to envision just societies. Evidence assesses the impact of different approaches, and how policy translates to implementation and practice.

CURRICULA NEED TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTICE

Sustainable Development Goal target 4.7 introduced the concepts of civics and citizenship education, human rights, peace and gender equality to the global education agenda. The 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development is the new global standard-setting instrument that lays out how education should be used to bring about lasting peace and foster human development through 14 guiding principles, highlighting the need to acquire competencies such as empathy, critical thinking, intercultural understanding and environmental stewardship (UNESCO, 2024b).

Human rights education aims to help students understand, protect and live by the principles of human rights, decrease violence, and increase engagement and empathy (UNESCO, 2023d). Success factors include clear goals and objectives, teacher training and support, and interactive and experiential learning methods (UNESCO, 2023d). In India, analysis of a contextually relevant human rights education programme delivered to poor children found that creative approaches helped teachers, families and students critique social inequalities (Bajaj, 2015).

In Georgia, secondary school students who went through the One World in Schools human rights education programme reported a high level of empowerment (Činčera et al., 2018). In Kyrgyzstan, children's rights issues were introduced in a subject (People and Society) from grade 5 in 2018, supported by teacher professional development that focuses on citizenship education, gender equality and human rights (Kyrgyzstan Government, 2020). Globally since 1970, the coverage of human rights themes in secondary school textbooks has grown, especially by discussing international rather than national issues (Meyer et al., 2010), student-centredness, and students' rights and voice (Bromley et al., 2011).

Peace education is a tool for social reconciliation, historical memory, inclusive institutions and transitional justice (Ramírez-Barat and Duthie, 2015). Restorative practices focus on communication, dialogue, problem-solving, critical thinking, empathy, negotiation, peer mediation and conflict resolution (Saleh et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2024a). A meta-analysis across 90 peace education intervention trials involving some 15,000 children found that, compared to control groups, participants significantly improved conflict resolution skills (Yu et al., 2026). The teaching of recent history emerges as a key axis for institutionalizing state policies of memory and non-repetition. Reports from justice courts, truth commissions and reconciliation commissions have been introduced and adapted for teaching in schools (Bellino et al., 2017). In Canada, in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, provinces revised curricula to include the history of residential schools and the contributions of Indigenous peoples (Wallace-Casey, 2022). In South Africa, the government used education as a primary tool for redress, introducing a national History and Life Orientation curriculum focused on human rights and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Programmes including Facing the Past supported teachers to process their own apartheid-era traumas to prevent transmitting resentment in the classroom (Ndwandwe and Adigun, 2023).

Education for peace and rebuilding is particularly used in post-conflict countries. In Cambodia, students in a peace education programme came to understand low-ranking perpetrators also as victims of the Khmer Rouge regime (Manning and Paulson, 2024). In Colombia, the Cátedra de la Paz (Chair of Peace) course is mandatory throughout

all education levels since 2014 and part of the national transitional justice strategy. Most stakeholders consider the course to be a necessary and useful initiative to advance more peaceful and active communities (Morales, 2021). Rwanda integrated peace and values education as a cross-cutting theme from pre-primary through secondary levels to address the legacy of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi (Buhigiro et al., 2024). Traditional practices such as community-based courts, community services and collective problem solving were incorporated into the formal curriculum and school activities. In districts with sustained, high-quality peace education, social cohesion and intergroup trust improved compared to districts with lower implementation quality (Bacha, 2025).

Education policy intentions are not always achieved in classrooms

The extent to which objectives of human rights and peace education are achieved is compromised by capacity constraints, pedagogical complexity and political obstacles.

Capacity

Introducing human rights education in schools can be difficult due to resistance in incorporating new areas into already established curricula (Parker, 2018), especially when it overlaps with other related areas (e.g. citizenship, peace, democracy intercultural education), which causes confusion among teachers and questions about its curricular status. In Mauritius, citizenship, values and multicultural education are taught at the primary level, while human rights education and life skills and values are taught at the secondary level (Mauritius Government, 2024). Interviews showed that, while former government officials believed students should be educated in civics education at a young age, teachers questioned the utility and pointed to an overloaded curriculum (Kaurooa and Sookrajowa, 2021). In Enugu state, Nigeria, a survey of 170 social studies teachers found that human rights teaching was difficult due to teachers' limited knowledge of human rights content and lack of engagement with participatory pedagogies (Obiagu and Nwaubani, 2020). In Uganda, teachers highlight that overcrowded classes and overloaded curricula limit the time to teach justice-related issues in lower secondary schools (Milligan et al., 2026). Generally, teachers find it difficult to teach some issues without support (**Box 2**).

BOX 2.**Teachers may struggle to tackle human rights issues in the classroom**

Teacher preparedness is a critical factor for effective teaching. In 12 European countries, there was some correlation between the incidence of grade 8 teacher training and the degree of confidence to teach citizen rights and responsibilities. Teachers in Croatia being the least likely to be confident and the second least likely to have received training; teachers from Poland were the most likely to be trained and confident in teaching (Figure 7).

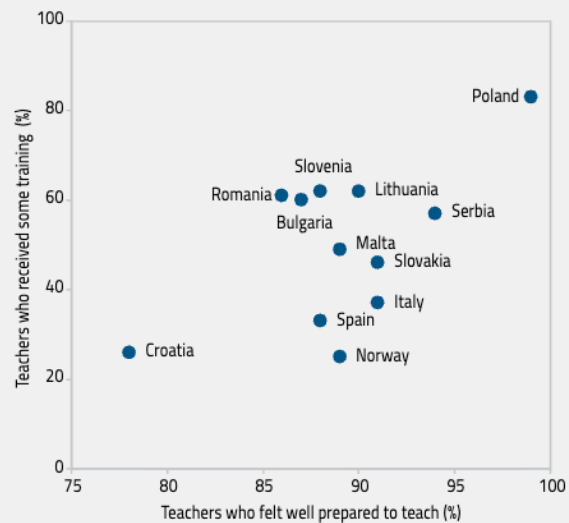
Teacher knowledge of civics and human rights may often be lacking. In Bangladesh, one of the main reasons why schools have not succeeded in implementing education for democratic citizenship, apart from its limited presence in the curriculum, is teachers' lack of understanding of human rights due to limited professional development opportunities (Fakir et al., 2025). In India, primary and secondary school teachers do not fully understand human rights or the legal framework that supports them (Gupta, 2018). In Nigeria, teachers have insufficient knowledge and lack pedagogical strategies to incorporate democratic citizenship and human rights into teaching (Obiagu and Nwaubani, 2020). In the United States, while secondary school graduation may require civic knowledge, some states do not require future teachers to study it sufficiently in their preparation programmes (Watkins, 2025).

Teachers often find teaching civics and human rights a politically problematic area, even viewing it as contrary to national interests and local culture. Citizenship education teachers in Japan feel unprepared to teach human rights, especially when linked to political conflict, migration, discrimination or cultural tensions (Hosoda, 2025). In Switzerland, while surveyed teachers were comfortable with incorporating values-based education, many teachers found human rights education a difficult concept to teach. They expressed reservations on formalizing it, noting that it may then be limited to only imparting knowledge or politicized; and cited the lack of resources and time for instruction to specifically devote to human rights education (Rinaldi, 2017). In the United States, the politicization of civics education has created challenges for teachers, prompting many to exclude the subject or self-censor (Learn, 2024; Perera and Tenpas, 2025).

Teachers tend to avoid human rights vocabulary and place rights violations in other countries or in the past. In Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, human rights were mainly taught through events, such as the slave trade, the French Revolution, the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement, or through human rights violations in the Global South, with limited focus on national and local issues (Hahn, 2020). In Japan, the use of human rights terms has increased between 1970 and 2010. However, there is very limited discussion of human rights issues related to three underprivileged groups in Japan: the Burakumin outcaste group, the Ainu ethnic group and foreign residents (Lo, 2026). In Peru, teachers found it difficult to teach and avoided teaching about the armed conflict because of fear of reprisals. As these issues are tackled superficially in classrooms, this led to simplistic rather than critical understandings of justice (Milligan et al., 2026).

In India, Satyashodhak Shikshak Sabha (Truth-seeking Teachers' Association) is a grass-roots collective in Maharashtra state rooted in anti-caste philosophy, which ran workshops in critical pedagogy to engage teachers in analysing texts and discussing ways to teach history differently. It faced challenges engaging teachers who did not see themselves as bearing responsibility for such critical engagement (GARJE, 2025).

FIGURE 7. Teacher training is correlated with more confidence in teaching citizenship rights and responsibilities
Percentage of teachers who reported having attended pre-service or in-service training courses and who felt well prepared to teach citizens' rights and responsibilities, European countries, 2022



Source: Schulz et al. (2025) from the 2022 International Civics and Citizenship Study optional teacher questions.

Continued on the next page

BOX 2. *Continued*

Teachers have varied opinions about teaching about violent pasts. Teacher surveys conducted in Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Kenya found that teachers strongly believed that schools were the ideal place to learn how to live with each other and foster national reconciliation. However, in practice, Kenyan and Ivorian teachers felt uncomfortable teaching conflict histories directly since they feared it would increase the politicization of ethnicity and make students relive trauma. In Côte d'Ivoire, fewer than 25% of teachers felt conflict history should be taught at the primary level, while 53% supported it at the lower secondary and 78% at the upper secondary levels. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, in contrast, perhaps as a result of enduring tensions, most teachers in Bukavu and Goma supported conflict history education, often starting as young as primary school (Kuppens and Nfundiko, 2025).

In Côte d'Ivoire, more than two thirds of surveyed teachers believed that more professional development was needed to prepare teachers to teach their country's conflict history and deal with traumatized children (Kuppens and Nfundiko, 2025). A survey of student teachers in Finland found that student teachers believed democracy and human rights education needed to be more explicitly part of their professional education and compulsory so that all teachers would have the same level of basic knowledge (Kasa et al., 2021). In Türkiye, a survey of 632 teacher candidates and 47 faculty members found that most believed teacher competencies in human rights education needed to improve, which would require an integration of curricular and extracurricular activities, social responsibility initiatives and visits to relevant institutions (Abedi and Fer, 2023).

Pedagogy

There is often little clarity on how to develop critical thinking capacity on human rights (Quennerstedt, 2022). Content is often emphasized over practice. An analysis of 71 articles found that most programmes focused on providing knowledge about human rights norms and principles (e.g. rights violations, legal instruments and human rights history) but not as much about education through or for human rights (Quennerstedt et al., 2025). Identifying and work towards eliminating human rights abuses receives less attention than teaching principles, therefore schools may not provide learners with the tools to identify when their own rights are violated and how to challenge injustices (Lundy and Martínez Sainz, 2018). In Côte d'Ivoire, a course on education in human rights and citizenship was introduced across all education levels in 2012 to promote respect for ethics, fundamental freedoms and the promotion of social justice for peace (Côte d'Ivoire Government, 2019). An assessment of its integration in lower secondary schools based on teacher surveys, focus groups and classroom observations found that despite enthusiastic uptake, a lack of depth in the course compromised the extent to which it could shift mentality (Kuppens and Langer, 2018). In Nepal, human rights education places low emphasis on local history, culture and values (Sahani, 2024).

Textbook content analyses indicate that human rights are not incorporated as a means for active engagement. For example, an analysis of 556 secondary school textbooks in 80 countries published between 1950 and 2011 showed that social movements were underemphasized in secondary school civics and social

studies curricula, relative to history textbooks, suggesting that such movements are seen as part of a historical record rather than as part of contemporary, active citizenship (Skinner and Bromley, 2019). In South Africa, coverage of human rights issues is mostly present in history textbooks and limited to conveying knowledge rather than instigating students to protect their rights; while the more actively oriented life orientation course is deprioritized and undervalued as a subject (Russell et al., 2019). In Türkiye, an analysis of references to human rights in textbooks used from 1950 to 2020 showed that they opted for a depoliticized and decontextualized narrative (Sen, 2023).

Teachers are reported to lack confidence in teaching an issues-oriented curriculum in an open classroom environment (Anderson, 2023). In Ireland, a survey of 206 teachers found that civic, social and political education had low status and received low prioritization in classrooms. Part of the reason was that the conceptualization of the subject was disconnected from its realization, while teachers lacked agency to bridge these gaps (O'Brien, 2024).

