



THE INTERNATIONAL
LEGAL FOUNDATION



Holistic Legal Aid: A Proven Model for Child Justice in Tunisia

Overview of Findings

MAY 2026



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC



Royaume des Pays-Bas

Introduction

For more than two decades, the ILF has been at the forefront of global efforts to advance rule of law and equal access to justice. Established in 2001, the ILF is the leading global advocate for the right to legal aid in criminal cases. Our mission is to make justice a reality for poor people by fighting to guarantee high-quality legal representation for everyone arrested or detained. Around the world, we provide criminal defense services and build sustainable, effective legal aid institutions. The ILF's work is carried out through locally led legal aid offices, ensuring that programs are grounded in national expertise while connected to a shared global model and standard of excellence.

Although Tunisia's Constitution guarantees the right to legal representation and the right to a fair trial, in practice, these protections remain out of reach for the vast majority of people. The ILF was established in Tunisia to help close this gap between law and practice. Our female led team is made up of 7 lawyers, an in-house social worker, and other support staff providing services across Tunis, Kasserine, Kairouan, and Sfax. Since opening in 2015, the ILF has defended hundreds of accused persons across Tunisia and has become a national leader in criminal defense, advancing a people-centered approach to justice that strengthens fairness, accountability, and public trust.

In 2020, in partnership with UNICEF, the ILF opened the first specialized legal aid offices for children in conflict with law. The ILF's model redefines legal aid by integrating early access to counsel with strong, sustained advocacy and multidisciplinary support. At the core of this model is an integrated team of specially trained defense lawyers and a social worker who work together from the moment of arrest through case resolution and beyond to provide comprehensive support to children in conflict with the law--connecting clients to services such as vocational training, mental health support, family assistance, and support for legal issues beyond their criminal case. This approach has achieved tangible and scalable systemic changes for children including reducing pretrial detention, reducing carceral sentences, reducing recidivism, and improving life outcome through connection with mental health services, education, job skills, and other critical services.

The evidence is clear: when children in conflict with the law receive specialized, multidisciplinary support, outcomes improve significantly for both the child and the justice system, and cycles of harm can be broken.

The Reality of Children in the Tunisian Justice System: Vulnerability Requiring Enhanced Support

Across Tunisia, children come into contact with the criminal justice system primarily because they are growing up in conditions of compounded vulnerability. Poverty, school exclusion, family instability, and experiences of abuse or neglect intersect to push children into conflict with the law. They are still developing cognitively, emotionally, and socially, and require specialized justice responses delivered by professionals trained in child development and equipped to address both legal needs and underlying vulnerabilities.

In partnership with UNICEF, the ILF provided legal representation to 224 children in 245 cases between March 2024 and May 2025. Data from these cases provides a clear picture of the overlapping and reinforcing vulnerabilities that shape children's pathways into the justice system:

89%

Had no prior contact with the justice system. Most children's contact with the criminal justice system does not reflect a pattern of risky behaviors, but rather their first and often preventable entry point.

45%

Had experienced abuse or neglect, underscoring how the justice system is often criminalizing children already carrying deep social scars, rather than addressing root causes of their behavior.

24%

Were enrolled in school at the time of arrest, a rate far below national average. Boys represented were disproportionately disengaged from education, with 82% of boys not enrolled, compared to 47% of girls.

85%

Came from economically vulnerable households suggesting that many children grow up in conditions with limited access to basic needs, education, and social support, increasing their exposure to risk and reducing protective buffers. None of the families of children served in this project could be categorized as having more than sufficient resources to meet essential needs.

In practice, children are processed through systems that do not fully account for their unique needs. While many dedicated justice actors and service providers are working to support them, legal aid is frequently inaccessible and limited to courtroom representation, and lack of specialized, child-centered knowledge and tools and gaps in sector-wide coordination mean children do not consistently receive the comprehensive support they need. Some fall through the cracks entirely, while stigma further limits access to services. As a result, the system too often defaults to punitive responses rather than protective ones. Detention remains widely used, despite its well-documented harms—disrupting education, exposing children to violence and stigma, and weakening critical family and community ties, ultimately risking further harm to children who are already vulnerable instead of addressing the root causes of their involvement in the justice system.

Saber's Story

A boy from a low-income household came into contact with the justice system after a neighborhood altercation was escalated into a criminal case. Living with his widowed mother and siblings, the child had no prior history of delinquent behavior but was struggling with financial hardship and grief at the loss of his father. When the ILF took the case, its legal team discovered that the child was below the age of criminal responsibility at the time of the incident—a critical fact that had been overlooked before the case was referred to court. The case was dismissed, but the ILF's support did not end there. Through a holistic approach, the child was referred for psychological care, and the family was connected to education-related financial assistance and long-term state support programs that they had previously been unable to access. Today, the child remains in school, is progressing academically, and is receiving the social and emotional support needed to help prevent future contact with the justice system.

