



Youth Crime in Uganda, 2017–2024: Trends and Policy Imperatives

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Abstract

Youth crime is a growing national concern in Uganda, reflecting global patterns and country-specific social and economic pressures. This article presents the first comprehensive national overview of Uganda from 2017–2024, drawing on Uganda Police Annual Crime Reports, JLOS data reports, and complementary statistical sources. Offences committed by young people aged 12–18 and 18–30 including theft, drug and substance abuse, assault, burglary, robbery, and sexual violence have increased notably between 2023 and 2024, particularly in densely populated urban settlements. These patterns mirror deeper structural challenges such as unemployment, poverty, family dysfunction, weak parenting, and widespread child abuse, all of which heighten vulnerability to offending.

With 72.3% of Uganda's population aged 30 and below, the country faces both a demographic opportunity and a heightened risk of youth crime. High youth unemployment, especially in urban centres, contributes to social exclusion, drug use, and conflict with the law. Many youth in conflict with the law are themselves victims of socio-economic hardship, lacking access to education, housing, protection, and legal representation.

The article also reviews justice-sector responses including diversion, community policing, rehabilitation, and reintegration framed through Strain, Social Learning, and Control Theories. It concludes with targeted policy recommendations to strengthen early intervention, rehabilitation, legal safeguards, and multisectoral collaboration to prevent youth and juvenile crime and safeguard Uganda's young population.

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Background

Youth crime remains a significant and evolving challenge in Uganda, shaped by rapid demographic growth, structural inequalities, and limited social protection systems [17]. Youth crime refers to offences committed by young people—typically aged 12 to 30 years—and includes both minor and serious offences such as theft, assault, robbery, drug-related crimes, and homicide. While youth offending is a global concern, evidence shows that its prevalence and harmful consequences are disproportionately higher in low- and middle-income countries, including Uganda, due to poverty, unemployment, rapid urbanisation, and weak institutional support systems [23].

Police crime statistics indicate a notable increase in youth involvement in criminal activity between 2017 and 2024, particularly in urban centres. In Kampala's informal settlements, adolescents and young adults are increasingly engaged in phone theft, drug distribution, gang-related violence, and other street-level offences. These trends reflect deeper socio-economic vulnerabilities, including chronic poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, exposure to violence, and weak community safety nets [6]. Youth crime in this context is therefore best understood as a manifestation of broader structural and systemic failures rather than individual deviance alone.

Uganda's demographic profile intensifies this challenge. According to the 2024 National Population and Housing Census, 72.3% of Uganda's population approximately 33 million people—is aged 30 years and below, presenting both a potential demographic dividend and heightened risk of youth involvement in crime if social and economic inclusion is not achieved (UBOS, 2024). Unemployment remains a key driver, as sustained joblessness significantly increases the likelihood of youth offending [12]. Urban youth unemployment rates are particularly high, contributing to social exclusion, substance use, and engagement in illicit activities.

Family and community environments further compound these risks. The Uganda Violence Against Children Survey identifies homes and neighbourhoods as primary sites of abuse, experiences

strongly associated with later delinquency [16]. Access to justice for young offenders is limited, with prolonged pre-trial detention and inadequate rehabilitation services undermining reintegration [20]. These dynamics underscore the importance of early prevention, diversion, and community-based interventions to reduce youth crime and promote long-term social cohesion.

Methodology

This study adopted a rigorous, policy-oriented methodology to examine youth and juvenile crime trends in Uganda between 2017 and 2024. A convergent mixed-methods design was used, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative contextual interpretation to strengthen validity and relevance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). While qualitative insights helped interpret patterns, the analysis relied primarily on quantitative crime data to assess trends, frequencies, and longitudinal changes.

Data were drawn from authoritative national sources, including Uganda Police Force Annual Crime Reports (2017–2024) and Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS) administrative records (2017–2024). Datasets were systematically reviewed, cleaned, and analysed to examine offence categories, age and gender profiles, spatial distribution, and shifts in justice-system responses over time. Where indicators overlapped across sources, cross-validation was applied to improve internal consistency and analytical reliability. The study largely used administrative data which may have faced underreporting which may bias findings. It acknowledges the critical role of national institutions in generating official crime statistics that enable evidence-based policy analysis.