Politics

Ideally, peace education should be taught in classrooms, throughout schools and in collaboration with communities and civil society organizations (Brooks and Hajir, 2020) but this is challenging. In Lebanon, initiatives aimed at increasing shared spaces for students from different sectarian backgrounds following the 1975–90 civil war faced significant implementation challenges, such as resistance from political leaders who viewed reconciliation

education as threatening established power structures (Al-Habbal, 2011). In Western Cape, South Africa, peace education programmes are difficult to implement not only due to resource constraints, but also due to the daily reality of gang and domestic violence in the community, which negatively influences the school environment (Ndwandwe, 2024).

A review of policy, curricula and classroom implementation of teaching and learning about environmental, transitional and social justice in Nepal, Peru and Uganda found that teachers lacked guidelines to translate policy intentions

into classroom instruction and empower students to engage critically. Topics were depoliticized, focusing on scientific knowledge on climate change or technical knowledge on conflict. In Nepal, teachers presented ideas of justice using traditional lecturing methods, relying primarily on textbooks. This superficial way of engaging with these issues made it difficult for students to grasp the systemic and structural issues of justice that could help promote analysis, reflection and critical thinking, and enable connections between knowledge and everyday experiences (Milligan et al., 2026).

Advancing pluralism

Nathalie Sirois, Global Centre for Pluralism, Canada

At the Global Centre for Pluralism, we work to understand what pluralism means in practice and to support people around the world who are advancing it in their own contexts. We understand pluralism as resting on two core pillars of reciprocal recognition and belonging. Reciprocal recognition means acknowledging the dignity, experiences and contributions of different groups in society. Belonging goes further than individual feelings of inclusion; it also means being meaningfully recognized within institutions and having real opportunities to shape collective life.

For me, pluralism is about recognizing the value of human diversity while also acknowledging that all societies are diverse in different ways. It is about creating the conditions in which people – across all dimensions of their identities – can participate fully and experience a genuine sense of belonging. In education, this translates into ensuring that diverse histories, knowledge systems and ways of learning are reflected in schools.

We support and connect local initiatives. In one of my projects in Canada, we are supporting newcomer teachers to integrate into francophone minority communities. We help teachers understand the local education context, adapt to teaching practices and build social connections in their new environments. Our Centre also runs flagship initiatives such as the Global Pluralism Award, which recognizes individuals and organizations demonstrating exceptional leadership in advancing pluralism globally. These initiatives highlight effective practices and create opportunities for others to learn from them. One recent award recipient was the Slovak organization OMAMA, which supports Roma mothers in providing early childhood interventions that help Roma children begin school on a stronger footing. We also developed a self-assessment tool for schools to help educators reflect on how pluralistic their environments are and identify areas for growth. These tools are designed to support practical institutional change and help translate pluralism from concept into action. Within the Centre, our education work is closely connected to other programmes, including the Global Pluralism Monitor, which assesses the state of pluralism in more than 20 countries, as well as initiatives related to peacebuilding and conflict. Our aim is to translate insights from this broader research into learning opportunities for educators and leaders.

One of the key lessons is that advancing pluralism in education requires engaging not only students, but also the adults who shape educational environments. We have increasingly focused on working with school leaders, principals and decision makers. I have seen how tensions can arise when teachers attempt to implement more inclusive practices without alignment from leadership. In some cases, educators experience significant stress when their efforts are not supported institutionally. This is why pluralistic leadership is so important. Leaders need to reflect critically on whether institutional policies and practices support or undermine pluralism. While laws and frameworks matter, pluralism is not only about compliance – it also requires ongoing reflection and a willingness to question established practices when they conflict with values of recognition and belonging.

I have also learned that this work is deeply systemic. Changes in one part of an education system inevitably affect others, and initiatives cannot be separated from broader social and historical contexts. In some cases, conversations about diversity and belonging take place in environments shaped by conflict or trauma, which requires careful and sensitive engagement.

I have seen how educators and leaders who engage in this work often experience meaningful shifts in how they understand their roles and responsibilities. Leaders who are trying to advance pluralism can often feel isolated, especially when challenging established norms. Building supportive communities of practice helps them share experiences, learn from one another and maintain momentum for change.

TEACHING JUSTICE REQUIRES TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Transformative approaches for justice promote contestation, critical engagement and collective dialogue (Bajaj, 2018). They emphasize student participation (Box 3), analysis of real situations of rights violations, and consistency between the values taught and school

practices (Jayasooriya, 2025). A whole-school approach to integrating peace, justice and tolerance requires tackling relationships within the school and with the community. This sees schools teaching respect for human rights and peaceful conflict resolution, and modelling them through everyday practices of participation, equity, dialogue and respect (Arystanbek et al., 2026).

BOX 3.

Students can feel disempowered by their lack of voice and influence

Human rights education should ideally be connected to students' context (Waldron and Oberman, 2016) and teach rights as everyday experiences (Moody et al., 2024), including rights violations (Lundy and Martínez Sainz, 2018). However, teaching about human rights, equality and justice can be difficult to reconcile with experiences of poverty or violence (Osler, 2020). Direct experiences with rights violations can strain the use of human rights education.

Students' experiences of learning about injustice can be superficial. A comparative analysis of Nepal, Peru and Uganda found that themes of social, environmental and transitional justice were presented in a limited manner. In Nepal, content was presented as abstract notions with little connection to learners' experiences. Most students lacked basic knowledge of former political movements and conflicts and lacked the opportunities to share their knowledge and ideas. In Peru, students lacked information and tools to discuss the armed conflict (Milligan et al., 2026). Discussions with secondary school students in the Republic of Korea showed that they thought of human rights almost entirely in terms of economic and political equality. Although they recognized the role of structural power and injustice, they applied this understanding primarily to settings outside their country (Kim, 2019).

Students often focus on their personal sphere of influence. A study of young adolescents in Colombia, Ireland, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) and the United States found that, while they recognized the role of personal and institutional factors in violating and protecting rights, their idea of influence focused primarily on their personal responsibilities, such as being charitable or volunteering, using education and fair treatment of others (Barton, 2020).

Students often do not feel empowered to influence human rights issues after learning about them. In Guatemala, some students thought collective action could force the government to act on its responsibilities, but other students felt that human rights abuses were part of a culture of violence and were pessimistic about the possibility of change (Bellino, 2014, 2015). In Israel, interviews with students who completed a human rights education unit in civic studies found that most of the students could name rights violations but were reluctant to act on them due to communal norms, lack of trust in adults and institutional systems, and fear of the implications (Perry-Hazan et al., 2024). An analysis of grade 7 and 8 students' experiences in citizenship and human rights education in Türkiye found that students felt it had little impact in empowering them to consider human rights as a key part of their lives (Çayır and Bağlı, 2011).

An analysis of the schooling experiences of some 3,000 grade 10 students in England, United Kingdom, found that only 38% felt safe expressing their views regarding social and political issues in schools. Less than half agreed that the history of people from their racial or ethnic background was accurately taught, while 61% of Black African and Caribbean students and 55% of Asian students viewed the unfair treatment of 'people like me' on the basis of colour, ethnicity, religion or nationality as a big problem in the country (Kitching and Gholami, 2023).

Students often engage in collective activism (Abad and Conchas, 2025), notably in demanding an understanding of climate change from a justice perspective: paying attention to how climate changes impact people differently, unevenly and disproportionately, and calling for the resultant injustices to be redressed (Sultana, 2022). However, young people have highlighted that they are not meaningfully engaged in decision-making processes, that the nature of learning about climate change is depoliticized and technical, and that tackling climate change is urgent (Sloan Morgan et al., 2024). Youth climate justice activism is often viewed as an educational and empowering opportunity not found in formal education (UNESCO and MECCE, 2024).

Innovative pedagogy can foster tolerance. The 1001 Nights citizenship education programme, which combines videos with classroom and take-home activities, grounded in storytelling, critical thinking and a cross-platform learning approach has been implemented at a large scale in schools in Iraq, Pakistan and Tunisia, and for refugee children in Jordan and Lebanon. Focus groups have found that teachers observed increased cohesion and other expressions of empathy and non-violence among children of different nationalities and reduced hostility between groups (Fisch, 2018).

The incidence of violence can be reduced with learning approaches that consist of multiple components. In Chile, school coexistence is increasingly integrated into education quality frameworks and supported by the Fund for Pedagogical Innovation in School Coexistence. Mediation practices, community and network practices, protocols and guidelines developed collaboratively to promote school coexistence, and, to some extent, incorporating school coexistence into the curriculum are among the approaches explored (Berger et al., 2024). A longitudinal analysis of school climate data between 2014 and 2022 showed significant improvements in school violence among grade 4 students, especially in public schools and those from a lower socioeconomic background (López et al., 2025). In Colombia, the Aulas en Paz (Classes in Peace) programme combines a curriculum focused on empathy, anger management and assertiveness with workshops for parents of more aggressive children and heterogeneous groups for extracurricular activities. A two-year quasi-experimental evaluation in seven public schools located in neighbourhoods with youth gangs, drug cartels and community violence found that teachers reported positive effects on behaviour and reduced aggression, while students highlighted improved assertiveness and less verbal victimization (Chaux et al., 2017). In Peru, classroom discussions about the importance of reporting violence, combined with an online platform to report incidents, reduced school violence and dropouts, increased test scores and eventually reduced crime (Gunapooti et al., 2026).

In Sierra Leone, education and justice are seen as two accelerators of national transformation, leading to a central role for civic and human rights education (Sierra Leone Government, 2021). The National Council on Civic Education and Development, established in 2018, reintroduced civic education with a focus on acceptance of diversity, gender equity, peace, tolerance, resilience and responsibility (Xu et al., 2020). Child-friendly versions of Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports were produced for students (Bond, 2022). In 2024, the Cotton

Tree National Civic Education Strategy (2024–2030) was developed to reshape civic consciousness (UNESCO, 2025a). Developed in consultation with youth, women, community leaders and civil society organizations, it aims to educate citizens on their rights and responsibilities with six pillars focusing on national participation and cohesion, food security, health, digital literacy, climate awareness, and inclusion and unity.

Conflict resolution programmes and peer mediation innovations can help tackle school violence and bullying constructively (Miranda-Medina et al., 2020). In Brazil, schools that adopted mediation as a regular practice observed a decrease in cases of violence and bullying, in addition to increasing empathy among students. An essential need was to train the teachers and principals, since their resistance could compromise the process (Dias et al., 2024). In Kaduna state, Nigeria, an evaluation of the Urban Youth Vocational Training programme showed that students in classrooms where Christian and Muslim communities were represented were discriminated against less than students in classrooms where there was no intergroup contact (Scacco and Warren, 2018). Socioemotional skills, such as self-esteem, a growth mindset, self-control, trust and cooperation, can help teach students to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner. In Switzerland, an evaluation of a two-year classroom-based socioemotional learning programme among 8-year-olds found that disruptive classroom behaviour was reduced, while secondary school completion and university enrolment rates had increased 10 years later (Sorrenti et al., 2020).

International organizations have also promoted innovative approaches. In the United Kingdom, UNICEF's 'Rights Respecting' whole-school approach is active in over 5,000 schools, with comprehensive implementation in 538 schools showing positive impacts on student engagement, inclusivity, and attitudes toward diversity (UNICEF, 2024a). Amnesty International's Human Rights Friendly Schools approach is applied in 22 countries and encourages human rights education through openness and debate (Amnesty International, 2017). A small-scale evaluation in Denmark and Italy noted challenges including limited teacher preparation and difficulty sustaining the programme long-term (Larsen, 2012).

LEGAL EDUCATION DESERVES STRONGER PRIORITY IN SCHOOL CURRICULA

The practical development of legal literacy, knowledge of rights, institutions and due process, and competences for deliberation and participation, is essential to navigate

everyday legal and administrative needs, and key to understanding law and justice institutions (OECD, 2025a). However, only a few countries have integrated such public legal education or legal literacy and education into the school curriculum, while implementation varies widely. For instance, countries vary in the extent to which

they require legal education, the specificity of learning objectives and the extent of practical knowledge expected. Typically, legal education is incorporated in a limited manner in civics and citizenship education or social studies, and in certain cases, through clubs or other extracurricular activities (Table 2).

