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An Empirical Study on the Rising Cases of Sexual Abuse Against Children: Examining the Contributing Factors and the Role of the POCSO Act

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ABSTRACT
Child sexual abuse is a serious child-protection and criminal-justice concern in India. The number of cases registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act has increased substantially over the period examined in this study, but an increase in registered cases should not automatically be interpreted as an equivalent increase in the underlying incidence of abuse. Greater awareness, improved reporting, broader legal coverage, access to police and child-protection institutions, and changes in social willingness to disclose abuse may also influence registration patterns. The present study empirically examines the trend in registered POCSO cases in India from 2014 to 2023 and analyses the contributing factors discussed in Indian and international literature, together with the role of the POCSO Act in prevention, reporting, investigation, adjudication and victim support. The study adopts a quantitative secondary-data research design using National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data and a qualitative legal-document analysis of the POCSO Act, 2012, related rules and government implementation material. Descriptive statistics, year-on-year growth, POCSO share in total crimes against children and a linear trend analysis are used. Registered POCSO cases increased from 34,449 in 2014 to 69,191 in 2023, representing an overall increase of about 96.5% and an approximate compound annual growth rate of 7.8%. The linear trend is positive and statistically significant for the eleven-year series. The findings also show fluctuations rather than a uniform year-by-year increase, including declines in 2017 and 2020. The study therefore interprets the rise as a growth in reported/registered cases, not as direct proof of a corresponding rise in true incidence. The analysis suggests that family and community conditions, inadequate awareness, barriers to disclosure, digital exposure, socio-economic vulnerability, institutional access and implementation capacity may interact in shaping reporting and protection outcomes. The POCSO Act provides a comprehensive legal framework through offence definitions, mandatory reporting, child-friendly procedures, Special Courts and safeguards for the child. However, effective protection depends on implementation capacity, timely investigation and trial, trained personnel, victim support and coordinated institutional action.
Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse; POCSO Act; Child Protection; NCRB; Reporting; Special Courts; Child-Friendly Justice; Sexual Offences; Legal Implementation; India.

1. INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse is a multi-faceted social, legal and public policy issue. It can impact children in the context of family, neighbourhood, education, institutions and the digital world and can be concealed, as children may not be able or willing to report abuse. A study conducted in India has identified child sexual abuse as a more complex issue that is influenced by many factors within the individual, family, community and society. The authors of a systematic review of the studies conducted in India found that there was considerable variation in the reported prevalence figures, and that not having a safe family environment, unsafe family contexts, viewing sex-related content, and other contextual vulnerabilities were among the factors associated with a higher risk of depression. The review also emphasised the need for representative and standardised epidemiological research. (Deb et al., 2018).

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO) was enacted to make a dedicated law for sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornographifying children and set up Special Courts for these offences. The Act came into force on 14 November 2012. It includes penetrative sexual assault, aggravated sexual assault, sexual assault, sexual harassment, using children in pornography and abetment & attempted sexual assault. It also offers procedural protection regarding evidence recording, privacy, in camera procedures, child-friendly access to justice and involvement of children. (Government of India, 2012). The empirical question gets complicated because of the meaning of "rising cases." A case which is registered by police or law-enforcement agencies is counted in NCRB statistics, not all cases occur in society. An uptick in POCSO cases can thus be due to actual victimisation, increased disclosure, better reporting, greater awareness of legal options, more institutional accessibility, changes in the definitions of what constitutes a POCSO offence, and changes in how POCSO is reported. The difference is a fundamental one for the current study. It does not presume that all the rise in the number of cases pertains to

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a rise in abuse, but instead investigates the observed trend and then considers factors that could affect victimisation and/or reporting.