The study faced several limitations. Crime data were inconsistently disaggregated by age and sex, and varying institutional definitions of “youth” complicated harmonisation and trend analysis. Some datasets captured only partial justice trajectories, limiting assessment of diversion and case outcomes, while the absence of data for the year 2021 created a temporal gap. The analysis relied mainly on administrative records, with limited qualitative perspectives from youth or practitioners. Causal relationships were inferred rather than tested, regional variations were underexplored, gender pathways insufficiently analysed, and long-term rehabilitation outcomes not fully assessed. Some of the gaps may necessitate future research.

Current Interventions to Address Youth Crime in Uganda

Uganda employs a mix of legal, social, economic, and preventive interventions led by government, civil society, and international partners to address rising youth crime. Central to state action is the Uganda Police Force (UPF), mandated to prevent and detect crime, protect life and property, and maintain internal security. In recent years, the UPF has expanded community policing approaches, emphasizing partnerships with local leaders, neighbourhood watch structures, early reporting, and public awareness. Police Annual Crime Reports indicate that these strategies have contributed to improved early detection, reduced youth involvement in high-risk urban hotspots, and strengthened trust between communities and law enforcement [19].

The Police also implement the Diversion Guidelines (2019), which redirect children accused of minor offences away from formal court processes toward counselling, mediation, and community-based rehabilitation. These measures operationalise the Children

(Amendment) Act, 2016 and align with international child rights standards by prioritising rehabilitation over punishment.

At sector level, the Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS) coordinates institutions including the Judiciary, Directorate of Public Prosecutions, Uganda Prisons Service, Uganda Law Reform Commission, and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD). JLOS reforms focus on reducing case backlogs, improving access to justice for vulnerable populations, and strengthening rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders [5]. Through MGLSD, Probation and Social Welfare Officers provide social inquiry reports, supervision, and referrals, while government remand homes and the Kampiringisa National Rehabilitation Centre offer counselling, psychosocial support, basic education, and vocational skills for children in conflict with the law. Social protection and economic interventions complement justice responses. The Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP) provides skills training and interest-free capital to unemployed youth, helping reduce economic drivers of crime. Universal Primary and Secondary Education programmes contribute to crime prevention by keeping children in school longer and enabling early identification of abuse, neglect, and delinquency [17].

Civil society organisations play a critical preventive and rehabilitative role. Legal aid providers such as FIDA-U, LASPNET, and university law clinics support child-friendly justice processes. Organisations like UYDEL deliver integrated prevention education, psychosocial support, vocational training, and reintegration services for high-risk youth in urban informal settlements. International partners, notably UNODC and UNICEF, support legal reforms, diversion systems, probation services, and community-based prevention. Despite measurable progress, coverage remains uneven and coordination gaps persist, underscoring the need for more integrated, youth-centred, and evidence-driven responses to sustainably reduce youth crime in Uganda.

Findings

This section presents key findings on juvenile and youth crime trends in Uganda between 2017 and 2024, highlighting patterns, fluctuations, and emerging risks across offence categories.

Juvenile crime trends (2017–2024)

Juvenile Crime Trends (Ages 12–18 Years):

Analysis of Uganda Police Force and Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS) data reveals fluctuating yet persistent patterns of juvenile offending between 2017 and 2024. Reported cases across multiple offence categories varied over time but did not show a sustained decline, indicating ongoing structural drivers of juvenile crime.

As shown in Table 1, theft accounts for the largest share of juvenile offences (2,153 cases), followed by sexual offences (971 cases) and breaking-related offences (583 cases). The marked decline in reported offences in 2020 across nearly all categories corresponds with COVID-19 containment measures, which restricted mobility, disrupted social interaction, and affected crime reporting and justice system operations. Following the easing of restrictions, offence levels rebounded, suggesting that the 2020 decline was temporary rather than indicative of a long-term reduction in juvenile offending (Table 1).

Table 1: Juvenile crimes across categories in Uganda (2017-2024).