TABLE 2.
Select examples of legal education in school curriculum

	Curricular expectations
Australia	The civics and citizenship subject (grades 7 to 10) includes content on concepts such as the rule of law, presumption of innocence, burden of proof, fair trial, legal representation and types of law. The Rule of Law Education Centre encourages active participation and teaching on the rule of law, providing resources such as case studies, explainers, posters and videos to schools and teachers, and supports visits to courts and meetings with judicial officers.
China	Legal education is required in primary and secondary schools, with a focus on basic rules of conduct and legal knowledge. Non-law majors in universities are expected to learn a basic course on the theory of law.
Finland	As part of history and social studies, legal education is introduced in schools at the age of 10. In upper secondary education, students are provided with a short introduction on how to participate in society. The aim is to develop understanding of fundamental rights and obligations as per the constitution, the workings of the judicial system, judicial power and police. In an advanced elective course ('Citizen law knowledge'), pupils are provided with a deeper understanding of the judicial system and learn to handle the most common legal matters.
India	Legal literacy clubs in secondary schools were introduced as an elective subject in grades 11 and 12 in 2013/14 and teach the historical evolution of the legal system, providing insights into civil and criminal law and procedures, contracting, and dispute resolution mechanisms.
Ireland	Civic, social and political education was introduced as a mandatory subject in 1997, which emphasized practical engagement and action projects. After 2019, students are no longer assessed on this knowledge for junior certification. The Irish courts services designed a module ('Let's look at the law') in consultation with teachers, legal professionals and the coordinating mechanisms for civic, social and political education to simplify teaching of the legal system.
Japan	Legal issues are covered through several subjects (mainly in social studies) and special activities (e.g. classroom discussions). In primary schools, the fundamental idea of law, decisions and rules, fundamental principles of private law, the Constitution, and the function of the judiciary and significance of judicial participation are covered. In 2018, a civic education reform introduced a mandatory subject ('Public') in the first year of secondary school, which addresses legal issues.
Mongolia	The secondary civics curriculum includes content related to accessing public services (e.g. police, courts), submitting inquiries and complaints to administrative agencies, using financial and banking services, participating in real estate and market activities, and integrating into the labour market.
New Zealand	Legal issues are an optional part of the social studies curriculum and may be covered briefly in some classes.
Poland	Civic education classes provide general information about the national legal structure, human and civil rights, sources of law, and types of legal professionals. However, there is very little emphasis on how to practically resolve justiciable problems of daily life.
Sweden	In grades 4 to 6, pupils learn about rights, the judicial system and society's need for legislation, different laws and sanctions, crime and its consequences on the individual, family and society. Legal education is quite extensive in grades 7 to 9, as part of social studies, with emphasis on issues such as what constitutes discrimination under law, the position and rights of minorities, the legal system, and the rule of law. Pupils also learn about consumer knowledge, rights and obligations, and human rights organizations.
Türkiye	An elective course on law and justice has been developed by the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education for grades 7 to 9.
England, United Kingdom	Public legal education is offered in citizenship education. At stage 3 (11 to 14 years), students are taught about the liberties enjoyed by citizens, the nature of rules and laws and the justice system, including the role of the police. At stage 4 (15 to 16 years), students are taught about the power of the government, the role of citizens and parliament, as well as human rights and international law.
Zambia	Legal education is taught in clubs on human rights, child rights and crime but is not on the curriculum.

Note: A questionnaire developed by the Global Access to Justice Project utilized a common framework to guide data collection and develop national reports, which included a description of the forms of legal education included in the school education curriculum (Global Access to Justice, 2020).

Source: Global Access to Justice national reports; ACARA (2026) and Rule of Law Education Centre (2025) (Australia); Cox (2017) (Mongolia); Department for Education (2013) (England, United Kingdom).

Beyond the curriculum, legal education needs are often met through specific programmes and initiatives in school systems. In many countries, non-governmental and civil society organizations, universities, courts and judicial bodies provide a range of legal education activities. A prominent example is the Street Law practice of university law students delivering legal education to schools. Street Law was founded in 1972 in the United States and has since been adapted in more than 40 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. Street Law programmes share three core characteristics: teaching practical content about rights and responsibilities; using interactive pedagogical strategies to develop skills such as civic participation, argumentation and communication; and connecting with the legal community through the direct participation of experts and the observation of law in action (Arbetman, 2018).

Evaluations in the United States have shown that hands-on public legal education increases students' interest in legal careers and pathways to law school (Sylvester, 2026). An evaluation of Street Law's inquiry-based approach to develop students' understanding of the rule of law in the United States found that students were able to make more connections between the content and their own lives, were more engaged in lessons, and more likely to discuss taking actions to improve their communities (Rapaport et al., 2022). A deliberative discussion model promotes highly structured conversations that help teachers and students discuss contested political issues and search for consensus. An independent evaluation in the states of Illinois and Maryland found that students overwhelmingly felt respected, with half of them reporting exposure to perspectives that they had not considered before, encouraging critical thinking without polarization (Street Law Inc, 2025).

In Brazil, a university developed an Education for Justice clinic to raise student awareness of their rights. Law students taught law, justice and equality through playful activities to simulate democratic conflict resolution, exchange experiences and demystify the legal system (De Souza and Puga, 2023). In Bulgaria, a handbook on civic education for legal practitioners supported teachers in class. It was aligned with the official civic education curriculum, but also included new law-related lessons. It piloted a model of teams of lawyers and teachers co-teaching the rule of law and justice, corruption, contracts, and national and international law to grade 11 and 12 students (Sofia Platform and Street Law Inc, 2023). In Uzbekistan, a programme developed by Street Law and Tashkent State Law University enabled law students to teach legal content to over 24,000 students per year in 190 secondary schools annually and has now expanded nationwide (Street Law Inc, 2024).

Another approach involves mock trials in schools and university competitions, often in association with local, national or international courts. In Mexico, the Liga de Enseñanza Judicial provides mock trial experiences to students and professional development opportunities to teachers (LANZA Judicial de Mexico, 2026). In South Africa, the National Schools Moot Court Competition, a collaboration between the South African Human Rights Commission and the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, emphasizes an understanding of the law and constitution (South Africa Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2025). The Young Citizens initiative in the United Kingdom involved almost 6,000 students from 380 schools in mock trial programmes in 2024. Surveys show that 85% of participants felt more capable of explaining how the law affects their lives and 91% reported a better understanding of their legal rights and responsibilities. The Big Legal Lesson programme has reached more than 300,000 young people since 2020. In 2024, 93% of teachers agreed that participating in the lesson gave their class a better understanding of the rule of law and its application to their lives (Young Citizens, 2026).

National programmes have also promoted legal literacy in schools with the support of justice system officials. In Bhutan, the National Legal Institute engaged with school law clubs in all 20 districts to teach issues of legal rights and responsibilities, such as child justice, legal protection and their role in upholding it, and the principles of due process and restorative justice (Bhutan National Legal Institute, 2025). In Singapore, the Ministry of Law and the Ministry of Education have conducted an annual school outreach programme covering topics such as the rule of law and human rights since 2015 (Singapore Government, 2023).

In Belgium, *Avocat dans l'école* (Lawyer in the School) introduces young people to the world of justice and its role in a democratic system. Lawyers can register to give talks and workshops in schools, while students or teachers can request a lawyer to visit their schools (Les Avocats du Barreau de Charleroi, 2026). In Spain, the Educating in Justice programme is promoted by the Communication Office of the General Council of the Judiciary. It aims to develop public secondary school students' knowledge about how the justice system operates through visits to judicial institutions and judges' and magistrates' engagement at schools (Poder Judicial Espana, 2026).

In Argentina, the programme *La Justicia va a la Escuela* (Justice Goes to School), promoted for over 25 years by the Association of Magistrates and Officials of the National Justice System, develops workshops and mock trials on everyday legal issues and concludes with a mock oral trial at

the Court of Appeals (Argentina Association of Magistrates and Officials of the National Justice System, 2025).

In Paraguay, the Educando en Justicia (Educating in justice) programme led to the creation of the Justice Education Secretariat in 2014, which is part of the Supreme Court of Justice. Its programming includes guided tours of judicial institutions and workshops for schools and universities (Paraguay Supreme Court of Justice, 2016).

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS BUILD CAPACITIES FOR JUSTICE

Higher education is pivotal for developing the capacity of the national justice system, investing in research, and serving as an exemplary environment for justice.

Global efforts to enhance human rights benefit from university curricula (von Berg, 2023). Between 1968 and 2000, more than 140 universities in 59 countries established academic chairs, research centres and programmes for human rights (Suarez and Bromley, 2012). Peace-building curricula have also been developed to target areas of peace building, tackling peace, sustainability and conflict resolution. An analysis of 178 peace- and conflict-oriented international education programmes shows that lasting alumni networks and connections help contribute to longer-term conflict prevention and peacebuilding after participants return home (Pugh and Ross, 2019). Transformative human rights education in universities goes beyond content to include reflection and participation through an experiential or service component to the course. A radical educational intervention with undergraduate students from law, criminology, international relations, politics and sociology in the United Kingdom found that students began to challenge existing assumptions and tensions in their beliefs, norms and values regarding marginalized groups (von Berg, 2023).

In Lebanon, after the 1975–1990 war, sectarian practices in national politics were mirrored in university settings, such as clubs. In recent years, Secular Clubs, a countrywide movement of independent student associations advocating for secularism, democracy and social justice has expanded (Baunkjær and Rohlfig, 2025). In Sierra Leone, higher education institutions introduced peace, conflict and human rights programmes, aiming to serve as neutral spaces for training the professional workforce; however, the impact of the curriculum is constrained by underfunding and affected by the dominance of short-term project-based donor funding (Moiwo, 2026).

Non-governmental organizations have worked to establish human rights-focused programmes in university and professional settings. For example, the Raoul Wallenberg

Institute has worked in various countries to promote human rights: in Armenia to help national institutions shape priorities, methodologies and outcomes (Ghulinyan, 2026); in Belarus, between 2012 and 2020, to integrate human rights and gender equality into the clinical legal education system, developing hybrid curricula, legal clinic model curricula, and a textbook on a human rights-based approach to educate for human rights (Khvatsik, 2021); in Cambodia, to support the development of human rights curricula, syllabi, research and materials at universities; in China, to support human rights education at universities (Sperfeldt, 2023), policy-relevant research on disability and human rights, and cooperation with key justice actors to strengthen the human rights component as part of the professional training of prosecutors (Ljungman and Sidel, 2016); and in Zimbabwe, to strengthen clinical legal education and expand the number of human rights experts (Moran and Mushayavanhu, 2023).

As a result of student demand, many universities have pioneered curricula that promote social justice. Throughout the United States, student protests, marches and boycotts have led over time to the establishment of programmes on women, gender (Guy-Sheftall, 2020) and race. Historically, Black colleges and universities were central to the Civil Rights Movement, training activists, organizers and leaders who drove grass-roots campaigns against segregation and fought for racial equality (Franklin, 2003). In recent years, there have been efforts to reduce programmes on sexual orientation, gender identity and race (Briscoe et al., 2025). In 2025, a Department of Education directive sought to restrict diversity, equity and inclusion efforts nationwide (Cooper, 2025). Some higher education institutions pushed back to preserve their academic freedom to teach about and engage in social justice issues. In a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and other plaintiffs on behalf of the National Education Institution, a district court invalidated the directive, preventing the government from enforcing, relying on or reviving it (Hinger and Bissonnette, 2026).

Around the world, there have historically been efforts focused on transforming curricula, pedagogy and practices that follow culturally dominant perspectives and interests, for example, recognizing colonial historical narratives (Zembylas, 2017). Some Asian countries have tried to bring back local philosophies and knowledge to support indigenous perspectives (Shahjahan et al., 2022). In India, there has been a strong focus on caste-based discrimination and violence, gender and sexual orientation rights, and regional and minority rights, notably in response to the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 (Singh et al., 2025).

As in other parts of Africa, many higher education institutions in South Africa have placed a major emphasis on adding

Africa-centred content and assignments. The #FeesMustFall protest movement of the 2010s framed barriers in access to higher education as a legacy of apartheid and institutional racism, emphasizing the need for equal access to higher education for disadvantaged groups and for decolonizing the university curricula. A related movement focused on removing representations of Cecil Rhodes, a symbol of white supremacy for many, from higher education institutions. Students highlighted that reforms should not just be about making the curriculum local or indigenous, but also focus on how and who is teaching it (Gukurume and Maringira, 2022). However, to this date, there has been limited progress in this area, as topics such as African philosophy are still elective courses rather than mainstreamed in the syllabus (Govender and Naidoo, 2023; Metz, 2017).

Indigenous higher education institutions and programmes supporting indigenous groups in other institutions have been established. An analysis of 501 universities in 85 countries found that one third had implemented some type of indigenous-supportive features, such as history or culture courses, research centres, and support for Indigenous language preservation and access policies (D'Apice, 2025). In Canada, higher education institutions incorporated storytelling, land-based pedagogies and settler identity issues in the curriculum. In Central and South America, there has been an emphasis on strengthening partnerships with indigenous communities and integrating sociopolitical issues into the curriculum. However, many of the efforts have faced considerable implementation challenges, such as superficial additions rather than deep transformation, and tensions with demands to standardize curricula (Ensunchoa, 2023; Raffoul et al., 2022; Sefa Dei and Cacciavillani, 2024).

