

Governance Capacity and Subnational Variation in Child Protection: Evidence from Indonesia's Index

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Abstract. *This study aims to analyze governance capacity and subnational variation in child protection performance in Indonesia based on the Child Protection Index, Child Rights Fulfillment Index, and Special Child Protection Index. The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design covering 38 Indonesian provinces, using descriptive statistics, quadrant analysis, correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression. The findings reveal substantial variation in child protection achievements across provinces, with out-of-school children emerging as the most consistent structural vulnerability factor negatively affecting the Special Child Protection Index. Stunting and child poverty also show negative relationships, although their effects are weaker than the education-related factor. These findings indicate that child protection performance is not determined solely by national policy frameworks, but also by local government capacity to integrate education, health, social, legal, and child protection services. The implication is that local governments need to strengthen integrated child protection systems, prioritize out-of-school children, and use accurate data to design more responsive and equitable child protection policies.*

Keywords: *Child Protection; Governance Capacity; Out-Of-School Children; Special Child Protection; Subnational Variation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Child protection is one of the important issues in public administration because it is directly related to the state's capacity to guarantee basic rights, provide public services, and protect vulnerable groups. In the development of public governance studies, child protection is no longer understood merely as a legal, family, or social welfare issue, but as part of a public service system that requires cross-sectoral coordination. Children face various forms of vulnerability, including violence, exploitation, poverty, malnutrition, limited access to education, and weak protection within their immediate social environment. These conditions indicate that child protection cannot be addressed by a single institution alone, but requires the integrated involvement of the education, health, social, legal, and local government sectors (Gilbert et al., 2009; Hillis et al., 2016; OECD, 2021).

From a public administration perspective, the effectiveness of child protection is strongly influenced by governance capacity. Governance capacity refers to the ability of public institutions to formulate policies, manage resources, build coordination, implement programs, and evaluate policy outcomes. Wu et al. (2015) explain that policy capacity consists of analytical, operational, and political dimensions. These three dimensions are highly relevant to child protection. Analytical capacity is needed to interpret data on child vulnerability and formulate evidence-based policies. Operational capacity is required to provide accessible and responsive protection services. Meanwhile, political capacity is necessary to build

commitment, secure budgetary support, and strengthen coordination among actors in the implementation of child protection policies. Child protection also requires the government's ability to establish both horizontal and vertical coordination. Horizontal coordination is needed because child protection services involve various institutions, such as women's empowerment and child protection offices, social affairs offices, education offices, health offices, the police, service agencies, schools, and civil society organizations. Vertical coordination is required because national policies must be effectively translated by local governments according to the needs and characteristics of each region. The whole-of-government approach emphasizes the importance of institutional integration in addressing complex public problems (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007). Similarly, collaborative governance theory stresses that solving public problems involving multiple actors requires trust, communication, shared commitment, and sustainable coordination mechanisms (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

Indonesia provides a relevant context for examining child protection within the framework of governance capacity because its governmental system operates under a decentralized structure. Decentralization gives local governments broad authority in delivering public services and implementing social development programs. Normatively, decentralization can improve government responsiveness because local governments are closer to communities and better understand local needs. However, decentralization can also produce variation in regional outcomes because each region has different fiscal capacity, human resources, service infrastructure, and institutional commitment. Bardhan (2002), Prud'homme (1995), and Faguet (2014) explain that the success of decentralization depends greatly on the institutional capacity of local governments. In the Indonesian context, local government capacity has also been shown to be associated with the quality of public service delivery (Setiawan et al., 2022). The challenges of child protection in Indonesia remain complex. Various reports show that violence against children continues to occur in many regions in diverse forms, including sexual, physical, and psychological violence, neglect, and exploitation. These cases demonstrate that social spaces that should function as protective environments, such as families, schools, peer groups, and communities, can still become sites where violence against children occurs. Beyond violence, children also face other vulnerabilities related to poverty, stunting, limited access to basic services, and unequal educational access. Children living in poor households, residing in underdeveloped regions, having disabilities, or being outside the formal education system tend to face a higher risk of violence, exploitation, and social neglect. The Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, has developed the Child Protection Index as an instrument for measuring child protection

achievements at the national and subnational levels. This index is used to assess the extent to which child protection and the fulfillment of children's rights have been implemented across regions. The Child Protection Index consists of two main dimensions: the Child Rights Fulfillment Index and the Special Child Protection Index. The Child Rights Fulfillment Index reflects the fulfillment of children's basic rights in health, education, family environment, civil rights, and child participation. Meanwhile, the Special Child Protection Index measures protection for children in vulnerable situations, such as child victims of violence, children in conflict with the law, child laborers, out-of-school children, child victims of exploitation, and children requiring other forms of special protection.