Crime Categories	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022	2023	2024	Total
Homicide	3	3	1	4	0	1	3	14
Economic Crimes	5	15	12	1	8	4	1	46
Sex Related Offences	174	240	188	160	58	103	48	971
Child Related Offences	3	4	9	2	4	7	2	31
Breakings	68	85	118	53	60	117	82	583
Thefts	409	375	415	154	209	405	186	2153
Robberies	9	24	17	16	17	28	8	119
Assaults	112	60	45	35	21	24	22	319
Other Crimes in General	128	128	105	172	75	158	51	817
Terrorism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Political/Media Offences	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	3
Corruption	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Narcotics/Drugs	18	27	56	9	29	15	18	172
Other Laws**	20	73	27	17	48	68	37	290
TOTAL	1035	993	993	623	531	930	458	4563

Source: Uganda Police Force Annual Crime Reports, and JLOS (2017-2024).

Table 2: Juvenile offenders (charged) by Capital Crimes.

Crime categories	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022	2023	2024
Homicide	43	40	38	38	30	27	45
Sex related Offences	445	545	547	479	443	520	299
Robberies	68	112	142	88	118	168	140
Terrorism	0	0	0	0	0	12	0
Narcotics/Drugs	54	96	146	30	137	64	131

Capital offences among juveniles

Table 2 presents the distribution of juveniles charged with capital offences, offering insight into serious crime patterns and the justice system's response to high-risk juvenile offending. Although capital offences account for a smaller proportion of total juvenile crime, they represent significant protection and rehabilitation concerns due to their severity and long-term implications.

Sex-related offences constitute the largest category of capital charges among juveniles throughout the period under review, though reported cases show a gradual decline after 2020. A possible link to exploitation and reporting dynamic may be occur. This decline may reflect improved prevention, reporting changes during the COVID-19 period, or increased use of diversion mechanisms. In contrast, narcotics-related offences display notable spikes in 2019 and again in 2024, suggesting rising youth exposure to drug markets and the emergence of new substances, particularly in urban settings. Robbery offences fluctuate across the years, reflecting changing urban risk environments, while homicide cases remain comparatively low but increase again in 2024, warranting closer monitoring.

Conviction trends broadly mirror offence patterns, with a sharp decline in 2020 followed by relative stabilisation in subsequent years. Overall convictions fell substantially from 949 in 2017 to 458 in 2024, and the proportion of juvenile convictions within national totals declined from 5% to 2%. This trend likely indicates expanded use of diversion and non-custodial measures, in line with child-justice reforms. However, it may also signal ongoing challenges related to case preparation, evidentiary standards, and child-sensitive

investigations. Taken together, these findings underscore the urgent need to strengthen early prevention, child protection systems, specialised rehabilitation, and drug-use prevention to address the underlying drivers of serious juvenile offending (Table 2).

Diversion and child-friendly justice

Diversion and child-friendly justice uphold children's rights to protection and fair treatment under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules, 1985), and Uganda's Children (Amendment) Act, 2016.

Diversion rates have remained above 70% since 2017/18, peaking at 77% in 2023/24. Total diversions increased from 696 to 879, reflecting strengthened child-friendly justice practices. Males consistently represent the majority of diverted cases, although female involvement is slowly increasing. These trends highlight improved justice-sector responsiveness but also reveal gendered patterns in offending and detection.

Table 3 presents trends in the diversion of children from the formal criminal justice system between 2017 and 2024, illustrating the scale, consistency, and gender patterns of child-friendly justice practices in Uganda over time (Table 3).

Comparative trends: Thefts, sex-related offences, and narcotics

Thefts remained the most prevalent juvenile offence throughout the study period, peaking in 2023 before declining. Sex-related offences, while consistently high, show a steady reduction after 2019.

Table 3: Diversion of children from the criminal Justice System (2017-2024).

Year	Diversion Rate (%)	Male	Female	Total
2017/18	75%	549	147	696
2019/20	72%	590	150	740
2021/22	71%	593	167	760
2022/23	71%	–	–	–
2023/24 Target	75%	–	–	–
2023/24 Actual	77%	709	170	879

Source: Uganda Police Force Annual Crime Reports, and JLOS (2017-2024), Author's analysis.

Table 4: Youth charged by nature of crime over the years (2017-2024).