In high-income countries with a high degree of university autonomy, student activism has also focused on university policy and governance, demanding that university authorities divest their assets from certain corporations or stop collaborating with some governments, calling for concrete actions against climate, peace and security injustices. For example, fossil fuel divestment movements rapidly expanded in the 2010s. Over 100 teaching institutions have pledged to withdraw financial ties to the hydrocarbon industry in some form (Shenkin et al., 2023).

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION STRENGTHENS PEOPLE'S ABILITY TO ADVANCE JUSTICE

Non-formal education complements education delivered in schools and universities, helping meet the needs of people at different stages in their lives who may have significant legal problems and face challenges in securing remedies. Three broad types of intervention are covered here: those led

mainly by non-governmental organizations to empower more marginalized populations; those related to the criminal justice system and the prevention of crime; and those led by various public organizations within the scope of their activities to improve outreach and communications with citizens.

LEGAL EMPOWERMENT HAS BEEN A FOCUS OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION EFFORTS

Legal empowerment is the capacity to know, use and shape the law (Goodwin and Maru, 2017). A people-centred approach to justice acknowledges the key role that legal empowerment plays in preventing justice problems and improving people's lives (OECD, 2025a). It strengthens the rule of law by reducing power imbalances in the interactions between people and those in charge of justice institutions and importantly between people who experience injustice and those who commit it.

Non-formal education can support the legal empowerment of people at all ages. It combines awareness raising, community organization, advocacy and direct action. Grass-roots civil society organizations are often at the forefront of legal empowerment efforts. They typically work with community paralegals, who are trained to accompany individuals through legal processes, pursue legal remedies and organize collective action towards systems change (Chitalkar and Moy, 2026; Maru and Gauri, 2018). Popular education emphasizes simple language and lived experiences to explain the law in terms that communities can understand (Freire, 1970).

A meta-analysis found that 92 of 199 evaluation studies of legal empowerment interventions had reported increased legal knowledge, especially in community paralegal interventions, suggesting that practical engagement with the law helps participants internalize rights and procedures. In addition, 73 studies reported successful acquisition of a legal remedy or entitlement, through engagement with formal courts, ombudsman offices, regulatory agencies and service delivery institutions (Goodwin and Maru, 2017).

Analysis of 95 justice seekers across India, Kenya and Myanmar who had received support from community paralegals found that 84% mentioned an improvement in legal knowledge. Almost all had some understanding of the government institutions responsible for addressing their issues and could cite at least some of the key steps in the legal or administrative process. The respondents also reported a greater sense of confidence in engaging with officials and expressed a willingness to help others with similar problems (Khagai et al., 2025). In Indonesia, a qualitative study found that legal education grounded in community engagement

helped facilitate a deeper understanding of legal rights and obligations, developed the community's capacity to deter legal transgressions, and inspired active involvement in local conflict resolution (Setha, 2024).

Legal empowerment work has been documented to have a positive impact on the realization of a range of human rights, including health rights, women's rights, and land and environmental rights.

A scoping review on access to quality health services in low- and middle-income countries found that most programmes had paralegals at the centre of their legal empowerment strategy (Joshi et al., 2022). Another systematic review on the impact of paralegal programmes found that in Nicaragua, North Macedonia and the United Republic of Tanzania they increased legal literacy, reduced stigma and discrimination, and enhanced access to health and justice services for marginalized communities (Footer et al., 2018).

Legal literacy interventions have helped women assert their economic, social and political rights. In Bangladesh, 89% of female legal service recipients believed that legal empowerment activities reduced the climate of violence and oppression in their communities, and 70% that they stopped violence and abuse they were experiencing (Panday and Rabbani, 2017). In Ghana, legal literacy and paralegal support enabled women to challenge discriminatory practices and secure land or family rights (Ubink and Quan, 2008). In Guatemala, an assessment of a community-driven project, which attempted over 12 years to empower indigenous rural women through education, access to legal services and gender-based violence prevention, showed that it had delayed girls' marriage and improved knowledge of rights (Women's Justice Initiative, 2024). In rural Punjab, Pakistan, a legal empowerment project improved awareness and fulfilment of rights, financial empowerment, and agency development, especially for women (Cheema and Riaz, 2022).

Legal empowerment has long been deployed to advance land rights and environmental justice. A randomized controlled trial that compared three ways to protect and document community lands in Liberia, Mozambique and Uganda found that communities supported by paralegals advanced furthest in documenting their lands, completing 58% of the required steps, compared to 50% for those that only received rights education, 34% for those that received full legal services, and 19% for communities in a control group (Knight, 2012). In Indonesia, community paralegals supported communities living in peatlands to protect their land tenure, reducing evictions and the destruction of these ecosystems (IDLO, 2022).

Legal empowerment actors use grass-roots experiences, data and leadership to inform efforts to improve laws, policies and institutional practices. In Liberia, legal empowerment groups helped shape the national land rights policy by generating empirical evidence from the grass roots, enabling community members to speak directly with policymakers, maintaining direct lines of communication with the Land Commission, and engaging the public through the use of popular media channels (Kaba and Madan, 2022).

A recent mapping of 13 participatory action research projects in 17 countries explored the strategies through which legal empowerment actors pursue systems change. In Malawi, the Southern Africa Litigation Centre and the Centre for Human Rights Education, Advice and Assistance helped sex workers, informal traders, street-connected children and other marginalized groups to address cases of police abuse by training them to use accountability mechanisms like the Ombudsman and the Independent Complaints Commission. They supported the development of new guidelines and facilitated dialogues between the community and police to change the culture of impunity. These efforts improved police practices and also nurtured reform-minded allies within law enforcement (Kitchell, 2024).

Namati develops and documents pathways for escalating grass-roots casework into structural reform. In Kenya, community paralegals, local residents and civil society allies worked together to abolish a discriminatory vetting process that had denied fair access to national identity cards and citizenship. They drew on years of grass-roots legal empowerment work, combining data, lived experience, leadership and collective action to push the case for reform (Gowi, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025b). In Sierra Leone, key provisions of a progressive land rights law stemmed from people involved in grass-roots struggles supported by community paralegals. Having shaped the language of the draft, communities and paralegals led a nationwide movement to help the bill pass, which fundamentally shifted the system that governs responsible investment, mandates free, prior and informed consent, and protects women's land rights (Conteh and Maru, 2024).

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION HELPS YOUTH IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW

Tackling criminal behaviour requires a preventive approach, often based on cognitive behavioural therapy to tackle aggression (Smith et al., 2024). A review of 548 studies found that interventions which focused on punishment and deterrence increased criminal recidivism, while those focused on counselling, skills building and support services

had the greatest impact in reducing criminal behaviour (Clark, 2011). In Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, a school-based programme combines cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness and socioemotional learning to support vulnerable adolescents (Camargo et al., 2024). In Medellín, Colombia, where some 10% of 15- to 34-year-olds in low- and middle-income neighbourhoods are affiliated with gangs, typically recruited between the ages of 10 and 17, anti-gang interventions for adolescent males include a training and mentorship programme and information sessions on safety and future risks (Blattman et al., 2026).

Crime and violence are socially situated. Preventative engagement therefore also requires tackling root and structural causes, and engaging with youth, schools and communities. Evaluations on methods to reduce violence highlight direct pathways, such as policing, and indirect

pathways, such as health systems, gender relationships and public attitudes (Suescún, 2025). In Mexico, the *Jovenes Construyendo el Futuro* (Youth Building the Future) programme targets 18- to 29-year-olds in marginalized municipalities with training and economic support as a key dimension of crime prevention. In 2022, 6 out of 10 young people who went through the programme found employment (Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, 2025). Disadvantaged urban areas are often a focus of multi-sector interventions, including education, that try to curb crime (Box 4). However, social inclusion should not be framed in terms of crime prevention, which can exacerbate marginalization (Mora-Salas and Cortes, 2021). In the United Kingdom, a programme provided parents of young people caught in the youth justice system with facilitated peer-to-peer support (Caulfield et al., 2023).

BOX 4.

Urban anti-crime strategies need to involve a broad range of stakeholders

An effective public safety strategy that helps tackle the root causes of crime is urban regeneration, which encourages inclusion and access to cities (UNODC, 2010). But to be successful, urban regeneration needs to engage diverse stakeholders, including from the justice sector.

Urban regeneration helps invest in neglected communities and build infrastructure to foster well-being (McLendon et al., 2024). In Pelotas, Brazil, the Pact for Peace initiative incorporated elements from public health and criminal justice approaches to address high homicide rates, including targeting early risk factors in schools and engaging imprisoned gang leaders. The initiative was structured around social prevention, policing, justice, administration, urbanism and technology. The municipal programme was associated with a 9% reduction in homicide and 7% reduction in robbery (Degli Esposti et al., 2023). In Medellín, Colombia, major neighbourhood upgrades (especially improved transport links to reduce the isolation of some communities and improve access to jobs, schools and other services) lead to large drops in homicides and violence (Galeano-Duque, 2023). In Chihuahua, Mexico, the Audit Opinion Laboratory worked with governments and civil society institutions to provide education, training and informational interventions to alleviate social issues (González-Quiñones et al., 2018).

The coordinated work of diverse workforce types and specializations is especially important in cities with high levels of crime. In the United States, a longitudinal analysis of 264 cities between 1990 to 2013 showed that cities with higher concentrations of non-profit organizations focused on crime prevention, community development, substance abuse prevention, job training and youth activities achieved larger reductions in crime and violence. Every 10 such additional organizations in a city with 100,000 residents reduced the murder rate by 9%, the violent crime rate by 6% and the property crime rate by 4% (Sharkey et al., 2017). A public safety intervention developed in the city of Seattle, *Let Everyone Advance with Dignity* (LEAD), diverted complaints from businesses towards community referrals and to programme personnel instead of police. The non-punitive approach demonstrated success in improving individual outcomes and satisfying business grievances, highlighting the importance of engaging with alternative professionals for public safety and community vitality (Stuart and Beckett, 2021).

Another initiative originating from the United States is *Cure Violence*, which has taken a public health approach, treating violence as a contagious disease. It targets at-risk youth and redirects conflict to non-violent responses. Street outreach workers mentor young people at highest risk for violence, connecting them to jobs and educational opportunities. These multisector interventions were found to help achieve better results with fewer resources than isolated interventions (Cerdá et al., 2018). Over 20 years, the model has expanded widely and is operational in 81 communities in 26 cities in the United States, and 52 communities in 11 cities in Latin American and Caribbean. Evaluations consistently find that the approach has helped reduce violent crime, injuries, shootings and homicides, including in cities in Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago (Cure Violence Global, 2025; IADB, 2024).

Public views of criminal justice reform need to shift away from punitive measures towards rehabilitation solutions, using education and communication campaigns. The use of media campaigns, storytelling and social media engagement can help shape public opinion by presenting youth offenders in a compassionate light and emphasizing their potential for change (Oke et al., 2023). In Trinidad and Tobago, public education efforts to build awareness of new approaches to child justice included a comprehensive information package. Respondents to an evaluation highlighted that the public education campaign was an important start to changing public perception of the use of restorative and rehabilitative approaches to child justice (Seepersad, 2018).

NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS CAN PROMOTE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

While it is civil society that often provides legal empowerment to citizens to build demand for justice, it is critical that governments bear responsibility too, by ensuring institutions are functional and by communicating clearly with their citizens. Legal language and procedures are often inaccessible. In 2024, 36% of adults surveyed in the European Union countries – ranging from just 5% in Latvia to 60% in Romania – believed that fellow citizens were aware of their rights when they faced a legal problem, according to the EUROVOICES survey of the World Justice Project. Only 47% agreed that information was provided in simple formats – ranging from 35% in Italy to 62% in Malta.

Simplifying language in legal documents is critical to improve accessibility. In Australia, Canada and New Zealand, legal drafting guidelines have evolved to simplify wording to help readers by providing context and guidance, reflecting a growing awareness and understanding of users' needs (Zariski, 2026). In China, since 1985, five-year plans for legal education and communication require that all state functionaries, general cadre and students should have legal education (Wu, 2020). In Japan, a council was established in 2003 to promote law-related education in schools and develop educational tools and courses on rules, private law, consumer protection, the constitution and judicial systems. The Japan Legal Support Centre provides education through seminars and lectures on how to take action in response to consumer problems (Ikenaga et al., 2020). In the Netherlands, legislation was adopted to avoid technical legal terms and emphasize plain language (Van Domselaar, 2022).