The existence of the Child Protection Index enables a more systematic analysis of variations in child protection outcomes across regions. In the context of a decentralized state, variation in index scores across regions can reflect differences in the ability of local governments to manage child protection policies. Regions with stronger governance capacity tend to have better ability to provide services, build cross-sectoral coordination, manage data, allocate budgets, and respond quickly to cases. Conversely, regions with limited institutional capacity tend to face obstacles in building an integrated protection system. Therefore, the Child Protection Index should not only be read as a measure of social achievement, but also as a reflection of the effectiveness of child protection governance at the local level.

Studies on child protection in Indonesia have widely emphasized decentralization, local government capacity, and cross-sectoral collaboration as important determinants of policy success. In the Indonesian context, the Child Protection Index or *Indeks Perlindungan Anak* (IPA) is constructed from the Child Rights Fulfillment Index (*Indeks Pemenuhan Hak Anak/IPHA*) and the Special Child Protection Index (*Indeks Perlindungan Khusus Anak/IPKA*), covering dimensions such as civil rights, family environment, health and welfare, education, and special protection. However, most previous studies have examined child protection mainly from normative, sectoral, or single-case perspectives. Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett (2015) developed a policy capacity framework consisting of analytical, operational, and political capacities, while Setiawan, Tjiptoherijanto, Mahi, and Khoirunurrofik (2022) demonstrated that local government capacity positively affects public service delivery in Indonesia's decentralized governance system. Sujarwoto (2012) also showed that local political institutions, transparency, citizen participation, and social groups contribute to improved local public service performance. Nevertheless, these studies have not specifically examined how variations in subnational governance capacity explain differences in child protection outcomes across provinces or districts/cities as measured by IPA, IPHA, and IPKA.

Therefore, the main research gap lies in the limited empirical linkage between local governance capacity and subnational variation in child protection index performance. Furthermore, studies on Child-Friendly Cities/Districts and local child protection policies have highlighted the importance of collaboration, institutional networks, and organizational capacity. Tanuwijaya and Nugroho (2020) argued that the implementation of Child-Friendly Cities and Districts operates within Indonesia's decentralization framework and is shaped by local regulations and regional characteristics. Duadji, Tresiana, and Putri (2018) found that the implementation of child-friendly district programs in Lampung remained sectoral, partial, and insufficiently synergistic, requiring collaborative planning through multi-stakeholder forums. Rahman, Febrian, and Wijaya (2023) identified constraints in human resources, financial capacity, organizational capacity, and networks in the implementation of child protection in Rokan Hilir, while Rahman, Yuliana, and Wati (2024) showed that individual, organizational, infrastructural, network, and supervisory capacities in Bengkalis were still not optimal. Cahyono, Dewi, Zauhar, Domai, and Siswidiyanto (2023) discussed collaborative governance in child protection services in Indonesia, while Ansell and Gash (2008) emphasized the importance of dialogue, trust-building, institutional design, and facilitative leadership in collaborative governance. Similarly, Hastira and Maksum (2024) examined the contribution of the UNICEF–Indonesia Child-Friendly Cities Initiative to children's participation in Surabaya, yet their focus remained limited to one city rather than a broader comparison of subnational governance capacity. Thus, this study fills the gap by analyzing how governance capacity—including analytical, operational, political, institutional, and collaborative network capacities—explains variation in the Child Protection Index across Indonesian subnational governments. The novelty of this study lies in the use of IPA, IPHA, and IPKA as quantitative evidence to capture subnational variation in child protection, while integrating governance capacity theory and collaborative governance theory to explain why regions operating under the same national policy framework produce different child protection outcomes.

