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Stigma and Second Chances: Barriers to Juvenile Reintegration A Scoping Review for Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The opportunities afforded to young people upon leaving justice systems and the social judgments associated with their pasts influence the process of juvenile reintegration. Through a scoping review, stigma and associated barriers to reintegration are explored, focusing on Punjab, Pakistan. A rapid scoping approach was used to synthesize 38 peer-reviewed publications (29 empirical publications and 9 evidence reviews). Results were grouped into six areas: social and institutional labelling, educational disruption, insecure employment, family and peer relationships, unmet health needs and fragmented legal and aftercare provision. Stigma as synthesis implies that stigma is a two-part process of interpersonal rejection and limitation of access to normal developmental opportunities. International research has shown the importance of supportive relationships and coordinated care, and continuity of education, and Punjab evidence suggests that supported employment and mentorship are linked to pro-social development of identities. Aftercare effectiveness is mixed, and the available provincial literature is limited and only allows for conclusions on local outcomes. Labeling, developmental change and access to social resources are integrated by an integrated framework. The article suggests a coordinated reintegration pathway based on the principles of confidentiality, educational involvement, age appropriate livelihoods and continuity of supports. Second chances can only be sustainable if they are institutionalised and opportunities are available to them, as well as individual efforts to change.

Keywords: *Juvenile reintegration, stigma, Punjab, Pakistan, scoping review, desistance, aftercare.*

INTRODUCTION

Detention in itself does not allow a child to resume his/her role in society. A young person can be released back to his or her family without a school placement, a recognised learning record or any reliable income or trusted adult outside the family. Thus, reintegration is about the contextual and practical circumstances in which a child can live a normal life after the justice involvement (Barnert, Abrams, et al., 2020; Cauffman et al., 2021). A major point of this review is that stigma can be particularly harmful when it impacts upon access to these conditions. Decisions by schools, employers, service providers and public authorities to make participation possible are also needed, and so too is personal reform.

This is for two reasons: Punjab provides a suitable context in which reintegration is an undertaking that needs coordination between various institutions that are active within the province, and the social reintegration of juveniles is explicitly mentioned in the Pakistani legislation. Legal assistance, diversion, protection of identity and rehabilitation related arrangement are provided by Juvenile Justice System Act 2018 as amended in 2022. While these are important provisions in terms of a legal benchmark, they are not necessarily proof of accessibility or effectiveness in practice (Government of Pakistan, 2018). The analytical task is thus to analyse how to help a child to go from formal recognition of their entitlement to the day to day practice of their entitlement.

On 31st December 2024, the National Commission on the Rights of Child reports 851 children in detention in the Province of Punjab, including 684 under trial and 167 convicted children. These are custodial stocks and not annual admissions, release totals or recidivism rates. The difference makes a difference: kids can be excluded upon return from allegation or unresolved case without conviction. It is important that provincial reintegration planning should not presume that the child who has come in contact with the justice system is guilty (National Commission on the Rights of Child [NCRC], 2026). The administrative picture provided is relevant to the services, but not to the extent of post-release stigma.

Recent research provides a more satisfactory account of exclusion than is provided by the distinction between motivated and unmotivated children. A 2025 scoping review highlights the overlapping sorts of stigma that exist for youth in care and homelessness and justice contexts, as well as the lack of research in the Global South (Martínez-Jothar et al., 2025). Stigma in the criminal legal system is also linked to wellbeing, engagement in treatment, and community integration, but most of this research is focused on adults, with a focus on cross-sectional associations (Moore et al., 2024). These results warrant some further exploration of the nature of institutional response to children without presuming mechanisms which have been observed in some other places are the same in Punjab.

The word juvenile is used in the legal and bibliographic context. Children in conflict with the law and youth who are justice involved are preferred in the analysis as an allegation or conviction does not constitute a whole identity (Cauffman et al., 2024). Reintegration refers to return from detention, return from residential placement and re-engagement after court processing and/or community sanctions. These pathways are quite distinct. Evidence from ‘first-arrest cohorts' and community sentences is included to shed light on mechanisms but not as equivalent to evidence from children leaving custody.

The question the review puts is: What barriers are present in literature in recent times, how does stigma contribute to material and institutional disadvantage, and what kinds of responses should be explored in Punjab? The analysis combines an evidence map with an explanatory framework that is sensitive to the context. Direct research in Punjab drives the provincial conversation and international research provides mechanisms and implementation questions for local research. The links between stigma and access to education, livelihoods, relationships and care and the institutionalisation of these is emphasized.

