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Author Name(s): Ashari Kurniawan

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Restorative justice in juvenile justice systems: a comparative study of Indonesia and Belgium



Ashari Kurniawan*)

Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of restorative justice through diversion mechanisms in Indonesia's juvenile criminal justice system, compared with practices in Belgium. Using a juridical-comparative approach, the research analyzes legislation, international legal instruments, and relevant academic literature. The focus is on diversion policy, community involvement, and institutional challenges in applying restorative justice. The findings reveal that Indonesia has a strong normative foundation through the Juvenile Criminal Justice Law (2012) and Government Regulation No. 58/2022, which substantively align with the cultural value of musyawarah (deliberation). However, implementation remains hindered by regulatory overlaps, weak institutional capacity, and limited community participation. In contrast, Belgium demonstrates a more established system, with a clear separation between juvenile and adult justice, strong institutional support, and consistent application of diversion as a primary response to juvenile delinquency. The comparison highlights that although Indonesia possesses cultural compatibility with restorative justice, its implementation lags significantly behind Belgium. This study contributes to legal scholarship by offering concrete recommendations are harmonizing conflicting regulations, strengthening the capacity of LPKS and probation institutions, enhancing the role of law enforcement in facilitating diversion, and empowering communities through legal awareness. The findings reaffirm the need to shift from punitive approaches toward child protection and reintegration as the core principle of restorative justice.

Corresponding Author:

Ashari Kurniawan, Gadjah Mada University

Email: asharikurniawan55@gmail.com

Introduction

The juvenile criminal justice system plays a crucial role in protecting children in conflict with the law (CICL) (Pas-iwen et al., 2024; Wijaya & Hermawan, 2025). In Indonesia, the legal framework governing CICL has undergone significant transformation, particularly with the enactment of Law No. 11 of 2012 on the Juvenile Criminal Justice System, which replaced Law No. 3 of 1997 on Juvenile Courts (Candra, 2020; Hermi, 2022). The major change lies in the paradigm shift from a retributive approach, which emphasizes punishment, to a restorative justice paradigm that prioritizes rehabilitation, reconciliation, and the best interests of the child (Priyana et al., 2025; Rasiwan et al., 2025). However, despite this normative progress, the implementation of restorative justice in Indonesia remains fraught with limitations.

At the regulatory level, several provisions within Law No. 11 of 2012 and its derivative regulations still leave ambiguity in defining the scope and procedures of diversion, which often results in

inconsistent interpretations by law enforcement officials. In practice, children in conflict with the law are still frequently stigmatized as "naughty" or "delinquent," reflecting a persisting punitive culture within the justice system (Gurindro, 2022). Furthermore, diversion mechanisms are unevenly applied across regions due to inadequate training for law enforcement, limited institutional coordination, insufficient resources, and resistance from victims or their families (Hidayat & Effendi, 2023). These weaknesses highlight a persistent gap between the normative ideals of restorative justice and the legal realities on the ground, underscoring the urgent need for a more coherent framework and stronger institutional support for its implementation in Indonesia.

At the global level, the development of restorative justice has been widely discussed as an alternative to traditional criminal justice systems. Influential scholars such as Howard Zehr emphasize that restorative justice is not merely a technical program but a fundamental shift in the philosophy of justice, focusing on repairing harm and reintegrating offenders into society (Maglione, 2022; Marshall, 2020; Zheng, 2024). Several countries, such as Belgium, have successfully institutionalized restorative justice within their juvenile justice systems (Focquaert et al., 2024; Marder, 2020). The Belgian model is particularly noteworthy as it treats both juvenile offenders and children who are victims or neglected as individuals in need of protection (Limanté et al., 2022; Sivenbring, 2021). This approach has positioned Belgium as one of the leading countries in the effective implementation of restorative justice, offering a valuable comparative perspective for Indonesia.

Several studies in Indonesia have examined both the normative and empirical aspects of restorative justice in the juvenile criminal justice system. Sikumbang & Sara (2025), found that although the notion of restorative justice introduced by Law No. 11 of 2012 has gained recognition among law enforcement officials, its implementation remains hampered by practical obstacles such as insufficient training. Manik (2025), identified resource limitations and victim resistance as major barriers, while Purba et al. (2025) stressed that restorative justice represents a more humane approach but is not yet fully supported by policies and officials' understanding of diversion. Similarly, Hasanah & Yusuf (2025) highlighted weak inter-agency coordination and inadequate supporting infrastructure. Despite these valuable insights, little research has compared the Indonesian experience with countries that have more established frameworks and practices, such as Belgium, particularly in the context of diversion as a key element of restorative justice. Furthermore, studies investigating the concrete conditions under which diversion fails to be implemented in cases involving juvenile offenders remain scarce.