The issue has been further heightened by official figures that indicate that POCSO cases form a significant proportion of crimes committed against children. According to NCRB data, there were 69,191 cases of POCSO in 2023, representing 36.9% of all children-related cases of crime registered during the year. Total crimes against children were 1,87,702 in 2023, compared with 1,62,449 in 2022. These statistics highlight the reporting and protection problem and the importance of separating recorded crime from the actual incidence of abuse. (NCRB, 2023).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Though there is a dedicated statute for child protection, the number of POCSO cases registered has been significant and has been on the rise over the long term. An important research question is why this happened and what the rise of recorded cases means for child sexual abuse, reporting practices and the operation of the legal system. A restrictive definition might see an increasing number of registrants as the problem getting bigger. A wider empirical glossing recognizes the role of victimization, disclosure, reporting, police registration, and institutional practice as all having an influence on the number of cases observed.

The present study aims to solve this problem by using an eleven-year trend analysis of NCRB data, a review of research on determinants of child sexual abuse and an analysis of the legal architecture of POCSO. The study aims to offer more than a descriptive statement that there is a growing number of cases; it aims to explain how social, technological, economic and institutional conditions potentially impact abuse risk and case registration.

1.2 Research Objectives

• To examine the trend in registered POCSO cases in India during 2014–2024.
• To measure the annual growth and the share of POCSO cases in total registered crimes against children.
• To identify and discuss major social, family, economic, technological and institutional factors associated with child sexual abuse and reporting.
• To examine the role of the POCSO Act in defining offences, facilitating reporting, protecting child victims and providing specialised judicial procedures.
• To distinguish between the rise in registered cases and the underlying incidence of child sexual abuse.
• To identify implementation challenges and suggest evidence-based areas for strengthening child protection.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Indian literature on Child Sexual Abuse suggests that a single factor cannot explain the phenomenon. In a systematic review of 51 studies, Deb et al. (2018) reported on the wide range of prevalence estimates due to variations in study design and measurement. This synthesis of qualitative evidence, identified during the review, provided evidence of interplay of individual, family, community and societal factors. Some of the issues mentioned were the lack of family support, troubling family experiences, viewing sexual content, unsafe community situations, and vulnerabilities in social protection. The results help confirm a multi-faceted perspective, and do not support the monocausal view.

Maity and Chakraborty (2023) have specifically looked into the implications of the POCSO Act and determinants of child sexual abuse at the State level based on secondary NCRB data. Their research analysed the socio-economic and demographic factors and considered the registration of POCSO as an empirical result. The analysis is significant as it clearly shows that POCSO research does not have to be doctrinal, but can also be done from a state secondary data approach. Their findings cannot, however, be read as evidence of cause and effect of change in registered cases and change in actual abuse due to the impact of the reporting and recording process.

The child-centric approach of POCSO has been emphasized in the legal literature. The Act intended to tackle child pornography, sexual assault and sexual harassment, and establish Special Courts. It also contains procedural rules on how evidence to be taken should be recorded, how evidence should be taken from the child without their seeing the accused, how trials will be conducted in the middle of the day, and how they will get help from an interpreter or expert if needed. The provisions are a move away from the traditional ‘offence and punishment' approach to a child-sensitive justice process. (Government of India, 2012).

Although research and institutional assessment do reveal gaps in implementation. The Centre for Child and the Law, at the National Law School of India University, highlighted issues with the functioning of Special Courts, such as having inadequate infrastructure, procedural difficulties, and the absence of coordination and training. The pendency and irregular operations of the special courts have also been recognized as a major problem in the functioning of the government assessments of Fast Track Special Courts. The results show that outcomes are not solely a factor of statutory provisions, and the capacity to implement is an important component of child protection.

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Digital worlds are a new dimension. Kids nowadays communicate via cell phones, social media, online games and messaging. Digital contact can be a way to maintain awareness, manipulation, distribution of sexual images and exploitation, in addition to documentation and reporting. Digital environment should therefore not be the genesis of the increase of the POCSO offences, and it should not be a byproduct of that issue. It is an element of a larger system of family supervision, digital literacy, platform practices, and policing and child awareness.