METHODS

A rapid scoping review was conducted to identify the extent, nature and implications of evidence on stigma and reintegration of juveniles. The population–concept–context framework included children in juvenile justice and young adults who had previously been involved in juvenile justice, studies of later consequences of juvenile records, stigma and barriers to reintegration, and also a focus on Punjab, as the policy context. Broad evidence from Pakistan and globally was added to explore mechanisms and responses that are relevant to provincial policy. JBI methodological guidance (Peters et al., 2020)

informed the design and reporting was informed by PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018). The emphasis of the review was placed on descriptive mapping and thematic interpretation due to the diversity of populations, institutional contexts, outcomes and research designs in the literature.

Original journal publications were found via web searches using the publishers' web sites, PubMed, PubMed Central and institutional repositories. Search terms included a mix of juvenile or youth justice and reintegration, reentry, resettlement, stigma, labelling, education, employment, family, health and aftercare. Searches were carried out by geographical means, which included Pakistan and Punjab. This was supplemented by searching with the relevant reference lists which guided searches, and exact-title searches were made to find original publication records. The legal and institutional environment was provided by official Pakistani legislation and the national child-rights reporting. Empirical claims were checked against the original study records where possible and the full text of publications in question consulted if available, but if not, interpretation of abstracts and bibliographic information only.

The substantive publication window was from 2020 to 2026. When articles were assigned to an issue, final issue year was given, even for articles that were published earlier online. Outside this window primary legislation and the foundational PRISMA-ScR statement were kept as contextual and methodological sources. Eligible publications explored a reintegration domain, a stigma mechanism, developmental outcomes as a result of juvenile justice involvement, or an intervention that engaged the community. Because there is diversity in the field, empirical studies and evidence reviews were included. Where the findings of a mixed population review were of relevance to the children, they were retained; where it was not possible to identify the relevance of the findings of an adult-only review, these did not count as direct evidence about children. Any publications or sources that were not directly related that did not have a clear record of the original publication were not included.

Information charted on publication information, geographical context, design, population/scope, key findings and interpretive limitations. Thematic synthesis and charting were conducted according to guidance on presenting scoping evidence that is heterogeneous (Pollock et al., 2023). Three tiers of geographical relevance were considered for sources: direct evidence from Punjab, evidence from other parts of Pakistan and comparative evidence from other countries. A comparison was then made between the barriers and facilitators at these levels, to create six themes. Experiences and mechanisms were explored through qualitative accounts, developmental patterns through longitudinal studies and evaluations and reviews to determine the strength and consistency of the intervention findings.

There are 38 substantive publications that make up the evidence map, including 29 empirical publications and nine reviews. The methodological sources used support the analysis separately, and there are two legal or contextual sources. Several of the papers discuss the Crossovers cohort, and two of the papers discuss the Northwestern Juvenile Project; there was overlap in the samples and this was acknowledged in interpreting the findings. A single reviewer selected the articles for study and charted the articles narratively while addressing methodological limitations. This review was not pre-registered. Thematic synthesis was preferred based on heterogeneity in designs, outcomes and settings and overlapping evidence. The appendix provides details of the characteristics and contribution of publications included.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework includes linkages with labelling processes and developmental opportunities and social resources. The first piece is brought by labelling—how others view a young person after they come into contact with the justice system and how the young person expects to be treated in the future. The key here

is the difference between naming behaviour that ought to be held to account and between naming behaviour that creates an 'indelible' identity, thus making it more difficult to engage in everyday behaviour (Reed & Wagner, 2026; Rowan et al., 2023). Public stigma is when there are negative judgements shared, enacted stigma is when there is a negative treatment, anticipated stigma is the expected rejection, and internalised stigma is when the negative judgements are taken up in the self. Empirical studies differentiate anticipated and experienced stigma (Turney et al., 2023) and perceived and internalised stigma (Wang et al., 2026); this allows for analysing different stigmas in isolation.

The interpersonal pathway is now apparent in the context of present-day evidence. Among the Crossroads cohort, those that underwent formal processing gained more new deviant friends and fewer nond deviant friends over three years, but there was no difference between the two groups in terms of losing existing friends (Rowan et al., 2023). This pattern recognizes that the formation of friendships could be one pathway through which formal processing leads to post-formal disadvantage. The framework, applied to Punjab, focuses on whether being out of school or apprenticeship or community activity is a barrier to having supportive relationships. This needs to be locally investigated as the operation and relative importance of this pathway may vary.

The second component is the developmental change. A juvenile justice encounter happens when the identity, self-regulation and future expectations are still in the process of development. The research conducted after 9 years revealed that there are several offending pathways instead of a single pathway, and that most of those who were not in the persistently high pathway (Cauffman et al., 2024). This is evidence that disputes a determination made that an early offence is a permanent prediction. Developmental sensitivity also must be variable: effects of processing may vary based on young people's characteristics and circumstances. Such heterogeneity is demonstrated in research on callous–unemotional traits; the results of this research do not warrant the imploration of deterministic labels and unvalidated assessment thresholds in Punjab (Robertson et al., 2021).

