

ICCP/SL/OP/020

Trends and regional disparities in child protection reporting in Sri Lanka (2010–2023): A GIS-based analysis

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Background: Child protection issues in Sri Lanka have shown significant fluctuations between 2010 and 2023, with regional disparities strongly influenced by socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. This study investigates the trends and patterns of reported child protection incidents across Sri Lanka, using data from the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA). By examining district-level variations, this analysis highlights how reporting mechanisms, regional challenges, and national policies have affected the reporting and response to child protection issues.

Method: This study employed secondary data from the National Child Protection Authority (2010–2023) to examine district-level trends in reported child protection cases. ArcGIS was used for spatial mapping, with choropleth maps created to visualize the distribution and intensity of child protection cases across districts. Statistical analyses identified patterns and disparities, while district comparisons were made in relation to demographic and socio-economic indicators. This approach enabled evidence-based insights into regional vulnerabilities, providing a foundation for the development of targeted interventions and responsive child protection strategies.

Results: The analysis reveals a significant increase in reported child protection cases from 3,788 in 2010 to 11,694 in 2015, particularly in urban districts like Colombo (720 cases in 2010 to 1,477 in 2013) and Gampaha (524 cases in 2010 to 1,169 in 2014). This surge was driven by improved awareness and reporting mechanisms. However, from 2016, cases began declining, with 9,086 reported in 2019, suggesting possible underreporting. The most concerning drop occurred in 2023, with a 17.7% decrease, from 11,177 in 2022 to 9,200 in 2023, particularly in districts like Kilinochchi (44 cases) and Mullaitivu (67 cases), indicating barriers such as economic hardship, cultural stigma, and lack of trust in the system.

Conclusion: It is crucial to expand reporting mechanisms, including mobile units and anonymous channels, in areas with low reporting rates. Targeted awareness campaigns should focus on regions like Mannar (40 cases) to break down cultural barriers. Additionally, socio-economic support programs should be enhanced to help vulnerable families and reduce child exploitation. Strengthening law enforcement and social services, especially in high-risk areas like Colombo (1,014 cases) and Gampaha (764 cases), is also essential. These actions will help ensure that all children, regardless of location, are properly protected from abuse and neglect.

Keywords: Awareness campaigns, barriers to reporting, child protection, district-level variation, socio-economic support.