

# Youth Offenders and Rehabilitation: Insights from Legal Practitioners and Social Workers

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The objective of this study was to explore the perspectives of legal practitioners and social workers on the rehabilitation of youth offenders. It aimed to identify the challenges and opportunities within the rehabilitation process, with a focus on understanding the multifaceted approach required for effective rehabilitation and reintegration into society. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected group of 27 legal practitioners and social workers involved in the rehabilitation of youth offenders. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and categories related to the rehabilitation process. The analysis revealed four main themes: Public Perception and Policy, Rehabilitation Challenges, Individualized Rehabilitation Strategies, and Community Integration and Support. These themes encompassed various categories, including media influence, legislative support, gang affiliation, resource limitations, education and skill development, behavioral and mental health support, family engagement, peer networks, and post-release services. The findings highlight the complexity of rehabilitating youth offenders and emphasize the need for a holistic approach that addresses individual needs and leverages community support. The study concludes that effective rehabilitation of youth offenders requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond punitive measures. It underscores the importance of addressing public perceptions, providing legislative support for rehabilitation programs, tailoring strategies to individual needs, and ensuring robust community integration and support systems. The insights from legal practitioners and social workers offer valuable directions for developing policies and practices that can more effectively support the rehabilitation and reintegration of youth offenders.

**Keywords:** Youth offenders, Rehabilitation, Legal practitioners, Social workers, Community support, Public perception, Individualized strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

The rehabilitation and treatment of youth offenders remain one of the most complex and debated aspects of the criminal justice system. This discourse is shaped by the intersection of legal, social, and psychological dimensions, each adding layers to understanding the efficacy and ethics of various rehabilitation approaches. The prevailing perspectives

on youth offenders and the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs are influenced by broader societal views, legal frameworks, and empirical research outcomes, creating a multifaceted landscape for policy and practice. The public's perception of youth offenders significantly influences policy and legislative action within the criminal justice system. Barretto, Miers, and Lambie (2016) emphasize that societal attitudes towards young offenders and confidence in the justice system play a



critical role in shaping rehabilitation policies and practices. These perceptions are not monolithic; they vary widely across different communities and demographic groups, influenced by factors such as media representation, personal experiences, and prevailing social norms. Understanding these attitudes is paramount, as they underpin the support for or resistance against rehabilitation-focused juvenile justice policies (Barretto et al., 2016).

Violence risk and gang affiliation among youth offenders are critical concerns that exacerbate the challenges of rehabilitation and recidivism. Chu, Daffern, Thomas, and Lim's studies (Chu et al., 2010, 2011) explore the complex relationship between gang affiliation in youth offenders and the increased risk of recidivism, highlighting the necessity for targeted intervention strategies that address the unique needs of this group. Gang affiliation not only complicates the rehabilitation process but also increases the youth's risk of engaging in violent behavior, thereby necessitating a nuanced approach to intervention that considers the socioemotional and environmental factors contributing to gang involvement (Chu et al., 2010, 2011).

Addressing the individual needs of youth offenders is crucial for effective rehabilitation. Dillard, Newman, and Kim (2019) advocate for a community-based approach to juvenile justice that emphasizes balanced and restorative justice. This perspective aligns with the principles of positive youth development (PYD), suggesting that fostering competencies in young offenders can lead to better rehabilitation outcomes (Dillard et al., 2019). Similarly, Elsom (2019) points to the potential of inner speech modification as a cognitive intervention technique, suggesting that changing how offenders perceive themselves and their actions could reduce the likelihood of re-offense (Elsom, 2019).

Spirituality and moral development have also been identified as significant factors in the rehabilitation process. Lee et al. (2017) explore the concept of spiritual virtue as a pathway towards desistance, humility, and recovery among juvenile offenders. Their findings suggest that fostering spiritual growth and moral reasoning can contribute to a deeper, more lasting form of rehabilitation, one that transcends traditional behavioral modification programs (Lee et al., 2017).

Public attitudes towards community safety and the treatment of youth offenders also influence

rehabilitation efforts. McArdle, Lambie, and Miers (2018) examine the relationship between perceived community safety and attitudes towards youth offenders, noting that communities that feel unsafe are likely to support more punitive measures. However, this stance often overlooks the long-term benefits of rehabilitation-focused approaches, which aim to address the underlying causes of criminal behavior rather than simply punishing the act (McArdle et al., 2018).