2.1 Research Gap

Previous studies have focused on the epidemiological, psychological, legal and socio-economic issues surrounding child sexual abuse. There are however, merits which can be seen in the attempt to combine three aspects in one empirical framework: (i) the trend over time of registered POCSO cases; (ii) a distinction between underlying victimisation and registration/ disclosure; and (iii) the importance of the legal framework in making register disclosure into legal action. There is much public discussion that the number of registered cases is an inevitable sign of more abuse. Because administrative crime statistics are not sufficient to determine the extent to which an increase reflects an increase in the incidence of the crime and the extent to which it reflects reporting, awareness and institutional access, a more cautious empirical approach is needed.
This paper aims to fill these gaps, taking advantage of the eleven-year time series of the national data, and linking the statistical findings to the legal and socio-institutional literature. The method is intentionally based on an empirical analysis of registered cases, not an estimate of the actual prevalence of child sexual abuse.

2.2 Novelty of the Study

The novelty of the study lies in its integrated interpretation of the POCSO trend. First, it examines a eleven-year national series from 2014 to 2023 rather than relying on a single year. Second, it calculates the share of POCSO cases in total crimes against children, thereby placing the trend in the wider child-protection context. Third, it separates statistical observation from causal interpretation and explicitly considers reporting, awareness and institutional accessibility as possible contributors to the recorded trend. Finally, it links the empirical pattern to specific components of the POCSO legal framework, including mandatory reporting, child-friendly procedures and Special Courts.

3. HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

• H1: Registered POCSO cases in India show a statistically significant upward linear trend during 2014–2024.
• H2: POCSO cases constitute a substantial and persistent share of total registered crimes against children during the study period.
• H3: The annual growth in registered POCSO cases is not uniform across years, indicating that reporting and institutional conditions may influence the observed pattern.
The hypotheses are deliberately limited to relationships that can be examined using the national secondary time-series data. Claims about individual-level causes of abuse are treated as literature-based explanations rather than being presented as findings from a dataset that does not directly measure them.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study design was quantitative, descriptive and explanatory secondary data design. The quantitative component focuses on the number of POCSO cases reported each year, and how this compares to all registered crimes involving children. The explanatory part explains the observed trend in the context of published works and the legal provisions of the POCSO Act. The design is a longitudinal design as it spans the years of 2014-2024. The role and institutional logic of POCSO is examined through a legal-document analysis, along with the statistical analysis.

4.2 Data Sources

The National Crime Records Bureau's Crime in India series is the main source of statistics. The series for 2014-2021 is consistent with the series compiled using NCRB data and for 2022, 2023 values have been taken from NCRB reported crime statistics. The legal analysis is based on the official India Code text of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, and material provided by governments on the implementation of POCSO. Existing secondary academic literature is consulted to identify possible social, family, community and institutional factors.

4.3 Population, Period and Unit of Analysis

The population of interest are registered child sexual-offence cases in India. Units of analysis: Calendar year. The observation period is 2014 - 2024, with a total of 11 observations per year. The analysis does not involve individual

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level causality. The differences at the state level, under-reporting and variations in policing and recording practices are not directly included in the statistical model.

4.4 Variables and Measures

Variable	Operational definition	Source
POCSO cases	Number of cases registered under POCSO in a calendar year	NCRB
Total crimes against children	Total registered crimes against children in a calendar year	NCRB
POCSO share	POCSO cases ÷ total crimes against children × 100	Calculated from NCRB
Annual growth	Percentage change in POCSO cases from previous year	Calculated
Time trend	Calendar year used as the independent time variable	Calculated

4.5 Statistical Techniques

Reporting of mean and standard deviation of annual POCSO registrations are descriptive statistics. The year-on-year growth rates are calculated to determine growth and contraction in periods of time. To calculate the POCSO share of all child crimes, differences were computed for each year.Differences were computed for each year to calculate the share of POCSO crime out of all crimes committed against children. A simple ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression of annual POCSO registrations on calendar year is used as the primary parametric trend test. A Spearman rank correlation is also reported as a non-parametric robustness check since the year of measurement is a time series in the sample. The OLS slope is 3,987 cases per year ($R^2 = 0.909$, $p < 0.001$), while Spearman's rho is 0.936 ($p = 0.0000$). These statistics do not prove that there is a cause and effect relationship between calendar time and child sexual abuse.