Crime categories	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022	2023	2024
Homicide	28	47	44	32	1	41	0
Economic Crimes	854	992	1007	498	324	1216	282
Sex Related Offences	569	794	896	750	166	952	125
Child Related Offences	206	243	279	153	76	257	45
Breakings	1540	1901	1938	1569	847	2689	650
Thefts	7822	9008	9198	5644	4691	12548	4084
Robberies	227	404	361	305	117	545	136
Assaults	2231	2717	2714	1912	1018	2695	941
Other Crimes in General	5318	6744	5729	8282	3901	7235	3226
Terrorism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Political/Media Offences	9	26	8	112	12	7	0
Corruption	0	0	2	1	0	0	0
Narcotics/Drugs	806	1287	1327	633	842	1681	925
Other Laws**	2377	2497	2232	1274	2382	3123	1276
TOTAL	38760	26660	25735	21165	14377	32989	11690

Source: Uganda Police Force Annual Crime Reports (2017-2024), Author's analysis.

In contrast, narcotics-related offences recorded sharp increases in 2019 and again in 2024, indicating rising youth exposure to drug availability, use, or trafficking.

Between 2017 and 2024, Uganda experienced an overall decline in juvenile charges and convictions, with a pronounced disruption in 2020 linked to COVID-19 restrictions. Despite expanded diversion practices, persistent gaps between charges and convictions suggest ongoing challenges in investigation quality and case processing.

Youth Crime in Uganda, 2017-2024

This section examines the nature of crime, rates of convictions, offences, narcotics, homicides among others. It seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the authors analysis based on the available data from official publications. The table below shows youth aged 18-35 charged by nature of crime over the years 2017-2024.

Youth charged by nature of crime over the years

Trends in offences for youth aged 18–35 charged by crime category in Uganda from 2017–2024.

Table 4 shows that thefts and breakings dominate youth crime across all years, peaking sharply in 2023. Narcotics-related offences rise markedly, indicating growing youth exposure to drug markets. Most categories decline in 2020, reflecting COVID-19 disruptions, but rebound unevenly thereafter. Overall, trends highlight persistent property crime and emerging drug-related risks among youth aged 18–35.

Youth charged vs convicted

We compared the number of youths charged with offences to those ultimately convicted, highlighting trends in the justice process and outcomes as shown in figure 2.

Charges consistently exceed convictions because many cases are withdrawn, dismissed, or discontinued. Detailed data capture would narrow this gap. It reflects weaknesses in prosecution, evidence management, and delayed justice, contributing to prison congestion, rising costs, recidivism, JLOS staff burnout, and declining public trust in justice institutions.

Sex-related crimes

Tracking youth convictions for sex-related crimes is crucial for understanding patterns of sexual violence, accountability, and justice delivery in Uganda. Male convictions consistently dominate, peaking at 945 in 2023 before a sharp decline to 124 in 2024, possibly due to underreporting or delayed prosecutions. Female convictions remain extremely low, with a brief rise in 2019 before dropping to 1 in 2024. The overall decline after 2020 highlights weak evidence collection, limited survivor protection, and the need for strengthened prosecution-led investigations (Figure 3).

Narcotics crimes

Youth involvement in narcotics offences in Uganda (2017–2024), as defined under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Control) Act, 2024, reflects rising substance abuse and its broader social risks. These cases reveal vulnerabilities linked to unemployment,

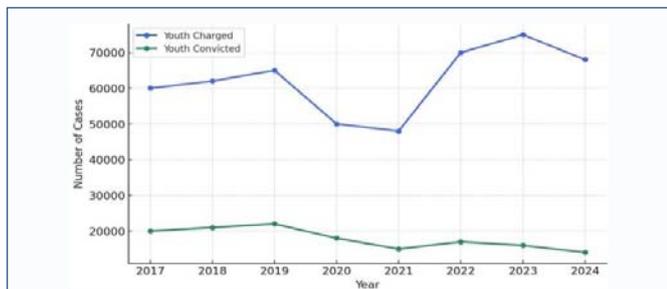


Figure 1: Youth charged vs convicted (2017-2024).