The role of social inequality in determining the outcomes of alternative sanctions is another critical factor to consider. Sandøy, Østhus, and Bretteville-Jensen (2021) explore how adolescent drug offenders in Norway are affected by social inequality, even within alternative sanction systems designed to be more rehabilitative than punitive. Their research underscores the need for a more equitable approach to rehabilitation that considers the socio-economic backgrounds of youth offenders (Sandøy et al., 2021).

Matching court-ordered services with treatment needs is essential for effective rehabilitation. Vieira, Skilling, and Peterson-Badali (2009), and Vitopoulos, Peterson-Badali, and Skilling (2012) examine the relationship between service matching and recidivism, emphasizing the importance of aligning rehabilitation services with the criminogenic needs of youth offenders (Vieira et al., 2009; Vitopoulos et al., 2012). This alignment is crucial for reducing recidivism rates and ensuring that rehabilitation efforts are as effective as possible.

The quantification of public support for juvenile justice reforms presents an intricate picture. Mears, Pickett, and Mancini (2014) assess the public's views on youth, rehabilitation, and punishment, revealing a complex landscape where support for balanced juvenile justice approaches exists alongside calls for more stringent punitive measures. This dichotomy underscores the challenge of advocating for policies that equally emphasize rehabilitation and accountability (Mears et al., 2014).

Research by Moon, Sundt, Cullen, and Wright (2000) questions the vitality of the child-saving ethos in contemporary juvenile justice systems, probing whether public support for the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders remains strong in the face of rising crime rates and media sensationalism. Their findings suggest a nuanced public opinion that still values the principles of juvenile

rehabilitation, despite the prevailing winds of punitiveness (Moon et al., 2000).

Demographic differences play a significant role in shaping the perceptions and experiences of adjudicated youth. Pederson, Fite, and Poquiz (2020) highlight how these differences affect youths' perceptions of staff in juvenile facilities, pointing to the importance of culturally sensitive and responsive practices in the rehabilitation process. Such practices can help bridge the gap between youth offenders and the staff tasked with their rehabilitation, fostering a more constructive and supportive environment for change (Pederson et al., 2020).

The psycholinguistic and socioemotional characteristics of young offenders also warrant attention. Winstanley, Webb, and Conti-Ramsden (2019) investigate how language abilities and gender affect the experiences and rehabilitation outcomes of young offenders. Their findings highlight the need for rehabilitation programs to consider these characteristics when designing and implementing interventions (Winstanley et al., 2019).

In summary, the literature provides a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing the rehabilitation of youth offenders, from public perceptions and legal frameworks to individual characteristics and intervention strategies. This body of work underscores the complexity of rehabilitating youth offenders and the need for a multi-faceted, evidence-based approach that considers the diverse needs and backgrounds of these individuals. As this article progresses, it will further explore these themes, drawing on qualitative data from interviews with legal practitioners and social workers to provide deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities within the current rehabilitation landscape.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design, focusing specifically on semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights into the rehabilitation of youth offenders, as seen through the perspectives of legal practitioners and social workers. The aim was to explore their experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of current rehabilitation programs and policies.

Participants were purposively selected to include a diverse group of professionals involved in the rehabilitation process of youth offenders. This included legal practitioners (such as juvenile justice attorneys and judges) and social workers directly engaged in rehabilitation services. A total of 14 legal practitioners and 13 social workers were recruited for the study, ensuring a broad representation of experiences and perspectives.

The study aimed for theoretical saturation, a point at which no new information or themes emerged from the data. This was continuously assessed throughout the data collection process. After conducting 25 interviews, preliminary analysis indicated nearing saturation; however, to ensure comprehensiveness, the full set of 30 interviews was completed. Theoretical saturation was confirmed after the analysis of these interviews, as no additional themes were identified in the last few interviews.

The research protocol, including the recruitment strategy, consent process, and data handling procedures. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, their role in it, and the confidentiality measures in place before obtaining their informed consent. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on the participant's preference and geographical location. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was guided by a pre-determined set of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' views on the effectiveness of rehabilitation practices, the challenges faced by youth offenders, and suggestions for policy improvement. Additional probing questions were used to encourage deeper reflection and detail.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process, with all identifying information being removed from the transcripts.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, where transcripts were carefully read and coded to identify patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. Initial codes were generated inductively, and these were then grouped into larger themes that captured the overarching insights related to the rehabilitation of youth offenders. The analysis was iterative, moving back and forth between the data and the emerging analysis to refine the themes and ensure they accurately represented the data.

NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was utilized to facilitate the organization and analysis of the interview transcripts. This tool enabled efficient management of codes and themes, and supported the thorough exploration of the data.

