

Social Research Call

Title:
*How Child Custody Disputes Become High-Conflict:
A Longitudinal Systems Analysis*



Acronym: TRAJECT

Project leader: Diogo Lamela

Host organisation: Universidade Lusófona

Main purpose of the project: TRAJECT aims to explain how post-separation child custody disputes evolve within the family justice system by identifying distinct trajectories of escalation, stabilisation, de-escalation, and resolution. It will determine which early case features differentiate these trajectories, test how changes in case features relate to later litigation activity, estimate trajectory-specific public costs, and examine how judicial and court-affiliated responses vary across them.

Design/methodology/approach: The project analyses a random sample of 500 cases from two large Portuguese judicial districts. Each case is followed for 24 months using full judicial records to code litigation activity, case features, system responses, and direct public costs. Quantitative trajectory, prediction, lagged longitudinal, and micro-costing analyses are combined with documentary case analysis and interviews with justice professionals.

Potential results: TRAJECT will produce a data-driven typology of litigation trajectories, an early differentiation model, and estimates of court-related public cost concentration. Outputs include a triage tool, a classification and reassessment protocol, scenario-based training materials, and a policy options paper for justice and court-support systems.

Social relevance of the research: Persistently litigated custody disputes expose children to prolonged instability while absorbing disproportionate judicial and professional resources. Because long-term risk is often not identifiable from entry severity alone, current responses may remain reactive and delayed. TRAJECT will support earlier monitoring, differentiated intervention, timelier support for families, reduced court congestion, and fairer resource allocation.

Originality/value of the project: TRAJECT treats high-conflict litigation as a process rather than a fixed label, converting full judicial documentary histories into repeated measures of litigation over time. It is the first study to integrate longitudinal litigation trajectories, early differentiation, and trajectory-specific cost estimation within one design.