National human rights institutions typically engage in public awareness campaigns (OHCHR, 2010). In Malawi,

the Human Rights Commission has carried out various awareness-raising initiatives to popularize the Access to Information Act, which is available in English and Chichewa (Malawi Government, 2022). In Saint Lucia, national capacity-building initiatives were undertaken for judiciary, media, workers unions, youth and students to improve their understanding of the Escazú Agreement, a regional agreement on access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters, (Saint Lucia Government, 2025). The Seychelles Human Rights Commission educates the public on constitutional and human rights issues, using multimedia platforms and workshops (Seychelles Government, 2025). In Slovenia, the Human Rights Centre, which was established after the Human Rights Ombudsman Act was amended in 2017, collaborates with universities to raise awareness and provide analyses of human rights issues (Slovenia Government, 2020).

Professional organizations also engage in public legal education efforts. In Canada, in response to a survey which found that fewer than half of adults agreed that the justice system was working as intended, Canadian law societies partnered to launch 'Ours to Protect', a national education campaign designed to raise awareness about the importance of the rule of law as a cornerstone of Canada's democracy (Law Society of Saskatchewan, 2025). The Law Society of Ireland supports public legal education that involves trainee solicitors and the public to promote legal literacy and teach skills that enhance participation in legal matters. The Public Interest Law Alliance, which promotes clinical legal education to complement the theoretical training law students receive, helped establish the Irish Clinical Legal Education Association (Field et al., 2020). In Singapore, the Law Society produced and circulated a 'Know the Law' publication to provide legal information, including where to seek legal help (Tan, 2020).

Cities can enhance a culture of human rights through education activities. The United Cities and Local Governments Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights is an international platform that brings together over 100 local governments to promote human rights issues (UCLG, 2026). Human Rights Cities, an international movement started in the 1990s by the People's Decade for Human Rights Education, focuses on 'rights in the city'. In Graz, Austria, initiatives include a human rights trail, a non-discrimination office, a Human Rights School, and annual human rights reports. Authorities in Porto Alegre, Brazil, conducted training and informational forums on issues such as racial and gender discrimination, domestic violence and police violence. In Kati, Mali, a human rights clinic was established during

market days for people to have questions answered about land rights and women's rights (MacNaughton et al., 2020).

Public institutions often collaborate with non-governmental organizations. In Canada, the federal Department of Justice established one public legal education organization in each province and territory in 1984. Community Legal Education Ontario provides public legal education material to other community legal clinics, for example, on filling out legal forms on topics such as family law, housing, consumer rights and human rights (CLEO, 2024). In India, in addition to the National Legal Services Authority, state-level authorities have implemented awareness-raising programmes such as legal literacy camps in schools, colleges, villages, prisons, observation homes, slums and remote areas, supported by civil society organizations (Mehra et al., 2020). The Law Society of Kenya undertakes legal awareness, along with civil society organizations (Baraza and Kimani, 2020). In Zambia, the Legal Aid Board implements programmes raising awareness on the right and access to legal aid services, including through radio spots (Limondin and Dinda, 2020).

Such initiatives are important in post-conflict and transitional justice settings (UNESCO, 2026a). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the International Criminal Tribunal developed an outreach programme, public screenings of trial proceedings, educational materials for universities, and youth dialogue initiatives across ethnic lines (ICTY, 2016). In Colombia, outreach included radio campaigns in remote regions, simplified guides to the peace agreement, and storytelling testimonies to explain victims' rights (Brett, 2022). In Guatemala, the Commission for Historical Clarification investigated abuses during the civil war and reported on the so-called Memory of Silence, including in indigenous languages (Bellino, 2016; Oglesby, 2007). In Nepal, following the 2006 comprehensive peace agreement, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in 2015 to encourage transitional justice awareness. Community radio, which included dialogues between former combatants, talk shows on reconciliation and federalism, and discussions on inclusion, helped reach remote hill districts, as well as communities speaking minority languages and with low literacy levels (AMARC Asia-Pacific, 2020).

In Rwanda, the gacaca community-based courts organized nationwide sensitization programmes explaining procedures, radio programmes explained participation

and rights, and community meetings prepared citizens to provide testimonies. Memorial education was offered through institutions such as the Kigali Genocide Memorial (Haskell, 2011; Wierzynska, 2004). In Sierra Leone, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission used weekly radio discussions to explain its proceedings to illiterate audiences, while mobile teams distributed peace messaging in local languages in rural areas (Bond, 2022; Mahony and Sooka, 2015). In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a highly publicized process, which included public education and awareness campaigns, such as nationally televised broadcast hearings, radio summaries in various languages, and public summaries of findings, including the South African History Archive multimedia project (Krabill, 2001; South Africa Government, 1998). In Timor-Leste, an autonomous agency was established in 2017 to facilitate the implementation of the Indonesia-Timor-Leste Commission of Truth and Friendship and promote human rights through education (Timor-Leste Government, 2019).

A review of the effectiveness of public legal education found that well-designed initiatives can improve knowledge and build confidence in the short term, but most evaluations do not use rigorous methodologies or involve control groups (Wintersteiger et al., 2021). Another literature review of human rights advocacy efforts over 20 years also noted the lack of clear evaluation methodologies (Esala et al., 2022). A review of over 100 peer-reviewed articles on factors behind effective human rights awareness campaigns highlighted the need to draw on behavioural and message-design theories, adapt to local contexts, and use traditional and new media (Boyle et al., 2017). An evaluation of the United Nations Development Programme's justice portfolio between 2014 and 2022 found engagement with legal aid centres supported by specialized civil society organizations to be effective in enhancing authorities' awareness of legal responsibilities in service provision. But the evidence on improving knowledge and rights awareness was limited and anecdotal (IEO and UNDP, 2023). An analysis of a two-year pilot in the United Kingdom found that providing public legal education on legal acts, legal information sources and how to guides raised the confidence of health and social care service users and carers in recognizing legal issues, being aware of their rights and knowing when to seek help. The programme increased the likelihood of seeking support by 12% (Eureka! Research and Central England Law Centre, 2018).

EDUCATION IS A PRECONDITION FOR DEVELOPING THE CAPACITY OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Often forgotten, education is one of the foundations for nations and societies to develop the capacity to establish the rule of law. The justice system needs enough people with strong legal knowledge and connection with the communities they serve in order to build just societies and people-centred justice systems. Many countries do not have enough professionals. For example, there are 2.6 times more judges and 2.3 times more prison officers per 100,000 people in high-income countries than in lower-middle-income countries (Table 3).

The consequences are significant. In Bangladesh, there are 3.5 million delayed court cases. In 2022, 77% of the prison population were in pre-trial detention (Bangladesh Government, 2025). In India, the prison population increased by 50% in 10 years and the proportion of people waiting for the completion of investigations or trials escalated from 66% to 76%. There is an average of 14 judges per million, compared to a target of 50 judges per million recommended by the Law Commission in 1987. In 15 states with data, the share of the police budget for training was about 1% (India Justice Report, 2025). In Malawi, people need to travel long distances in order to access police services. There is one police officer per 2,745 people. To meet the recommended 1:500 ratio,

36,000 more police officers would need to be recruited (Malawi Government, 2022).

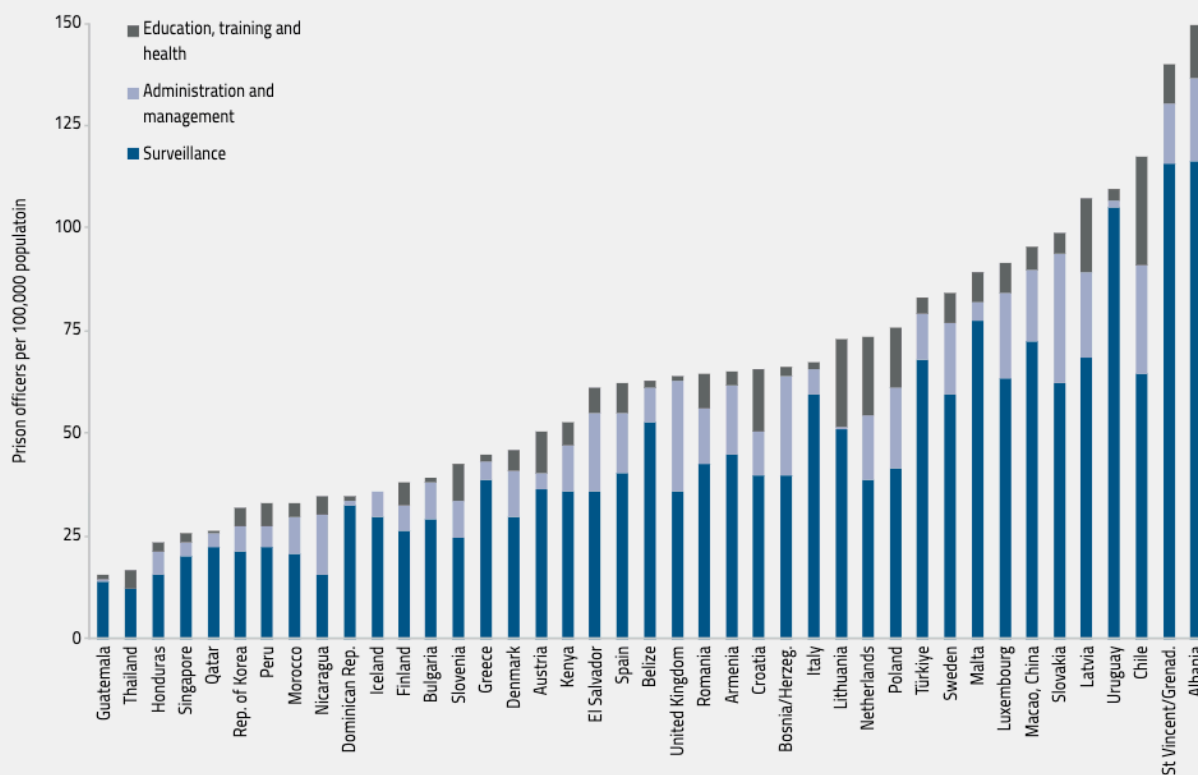
Access to justice also has gender dimensions. For female victims of sexual and other types of gender-based violence, the lack of access to female officers may discourage women from seeking justice through formal channels (UNODC, 2016). For every female police officer, there are four males in high-income, six in upper-middle-income, and eight in lower-middle-income countries. In many countries, access to justice is also affected by rural–urban disparity. One in five countries have reported major lawyer shortages in rural areas (UNODC, 2016).

The justice system needs to be developed in several ways related to professional capacity. For it to be trusted by citizens, professionals need skills to communicate and act with empathy and emotion in line with a people-centred approach. They need training in gender, environment, poverty and technology issues to achieve better justice outcomes. The system broadly needs better capacity to develop human rights protection mechanisms, such as ombudsmen, and preventive interventions, such as child protection. Correctional officers should be involved in prevention and rehabilitation (e.g. education and training activities); however, they are still primarily responsible for surveillance (Figure 8).

TABLE 3.
Criminal justice system personnel, by country income group, 2023 or latest year

	High income	Upper middle income	Lower middle income
<i>Rate per 100,000 people</i>			
Judges	16.7	12.5	6.4
Prosecutors	14.0	19.0	14.8
Prison staff	81.4	67.8	34.3
Police officers	380.3	455.6	234.0
<i>Male to female ratio</i>			
Judges	0.9	1.2	4.7
Prosecutors	0.8	2.4	1.9
Prison staff	2.8	3.6	4.9
Police officers	3.9	6.0	8.2

Source: UNODC (2026b).

FIGURE 8.**Prison officials are primarily hired for surveillance***Prison officials by responsibility, rate per 100,000 population, 2023 or latest*

Source: UNODC (2026b).

A survey of more than 750 judges from 102 countries highlighted that 46% had received some support to promote their well-being, of which 62% some training to address stress and well-being concerns from excess workload. Most survey participants believed that the lack of judicial well-being limited the efficiency of justice and court administrations, quality of decisions and judgments, and public trust and confidence in the judiciary (UNODC, 2022a).