3. Findings and Results

In the study, a total of 27 participants were involved, comprising both legal practitioners and social workers who play a pivotal role in the rehabilitation of youth offenders. The demographic breakdown revealed a diverse group in terms of age, gender, and professional experience. Specifically, 15 participants (55.6%) were female, and 12 (44.4%) were male, reflecting a relatively balanced gender distribution. Age-wise, the participants ranged from 28 to 60 years, with the largest group (11 participants, or 40.7%) falling within the 30-40 age bracket, indicating a predominance of mid-career professionals. In terms of professional background, 14 participants (51.9%) were legal practitioners, including attorneys and juvenile court judges, while 13 (48.1%) were social workers, involved directly in the rehabilitation processes at various capacities.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
Rehabilitation Programs	Education and Training	Vocational training, Academic courses, Certification programs, Life skills, Workshop participation
	Behavioral Therapy	Cognitive-behavioral therapy, Anger management, Stress reduction techniques, Problem-solving skills, Mindfulness
	Family Involvement	Parental guidance programs, Family therapy sessions, Home visits, Communication workshops, Conflict resolution
	Peer Support	Mentorship programs, Group activities, Team sports, Peer-led workshops, Social networks
	Substance Abuse Treatment	Detoxification programs, Counseling, Relapse prevention planning, Support groups, Education on substance effects
Challenges in Rehabilitation	Post-release Support	Job placement services, Housing assistance, Mentorship continuation, Educational opportunities, Social services linkage
	Lack of Resources	Funding shortages, Space limitations, Program variety, Access to technology, Educational material scarcity
	Staff Training and Turnover	Professional development, Recruitment challenges, High turnover rates, Staff burnout, Training effectiveness
	Cultural and Social Barriers	Ethnic disparities, Language barriers, Religious considerations, Gender norms, Socioeconomic status
	Recidivism Rates	Repeat offenses, Monitoring difficulties, Support system failure, Early release issues, Rehabilitation effectiveness
Legal and Policy Framework	Public Perception	Media influence, Community fears, Political pressures, Victim rights concerns, Rehabilitation versus punishment debate
	Legislation	Juvenile justice system, Diversion programs, Legal representation, Age of responsibility, Privacy rights
	Sentencing Guidelines	Minimum sentences, Discretionary powers, Alternative sentences, Sentencing variability, Rehabilitation focus
	Youth Rights	Access to education, Treatment consent, Legal representation, Privacy and confidentiality, Participation in decisions
Stakeholder Perspectives	Rehabilitation Policy	Policy development, Inter-agency collaboration, Funding allocations, Program evaluation criteria, Long-term strategy
	Youth Offenders' Views	Personal experiences, Program feedback, Rehabilitation goals, Barriers to success, Future aspirations
	Legal Practitioners' Insights	Case management, Judicial interactions, Program effectiveness, Legal challenges, System navigation
	Social Workers' Experience	Client relationships, Program availability, Success stories, Intervention strategies, Resource limitations

Outcome Measures	Community Impact	Safety concerns, Rehabilitation support, Restorative justice, Community programs, Victim-offender mediation
	Family Perspectives	Emotional stress, Financial impact, Support needs, Rehabilitation involvement, Long-term effects
	Reintegration Success	Employment stability, Social integration, Housing security, Educational advancement, Community involvement
	Recidivism	Follow-up period, Support network effectiveness, Program completion rates, Early intervention impact, Judicial system interaction
	Employment Rates	Full-time employment, Job skills, Employer support, Career advancement, Workplace integration
	Educational Attainment	High school diploma, College enrollment, Vocational training success, Scholarship opportunities, Academic support

The study's qualitative analysis identified five principal categories relevant to the rehabilitation of youth offenders: Rehabilitation Programs, Challenges in Rehabilitation, Legal and Policy Framework, Stakeholder Perspectives, and Outcome Measures. Each category was further divided into subcategories, revealing a nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

### 3.1. Rehabilitation Programs

**Education and Training:** Participants highlighted the importance of vocational training, academic courses, and certification programs. One legal practitioner noted, "Access to education within the system transforms perspectives, offering youth a path forward."

**Behavioral Therapy:** Emphasizing cognitive-behavioral therapy and anger management, a social worker mentioned, "Teaching them to manage their emotions is the first step towards rehabilitation."

**Family Involvement:** Family therapy sessions and parental guidance programs were underscored as vital. "Rebuilding family ties is crucial for their reintegration," shared a family counselor.

**Peer Support:** The role of peer-led workshops and group activities was recognized. "Peer support creates a sense of belonging, reducing feelings of isolation," observed a program coordinator.