Within this framework, this study aims to analyze governance capacity and subnational variation in child protection based on Indonesia's Child Protection Index. The focus of this study is directed toward the relationship between local governance capacity and differences in child protection outcomes across regions. Through this approach, child protection is understood as the result of interactions among national policies, local government capacity, institutional coordination, the quality of public services, and conditions of social vulnerability. Thus, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the importance

of strengthening local governance capacity in improving child protection more equitably across Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine governance capacity and subnational variation in child protection performance across Indonesia's provinces, because the research analyzes measurable indicators observed at one point in time and compares their distribution across territorial units (Wang & Cheng, 2020; Pérez-Guerrero et al., 2024). The design is descriptive, correlational, and explanatory, as it first describes provincial patterns, then examines statistical relationships between structural child vulnerability and special child protection outcomes, and finally estimates the contribution of those vulnerability indicators to the Special Child Protection Index or IPKA (Siedlecki, 2020; Zapf et al., 2024). The research location is Indonesia, with the unit of analysis consisting of all 38 provinces, so the population and sample are identical and the study applies a census or total-sampling approach rather than selecting a subset of provinces (Siedlecki, 2020). The data used in this study are secondary data from 2024 government publications, particularly the Child Protection Index framework, which includes the Child Protection Index (IPA), Child Rights Fulfillment Index (IPHA), and Special Child Protection Index (IPKA) compiled by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection and the Central Statistics Agency (KemenPPPA & BPS, 2024). The use of IPA, IPHA, and IPKA is appropriate because these indices were developed as standardized measures of child protection development, child rights fulfillment, and special child protection performance at national and provincial levels, and their construction refers to child-rights clusters including civil rights, family environment, health, education, and special protection (KemenPPPA & BPS, 2024).

The dependent variable in this study is IPKA, which represents provincial achievement in protecting children who experience special vulnerability, including vulnerability related to violence, exploitation, child labor, child marriage, disability inclusion, and other protection risks (KemenPPPA & BPS, 2024). The independent variables are the percentage of stunted toddlers, the percentage of children living below the poverty line, and the percentage of children aged 7–17 who do not participate in education, because these variables represent core structural dimensions of child vulnerability in health, economic well-being, and education (Prada & Sanchez-Fernandez, 2021; Petry et al., 2025). Stunting is included because it reflects chronic nutritional deprivation and unequal access to nutrition, health care, and basic public services, making it relevant for assessing how regional governance capacity is associated with

children's health-related vulnerability (Muliadi et al., 2025; Petry et al., 2025). Child poverty is included because poverty limits children's access to adequate nutrition, health services, education, and safe living conditions, which can intensify protection risks and reduce children's well-being (Prada & Sanchez-Fernandez, 2021; Petry et al., 2025). Out-of-school children are included because school participation is a key dimension of child rights fulfillment and because educational exclusion may reduce children's access to institutional support, protection channels, and future development opportunities (Prada & Sanchez-Fernandez, 2021). IPHA is not used as the dependent variable in the regression model, but it is used in the quadrant analysis to compare the achievement of child rights fulfillment and special child protection across provinces (KemenPPPA & BPS, 2024).

Data collection was carried out through documentation, namely by extracting provincial-level indicators from official government publications and organizing them into a single dataset based on province as the unit of analysis (KemenPPPA & BPS, 2024). Because this study uses official secondary data rather than questionnaires or interviews, instrument validity is maintained through the official definitions, standardized measurement procedures, and institutional credibility of the data-producing agencies (KemenPPPA & BPS, 2024). Data reliability was strengthened by using the same year of observation, the same unit of analysis, and consistent provincial identifiers across all variables before analysis was conducted (Siedlecki, 2020).

Data analysis was conducted in several stages using Microsoft Excel. First, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the distribution of IPHA, IPKA, stunting, child poverty, and out-of-school children across 38 provinces, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values (Siedlecki, 2020). Second, quadrant analysis was used to classify provinces based on their position relative to the national averages of IPHA and IPKA, producing four categories: High-High, High-Low, Low-High, and Low-Low (KemenPPPA & BPS, 2024). Third, correlation analysis was applied to examine the statistical relationship between structural vulnerability variables and child protection outcomes, because correlation is suitable for identifying the direction and strength of association between numerical indicators (Zapf et al., 2024). Fourth, multiple linear regression was used to estimate the effect of stunting, child poverty, and out-of-school children on IPKA, because regression analysis is appropriate for quantifying the relationship between several independent variables and one outcome variable in a cross-sectional dataset (Zapf et al., 2024). The multiple linear regression model used in this study is formulated as follows: $IPKA = \alpha + \beta_1(STUNT) + \beta_2(POVERTY) + \beta_3(OOSC) + \varepsilon$. Where: IPKA= Special Child Protection Index, STUNT= percentage of