4.6 Conceptual Framework

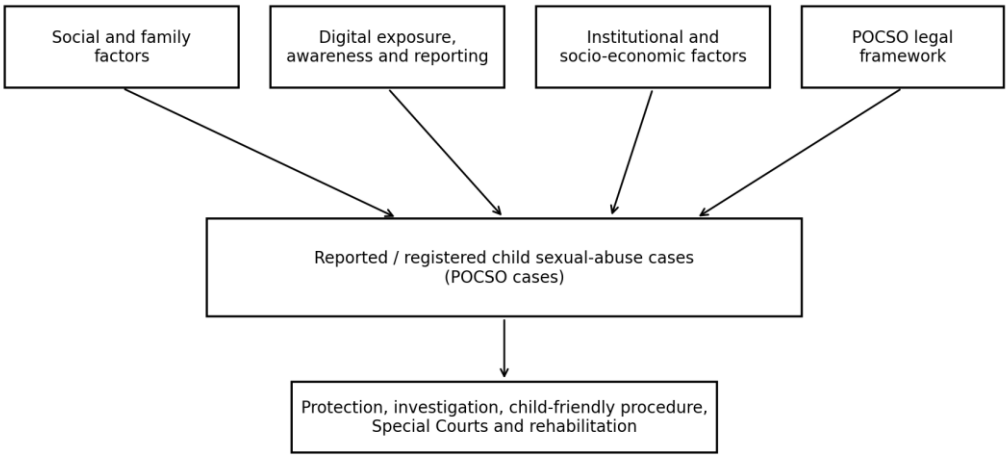


Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking contributing factors, reporting/registration and the POCSO institutional response.

The conceptual framework proposes that child sexual abuse and its reporting are shaped by interconnected social and family factors, digital exposure and awareness, socio-economic vulnerability and institutional conditions. The POCSO Act operates as the legal framework through which reported cases are classified, investigated and taken through child-sensitive procedures. The framework therefore distinguishes the determinants of abuse/reporting from the legal response to reported cases.

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5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Measure	POCSO cases	Total crimes against children	POCSO share (%)
Mean (2014–2024)	47,830.9	137,723.2	34.64
Standard deviation	13,866.0	32,057.3	4.48
Minimum	32,608	89,423	25.27
Maximum	69,191	187,702	39.04

The mean number of registered POCSO cases over the eleven-year period was 45,694.9, with a standard deviation of 12,564.5. The minimum occurred in 2017 at 32,608 cases, while the maximum occurred in 2023 at 69,191 cases. The average POCSO share of total registered crimes against children was 34.42%. The share ranged from 25.27% in 2017 to 39.04% in 2022. These figures indicate that POCSO has consistently represented a major component of recorded crimes against children.

5.2 Year-wise Trend Analysis

Year	POCSO cases	Total crimes against children	Annual growth (%)	POCSO share (%)
2014	34,449	89,423	—	38.52
2015	34,505	94,172	0.16	36.64
2016	36,022	106,958	4.40	33.68
2017	32,608	129,032	-9.48	25.27
2018	39,827	141,764	22.14	28.09
2019	47,335	148,185	18.85	31.94
2020	47,221	128,531	-0.24	36.74
2021	53,874	149,404	14.09	36.06
2022	63,414	162,449	17.71	39.04
2023	69,191	177,335	6.75	38.17
2024	69,191	187,702	2.21	36.86

Table 2: NCRB-based national trend and calculated indicators, 2014–2024.