A backlog of cases and delays is a common symptom of inadequate human resources. Among the solutions to tackle the problem of low staff numbers and high caseloads is a system of triage, similar to health-care processes, which helps meet legal needs using a differentiated workforce of justice professionals who work in government or non-governmental organizations to support lawyers and judges. Paralegals help expand access to justice and decentralize legal expertise. Community workers strengthen the demand side of a people-centred justice system by empowering citizens to access remedies, demand accountability, identify systemic failures,

advocate for reform and seek collective solutions (Maru and Gauri, 2018).

Social service workers help children in conflict with the law access justice, meet their needs when in detention, and prepare for release and reintegration through diversion and non-custodial measures that reduce reoffending. Social service workers also help child victims and witnesses by acting on behalf of the state to promote their physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration. Mental health professionals and mediators help address the root causes of injustice.

This workforce too needs to be trained, and its competencies acknowledged and recognized, as part of efforts to expand and align systems to justice needs; yet it is often under-resourced (UNICEF, 2025b). For example, in Montenegro, there is an acute lack of professionals to handle children in conflict with the law or victims of violence, abuse and exploitation – and the professionals who are in the system often lack specialized training in child-friendly judicial procedures (UNICEF, 2019).

JUDGES AND PROSECUTORS

Countries follow a variety of pathways to improve judicial capacity and training. In Bhutan, the national legal institute was established in 2011, the first law school was established in 2015, and the first justice sector strategy was developed in 2018. The law school curriculum covers global and local understandings of justice, human rights and human dignity, along with a focus on experiential learning and a 12-month law clinic (Bhutan Government, 2018; Case, 2017). In Guinea-Bissau, a training school for magistrates and judicial personnel was established in 2012 but continuing professional development is limited due to lack of funding. Many judges lack law degrees. Judges have highlighted fear of retaliation and lack of security in politically sensitive cases (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Guinea-Bissau Government, 2022). In Sri Lanka, degree-level programmes and training aim to expand the capacity of justice officials (Sri Lanka Government, 2022).

Most countries require legal training that lasts from three to five years. To become a judge, one needs to complete a law degree, followed by specialized judicial training. In civil law systems, judges can begin their careers soon after university, while in common law systems, they may begin their career after many years as practising lawyers. Pedagogically, adult education methods are used to engage judges in learning through active discussions and practical exercises. Institutionally, judicial schools may be set up under the Ministry of Justice or the Supreme Court (Judiciaries Worldwide, 2026). For example, in France, initial training of newly recruited judges consists of on-the-job training in courts of justice, under the supervision of experienced judges. In Spain, aspiring judges take an examination after university to enrol in a three-phase programme: 10 months of training, 6 months of internship and 6 months of work in a court under the supervision of judicial school faculty (Judiciaries Worldwide, 2026).

Professional qualification criteria can vary. For example, in the United States, a survey of state laws found that 32 states allow a person without a law degree to become a judge for low-level state court positions, and 17 states do not require judges who adjudicate eviction cases to have law degrees. In some instances, because of the irregular timing of magistrate training programmes, some magistrates may be adjudicating cases for half a year or more with no legal or administrative training. This situation creates major challenges for the poor (Greene and Renberg, 2022).

Further training needs are required to promote a people-centred and inclusive judicial system. In Chile, training activities and programmes for judges have expanded, particularly in areas related to violence against women, with regional femicide officers and lawyers dedicated to these cases (Chile Government, 2017; OHCHR, 2024). In Greece, the Ministry of Justice runs continuous training and specialization programmes for court officials and judges. In cooperation with the National School of Judges, education and training for judges and prosecutors has focused on disability rights and inclusion within civil, penal and administrative frameworks (Greece Government, 2022). In Kazakhstan, the Higher Judicial Council trains judicial candidates and provides advanced training to support the modernization of the justice system from five to three tiers (Kazakhstan Government, 2019, 2025). In Mexico, as part of criminal justice system reforms aiming to ensure better protection for victims and suspects, prosecutors and judges are trained to operate under a new procedural guarantee of fairness and transparency (Mexico Government, 2018). As part of its Judges Initiative, over the course of 10 years, UNESCO has helped train over 39,000 judicial actors, including judges, prosecutors and lawyers, through Massive Open Online Courses on regional and international standards on freedom of expression, access to information and the safety of journalists in over 160 countries around the world (UNESCO, 2023a).

In India, a judicial education system review, conducted by the Centre for Research and Planning of the Supreme Court of India and the National Judicial Academy in 2023, found that the focus of judicial learning was on procedural aspects and not on sensitizing judges on the societal aspects of cases. Among 22 state judicial academies reporting, all had programmes on children and minors but were limited to procedural aspects of the 2012 Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and the 2015 Juvenile Justice Act; 15 had programmes on gender sensitization and women issues; and 6 on issues faced by people with disabilities. One in three academies assessed their learning sessions. Shifting judicial education from traditional lecture-based formats to interactive and practical learning methods, and developing high-quality learning materials were recommended (Supreme Court of India, 2024). Justice systems need to continuously evolve to wrestle with challenging issues, such as those posed by the integration of artificial intelligence (Box 5).

BOX 5.

Artificial intelligence can improve the efficiency of justice systems but requires training

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in legal fields has generated hopes that it can relieve congestion and backlogs, facilitate investigations, and make sentencing more consistent and fairer. Automated systems can help handle routine tasks such as document reviews, case management and legal research, which can help free up professional time to focus on more complex and strategic aspects of work. AI algorithms can analyse vast amounts of legal data and precedents to provide insights into informal legal strategies and decision-making.

However, there are many potential challenges. The bias and discrimination inherent in AI algorithms due to historical data may perpetuate and exacerbate disparities in the justice system. Rapid advancement of AI technologies may outpace regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines, leaving legal systems ill-equipped to address emerging challenges and risks. As AI systems become more prevalent, human judgement can be eroded (Borgesano et al., 2025). Judicial system actors need to have the knowledge and the tools to understand the benefits and risks for their work (UNESCO, 2023c).

The use of digital technology in law has created challenges for human rights. In Australia, a debt recovery programme, which ran between 2015 and 2019, miscalculated and sent debt collection receipts to over 400,000 taxpayers. A large class-action suit led the government to concede that it had unlawfully imposed AUD 1.8 billion worth of debt. It follows that introducing automation into legal systems with little human oversight is a matter of concern (Gans-Combe, 2022).

A 2023 UNESCO survey showed critical gaps in AI training for judges, prosecutors and lawyers. Of over 500 respondents from 96 countries, of those who had used chatbots, some 40% used the tools for searching and 30% for writing. In total, two thirds highlighted potential risks related to output quality, data protection, copyright, bias and the replacement of human labour. Only 9% had AI guidelines or tools in their institutions, stressing the need for guidance and support on the ethical and responsible use of AI tools in judicial work (UNESCO, 2024d).

Educational qualifications matter. Analysis of 11 Latin American countries found that judges in Supreme Courts with better academic qualifications were more likely to produce higher-quality judicial decisions (Basabe-Serrano, 2019). Judicial education has also been associated with positive impacts. In the United States, a survey of judges who had attended a continuing education course found that it had improved legal knowledge, case management skills, decision-making confidence and even patience (Murphy et al., 2021). However, state and federal programmes in judicial training often set content without a comprehensive needs assessments of what judges need to know or what they seek to learn (Benton and Sheldon-Sherman, 2020).

Marginalized groups often turn to customary, traditional and informal justice mechanisms to deal with disputes such as divorce, inheritance, land and debt disputes (Denney and Domingo, 2023; Working Group on CIJ and SDG16+, 2023). Yet traditional systems are also often viewed as discriminatory, not meeting international human rights standards, potentially lacking modern legal knowledge; and emphasizing community harmony over meeting the victims' rights (Harper and Colliou, 2023). In Punjab, Pakistan, there are about 60,000 marriage registrars who are often religious leaders or community members. Registrars do not require a minimal educational or training requirement and have limited knowledge of the

law. An intervention providing training to some marriage registrars on women's rights (e.g. age, divorce, polygamy) substantially increased their knowledge of key areas of family law related to women's rights, compared to those who did not receive training (Field and Vyborny, 2020).

LAWYERS

Legal education is aimed to help professionals develop technical competences, such as research, legal reasoning, and digital and assessment literacy skills. But it also needs to build social awareness of real-world legal challenges (de Langen, 2023).

Legal education needs to challenge biases, not reinforce them. Analyses of excess levels of criminalization against First Peoples in Canada highlighted that legal training should lead to practitioners being more reflexive, purposeful and constructive by carrying out more critical reading of evidence (Williams, 2025) and bring indigenous voices and systems of law into curricula to understand indigenous practices (Milroy and Burns, 2025). Analysis of criminal justice majors in a public university in the United States found that white students felt race issues were adequately discussed, minority students did not agree. While male students were more interested in the job of arresting criminals and upholding the

Constitution, female students were mainly motivated to use their education to help solve social problems (Gu and Crawford, 2022).

Active learning, through role playing as judges, attorneys, witnesses, plaintiffs and other members of the court, is often implemented in undergraduate programmes. Reviews of such training approaches in the United States show that students felt more confident during their litigation practices (Cosby, 2018) and found it a more helpful method than using textbooks, lectures or videos (Ivković and Liu, 2025).

Clinical legal education provides law students with the opportunities to bridge academic learning and real-world legal practice. A mapping of clinical legal education in 42 countries found that virtually all programmes had a social justice objective. The ideal clinical education curriculum focuses on active learning from experience, student development and professional identity, ethics and client responsibility (Giddings, 2024). A survey of 63 respondents from law clinics in Czechia, Ireland, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, the United States and Uzbekistan found that clinics had improved their ability to explain law topics to a lay audience, motivated them to think critically about the way the law affects lives, and revealed the practical ways in which people understand law and build confidence about engaging with legal institutions (Wallace and Perdue, 2020). An assessment of the experience of a law clinic focused on women's issues in Nigeria found that it had helped students gain more insights into their ethical and professional responsibilities and develop office management, mediation, conciliation, legal writing and legal research skills (Ajagunna and Byron, 2024).

Legal clinics are well-established as a pedagogical approach in some countries. In Poland, the Polish Legal Clinics Foundation supports a network of 25 university-based legal clinics that provide free legal advice to marginalized people. Cooperation between universities and civil society enhances students' knowledge and practical skills (Czernicki and Włodarczyk, 2022). In Nigeria, the Network of University Legal Aid Institutions, an association of university law clinics, developed a clinical legal education curriculum for Nigerian university faculties (Ojukwu et al., 2013). In Barcelona, Spain, an elective course on prisons offered to final year law students of the ESADE Business and Law School in collaboration with the judicial branch of the Catalan government is taught in a prison, with equal numbers of students and inmates who discuss identity, happiness, justice and forgiveness (Abenoza and Gimeno, 2023). International networks, such as the Global

Alliance for Justice Education (Global Alliance for Justice Education, 2001) and the European Network for Clinical Legal Education (European Network for Clinical Legal Education, 2013), promote justice education.

COMMUNITY PARALEGALS

Community paralegals use knowledge of laws and government, combined with skills in advocacy, mediation, organization and education, to help people impacted by injustice to know, use and shape the law. They engage formal and customary institutions alike, including administrative agencies, human rights commissions, parliaments and others (Chitalkar and Moy, 2026). An analysis of 95 justice seekers who received support from community paralegals in India, Kenya and Myanmar found that 84% mentioned an improvement in legal knowledge, while 90% felt more confident engaging with government officials (Khagai et al., 2025). Community paralegals tend to be affiliated with civil society actors (Grassroots Justice Network, 2019, 2026a), although government-funded legal aid programmes sometimes also train community paralegals. Some work as volunteers, while others are paid or receive in-kind support (IDLO, 2021; Torres García, 2024).

Sensitive justice issues have particularly benefited from community paralegal engagement. Informal, customary mechanisms exist in Bangladesh (shalish), Burundi (bashingantahe), Fiji (bulubulu), Samoa (ifoga) and other countries, but have been documented as being unjust towards women, urging compromise in rape, sexual assault or domestic violence cases. The education provided by community paralegals can educate women and other community members about the law and their rights, and inform victims about options for redress. Paralegals can help navigate between formal and informal systems, including in educating local leaders about the law and acting as a buffer between women and police or local authorities (ICAAD, 2015; Meten et al., 2024). For example, in Zambia, the training, support and building of trust with community paralegals helped influence customary leaders' approaches. Some village headmen highlighted how Law and Development Association paralegals helped them understand law and human rights, and some expressed a willingness to work collaboratively to resolve local disputes. However, volunteering by paralegals declines when there is a lack of reimbursement of expenses (Betancur et al., 2013).