stunted toddlers, POVERTY= percentage of child poverty, OOSC = out-of-school children aged 7–17, α = constant, β = regression coefficient, ε = error term. This study has several limitations. First, the use of cross-sectional secondary data does not allow strong causal inference because all variables are observed at the same time and the temporal order between structural vulnerability and protection outcomes cannot be fully established (Wang & Cheng, 2020; Pérez-Guerrero et al., 2024). Second, the indicators are limited to aggregate provincial-level data, so the analysis cannot fully capture implementation dynamics at district, municipal, community, household, or individual levels (Wang & Cheng, 2020). Third, governance capacity is inferred from provincial variation in index achievement and its association with structural vulnerability indicators, so the study does not directly measure administrative processes, budget execution, human resources, institutional coordination, or service quality in each province (Setiawan et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023). Nevertheless, this approach remains relevant as an initial empirical mapping of how structural child vulnerability is associated with special child protection performance under Indonesia’s decentralized governance system (Setiawan et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of 38 provinces in Indonesia shows substantial variation in child protection achievements at the subnational level. This variation is reflected in differences in the Child Rights Fulfillment Index (IPHA), the Special Child Protection Index (IPKA), stunting prevalence, child poverty, and the proportion of children aged 7–17 who are out of school. Descriptive statistics indicate that child protection outcomes are not evenly distributed across provinces. This suggests that child protection performance is shaped not only by national policy frameworks, but also by the capacity of local governments to provide basic services, manage structural vulnerabilities, and develop responsive special protection systems for children in vulnerable situations. The descriptive statistics of the research variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables.

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
IPHA	38	63.38	12.94	6.56	78.97
IPKA	38	75.80	10.83	41.27	93.16
Stunting (%)	38	23.01	6.66	8.70	40.00

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Child Poverty (%)	38	14.04	7.74	5.05	35.35
Out-of-School Children (%)	38	6.09	5.71	1.85	31.08

Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2026.

Table 1 shows that the mean IPKA score is 75.80, which is higher than the mean IPHA score of 63.38. However, the standard deviations of both indices indicate considerable variation across provinces. The minimum IPHA score of 6.56 suggests that at least one province has a very low level of child rights fulfillment compared with other provinces. Meanwhile, IPKA scores range from 41.27 to 93.16, indicating that provincial capacity to provide special protection for children also differs substantially. In terms of structural vulnerability, the average stunting prevalence is 23.01%, child poverty is 14.04%, and the proportion of out-of-school children is 6.09%. The gap between the minimum and maximum values of these indicators shows that child vulnerability is unevenly distributed across provinces. Therefore, differences in IPHA and IPKA cannot be separated from disparities in children's health, economic conditions, and access to education. To examine the relationship between child rights fulfillment and special child protection, this study applied quadrant analysis based on each province's position relative to the national average of IPHA and IPKA. This analysis produced four categories: High–High, High–Low, Low–High, and Low–Low. The High–High category refers to provinces with both IPHA and IPKA above the national average. The High–Low category refers to provinces with relatively high child rights fulfillment but low special child protection. The Low–High category refers to provinces with low IPHA but high IPKA. Meanwhile, the Low–Low category refers to provinces with both IPHA and IPKA below the national average. The quadrant distribution is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Provinces by IPHA–IPKA Quadrant.

Quadrant	Number of Provinces	Percentage
High–High	23	60.5%
High–Low	6	15.8%
Low–High	2	5.3%
Low–Low	7	18.4%

Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2026.

Table 2 shows that most provinces are located in the High–High category, with 23 provinces or 60.5%. This finding indicates that most provinces have relatively aligned achievements in child rights fulfillment and special child protection. However, 6 provinces or

15.8% are in the High–Low category. This group requires particular attention because it suggests that progress in fulfilling children’s basic rights does not automatically lead to effective protection for children in special situations. In contrast, 2 provinces or 5.3% are in the Low–High category, indicating that some regions have relatively strong special protection outcomes despite lower achievements in child rights fulfillment. Meanwhile, 7 provinces or 18.4% are in the Low–Low category. This is the most vulnerable group because low child rights fulfillment occurs alongside low special child protection performance. Thus, the quadrant analysis reveals governance disparities across regions, especially in the capacity of local governments to integrate basic services with special child protection mechanisms.

Correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the direction and strength of the relationship between IPKA and structural vulnerability indicators, namely child poverty, stunting, and out-of-school children. This analysis provides an initial statistical picture of how children’s basic social conditions are associated with special child protection outcomes at the provincial level. The correlation results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation between IPKA and Structural Vulnerability Indicators.

Variable	Correlation with IPKA (r)
Child Poverty	-0.597
Stunting	-0.603
Out-of-School Children	-0.631

Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2026.