A Proven, Scalable, Child-Centered Solution

The holistic legal aid model is an integrated team of specially trained defense lawyers and social workers who work together from the moment of arrest through case resolution and beyond. This coordinated team approach ensures that each child's case is understood not only in legal terms, but also that the child's individual, social, educational, and psychological circumstances are fully considered in legal proceedings, and that sustained support is delivered through referrals to relevant services including Tunisia's social protection programs.

- Specialized legal defense ensures children's rights are protected at every stage of the process and that detention is used only as a last resort.
- Dedicated social work support identifies underlying vulnerabilities and connects children and their families to appropriate services.
- Coordinated advocacy enables lawyers to pursue diversion, mediation, and non-custodial measures that support rehabilitation rather than punishment.

Beyond basic legal representation, it is a model designed and proven to address the full reality of a child's life, aligning fair and child-centered justice outcomes with long-term well-being, rehabilitation, reintegration, reducing the risk of reoffending, and strengthening resilience.



Delivering Results: Better Outcomes for Children and the Justice System

Reducing Detention

Holistic legal representation helped children to remain in their communities and pursue opportunities for education and rehabilitation, and to avoid the traumas of detention.

70% of children were released pretrial as a result of ILF representation (out of the number of children held in detention at the time representation was initiated).

77% of concluded cases resulted in children avoiding detention through mediation, alternative sanctions, or dismissal of charges.

Preventing Recidivism

Child-centered holistic legal aid reduces future contact with the criminal justice system which has lasting benefits for children, their families and our society as a whole.

91% of the 224 children represented had not been rearrested as of 31 August 2025.

Connecting Children with Services

Holistic legal aid goes beyond the courtroom by connecting children to critical services that address their underlying needs and support their long-term reintegration.

132

children received direct social work support.

41%

were referred to psychosocial services

18%

were connected to education or vocational training

Ensuring Justice at All Stages of the Case

Decisions made at every stage of a case can fundamentally change a child's outcome and future. Effective legal representation at every state of a case, including appeal, is essential to correct errors, reduce harmful sentences, and ensure that justice systems deliver fair, proportionate, and child-centered outcomes.

51%

The percentage of favorable rulings obtained on appeal. These rulings included mediation, case dismissal on merits, alternative sanctions replacing custodial sentences, and sentences reduced or replaced with time already served.

Hatem's Story

After months of bullying at school, a boy reacted impulsively and was charged with assaulting a teacher. When the International Legal Foundation (ILF) took his case, the team recognized his actions as the result of distress, not criminal intent. Through a holistic approach, the ILF pursued mediation with the teacher while facilitating a psychosocial assessment and advocating for alternatives to detention. As trust was built, the teacher agreed to mediation, leading to the dismissal of all charges. The ILF also connected the boy with psychological support and vocational training aligned with his interests. Today, he is stable, confident, and engaged in learning a trade, with no further contact with the justice system.

Recommendations

The ILF's holistic legal aid model implemented in partnership with UNICEF has shown that combining specialized legal expertise with social support reduces reliance on detention, improves outcomes, promotes long-term well-being, and relieves pressure on already overburdened courts and detention centers.

Key Recommendations

- **Adopt and scale an institutional, holistic legal aid model** that combines legal defense with social and psychological support as a core component of the justice system.
- **Ensure early access to holistic legal representation.** Some critical ways to do this:
 - Establish a formal referral mechanism for legal aid. Direct referral of children to specialized defense lawyers from the time of arrest would ensure more children receive legal representation at the earliest stage of proceedings, reducing harms associated with justice system involvement.
 - Ensure immediate access to legal counsel at the point of arrest, including clear protocols and training for law enforcement.
 - Introduce early notification mechanisms so lawyers are alerted as soon as a child is detained, reducing unlawful or unnecessary detention.
- **Expand the use of diversion and non-custodial measures,** including mediation and parental supervision, in line with the principle that detention is a last resort.
- **Improve services and stakeholder coordination** to address the root causes of justice system contact and recidivism and to better implement mediation, diversion, and alternatives to incarceration:
 - Prioritize school retention and reintegration. The strong link between school dropout and justice system involvement indicates an urgent need for early and targeted interventions that help children remain in or return to school, especially for boys. Expanding access to vocational training programs and second-chance schools can provide practical pathways for youth who have already left.

- Strengthen social protection for vulnerable families. Expanding access to programs such as Amen Social and improving support for families with unstable livelihoods can reduce the economic pressures that contribute to school dropout, child labor and other risks that increase exposure to the justice system.
- Strengthen coordination with Child Protection Delegates (DPEs) to ensure children in conflict with the law are systematically referred to protection services where appropriate.
- Support holistic case management, linking children to psychosocial care, family mediation, and long-term protection mechanisms.

Contact us



www.theilf.org



www.unicef.org/tunisia



info@ilf-t.org



adeliege@unicef.org

ILF

THE INTERNATIONAL
LEGAL FOUNDATION

unicef 
for every child