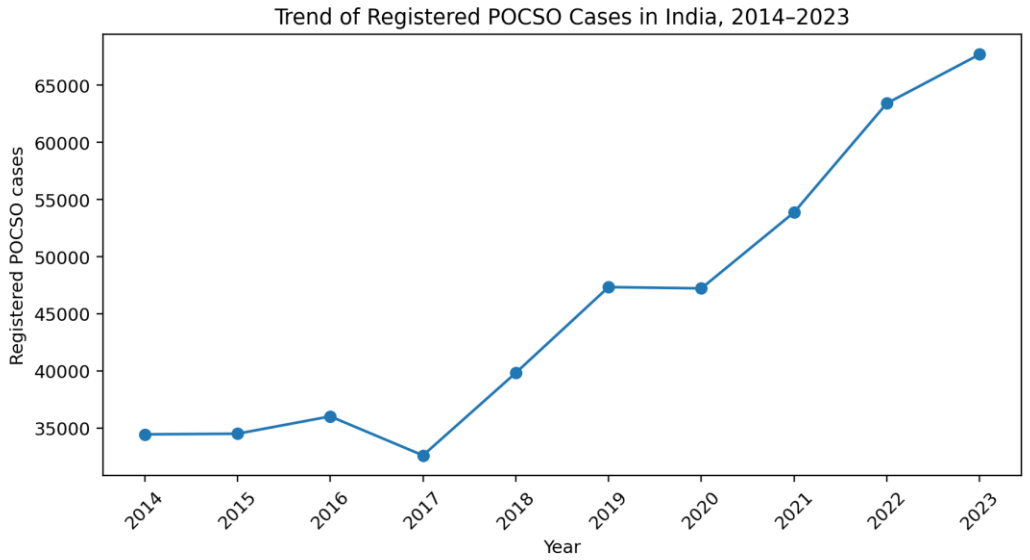


Figure 2: Trend in registered POCSO cases in India, 2014–2024.

The overall trend of the time series is upward, but there is no annual increase. Cases rose slightly from 34,449 in 2014 to 36,022 in 2016, fell to 32,608 in 2017, and then increased to 39,827 in 2018 and 47,335 in 2019. The 2020 figure was almost unchanged at 47,221, followed by increases to 53,874 in 2021, 63,414 in 2022 and 69,191

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in 2023. However, the growth was the strongest after 2017, and 2020 is a period of interruption in the longer-term upward trend.

Across the entire period, registered POCSO cases increased by 100.9% from 34,449 in 2014 to 69,191 in 2024. The annual growth rate of the corresponding compound is about 7.2% per annum. The average growth of registered cases per year in the OLS regression is about 3,987, and the resulting R^2 is 0.909, and p value is <0.001. The Spearman test is also used to determine the correlation between year and registered POCSO cases, which was estimated to be high and positive (rho = 0.936, p = 0.0000). The combination of these tests leads to a confirmation of the H1 hypothesis, which suggests that the eleven-year series has a statistically significant temporal trend upwards.

H2 is descriptively supported. In all the years in the study period, POCSOs accounted for over 25% of all registered child-related crimes, and in 2024, accounted for 36.9%. 69,191 cases falling under POCSO category were 36.9% of 187,702 cases of registered crimes against children (RWCRAC) in 2024. The year-to-year fluctuations – the series has a 9.48 % decrease in 2017, a 0.24 % decrease in 2020 and a 2.21 % increase in 2024 – support the H3. In this way, the long-run trend is rising although annual changes are not necessarily regular.

5.2.1 Statistical Trend Test

The study uses ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression with the independent variable being the calendar year and the dependent variable registered POCSO cases per year to ensure the test of the trend is statistically significant. The model is: $POCSO_t = \alpha + \beta(Year_t) + \varepsilon_t$. The estimated slope is $\beta = 3{,}987$ indicating an estimated mean annual increase of about 3,987 registered cases. The slope of the model is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), and the model explains 90.9% of the variation in the eleven annual observations ($R^2 = 0.909$).

A Spearman rank-correlation test is used as a robustness check since there are few observations available per year. Spearman's rho value is 0.936 with p value 0.0000 showing that the link between year and registered POCSO cases is positive monotonous. A further non-parametric check of the upward ordering is provided by Kendall's tau which is 0.855 with associated p value of 0.0000. This should be treated as a trend test and not as a causal model as the registered cases of POCSO increased over time, but they do not specify which social or institutional factor led to this increase.