Public recognition of community-based justice work, sustainable financing and enhanced protections for justice defenders are all vital to the success of legal empowerment efforts. Earlier mapping of legal aid status

and trends across 49 countries found that even though some legal systems rely on paralegals, some countries' bar associations are resistant to including paralegals in the professional space (UNODC, 2016). A recent analysis of paralegal legislation in Canada, Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Uganda and the United States found differences in regulatory frameworks, ranging from criminalization in the United States to unpaid work in Colombia and onerous registration requirements in Indonesia (Torres García, 2024).

National policies increasingly recognize the role of community paralegals, although some frameworks risk impinging on their independence. In Kenya, the Legal Aid Act recognizes paralegals as legal aid providers so long as they complete training programmes approved by the Council of Legal Education (a government entity) and are supervised by an advocate or an accredited legal aid provider. Such heavy-handed regulation has attracted criticism as it could displace well-established informal structures for community paralegal coordination and capacity building (Mbogoh, 2021). In Sierra Leone, the Legal

Aid Board has institutionalized paralegal deployment across all districts to provide community-based justice services, and the legal aid law was adopted in 2012. The mixed model of criminal and civil legal aid allowed the Legal Aid Board to scale its operations (Manuel and Manuel, 2024). In South Africa, the Legal Practice Bill in 2014 passed into law the statutory recognition of paralegals, providing a legislative framework for restructuring the legal profession (South Africa Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2014).

The Kampala Declaration on Community Paralegals calls on governments to embrace them, recognize their contributions to justice and accountability, and invest in scaling up their efforts, while protecting their independence (Grassroots Justice Network, 2012). Efforts to legally empower paralegals should be insulated from political influence and government control. Independence allows them to put the vulnerable people's needs first and, when necessary, to hold institutions accountable, or advocate for reforms.

Empowering communities through legal knowledge: The importance of paralegals

Hazel Lavitoria, Executive Director, Sentro ng Alternatibong Lingap Panlegal (SALIGAN, Alternative Legal Assistance Centre), Philippines

Founded in the late 1980s, SALIGAN was one of the first organizations in the Philippines to champion the concept of legal empowerment. One of the key challenges we address is the lack of access to basic legal knowledge. In the Philippines, the legal system is highly professionalized and only a small segment of the population has the opportunity to study law or gain familiarity with legal processes. At the same time, legal literacy is not widely integrated into the formal education system. Basic legal knowledge – like understanding family law, property rights or workers' rights – is not taught in schools. So many people simply don't know their rights or where to go if those rights are violated.

To address this gap, we work directly with communities through training programmes, workshops and partnerships with grass-roots organizations, in community settings, often collaborating with local groups such as labour unions, community leaders and service providers. Our flagship initiative, Paralegal Formation Programme, trains community members to become legal resource persons within their organizations and neighbourhoods. SALIGAN's paralegals are community leaders and advocates who receive training in basic legal principles and practical skills. Participants undergo a series of workshops and mentoring sessions that can last between one and three years. During this time, they learn how to interpret laws, navigate administrative processes and assist others in resolving legal issues. These paralegals become the first point of contact for legal questions in their communities. They help fellow workers understand their rights, assist union members in filing complaints, and sometimes even represent themselves or their organizations in administrative proceedings.

The impact of these programmes has been far-reaching. Many trained paralegals have gone on to play active roles in shaping public policy and advocating for stronger labour protections. Some of our paralegals are now appearing before Congress to propose legislation. They are advocating for laws that protect workers in sectors like business process outsourcing and the gig economy.

SALIGAN's work also extends to other critical social issues, including gender equality and responses to gender-based violence, housing rights, indigenous peoples' rights, environmental protection and community participation in governance.

The diversity and impact of the work continue to motivate me every day. Our colleagues often say that the ultimate goal of alternative lawyering is to put ourselves out of business. If communities are fully empowered and able to defend their rights without needing us, that means we have succeeded. Everything we do is connected by the same goal: creating a more just and equitable society.

POLICE OFFICERS

The police are the institution of the criminal justice system with which people are most likely to come into contact. While the police are pivotal for ensuring public safety, in many countries they have a reputation for violence, brutality and corruption, especially affecting the most marginalized. A 2020 global comparison of police training requirements of more than 100 countries found that the United States had among the lowest police training requirements. Police training is mostly reactive, with a heavy emphasis on combat tactics and specific threats rather than crime prevention. In 37 states, police officers are not required to complete their training before given authority (Institute for Criminal Justice Training Reform, 2025). Improvements in education and training can improve police performance. College-educated officers can identify scientific evidence, build better relations between the police and communities they serve, and are less likely to use force (Bouffard and Armstrong, 2020). In Honduras, a police reform programme improved recruitment requirements, training curricula and infrastructure for criminal investigations. The programme contributed to a 50% drop in the homicide rate and a 50% increase in public confidence in the police (IADB, 2024).

Community-oriented policing, which focuses on community involvement and problem solving, can build trust, reduce bias and the use of force, and play a preventative role (UNODC, 2010). In Seychelles, the police force adopted the Respect Our Community initiative to foster collaboration between the police and the public and introduced a competency framework to ensure a professional and compassionate workforce (Seychelles Government, 2025). In the Solomon Islands, community-based crime prevention committees have been introduced to enable citizens to work with police in identifying and resolving security concerns (Solomon Islands Government, 2024). In Sri Lanka, the Praja Police Sewaya community-based model involves local public protection committees and youth to reduce crime and violence (Sri Lanka Government, 2022). In Trinidad and Tobago, a police manpower audit was carried out, which assessed processes, positive partnerships and public confidence-building needs, to develop a blueprint for the transformation of the service (Trinidad and Tobago Government, 2020). However, experimental evaluation of community policing initiatives in Brazil, Colombia, Liberia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Uganda found that they did not improve trust nor reduce crime. Poor implementation, lack of sustained buy-in from police leadership, rotation of officers, and lack of resources to respond to issues raised by citizens may explain the poor outcomes (Blair et al., 2021).

In several countries, the police also try to engage with youth. In Bulgaria, the national school policing programme works to prevent violence against school-age children, build safe behaviour models and create positive attitudes towards police. In Hungary, police give crime prevention talks in children's homes and schools. In Jharkhand province, India, the Police Uncle Tutorial initiative provides education to students at risk of dropping out in areas affected by extremism. The programme helps students prepare for grade 10 examinations, with education seen as a preventive and rehabilitative tool.

Legitimacy comes from people's perceptions of the ends and the means through which institutions interact with citizens. Training police officers on procedural justice principles of voice, neutrality, respect and reliability (i.e. explaining why choices are being made) can help enhance the legitimacy and trust of police. For the training to work, police officers have to understand the principles so that they can internalize them and change their behaviour. A randomized evaluation on procedural justice training in Mexico focused on legitimacy and trust and highlighted the importance of organizational, rather than individual, practices. The training improved how individual officers thought about policing but also how they behaved on the street. However, the effects were smaller for officers whose managers were not trained. Improvements in behaviour were also constrained by how police officers are evaluated: rewarding police for arrests and reductions in crime led officers to focus on arresting people rather than on building trust with citizens. When police forces consider citizens as their central concern, they focus on understanding their problems, building trust and establishing collaborative relationships; if they prioritize local government accountability then they focus on crime metrics (Canales et al., 2025).

PRISON OFFICERS

Globally, it is estimated there were 11.7 million people detained in 2023. Over one third of the global prison population remains in pre-trial detention. In South Asia, almost two thirds of held detainees were unsentenced (UNODC, 2025).

Humane approaches in prisons build trust with citizens and improve their well-being. A systematic review of recidivism statistics in 33 countries found that two-year recidivism ranged from 18% in Norway (down from 70% in the 1990s) to 55% in Australia (Yukhnenko et al., 2023). In Norway, prisons promote rehabilitation, vocational, educational and therapeutic programmes to improve prisoners' quality of life and promote a smooth transition back to society. The prison system emphasizes preparing inmates for life after their

release. Prison staff were trained to act more like social workers to build trust. The enabling environment provided prisoners education, job training and mental health support (First Step Alliance, 2022; Jones, 2021).

Strengthening human resources yields positive results for prison welfare. In Indonesia, a partnership between the Ministry of Law and Human Rights and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute helped build capacity in correction facilities from 2007 to 2017. The programme improved the management and operational skills of correctional staff, including the number of capable auditors and audited prisons, creating sustainable conditions for a national monitoring system of human rights compliance (Raoul Wallenberg Institute, 2015, 2026). In Kenya, the Nelson Mandela Rules – the UN-adopted Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners – and human rights have been embedded in the practices of the national prison service. Training was provided to officers in charge of prisons, regional commanders of prisons, prison headquarter directors and senior correctional managers, with an emphasis on transformational leadership. Correctional institution audits found concrete improvements in prison conditions and increased staff capacity to tackle human rights issues (Hackett et al., 2017). In Ukraine, a new strategic emphasis on penitentiary reform focused on strengthening professional training on human rights protection (Kokhan, 2026).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND JUSTICE COULD BE BETTER MONITORED

Assessment of progress on justice-related indicators through the SDG monitoring framework is mixed. There is some solid reporting, but unofficial data are needed to fill the gaps. There is a lack of indicators that link education and justice but considerable scope for exploring opportunities.

The monitoring indicators of SDG target 16.3 – to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all – are the proportion of victims of violence who reported their victimization (16.3.1); unsentenced detainees as a share of the prison population (16.3.2); and experiencing a dispute and accessing a dispute resolution mechanism (16.3.3). The Global Progress Report on SDG 16 has been prepared annually since 2023 (UNDP et al., 2024; UNODC et al., 2023). The 2025 report showed that the world was not on track to achieve any of the 12 SDG 16 targets and in fact moved in the opposite direction for 2 targets. Conflict and violence, attacks on human rights defenders and journalists, justice gaps, corruption, exclusion,

discrimination and forced displacement all remain at high levels (OHCHR et al., 2025).

Within voluntary national reviews, reporting on the importance of access to justice has grown from modest country coverage in 2016 to near-universal coverage by 2025 (UNDP, 2025). However, given the lack of data reporting, unofficial data become important in providing a global picture. The SDG 16 Data Initiative, a consortium of 18 organizations coordinated by International IDEA, seeks to promote SDG 16 through non-official data. The 2023 assessment by civil society partners highlighted that birth registration and the existence of national human rights institutions were showing signs of progress, while peace and violence, children, the rule of law and access to justice, fundamental freedoms and discrimination were regressing. The 2025 assessment affirmed major gaps in access to justice: 1.4 billion people failed to obtain justice because their civil or administrative justice needs were not met (SDG 16 Data Initiative, 2025).

The World Justice Project (WJP) Global Legal Needs Survey has been proposed as an alternative source on the needs and experiences of dispute resolution mechanisms. As only five countries have reported to the UN SDG indicators database on SDG indicator 16.3.3, the WJP household-level access to justice data help fill the gap (World Justice Project, 2023a). WJP's people-centred justice work prioritizes generating data to understand the scope, nature and impact of justice problems; supporting the design and delivery of people-centred justice strategies; and strengthening learning and adaptation by measuring what works (World Justice Project, 2024). Its Rule of Law index, a comprehensive data set that evaluates and ranks countries across eight key indicators, finds a weakening of the rule of law in 57% of 142 surveyed countries.

Education's importance is recognized by the justice community in the roadmap for peaceful, just and inclusive societies. In April 2016, the World Federation of United Nations Associations launched the 16+ Forum, which identified 24 targets from 7 SDGs other than SDG 16 that are directly related to peace, inclusion or access to justice. Reference was made to SDG target 4.5 on equity in education and SDG target 4.7 on a culture of peace and non-violence, human rights, gender equality and global citizenship (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, 2019).

The 2025 Global Progress Report on SDG 16 (OHCHR et al., 2025) highlights people's satisfaction with social services as an indicator of effective and accountable institutions

in inclusive societies, drawing on UNDP and Gallup World Poll data. But while information on satisfaction with health services is available from 148 countries, only 43 countries report on satisfaction with secondary education and just 11 countries report on primary education. Meanwhile, new evidence from 119 countries shows an upward trend in global experience of discrimination. One in four people from least developed countries reported being discriminated against on grounds prohibited by international law. An inverse relationship between education level and experiences of discrimination was highlighted: 21% of those with no education reported feeling discriminated against or harassed in the past 12 months, compared to 14% of those with secondary education. However, fewer than half of all countries provide disaggregated data by education level, and only one in five countries conduct repeated surveys. Data collection on survey respondents' education attainment could be improved and thereby help highlight how legal needs, capability and other dimensions of access to justice vary for adults by education.