This study specifically focuses on children as perpetrators of criminal acts and their treatment within Indonesia's juvenile criminal justice system. The main issue under examination is the extent to which the restorative justice paradigm, particularly through diversion mechanisms has been contextualized in Indonesia, as well as the challenges and opportunities that arise in its implementation when compared to the Belgian model. The scope of this research is limited to the legal and policy dimensions of the juvenile justice system in Indonesia, with particular emphasis on the normative framework and its practical implications.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the normative framework of restorative justice and diversion within Indonesia's juvenile criminal justice system; (2) to compare Indonesia's system with Belgium's best practices in implementing restorative justice; and (3) to identify challenges, gaps, and opportunities for strengthening restorative justice in Indonesia. Methodologically, this research employs a normative juridical approach combined with comparative analysis. The normative juridical approach is used to examine statutory regulations and principles of restorative justice, while the comparative analysis serves to draw lessons from Belgium's experience in evaluating Indonesia's implementation. By sharpening its focus on children in conflict with the law and highlighting the legal issues surrounding the gap between normative ideals and practical implementation, this study aspires to contribute to the academic discourse on child protection while offering relevant policy recommendations for strengthening restorative justice in Indonesia.



Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design with a juridical-normative and comparative approach. The juridical-normative approach is applied to analyze laws, regulations, and policies relating to the juvenile criminal justice system and restorative justice in Indonesia and Belgium, while the comparative approach is used to systematically contrast both countries in terms of legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and implementation outcomes. The comparative analysis is structured around four fixed parameters: (1) regulatory framework, (2) institutional actors, (3) diversion procedures, and (4) outcomes for children in conflict with the law.

This study relies on a literature-based approach that incorporates both primary and secondary legal materials. The primary materials include national laws, such as Indonesia's Law No. 11 of 2012 on the Juvenile Criminal Justice System and Belgian juvenile justice regulations along with government decrees and relevant international conventions, including the CRC and the Beijing Rules. The secondary materials consist of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and institutional reports from authoritative bodies such as CRIN, UNICEF, and Terres des Hommes. To ensure analytical validity, the selection of sources followed explicit criteria, namely their relevance to juvenile justice and restorative justice, legal authority, credibility of publication, and temporal relevance within the 2015–2025 period. Outdated or non-authoritative references were deliberately excluded to maintain the rigor and reliability of the research.

Legal documents and scholarly materials were analyzed qualitatively through a combination of content analysis and legal interpretation methods (grammatical, systematic, and teleological interpretation). The analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) Thematic coding of normative provisions and scholarly arguments; (2) Comparative mapping of Indonesia and Belgium using the four analytical parameters; (3) Synthesis and evaluation to identify similarities, differences, and lessons learned.

To ensure credibility, findings were cross-verified through triangulation of multiple sources (laws, academic journals, and institutional reports) and checked against the most updated regulations in both countries.

The study is limited to the legal and policy dimensions of juvenile criminal justice systems in Indonesia and Belgium, covering the period 2015–2025. It does not include empirical fieldwork such as interviews or observations; however, this limitation is addressed by relying on authoritative reports and peer-reviewed literature. Future studies are encouraged to complement this normative-comparative analysis with empirical data for a more contextual perspective.

Results and Discussion

Juvenile Criminal Justice System in Indonesia

Before Indonesia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the country had already established several provisions related to children in the context of criminal justice. The Indonesian Constitution guarantees children's rights to protection from violence and discrimination (Hanafi, 2025; Simamora & Panjaitan, 2023; Suriati, 2023). In addition, the Criminal Code (KUHP) and procedural laws provide alternatives for handling cases involving children. For example, Supreme Court Circular Letter No. 3 of 1959, Supreme Court Instruction No. M.A/Pem./048/1971, and Law No. 8 of 1981 on the Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP) regulate that trials involving child defendants must be closed to the public. Violation of this principle renders the court's decision null and void. Moreover, the proceedings must be led by judges with adequate knowledge and sensitivity to children's circumstances.