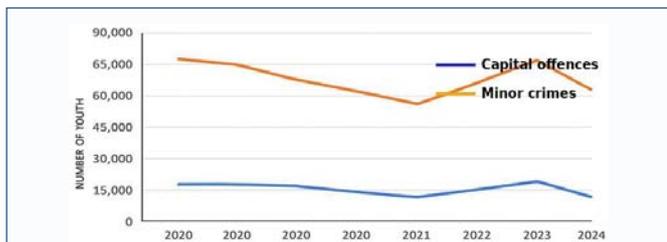


Figure 2: Youth charge by nature of crime over the years (2017-2024).

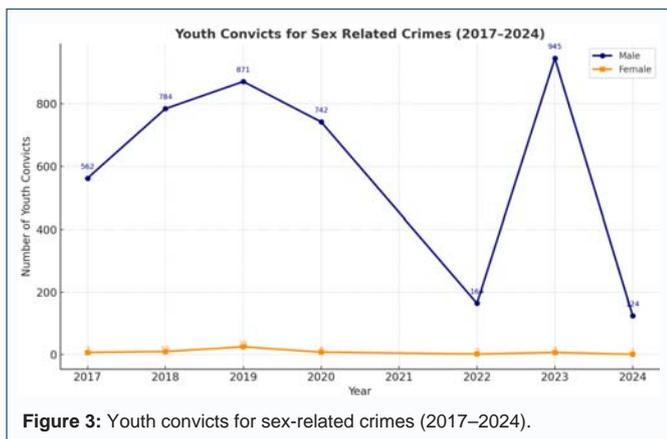


Figure 3: Youth convicts for sex-related crimes (2017–2024).

peer influence, and trafficking networks, which often fuel secondary crimes such as theft and violence.

The data shows a sharp rise in narcotics-related charges among male youth, increasing from 2,132 in 2017 to 5,509 in 2024. Female cases remain low but notable. These trends underscore the urgent need for targeted prevention, rehabilitation, and strengthened drug-control interventions (Figure 4).

Youth convictions for homicide

Homicide among Ugandan youth reflects deep social vulnerabilities, including poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, and weak protection systems, posing serious risks to community safety. Youth homicide convictions remain consistently lower than charges, highlighting a persistent justice gap. Male convictions dominate throughout the period, peaking at over 450 cases in 2019, while female convictions remain minimal. Convictions declined sharply after 2020, reaching approximately 240 cases in 2024, partly due to COVID-19 disruptions, delayed prosecutions, and limited witness protection. While the decline may indicate some diversion or prevention gains, it also points to systemic weaknesses in adjudication. Persistent homicide involvement underscores the need for strengthened court processes, targeted prevention, and

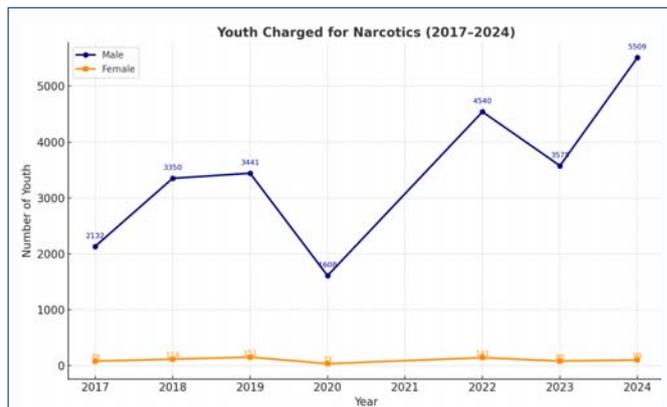


Figure 4: Source: Uganda Police Force Annual crime reports (2017-2024).

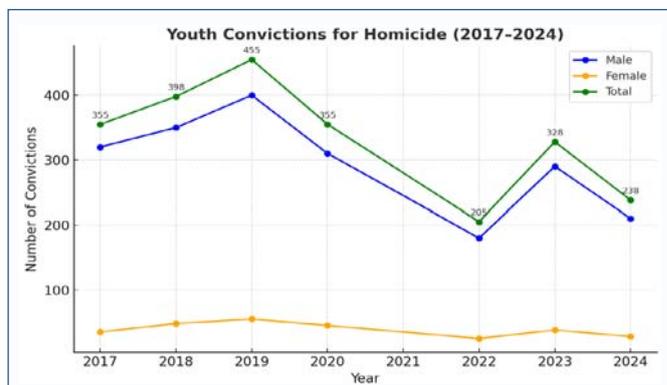


Figure 5: Youths Convictions for Homicide in Uganda (2017-2024).

rehabilitation particularly for at-risk young men; see figure 5.