Table 3: Statistical Trend Tests

Test	Statistic	p-value	Interpretation
OLS linear trend	Slope = 3,987; R^2 = 0.909	<0.001	Significant positive time trend
Spearman rank correlation	rho = 0.936	0.0000	Strong positive monotonic trend
Kendall rank correlation	tau = 0.855	0.0000	Positive monotonic trend

5.3 Interpretation of the Rise in Registered Cases

The central empirical finding is not a direct measure of the increase in underlying abuse, but rather an increase in the number of cases registered. This is an important distinction to make. A registered-case series may expand if more children identify the abuse in themselves, more parents report abuse, more police records of cases are entered, communities are made more aware of POCSO or previously unknown activities are entered into the criminal-justice system. Meanwhile, an increase may also indicate a real rise in victimisation. These mechanisms cannot be distinguished in available national aggregate data.

The 2020 interruption is evidence of the need to be careful. The number of POCSOs registered from 2019 to 2020 has barely shifted; however, people's social mobility and access to institutions has changed significantly during this period. A quick conclusion that this is due to a reduction in abuse is incorrect. During the period of time, reporting opportunities, access to schools, mobility, family contact and institutional visibility were altered. The number of people who registered observed, however, is not just a reflection of underlying events, but also of the environment in which the registration took place.

5.4 Contributing Factors Identified from the Literature

Family and social environment: Child sexual abuse can take place in situations where children rely on adults for their care and supervision or material support. Some of the factors that are identified as factors of vulnerability are lack of family support and negative family environments as described by the research reviewed by Deb et al. (2018). Additionally, when disclosure is difficult because the alleged offender is trusted and/or a significant source

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of funds, this may make disclosure more challenging. This means that, prevention must be not only a legal deterrent but also provide safe avenues for children to report abuse.

Awareness and reporting: Improving awareness about the POCSO framework and child rights can improve the number of registrations as it helps to make those who witness such incidents more aware and confident that their actions are in line with the framework and will lead to registration.Awareness and reporting: Improving awareness of POCSO and rights of children will increase the number of registrations as it will make children more aware and understand that they should register if they witness such behaviour, and will make institutional responses more robust. Certain offences under POCSO are legally mandates to report, which may shift from private handling to formal reporting. Therefore, the increase in registered cases could be due to increased visibility for an existing issue, rather than a proportional increase in the incidence of the issue.

Children are at greater risk of being exposed to unsafe situations because of socio-economic vulnerability, which can include poverty, insecure housing, lack of community protection, child labour and limited access to support services. Deb et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review and found that risk is not a simple concept, and that income is not the only component of risk. Socio-economic disadvantage can be realized in the form of supervision, access to education, migration, reliance on adults and access to justice.

Digital exposure: Digital communication can provide new avenues for grooming, sexual harassment, coercion and the spread of CSA material. Can also develop evidence and reporting trails. An important implication of the research is that digital exposure should not be taken as a direct cause of an increase in POCSO cases, but rather as a mediating environment. Some factors include digital literacy, parental guidance, platform protection measures, and law enforcement capacity.

Institutional accessibility: The easier it is and the quicker that police, child-protection agencies, schools, hospitals and the courts respond, the more likely that an incident will be registered as a case. Institutions may update reporting processes and registration can increase without any changes in the rate of change. Barriers, stigma or low institutional trust, however, can stifle reporting. Thus, institutional capacity needs to be considered when evaluating the empirical trend.

6. ROLE OF THE POCSO ACT, 2012

The POCSO Act fulfills a few different functions in the child-protection system. One is the establishment of a specific legal approach towards sexual offences against children. The Act provides a definition of penetrative sexual assault, aggravated penetrative sexual assault, sexual assault, aggravated sexual assault, sexual harassment and uses children for sexual pornography. This specificity minimises the need for multiple, overlapping pieces of legislation and creates a law-based framework that is child-centred. (Government of India, 2012).