A more specific legal framework emerged with Law No. 3 of 1997 on Juvenile Courts, followed by the 2002 Child Protection Law. The most important milestone was Law No. 11 of 2012 on the Juvenile Criminal Justice System (SPPA Law), which introduced diversion and restorative justice as core principles. This law was later strengthened by Government Regulation (PP) No. 58 of 2022 concerning



the forms and procedures of implementation and measures against children. These developments demonstrate Indonesia's gradual shift from a punitive to a restorative approach, emphasizing rehabilitation and reintegration rather than punishment.

Nevertheless, the implementation of this legal framework faces serious challenges. According to the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), from 2016 to 2022 there were 2,883 recorded cases of children as perpetrators (Adhantyo, 2022). Meanwhile, the National Legal Development Agency (BPHN) reported at least 2,302 cases in just three years (2020–2022). The Head of BPHN, Widodo Ekatjahjana, acknowledged that despite collaboration with Legal Aid Organizations (OBH) to provide pro bono legal services, the high number and complexity of cases remain pressing issues.

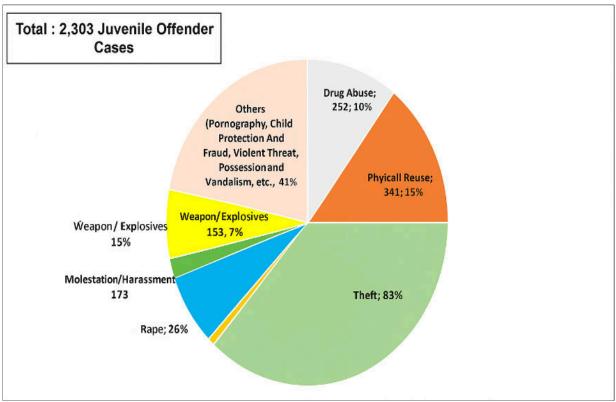


Figure 1 Types of Crimes and Criminal Behavior of Children Who Receive Child Litigation Legal Assistance from BPHN from 2020 to 2022

The distribution of cases is particularly concerning. BPHN data (2020–2022) shows that theft dominates with 838 cases (36%), followed by drug-related offenses (341 cases; 15%), abuse/assault (232 cases; 10%), sexual abuse (173 cases; 8%), sharp weapons/explosives (153 cases; 7%), and other crimes such as pornography, fraud, trafficking, and traffic violations (491 cases; 21%). While theft reflects socioeconomic vulnerabilities, the significant proportion of narcotics and sexual crimes highlights broader structural issues such as weak family supervision, peer influence, and limited preventive mechanisms in schools and communities (Sartika et al., 2022).

In practice, however, law enforcement still tends to treat children as mere objects of the justice process rather than as rights holders who require protection. Many children undergo formal criminal proceedings that often end in imprisonment, despite the SPPA Law's emphasis on diversion and restorative measures. This gap between normative regulation and actual practice illustrates a persistent legalistic bias, where punitive measures overshadow rehabilitative goals.

To address this, the juvenile justice system must not only uphold children's rights during trial but also ensure effective prevention strategies, accessible diversion mechanisms, and holistic rehabilitation programs. A more integrated approach that considers social, economic, and cultural



contexts is needed to prevent recurrence and to strengthen the system's orientation toward restorative justice.

Justice System Criminal in Belgium

The Juvenile Justice System in Belgium is fundamentally structured not as a criminal law system for juveniles, but as a child protection system. The primary objective is to safeguard children rather than punish them (Yadav, 2020). Within this framework, the emphasis lies on welfare and rehabilitation, with re-education prioritized over criminal sanctions (Gerard, 2023). Consequently, Belgium's juvenile justice system is widely recognized as one of the most welfare-oriented systems in the world (Dünkel, 2022; Pearce & Martin, 2025).

A distinctive feature of the Belgian system is its broad scope: it not only addresses children who have committed offenses but also those considered in need of welfare, such as victims of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Both groups of children are treated similarly, under a welfare and care framework rather than through punitive mechanisms (Dünkel, 2022). This establishes the Belgian juvenile justice system as a separate and independent entity, distinct from the broader criminal justice framework.