Table 3 shows that all structural vulnerability indicators have a negative relationship with IPKA. The correlation between child poverty and IPKA is $r = -0.597$, indicating a moderately strong negative association. This means that provinces with higher child poverty tend to have lower special child protection achievements. The correlation between stunting and IPKA is $r = -0.603$, suggesting that children’s health vulnerability is also associated with weaker special child protection outcomes. The strongest negative relationship is found between out-of-school children and IPKA, with $r = -0.631$. This finding indicates that children’s disconnection from the education system is an important factor associated with lower special child protection performance. Substantively, out-of-school children may be more difficult to reach through public services, have weaker access to reporting mechanisms, and face higher risks of exploitation, child labor, child marriage, violence, and neglect.

To further examine the effect of structural vulnerability indicators on IPKA, this study applied multiple linear regression. The independent variables were stunting, child poverty, and out-of-school children, while the dependent variable was IPKA. This analysis was used to

identify which structural vulnerability indicator had the most consistent effect on special child protection achievement when all three indicators were tested simultaneously. The regression results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Results on IPKA.

Variable	Coefficient (β)	t-statistic	p-value
Stunting	-0.512	-1.921	0.063
Child Poverty	-0.192	-0.742	0.463
Out-of-School Children	-0.720	-2.385	0.023

Source: Data processed by the researchers, 2026.

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.512$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.469$; F-statistic = 11.88; $p < 0.001$; $N = 38$. Table 4 shows that the regression model is statistically significant, with an F-statistic of 11.88 and $p < 0.001$. The R^2 value of 0.512 indicates that 51.2% of the variation in IPKA across provinces can be explained by the three structural vulnerability indicators included in the model: stunting, child poverty, and out-of-school children. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.469 also indicates that the model has adequate explanatory power after accounting for the number of independent variables. Partially, the out-of-school children variable has a negative and statistically significant effect on IPKA, with $\beta = -0.720$ and $p = 0.023$. This means that an increase in the proportion of out-of-school children tends to be followed by a decrease in IPKA achievement. Stunting also shows a negative coefficient, $\beta = -0.512$, although its p-value of 0.063 indicates that the effect is not statistically significant at the 5% level. Child poverty has a negative coefficient, $\beta = -0.192$, but is not statistically significant, with $p = 0.463$. Overall, the regression results show that education is the most consistent structural vulnerability dimension associated with special child protection performance. This finding strengthens the argument that child protection cannot be separated from the quality of education services and the ability of local governments to keep children connected to formal social institutions.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that variation in child protection outcomes across provinces reflects not only differences in socioeconomic conditions, but also differences in local governance capacity. In a decentralized system, local governments play a central role in translating national child protection policies into programs, services, and coordination mechanisms at the local level. The finding that 23 provinces fall into the High–High category indicates that most provinces have achieved relative alignment between child rights fulfillment and special child protection. However, the existence of 6 provinces in the High–Low category reveals a gap between the provision of basic services and the effectiveness of special protection

systems. In other words, access to education, health care, or basic administrative services does not automatically ensure that children in special situations receive adequate protection. This finding is consistent with Setiawan et al. (2022), who argue that local government capacity influences the quality of public service delivery in Indonesia's decentralized governance system. Their study emphasizes that decentralization can improve public services only when local governments have sufficient institutional, administrative, and policy capacity.

The quadrant analysis also indicates the presence of policy fragmentation. Provinces in the High–Low category can be understood as regions that have made progress in fulfilling basic child rights but have not yet developed strong special protection systems. From a public governance perspective, this situation may occur when the education, health, social affairs, legal, and child protection sectors operate separately without effective coordination. Special child protection requires more complex coordination because it involves children who are victims of violence, children in conflict with the law, children experiencing exploitation, child laborers, children with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. Therefore, IPKA should not be interpreted merely as an indicator of program availability, but also as a reflection of local government capacity to conduct early detection, case referral, assistance, recovery, and prevention. In this context, the findings support the importance of a whole-of-government approach, which emphasizes cross-sectoral integration in addressing complex public problems. Provinces in the Low–Low category require greater policy attention because they face a double burden: low child rights fulfillment and weak special child protection performance.

The correlation and regression results show that out-of-school children are the most consistent variable negatively associated with IPKA. Empirically, this variable has the strongest correlation with IPKA, with $r = -0.631$, and it is the only variable in the regression model with a statistically significant effect, with $p = 0.023$. This finding indicates that education has an important protective function. Schools do not only serve as learning spaces, but also as social institutions that can detect risks of violence, connect children with support services, strengthen social monitoring, and provide safer spaces for interaction. This finding is in line with Clarke et al. (2025), who demonstrate that schools function as safety nets in the reporting of violence against children. When children are disconnected from school, cases of violence, exploitation, and neglect may become less visible to formal protection systems. Out-of-school children are also more difficult to reach by teachers, social workers, health personnel, and formal referral mechanisms. Therefore, a high proportion of out-of-school children may indicate weak integration between education services and child protection systems.