Minor crimes in Uganda

Minor offences among Ugandan youth between 2017 and 2024 remain widespread, often driven by poverty, peer influence, and unemployment, highlighting the urgent need for preventive measures and community-based rehabilitation (Table 5).

Minor crimes form the largest share of youth offences in Uganda, with thefts consistently exceeding 25,000 cases annually and peaking in 2023. Breakings, assaults, and economic crimes also remain high, reflecting poverty and unemployment pressures. These offences strain the justice system and drive overall youth crime trends. Addressing minor crimes through early, community-based prevention is essential to reduce escalation.

Youth crime patterns and justice outcomes in Uganda (2017–2024)

Analysis of Uganda police force annual crime reports (2017–2024) shows that youth offenders constitute a substantial proportion of individuals in conflict with the law, with involvement spanning both minor and capital offences. across all crime categories, the number of youths charged consistently exceeded those convicted. This gap reflects cases that were withdrawn, dismissed, discontinued, remained pending, indicating limitations in prosecution, evidence management, and case processing. theft-related charges remained particularly high, with over 28,000 cases recorded in 2024, while convictions declined sharply to 4,084.

Minor offences dominated youth crime throughout the period. Thefts, breakings, and assaults consistently accounted for the largest

Table 5: Youth offenders categorized by Minor crimes (2017-2024).

Crime Categories	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022	2023	2024	Total by Case
Economic Crimes	3,004	3,419	3,612	2,331	2,837	3,918	2,727	21,848
Child Related Offences	752	824	860	665	699	1,083	718	5,601
Breakings	6,233	7,306	7,690	5,646	7,483	9,177	7,023	50,558
Thefts	25,314	26,461	27,958	18,583	28,358	35,742	28,264	190,680
Assaults	7,696	8,762	8,776	7,329	7,062	8,436	7,728	55,789
Other Crimes in General	17,423	20,072	20,134	22,746	19,474	22,599	21,563	144,011
Political/Media Offences	70	258	110	1,011	106	97	49	1,701
Corruption	6	2	7	4	0	2	2	23
Narcotics/Drugs	2,210	3,464	3,592	1,641	4,681	3,655	5,608	24,851
Other Laws**	3,664	4,008	3,642	2,487	7,513	4,951	3,562	29,827
Grand Total	66,372	74,576	76,381	62,443	78,213	89,660	77,244	524,889

Source: Uganda Police Force Annual Crime Reports (2017-2024).

share of cases, often exceeding 70,000 annually and peaking in 2023. These offences showed fluctuations between 2020 and 2022, likely influenced by covid-19 restrictions and changes in law enforcement activity. Although classified as minor, these offences shaped overall youth crime trends and placed sustained pressure on the justice system.

Capital offences, while fewer in number, revealed distinct patterns. Sex-related offences were the most prevalent capital crime among youth, consistently exceeding 5,000 cases annually and accounting for more than 40,000 cases across the period. Narcotics and drug-related offences increased markedly, reaching 5,608 cases in 2024, making them the fastest-growing category. Robbery cases rose steadily until 2023, while homicide cases declined after 2019 before increasing slightly in 2024. Terrorism-related offences remained low but showed isolated increases.

Conviction trends indicate that minor offences accounted for most youth convictions, while conviction rates for capital offences particularly sex- and child-related crimes remained below 30%. Capital convictions declined further in 2024, highlighting persistent challenges in adjudication and case completion.

Cases taken to court vs cases dismissed

Cases taken to court increased steadily between 2017 and 2024, rising from 66,626 to 81,750, while dismissed cases fluctuated and generally remained below 12,000. Dismissals declined sharply during the COVID-19 period before rising again after 2022. Although the overall proportion of dismissed cases remained relatively low, their persistence points to challenges such as arrests made before sufficient evidence is gathered, weaknesses in investigation quality, evidence management, and prosecutorial follow-up. Continued improvements in case preparation and coordination across justice institutions are necessary to sustain efficiency and reduce unnecessary case attrition.