The evolution of Belgium's child protection legislation illustrates this welfare orientation. The Child Protection Act of 1912 introduced the principle of criminal majority at 16 years of age (Debaenst, 2023). This threshold was subsequently raised to 18 years under the Youth Protection Act of 1965, positioning Belgium among the European states with the highest minimum age of criminal responsibility. In practice, children below the age of 10–12 are generally not prosecuted, as they are deemed unable to distinguish between right and wrong. Once a child reaches the age of 18, protective measures end, except in exceptional cases involving neglect or habitual offending. Importantly, judges in Belgium consistently apply the principle of assistance rather than punishment, seeking measures that emphasize care, education, and rehabilitation (Yadav, 2020).

The Belgian system also emphasizes detention as a last resort. In accordance with the Child Protection Law (2002) and the Youth Protection Act (1965), detention must be applied for the shortest possible duration and only when no viable alternatives exist (Terres des Hommes, 2021). Diversion plays a crucial role and may be implemented at various stages. At the prosecutorial level, cases can be mediated or discontinued with a written warning, while at the judicial level, diversion can involve non-custodial measures. Children with mental health conditions may be placed in closed institutions only when alternative treatment options are unavailable, and when their behavior poses a serious risk to themselves or others.

Furthermore, Belgian law provides several alternatives to incarceration. These include placement with a legal guardian, supervision by social services, mandatory community work, or restorative offers initiated by the child. At the sanctions stage, judges may order: (1) A restorative agreement; (2) A child-proposed project; (3) Assistance within their community; (4) Placement in an open facility, and only as a last measure; (5) Placement in a closed facility.

Overall, Belgium's juvenile justice system reflects a strong commitment to restorative and welfare-oriented principles. By prioritizing diversion, rehabilitation, and community-based sanctions, it demonstrates a model where the best interests of the child remain the central concern. This orientation provides a significant comparative lens for evaluating Indonesia's juvenile justice framework, which still faces challenges in balancing punitive practices with restorative justice principles.

Opportunities and Challenges in Implementing the Diversion Concept of Restorative Justice in the Juvenile Criminal Justice System in Indonesia and Belgium

The implementation of restorative justice in the juvenile criminal justice system reflects not only legal norms but also cultural values and community participation. Friedman emphasizes that legal culture, shaped by factors such as education, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background significantly influences how laws are applied and received in society. In this context, community



involvement becomes vital for restorative justice to succeed; without active participation, restorative mechanisms risk becoming ineffective (Sartika et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, restorative justice resonates with the tradition of musyawarah (deliberation), which underpins local conflict resolution practices. The SPPA Law (2012) explicitly requires diversion through a restorative approach, involving not only children and their families but also victims, social workers, and community counselors at every stage of the legal process (Anggraeni & Irawati, 2024; Jubaidi, 2024). The core values of restorative justice, dialogue, repairing harm, and rebuilding relationships are therefore well-aligned with Indonesian socio-legal culture (Gurindro, 2022). However, despite this cultural compatibility, implementation faces persistent challenges. Differences in regulatory frameworks, inconsistencies in practice, and limited institutional capacity hinder the full realization of diversion goals (Arintyas et al., 2023).

One of the most notable weaknesses in Indonesia's implementation lies in the marginalization of victims. While the SPPA Law mandates victim involvement, in practice, victims often become passive participants, their voices overshadowed by the focus on rehabilitation of the child offender. This not only risks secondary victimization but also reduces the legitimacy of diversion outcomes. By contrast, in Belgium restorative processes often ensure victims' perspectives are central to dialogue, giving them agency to negotiate restitution or other restorative measures.

Several structural obstacles remain. First, although Government Regulation No. 58 of 2022 was enacted to strengthen the SPPA Law, detailed rules for Article 82 paragraph (4) remain absent. Second, contradictions between the SPPA Law and the Regional Government Law regarding the establishment of Special Child Development Institutions (LPKS) create ambiguity in responsibility allocation (Adhantyo, 2022). Third, unclear roles of the police and prosecutors, combined with practices such as case termination without diversion, reinforce the perception that restorative justice has not been institutionalized properly. These institutional ambiguities are exacerbated by limited resources: many LPKS are underfunded, Bapas officers are overburdened, and coordination between police, prosecutors, and social workers is often ineffective. These gaps indicate that criminal law is still the dominant mechanism, and restorative processes are often sidelined.