LEARNING ASSESSMENTS CAN BE USED TO CAPTURE JUSTICE-RELEVANT COMPETENCIES

Apart from education attainment, learning achievement is also a key factor facilitating access to justice, especially in contexts where legal language is hard to understand. Cognitive outcomes (e.g. understanding justice, inclusion and peace, justice systems, and human rights frameworks), socioemotional outcomes (e.g. the ability to debate, show empathy and reflect on personal belonging) and behavioural outcomes (e.g. critical assessment of peace, justice, inclusion and strong institutions, ability to demand and support policies promoting peace and justice, and contribute to conflict resolution) are relevant for the achievement of SDG 16 (UNESCO, 2017a).

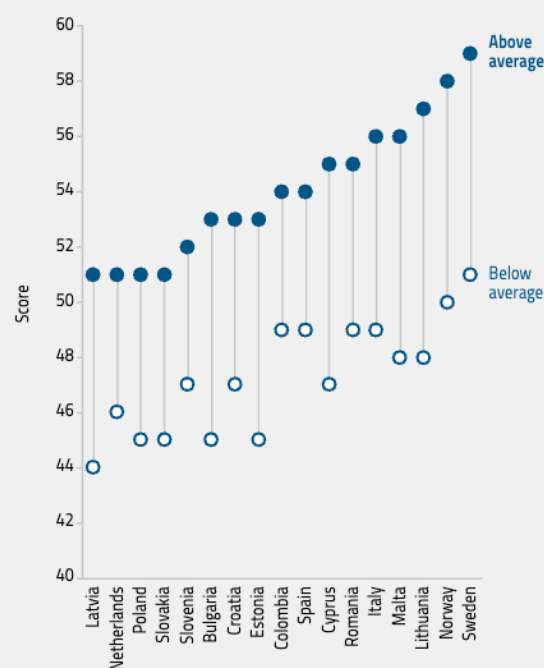
An understanding of legal rights and responsibilities among young people is the foundation for the future support and practice of rights. However, there are limited comparative assessments on knowledge and competencies for improving justice outcomes in society.

The 1999 IEA Civic Education study examined differences in 14-year-old students' knowledge related to human rights in 27 education systems. Students were asked to identify the rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Students performed better on human rights knowledge items when their countries paid more attention to human rights in intergovernmental discourses. Students with more knowledge of human rights, more frequent

engagement with international topics, and open class and school climates held stronger norms supporting social movements and positive attitudes towards immigrants' rights (Torney-Purta et al., 2008).

The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, which replaced the Civic Education Study, remains the main large-scale assessment on students' knowledge, attitudes and engagement regarding human rights, albeit mainly for high-income European countries. In 2022, civics knowledge scores stalled after improvements in previous rounds in 2009 and 2016. But the data show the importance of civic knowledge for developing attitudes that promote more just societies. For instance, students who scored above average in terms of civic knowledge and understanding tend to be more supportive of gender equality and of equal rights for immigrants and ethnic minority groups (Schulz et al., 2025) (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9. Higher proficiency in civic knowledge is positively associated with endorsement of equal rights for all
Score of students' endorsement of equal rights for all ethnic groups, by level of civic knowledge, 2022



Source: Schulz et al. (2025).

As part of the International Survey of Children's Well-Being, it was found that of some 17,000 8-year-old children, only a minority knew what rights they had. Children who came from more privileged families and who felt heard at home and school were more aware and knowledgeable of children's rights, and felt more respect from adults (af Ursin and Haanpää, 2018).

However, the ICCS surveys have only been conducted in less than 30 upper-middle- and high-income countries, mostly from Europe (Schulz et al., 2025), limiting understanding of the contextual variation in knowledge, values and attitudes towards social justice and inclusion. Expansion of civic assessments at the national level and more emphasis on civics and related knowledge globally would show more variation and provide a better basis for analysis.

Efforts to capture justice-related outcomes in school-based learning are continuing. The Climate Literacy component of the 2029 round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) framework will evaluate students' ability to connect scientific knowledge with social-ecological issues, providing some emphasis on climate justice-related issues in student competencies. The idea of focusing on climate literacy in PISA stems from the demand of young people for climate education and from a call for a multidisciplinary perspective in assessment. Competencies to be assessed will include understanding and explaining human-induced climate change; applying evidence-based and systems reasoning to climate challenges; engaging with arguments and perspectives on climate change; and exercising agency for climate futures. Among the expectations is the ability to integrate diverse sources of evidence to inform decision

making, and understand engagement with different knowledge systems, including indigenous knowledge (OECD, 2025b).

While legal capability frameworks for adults have been more extensively developed in relation to legal systems, frameworks for children need to be developed. To be legally capable, children need to develop an understanding of legal needs through their lived experiences and participation. A proposed measure of legal capability includes three components: knowledge – of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, how it applies to their situation, and that they have a right to speak about things that affect them; skills – to recognize the problem, identify appropriate sources of support, take appropriate action and escalate the action appropriately; and confidence – a belief in their ability to achieve a goal individually or collectively. Along this scale, an intermediate level of capability would encompass knowledge of domestic law and its applications, as well as the ability to identify remedies; while an advanced level of capability would be the ability to have a critical understanding of laws and children's rights, communicate concerns, and transfer learning about rights and laws to new contexts (Watkins et al., 2025).

Public legal education is often cited as a way to build the legal capability necessary to make and carry through informed decisions to resolve justiciable problems. Some surveys include questions on awareness of or familiarity with legal services, but only a handful pose questions on respondents' knowledge or legal understanding, which suggests a greater concern with people's ability to obtain information and support, than with their ability to deal with legal cases (OECD and Open Society Foundations, 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Challenges in access to the justice system and its services, growing concerns with social, climate and transitional justice issues, and the weakening of the rule of law: all these problems call for more attention to the root causes of injustice and how they can be addressed to reimagine and rebuild more just societies. In this context, the education–justice nexus is critical. Education has a political and moral purpose at its heart, helping children and youth experience, learn and question issues of justice, rights and power.

But education can reproduce established norms just as it can transform them. The positive power of education must therefore be the focus. When some disadvantaged populations are discriminated against, education can help empower them to claim their rights, not least by strengthening their foundational skills, and further develop their capacities to navigate the legal system and access solutions to legal problems. Education is also the main mechanism to develop the capacities of actors in the justice system, not only technical but also those skills that are a precondition for people-centred dispensation of justice. Just as formal and non-formal education channels play complementary roles, formal and non-formal actors of justice systems need to be the focus of education interventions.

One way to characterize the interdependence between education and justice is by considering justice *in* education (fairness within education systems), *for* education (education's role as a lever for justice in society) and *through* education (processes that transform society towards greater justice). As 2030 is approaching, given the close interrelationship between the goals of inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG 4) and peaceful, just and trustful societies and institutions (SDG 16), the goals also need to be operationalized in tandem. This report has presented numerous examples of doing so but the finding that stands out is the lack of a systematic approach. The following recommendations summarize some practical steps that can be taken in that direction.

Embed human rights and legal education in school systems at all levels.

Globally, the coverage of justice issues in curricula is inconsistent. Meanwhile, there is a tendency to look at injustices in classrooms from a historical perspective rather than as contemporary challenges.

- Integrate human rights, peace and legal education through a specific subject (e.g. civics), whose teaching time is protected, and also embed justice questions across the curriculum and at all stages (e.g. through literature).

- Adopt a whole-school approach that embeds justice values into school culture and relationships with the community, making institutions inclusive and putting student experiences of injustice at the centre.

Invest in teacher education and create conditions for quality teaching.

Teachers are often hampered in teaching issues of justice, rights and power in classrooms because of lack of preparation, inappropriate pedagogy and political sensitivities.

- Provide high-quality teacher professional development to prepare teachers to teach questions of justice, rights and power, anticipating any difficulties that may arise in classrooms.
- Do not treat these questions only as a matter of transferring factual knowledge but consider the contributions that students can make through action-oriented and experiential methods.

Prioritize education for crime prevention and youth offender rehabilitation.

There is strong evidence that education attainment, learning achievement and vocational training opportunities help young people avoid crime – and those in conflict with the law to be reintegrated into society.

- Invest in early childhood and school education in disadvantaged areas with a high crime propensity and prone to gangs.
- Ensure a dedicated and well-resourced rehabilitation strategy for people in detention, especially for children and young people deprived of their liberty, with education and skills development as a central component.

Build the capacity of justice system actors to focus on a people-centred approach.

As many people believe that key justice system actors do not abide by professional principles, they do not trust their actions and decisions.

- Address shortages of justice system professionals, including in education and rehabilitation roles, ensuring that people with strong qualifications are selected in courts, the police and correctional institutions.

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- Invest in continuing professional development for judges, prosecutors, lawyers, police and prison officers, with the aim to build a rights-respecting, people-centred justice system.
 - Recognize the role of community paralegals in bridging the gap between communities and formal institutions, and support their ongoing training and grass-roots outreach.

Promote legal empowerment for marginalized communities who face injustice.

Structural barriers, discrimination and lack of knowledge and confidence prevent billions of people from meaningfully addressing their justice problems.

- In formal education, ensure that legal education is practically oriented to improve understanding and engagement with justice institutions.
- In non-formal education, support civil society legal empowerment efforts to help t communities pursue legal remedies and shape fairer, more sustainable systems.

Improve the monitoring of the education–justice relationship to keep it high on the policy agenda.

Few countries monitor key aspects of SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, with many critical insights coming from non-official data.

- Disaggregate access to justice indicators by education attainment and learning achievement to make the reduction of inequality a key driver of policy.
- Develop a definition of legal literacy and/or capability for use in assessments of the effectiveness of formal and non-formal legal education programmes.

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Education and justice

Learning to build just societies

Living in peaceful, just societies with trusted institutions that safeguard human rights is a universal aspiration. But the rule of law is in decline in many countries, with growing challenges to fundamental rights and low trust levels in justice system institutions and their actors. Individual legal needs are vast. Yet billions of people, especially from disadvantaged populations, face obstacles in accessing legal systems and their services. When justice systems fail, they compound inequality, including by failing to protect the right to education.

Following two publications on climate change and nutrition, this is the third publication in the *Global Education Monitoring Report* series aimed at advancing debate on the interrelationship between education and selected outcomes of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In partnership with Namati, an organization dedicated to legal empowerment and community paralegals, this report argues for people-centred justice, which requires a legally empowered citizenry. Education, as part of its moral and political purpose, has a role to help people understand their rights, navigate justice systems and shape fairer societies. It also has a clear role, through formal and non-formal channels, to develop the professional capacity of justice system actors.

Education and justice are deeply interconnected. Advancing the links between SDG 4 and SDG 16 requires stronger education and justice systems, alongside better quality, more disaggregated data to understand how educational inequalities relate to discrimination, exclusion, trust in institutions and access to justice.

Alexandra Wilde, United Nations Development Programme

Evidence on the links between education, justice, and peace remains limited outside high-income settings, and what exists still too rarely reaches decision makers in actionable form. This report is a timely call for more rigorous, context-sensitive evidence that policymakers, educators, and justice actors urgently need.

Daniela Barba, Director of Research, Access to Justice, World Justice Project

Street Law welcomes UNESCO's education and justice paper for its strong recognition of legal empowerment and community-based education as essential to advancing access to justice. The paper highlights how practical legal education strengthens civic participation, protects rights, and equips communities to engage confidently and effectively with justice systems.

Amy Wallace, Advisor, Law School Programs, Street Law, Inc.

The Raoul Wallenberg Institute endorses the paper's call to embed human rights and legal education across education and justice institutions as fundamental to building just and inclusive societies. Strengthening institutional capacities is central to building a culture of human rights.

Morten Koch Andersen, Director of Research and Education, The Raoul Wallenberg Institute

BABSEACLE strongly endorses the integration of human rights, civic, and legal education across school systems as a foundation for expanding access to justice. This approach aligns with our mission to cultivate globally minded, pro bono-oriented legal professionals and empower communities through justice education.

Bruce Lasky, Managing Director, BABSEACLE

Evidence on the links between education, justice, and peace — central to achieving SDG 16 — remains scarce outside high-income settings, and what exists is too rarely used by the decision-makers. This report is a timely call for the rigorous, context-sensitive evidence that policymakers, educators, and justice actors urgently need.

Ricardo Morel, Director of the Peace & Recovery Program, Innovations for Poverty Action



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