Stunting also shows a negative relationship with IPKA, although its effect is not statistically significant at the 5% level. This suggests that health vulnerability remains relevant to child protection outcomes, even though its effect in this model is weaker than that of out-of-school children. Stunting is a multidimensional vulnerability indicator because it is related not only to nutrition, but also to poverty, sanitation, access to health care, parental education, and environmental conditions. Recent studies on child stunting emphasize that stunting is shaped by social, family, environmental, and service-related factors, and therefore requires cross-sectoral intervention. This is relevant to the findings of this study because special child protection cannot be separated from children's basic health conditions. Children experiencing stunting may live in environments with limited access to public services, social protection, and family support. Although the coefficient of stunting is not statistically significant, its negative direction indicates that health vulnerability should remain an important consideration in child protection policy design. Child poverty also has a negative but statistically insignificant effect on IPKA. This finding does not mean that poverty is unimportant for child protection. Rather, it suggests that the influence of poverty may operate indirectly through other mechanisms, such as access to education, health service quality, social protection coverage, parenting conditions, and institutional capacity. Prada and Sánchez-Fernández (2021) emphasize that child well-being is multidimensional and cannot be explained solely by economic indicators. Child well-being must be understood through the combined dimensions of health, education, protection, and family conditions. Therefore, provinces with high child poverty do not necessarily have the lowest IPKA if they have strong social protection systems and effective child services. Conversely, provinces with lower poverty levels may still perform poorly in special child protection if cross-sectoral coordination is weak.

Theoretically, the findings support the argument that child protection is the outcome of interaction between structural vulnerability and governance capacity. Local governments need analytical capacity to interpret data on vulnerable children, operational capacity to provide accessible services, and coordinative capacity to connect the education, health, social, legal, and child protection sectors. The cross-sectional design used in this study is useful for describing conditions at one point in time and examining relationships among variables, but it cannot establish strong causal inference. As explained by Wang and Cheng (2020), cross-sectional studies are useful for identifying associations but have limitations in determining temporal order and causality. Similarly, Siedlecki (2020) notes that descriptive research designs are appropriate for systematically describing the distribution of a phenomenon. Therefore, the findings of this study should be understood as an initial empirical mapping of

the relationship between structural vulnerability and child protection outcomes, rather than as final causal evidence. The main policy implication of this study is the need to strengthen integrated child protection services at the provincial level. Local governments should place out-of-school children as a strategic priority because this indicator is the most consistently associated with lower IPKA. Programs for returning children to school, expanding equivalency education, improving data systems for school dropouts, and strengthening referral mechanisms between schools and social services should be reinforced. In addition, stunting and child poverty reduction programs should be integrated into the child protection system rather than treated only as health or economic programs. The main limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary data at the provincial level, which cannot fully capture variation at the district, municipal, school, household, and community levels. Moreover, governance capacity in this study is inferred from index achievement and structural vulnerability indicators, rather than measured directly through budget data, human resources, institutional coordination, service standards, or case management effectiveness. Future studies should include more direct institutional indicators to explain the relationship between governance capacity and child protection outcomes in greater depth.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article concludes that child protection achievements in Indonesia still vary considerably across regions, even though all provinces operate under the same national policy framework. Differences in IPHA and IPKA scores indicate that the success of child protection is not only determined by the existence of policies or programs, but also by the governance capacity of local governments in managing basic services, building cross-sectoral coordination, and responding to children's vulnerabilities in an integrated and timely manner. The findings show that out-of-school children represent the most consistent structural vulnerability factor associated with lower special child protection performance, while stunting and child poverty also show negative relationships, although their effects are not as strong as the education-related factor. This confirms that schools play an important social protection role because they function as spaces for early detection, monitoring, service referral, and prevention of violence, exploitation, and neglect. The contribution of this article lies in strengthening empirical evidence that subnational variation in child protection can be explained through the relationship between structural vulnerability and local governance capacity, while its implication is the need to strengthen an integrated child protection system by prioritizing out-of-school children,

improving coordination among education, health, social, legal, and local government sectors, and using more accurate data to design more equitable and responsive child protection policies.

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