Secondly, the Act promotes the concept of procedure for the benefit of children. Among the conditions it incorporates is the recording of evidence, protection for the child's contact with the defendant in giving evidence, in-camera trials, and the services of an interpreter or expert. The framework aims to minimise unnecessary harm and to ensure the dignity and privacy of the child. The statutory framework in turn extends beyond punishment; it also considers the way child victims are treated by the justice process.

Third, POCSO establishes an institutional framework with Special Courts. Special Courts for speedy trial of offences under the Act is provided for under Section 28. The Act also contains provisions on the time frame for obtaining evidence and disposing of the case. These mechanisms are in theory capable of bringing reporting and justice closer together. However, in reality the statutory design is judged by the capacity of the court, the availability of court staff, forensic services, the prosecution and the availability of witnesses and infrastructure.

The Act also improves reporting and institutional accountability in the following ways: This makes it easier to spot the abuse, especially if a child cannot go to the police on his or her own. Meanwhile, the mandatory reporting raises the issue of sensitive implementation as children and families may fear that they will have their privacy breached, their family dynamics will be adversely affected, or institutional consequences will follow. The challenge for the policy is then to balance two goals: maintaining a protective mandate and maintaining child sensitive communication and support.

Fifthly, the wider child protection system has grown beyond the scope of the Act. The Ministry of Women & Child Development provides for POCSO Act and Rules along with programmes like Mission Vatsalya and support schemes for victims. This means that child protection cannot be realised without a coordinated response between the law, welfare, rehabilitation and community level services, beyond the criminalisation of the response.

6.1 Implementation Challenges

The first challenge is that of the difference between statutory design and institutional capacity. But only if enough judges, prosecutors, court staff, forensic facilities and case-management systems are on hand, can Special Courts provide timely justice. Delays and different implementation have been reported across jurisdictions in institutional

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assessments. This can pose a danger to a child having to be involved in a prolonged process when the statute aims to make the process child-friendly and time-bound.
The second difficulty has to do with investigations and evidence. Medical examination, forensic evidence, digital evidence, witness statements and sensitive questioning may be vital to the case of child sexual offences. Any delays at any point can impact the quality of the evidence and the length of the child's engagement with the system. Police officers, prosecutors, judges, medical professionals, counsellors and other stakeholders, therefore, are stakeholders in training.
Stigma and disclosure is the third challenge. A child can feel guilty, saddened, or embarrassed; or worried about the reactions of their family and peers. Reporting might be more difficult if the alleged offender is well known to the child or to the child's family. Safe disclosure systems, confidential support and trained staff to communicate with children in an age-appropriate way need to follow legal awareness.
Digital transformation is the fourth challenge. Existing child protection systems should be adapted to address the challenges of online grooming, sharing of harmful content and cross-platform evidence. Technical capacity is needed in order to enforce an effective mechanism, but respecting the child's privacy and dignity. Digital safety education for children, parents and educators should also be considered as an element of prevention.

7. DISCUSSION

The available data confirms that there is a noticeable increasing trend in registered POCSO cases in 2014-2024. The findings are not necessarily interpreted to mean that the POCSO Act is responsible for the rise. Much of the reporting and recording of cases takes place within the institutional environment and the Act predates much of this. The increase could reflect an increase in the recognition and reporting of offences that were not detected before. The study consequently assumes the observed increase in registered cases to be a proxy for the size of the protection and justice workload and acknowledges uncertainty regarding underlying incidence.
The results are similar to those of the general literature which broadly speaking conceptualises child sexual abuse as multi-faceted. The national trend goes hand in hand with social, family, economic, technological and institutional influences that can affect vulnerability and reporting. This implies that a single measure, such as stricter punishment, awareness campaigns, electronic monitoring or simply more courts, is not going to solve all the ways in which abuse can happen or be detected by the justice system.
The whole child protection journey, from prevention and awareness through to disclosure, mandatory reporting, investigation, medical and psychosocial support, prosecution, child friendly adjudication, compensation and rehabilitation, is therefore the best way to understand the role of POCSO. The effectiveness with which these stages are linked will determine the strength of the legal framework. A dedicated statute is required, but it is not enough to ensure uniformity of results in states and districts.

8. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings have implications for policy, law-enforcement agencies, schools, families, courts and researchers.
• Reporting systems should be made accessible, confidential and child-sensitive so that children can disclose abuse without fear or unnecessary exposure.
• Police, prosecutors, judges, medical personnel and counsellors should receive regular specialised training on child-friendly procedures, trauma-sensitive communication and digital evidence.
• Special Courts and related support infrastructure should be adequately staffed and monitored so that statutory time expectations are translated into actual case-management performance.
• Prevention programmes should include age-appropriate personal-safety education, digital-safety education, parental awareness and school-based safeguarding systems.
• Data systems should distinguish, wherever possible, between reporting trends, investigation outcomes, trial outcomes and victim-support indicators so that policymakers do not rely only on case-registration counts.
• Future empirical studies should use state-level panel data to examine how education, poverty, urbanisation, digital access, policing capacity, reporting infrastructure and court capacity are associated with POCSO registration and case outcomes.

9. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

First: The study is based on aggregated administrative data. The registered cases are not the same as the actual prevalence of child sexual abuse cases. The numbers observed may be distorted due to under-reporting and variations in registration practices. Second, the national eleven-year series is rather short, limiting the utility of the regression as a causal model to the overall trend. Thirdly, this study does not directly observe victims, perpetrators, family conditions, and digital exposure and reporting. Fourth, the analysis is not causal and does not allow for state-level comparisons due to differences in state populations, reporting systems and capacities. Finally, the legal analysis is descriptive, and not a judicial scrutiny of the validity or constitutionality of specific provisions.

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10. SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study can be expanded in a number of ways in the future. A panel data set for the state level for multiple years could explore the association between POCSO registration and socio-economic and institutional indicators. An additional study might examine the linkage between awareness programs and reporting. Another useful approach would be to access NCRB data in combination with the data generated by National Judicial Data Grid or Special Court to analyse the status of the cases from the registration to charge-sheet, from the trial to final disposal. Administrative statistics may not show the barriers to child protection as clearly as a qualitative interview with child protection professionals might.

Research is also needed into digital CSE. Further research is possible on the topic of online grooming, the spread of inappropriate content, reporting procedures and the fact that the communication is often encrypted or takes place across platforms, resulting in evidentiary issues. Further distinctions between changes in reporting and changes in victimisation can be made using longitudinal studies. Comparative research between countries could also be used to identify practices in the institutions which enhance the child friendly approach to justice, while also respecting the right of children to due process and child privacy.

11. CONCLUSION

This study reviewed the trend of registered cases of POCSO Act in India from 2014 to 2024 and explored the social, family, economic, digital and institutional factors that may impact child sexual abuse and reporting. The registered POCSO cases increased significantly from 34,449 in 2014 to 69,191 in 2023 and the positive linear trend is statistically significant. POCSO continued to be a significant category of registered crimes against children over the study period.

The study also notes that increased registration should not be considered as a linear translation of increased incidence. The number of cases reported can rise despite a more complex underlying pattern due to improved awareness, disclosure, mandatory reporting and improvement in how cases are recorded. This is, in fact, an interpretation that India has seen a significant rise in the number of children sexually offend and that a growing need exists for children's sexual-offence prevention, investigation, child-friendly justice and rehabilitation.

The POCSO Act is the national law that sets out the framework for addressing this challenge. It has introduced definitions of offences, provisions for reporting, institutional safeguards, and Special Courts to respond to the offence. This framework is effective though, in practice, only if implementation capacity is in place. Assessing and improving reporting mechanisms, training, forensic and investigative capabilities, court support, child support and prevention education can support the translation of statutory protection to practical protection. The study consequently ends by suggesting that the increasing POCSO workload is a measurement problem as well as a child protection and an institutional capacity problem

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