Community servicing punishment trends

Community service punishment trends in Uganda highlight the justice system's growing use of non-custodial sentences to ease prison congestion and promote rehabilitation (Community Service Act, Cap 115). This shift toward restorative justice helps young offenders reform, remain accountable, and reintegrate positively within their communities. Community service sentencing in Uganda fluctuated between 2017 and 2024, peaking at 24% in 2020 likely due to COVID-19 restrictions on prison operations. As total convictions

rose above 27,000 in 2023, community service also peaked at 5,341 cases. However, its sharp decline to 8% in 2024 indicates a shift back to custodial sentences. Narcotics offences received community service more often than robberies. Expanding non-custodial options could ease prison congestion for non-violent offenders.

Recidivism and youth crime in Uganda

A critical indicator of justice-system effectiveness in Uganda, with 3,266 repeat offenders recorded by 2024. Reoffending declined in 2020 due to COVID-19 disruptions but increased from 2022, reflecting post-pandemic pressures such as unemployment and drug use. Juveniles (12–18 years) mainly reoffend through minor survival-related offences, while youth (18–35 years) dominate narcotics, robbery, and sex-related offences. Peaks in 2019 and 2023 were driven largely by male youth. Persistent reoffending highlights weak aftercare, limited psychosocial support, and inadequate reintegration pathways, underscoring the need for coordinated rehabilitation-focused responses. In future, one needs to quantify recidivism rates relative to total convictions so as to contextualise scale.

Prison population and youth crime dynamics in Uganda

Uganda's prison data show clear age and gender disparities, with young people forming the largest share of inmates. In 2024, 75% of prisoners were aged 18–35, reflecting the impact of unemployment, poverty, weak family systems, and limited social protection. Women, though less than 5% of inmates, represent a steadily growing group linked to gendered vulnerabilities and survival crimes. These trends underscore the urgent need for youth-focused prevention, rehabilitation, and restorative justice strategies.

Discussion

This study analyzed juvenile and youth crime trends in Uganda between 2017 and 2024 using data from the Uganda Police Force and the Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS). The findings reveal fluctuating yet persistent patterns of youth offending, shaped by socio-economic pressures, justice-sector reforms, and external shocks most notably the COVID-19 pandemic. The sharp decline in reported crime in 2020 coincided with movement restrictions and reduced court operations, followed by a resurgence from 2022 as unemployment, economic hardship, and social instability intensified.

Across both juveniles (12–17 years) and youth (18–35 years), males consistently accounted for the majority of offences, although female involvement while lower showed gradual increases,

particularly in theft- and sex-related offences. This trend reflects changing gendered vulnerabilities, survival strategies, and exposure to exploitation. Minor offences dominate the youth crime profile, with thefts, breakings, assaults, and general offences accounting for the largest share of cases. These offences are closely linked to poverty, unemployment, peer influence, and weak community support systems. Although often categorised as low-level crime, their high-volume places sustained pressure on the justice system and increases the risk of escalation when early prevention and diversion are absent.

Capital offences, though fewer, raise serious public safety and protection concerns. Sex-related offences remain the most prevalent capital crimes among juveniles and youth, underscoring persistent risks of sexual abuse, exploitation, and harmful gender norms. Despite a gradual decline after 2020, low conviction rates point to weaknesses in survivor-centred investigations, evidence management, and witness protection. Narcotics-related offences emerged as the fastest-growing category, with notable spikes in 2019 and 2024, signalling increased youth exposure to substance use, trafficking, and organised crime networks. Robbery trends fluctuated alongside urban economic pressures, while homicide cases though comparatively low rose again in 2024, reflecting ongoing structural vulnerabilities.

A central finding is the persistent gap between charges and convictions across offence categories. While convictions declined steadily over the period, this trend reflects both expanded diversion and systemic challenges in investigation, prosecution, and adjudication. Low conviction rates particularly for sex- and child-related offences risk undermining survivor confidence, public trust, and deterrence. These justice gaps also contribute to prison congestion, rising costs, staff burnout, and repeat offending. Uganda's diversion and child-friendly justice reforms represent a notable strength. Diversion rates exceeded 70%, peaking at 77% in 2023/24, aligning with international child-rights standards. However, limited aftercare, weak psychosocial support, and inadequate reintegration pathways undermine long-term outcomes. Recidivism data show juveniles often reoffend through survival-related crimes, while older youth dominate repeat involvement in narcotics, robbery, and sex-related offences.