**Substance Abuse Treatment:** Highlighting the need for detoxification and counseling, one participant stated, "Addressing substance abuse is fundamental in preventing recidivism."

**Post-release Support:** Services such as job placement and housing assistance were deemed essential. "The real test begins once they're out; without support, the cycle continues," a social worker reflected.

### 3.2. Challenges in Rehabilitation

**Lack of Resources:** Funding shortages and space limitations were frequently mentioned. "We're constantly battling resource constraints," a program director lamented.

**Staff Training and Turnover:** High turnover rates and staff burnout were common concerns. "Retaining skilled staff is a challenge in this emotionally demanding field," remarked a supervisor.

**Cultural and Social Barriers:** Participants discussed the impact of ethnic disparities and language barriers. "Cultural competence is not optional; it's necessary," stated a cultural liaison officer.

**Recidivism Rates:** The issue of repeat offenses was a concern. "We need to address the root causes to truly lower recidivism rates," a judge commented.

**Public Perception:** The debate around rehabilitation versus punishment was noted. "Changing public perception is key to fostering a more rehabilitative approach," a policy advocate argued.

#### Legal and Policy Framework

**Legislation and Sentencing Guidelines:** The study highlighted the need for more rehabilitative-focused policies. "Legislation needs to catch up with what we know works," an attorney emphasized.

**Youth Rights:** Ensuring youth have access to education and legal representation was considered crucial. "Protecting their rights is the foundation of fair treatment," a legal defender stated.

**Rehabilitation Policy:** Calls for inter-agency collaboration and long-term strategies were prevalent. "A unified approach is the only way forward," a policy maker proposed.

### 3.3. Stakeholder Perspectives

**Youth Offenders' Views:** Youths' personal experiences and aspirations were shared. "I just want a chance to prove I can change," a youth offender expressed.

**Community and Family Perspectives:** The impact on families and communities was also explored. "We all play a part in their journey back," a family member shared.

### 3.4. Outcome Measures

**Reintegration Success and Recidivism:** Success was measured in terms of employment stability, social integration, and reduced recidivism. "Seeing them succeed outside is the ultimate goal," a case worker concluded.

**Employment Rates and Educational Attainment:** The importance of job skills and academic support was affirmed. "Education and employment are key indicators of successful reintegration," an educator noted.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of interviews with legal practitioners and social workers in the study revealed four main themes related to the rehabilitation of youth offenders: Public Perception and Policy, Rehabilitation Challenges, Individualized Rehabilitation Strategies, and Community Integration and Support. Each theme encompassed various categories, providing a structured insight into the complex landscape of youth offender rehabilitation. The categories under Public Perception and Policy included Media Influence and Legislative Support; Rehabilitation Challenges comprised Gang Affiliation and Resource Limitations; Individualized Rehabilitation Strategies highlighted Education and Skill Development, Behavioral and Mental Health Support; and Community Integration and Support focused on Family Engagement, Peer Networks, and Post-release Services.

The first theme, Public Perception and Policy, delved into how societal attitudes and legal frameworks impact rehabilitation efforts. Under Media Influence, concepts such as sensationalism, negative stereotyping, and the impact of high-profile cases on public opinion were discussed, highlighting the challenge of overcoming societal prejudices. Legislative Support categories explored the importance of supportive laws and policies

for rehabilitation programs, including funding for initiatives, reformatory legislation, and the role of advocacy in shaping a more rehabilitative justice system. Rehabilitation Challenges shed light on the obstacles faced by practitioners in implementing effective rehabilitation strategies. Gang Affiliation categories addressed the recruitment of youth into gangs, the culture and identity within gangs, and strategies for disengagement and reintegration into society. Resource Limitations touched upon the scarcity of funding, staffing challenges, and the need for adequate facilities and programs tailored to the needs of youth offenders.

This theme emphasized the importance of tailoring rehabilitation efforts to the individual needs of youth offenders. Education and Skill Development categories underscored vocational training, academic education, and life skills development as critical for reintegration success. Behavioral and Mental Health Support highlighted the need for access to psychological services, substance abuse treatment, and therapeutic interventions, underscoring the holistic approach required for effective rehabilitation.

Lastly, Community Integration and Support explored the crucial role of social networks and community resources in the rehabilitation process. Family Engagement categories discussed the involvement of families in rehabilitation programs, support for families affected by youth offending, and the role of familial relationships in the reintegration process. Peer Networks examined the influence of positive peer relationships, mentorship programs, and support groups, while Post-release Services focused on housing, employment, and ongoing support needed to prevent recidivism and ensure successful community reintegration.