By contrast, Belgium presents a long-standing tradition of separating juvenile justice from the adult criminal justice system, emphasizing welfare, protection, and community-based measures. Diversion mechanisms have been developed through decades of experimentation and are supported by institutional arrangements that prioritize social rehabilitation over punishment (Snacken et al., 2022). In practice, juvenile delinquency in Belgium encompasses a wide range of offenses, but diversion and community measures remain central responses. Detention is used only as a last resort and for the shortest possible duration, while restorative options, community projects, and supervised care dominate the sanction framework (Terres des Hommes, 2021). Importantly, these welfare measures are underpinned by a social culture that perceives juvenile offenders not as criminals but as children in need of care and reintegration, making restorative solutions more widely accepted by the community.

Nonetheless, both Indonesia and Belgium face similar challenges when addressing serious crimes such as sexual violence, aggravated assault, or murder. In Indonesia, the Attorney General's Office has made it clear that certain offenses, especially rape, cannot be resolved through restorative justice due to the irreversible trauma suffered by victims (Hardiantoro, 2023). Belgium, too, applies stricter measures when dealing with severe juvenile offenses, sometimes resorting to closed facilities when no alternatives exist. This highlights the universal dilemma of balancing rehabilitation goals with the need for justice in serious cases, as emphasized in the UNCRC and Standard Minimum Rules (SMR). From a socio-cultural perspective, Indonesian society often stigmatizes juvenile offenders, making reintegration more difficult, whereas Belgian welfare orientation fosters community acceptance of rehabilitative outcomes.

Global data underscore these contrasts. According to CRIN's Access to Justice for Children: Global Ranking, Belgium ranks first with a score of 81.6%, while Indonesia is ranked 122nd with only 44.1% (CRIN, 2011). The wide gap demonstrates that although Indonesia has made normative progress by



adopting restorative principles into its legislation, its implementation remains hampered by regulatory inconsistencies, weak institutional support, insufficient victim protection, and limited community engagement.

Moving forward, effective diversion in Indonesia requires addressing these structural and cultural gaps: (i) harmonizing conflicting regulations, (ii) strengthening institutional readiness of LPKS, Bapas, and social services, (iii) enhancing the role of police and prosecutors in facilitating diversion rather than bypassing it, (iv) empowering community participation through education and awareness, and (v) ensuring victim-centered restorative practices that prioritize justice and healing. Policymakers should also provide sufficient budget allocations, mandatory training programs for law enforcement, and standardized operating procedures to guide restorative mechanisms. These policy measures would create a stronger foundation for restorative justice, bridging the gap between legal ideals and practical realities.

In conclusion, Belgium demonstrates how a welfare-oriented model supported by strong institutions and cultural acceptance can make diversion an integral part of juvenile justice, while Indonesia illustrates the challenges of embedding restorative justice in a legal culture still dominated by punitive traditions. Bridging this gap requires not only legal reform but also a cultural shift towards recognizing children's best interests as the primary principle of justice. Most importantly, both systems remind us that juvenile justice cannot succeed without balancing the rights of child offenders, the needs of victims, and the involvement of the wider community.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the implementation of restorative justice in the juvenile criminal justice systems of Indonesia and Belgium demonstrates both convergence and divergence. Both countries recognize diversion and restorative mechanisms as central instruments, aiming to prioritize children's welfare and minimize exposure to punitive sanctions. However, their approaches differ significantly. Belgium applies a welfare-oriented model in which juvenile justice is separated from the adult criminal justice system. Its strengths lie in strong institutional support, clear diversion mechanisms, and an integrated child protection framework. Nevertheless, challenges remain in handling serious crimes, where restorative measures are limited and detention may still be applied as a last resort. Indonesia, in contrast, has made important normative progress through the SPPA Law and supporting regulations, which align with cultural traditions of deliberation (musyawarah). Its potential strength lies in the cultural compatibility of restorative principles with local conflict resolution practices. Yet, implementation is hindered by regulatory inconsistencies, institutional weaknesses, and limited roles of law enforcement actors and communities, resulting in a gap between normative ideals and practical realities.

The comparative analysis underscores that Belgium's experience provides valuable lessons in institutional coherence and welfare-based orientation, while Indonesia illustrates the difficulties of embedding restorative justice within a punitive legal culture. These findings highlight that restorative justice cannot succeed through legal reform alone; it requires harmonized regulations, strong institutional frameworks, active law enforcement engagement, and meaningful community participation. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that while Indonesia and Belgium share a commitment to restorative justice, their divergent outcomes stem from structural, cultural, and institutional differences. The research contributes to academic discourse by identifying specific juridical and practical gaps in Indonesia and offering comparative insights that may inform future policy reforms toward a more child-centered, restorative juvenile justice system.

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