These findings are well explained by Strain Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Control Theory. Economic deprivation and blocked opportunities generate strain; peer environments normalise delinquency; and weakened family, school, and community bonds reduce informal social control. Together, these dynamics confirm that youth crime in Uganda is fundamentally a structural and developmental challenge rather than isolated individual deviance.

Youth Crime in Uganda: Regional Trends and Lessons from Sub-Saharan Africa

Uganda's youth crime trends mirror patterns observed across several low- and middle-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa, notably Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa. In Kenya and Tanzania, youth offending is similarly dominated by property-related crimes such as theft and break-ins, alongside rising drug-related offences linked to urban unemployment, informal settlements, and expanding illicit markets (UNODC, 2023; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Tanzania Police Force, 2021). Uganda's post-2019 increase in narcotics offences aligns with regional evidence of growing availability of synthetic and emerging substances (UNODC, 2023).

South Africa reports higher absolute crime levels, yet shows comparable dynamics: disproportionate youth involvement in violent

and property crimes, persistent gaps between arrests and convictions, and high recidivism driven by poverty, inequality, and substance use (Statistics South Africa, 2022; Dissel & Kollapen, 2019). Across all four countries, COVID-19 restrictions temporarily reduced reported crime and court activity, followed by post-pandemic rebounds. The shared expansion of diversion and non-custodial measures reflects regional commitments to child-friendly justice, while weak aftercare systems remain a common constraint [24].

Conclusion

Youth and juvenile crime in Uganda reflects deep structural vulnerabilities rather than isolated criminal behaviour. While diversion and child-friendly justice reforms have reduced reliance on custodial responses, persistent reoffending, rising drug-related crime, and gaps between charges and convictions reveal the limits of justice-only solutions. Effective crime reduction requires an integrated policy approach that combines early prevention, sustained diversion, and socio-economic reform. Strengthening education access, youth employment, mental-health and substance-use services, and community-based aftercare must accompany justice-sector reforms. Aligning prevention, rehabilitation, and social protection is essential to transform Uganda's demographic pressure into a dividend and ensure safer, more resilient communities.

Recommendations

Policy-level. Uganda should develop and implement a comprehensive national crime-prevention strategy that integrates justice, health, education, and social protection. Crime-prevention and legal-literacy education should be expanded within schools and tertiary institutions. The establishment of drug courts is recommended to divert youth involved in substance-related offences into treatment and rehabilitation rather than incarceration. The minimum age of criminal responsibility should be raised from 12 to 14 years in line with international standards. Youth-friendly mental health, substance-use, and rehabilitation services should be strengthened, and non-custodial sentencing and diversion expanded for non-violent offences.

Institutional level. Justice institutions should strengthen case handling, investigation quality, and prosecution readiness, particularly for sex- and child-related offences. Investment in digital crime-record and case-tracking systems is essential to reduce case attrition and improve accountability. A national youth crime database disaggregated by age, gender, offence type, and case outcome should be established. Stronger coordination among the Police, Directorate of Public Prosecutions, Judiciary, Prisons Service, and civil society organisations is critical to closing justice gaps.

Community-level. Community-based prevention must be scaled up through community policing, mentorship, diversion, and gender-responsive programmes. Public awareness campaigns via radio, television, schools, and neighbourhood structures should address substance use, sexual violence, and legal literacy. Safe spaces, psychosocial support, and positive youth development initiatives such as sports, arts, and vocational training are essential to reduce vulnerability. Youth employment, reintegration, and aftercare programmes should be prioritised to reduce recidivism and support long-term rehabilitation.

Research Recommendations

Future research should prioritise understanding pathways into narcotics and organised crime, gendered trajectories of offending

and victimisation, and the role of unemployment, substance use, and peer networks in repeat offending. Studies should examine why diversion succeeds for some youth but fails for others, and how justice processes shape long-term outcomes. Applying phenomenological and participatory methods cantering youths lived experiences will generate deeper insights into crime, rehabilitation, and reintegration, strengthening evidence for prevention-focused, youth-centred policy and programming.

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