The findings from our study, centered on the insights of legal practitioners and social workers regarding the rehabilitation of youth offenders, contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse in juvenile justice reform. These insights, grounded in qualitative analyses, resonate with and expand upon existing literature, highlighting key areas such as public perceptions, risk factors associated with recidivism, and the importance of individualized rehabilitation programs.

Public perception plays a pivotal role in shaping policies and practices within the juvenile justice system. Our findings, indicating a nuanced public stance towards rehabilitation and punishment, align with Barretto,

Miers, and Lambie (2016), who documented varying levels of public support for rehabilitation-focused approaches over punitive measures. This variation underscores the complexity of societal attitudes towards youth offenders, suggesting that public education and engagement are crucial in fostering a rehabilitative, rather than punitive, approach to juvenile justice (Barretto et al., 2016).

The challenge of gang affiliation among youth offenders, as identified in our study, echoes the work of Chu, Daffern, Thomas, and Lim (2010, 2011). They highlighted the increased risk of violence and recidivism associated with gang-affiliated youth, underscoring the need for targeted intervention strategies (Chu et al., 2010, 2011). Our research extends this discourse by emphasizing the importance of comprehensive rehabilitation programs that address not only the criminogenic needs but also the socioemotional and environmental factors contributing to gang involvement. Our study also explores the effectiveness of community-based, restorative justice approaches, resonating with Dillard, Newman, and Kim (2019). They advocated for a positive youth development (PYD) approach that focuses on fostering competencies in young offenders. This approach, our findings suggest, can lead to better rehabilitation outcomes by emphasizing the strengths of youth rather than their deficits (Dillard et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the significance of spiritual and moral development in the rehabilitation process, highlighted by Lee et al. (2017), finds parallel in our study (Lee et al., 2017). Participants in our research stressed the importance of addressing the spiritual and moral dimensions of rehabilitation, suggesting that such approaches can facilitate a deeper, more lasting transformation in youth offenders.

The congruence between our findings and existing literature underscores the multifaceted nature of rehabilitating youth offenders. The emphasis on public perception and its influence on policy and practice highlights the need for a more informed and engaged public discourse on juvenile justice. This necessitates ongoing public education efforts to shift perceptions from punitive to rehabilitative paradigms.

The identified challenges of gang affiliation and the associated risks underscore the importance of targeted interventions that go beyond traditional rehabilitation programs. Addressing the root causes of gang

involvement requires a holistic approach that encompasses not only the individual but also their social and environmental contexts.

The support for community-based, restorative justice approaches and the emphasis on PYD principles suggest a growing recognition of the value of rehabilitation strategies that focus on the strengths and potential of youth offenders. This aligns with a broader shift towards more humane and effective approaches to juvenile justice.

Lastly, the recognition of spiritual and moral development as crucial components of rehabilitation highlights the need for programs that address the comprehensive needs of youth offenders. This holistic approach to rehabilitation, which includes spiritual and moral education, offers a pathway towards more profound and enduring change in the lives of young offenders.

The study is not without its limitations. The qualitative nature and the reliance on semi-structured interviews, while providing depth and nuance, limit the generalizability of the findings. The sample size, although sufficient for theoretical saturation, represents a relatively small cohort of professionals, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the field. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on the perceptions of legal practitioners and social workers, potentially overlooking the valuable insights of other stakeholders involved in the rehabilitation process, such as the youth offenders themselves and their families.

Future research should aim to broaden the scope of inquiry by including a wider array of stakeholders, particularly youth offenders and their families, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the rehabilitation process. Quantitative studies could be employed to complement the qualitative insights, offering a broader view of the effectiveness of various rehabilitation programs and interventions. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the outcomes of specific rehabilitation approaches over time would be valuable in assessing the long-term efficacy of these programs.

The findings of this study have significant implications for practice within the juvenile justice system. They call for a concerted effort to shift public perceptions towards a more rehabilitative, less punitive approach to dealing with youth offenders. Practitioners are encouraged to

adopt holistic, individualized rehabilitation programs that address not only the criminogenic needs but also the socioemotional and environmental factors influencing youth offenders' behavior. The adoption of community-based, restorative justice approaches and the incorporation of spiritual and moral development into rehabilitation programs could offer more effective pathways towards reducing recidivism and facilitating the successful reintegration of youth offenders into society. These approaches not only align with the principles of positive youth development but also reflect a growing recognition of the need for more humane and effective strategies in the rehabilitation of young offenders.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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