The third aspect relates to the availability of resources and supportive recognition. Building connections to education, livelihoods, care and legitimate opportunities are the relationships that need to be established for reintegration. Family support can help to offer emotional security, and outside relationships can offer a teacher, mentor, employer or service advocate. There is a difference between these functions: No affectionate family can negotiate the admission of a child to the school or arrange safe employment (Ahmed et al., 2025; Hussain & Sajid, 2024). Resilience studies also reveal that regulatory capabilities, resources for meaning-making and interpersonal or ecological supports are all important, which is why it is inaccurate to label resilience as solely a personality issue of the child (Rock et al., 2025).

As such, the integrated explanation is a conditional explanation. Contact with justice can trigger negative evaluations, which can limit opportunities, which can make it more difficult to maintain a prosocial identity and reinforce feelings of non-belonging. This process can be halted by protective relationships and fair institutional decisions (Smith et al., 2025; Walton et al., 2021). Its intensity may be affected by poverty, disability, gender and geographical isolation. The proposed mechanisms have been summarised in table 1. The structure categorises questions related to the who, how and what might help to re-establish participation. There are still propositions for empirical investigation with regards to its explanatory relationships.

As time goes on, these mechanisms can also compound. Interruption of schooling may limit the range of training options and the job security may limit the feasibility of educational return. Rejection in one context can impact the expectations for another context, even if the latter is welcoming. On the other hand, a solid connection can facilitate a child taking a number of concrete actions. Timing and sequence are very important issues for their cumulative operation. Longitudinal enquiry is required to differentiate an initial exclusion from the effects of this exclusion on relationships, expectations and participation (Rowan et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2025).

Table 1: **Proposed mechanisms and questions for Punjab**

Labelling	**Negative classifications restrict fair access**	**Readmission decisions and privacy practices**
Developmental change	An early justice encounter is not a fixed identity	Age appropriate opportunities and repeated assessment
Relationships and resources	Support connects effort to practical opportunities	A trusted adult and completed service connections
Intersecting disadvantage	Barriers may differ across social positions	Separate analysis by gender disability and location
Protective interruption	Fair decisions and reliable support may alter a pathway	Participation safety and belonging over time

Note. Conceptual synthesis informed by empirical studies of processing and peer ties (Rowan et al., 2023), developmental trajectories (Cauffman et al., 2024), and supportive school relationships (Smith et al., 2025; Walton et al., 2021).

FINDINGS

Stigma and Exclusion Beyond the Justice Setting

Evidence distinguishes the change in legal status from the change in social status. One formal process may be completed through the completion of a sentence, diversion/release and continue expectations on a justice history. Stigma can shape the way adults view a wrongdoing and whether they view it as typical teen behaviour or as evidence of a permanent criminal identity. It can also deter young people from trying to re-enter to where they feel they are not wanted. These mechanisms are best measured separately, as the protective relationships that are anticipated and those that are experienced can be different (Turney et al., 2023). In China, exploratory (n = 720) and confirmatory (n = 388) samples revealed a separation between perceived and internalised stigma (Wang et al., 2026). These distinctions inform measurement, and must be linguistically and culturally tested in Punjab.

After accounting for observed differences, the five-year Crossroads analysis of 1,216 boys who were referred to juvenile courts for the first time found that formal processing was linked to poorer outcomes, such as school enrolment and graduation, and subsequent justice contact (Cauffman et al., 2021). The study is observational and thus potential residual confounding is possible. Yet it calls into doubt the notion that simply increasing the level of formal involvement means enhancing development prospects. The results indicate that there is a need to explore the developmental and collateral effects of processing decisions in Punjab, focusing on the local organisation of diversion and community support.

A randomised trial offers more evidence with regard to an alternative processing pathway. In a study of 143 young people ages 13-17, restorative justice conferencing resulted in a 19 percentage point decrease in six month rearrest rates, and effects were sustained four years after the intervention (Shem-Tov et al., 2024). This shows a diversion effect contextually and it does not isolate stigma as a mechanism nor assess aftercare in the postcustody phase.

In Ghana, a study of 12 released male juveniles found that poverty, stigma, and limited access to education and employment and a reliance on family, friends, nongovernmental support, and personal coping were identified as reasons for school dropout or adolescent pregnancy (Frimpong-Manso & Bosomprah, 2025). Material deprivation and social rejection offer a good comparative context for Punjab. School readmission, apprenticeship offers and access to services may be analysed to see how stigma affects tangible opportunities, in addition to general attitudes to rehabilitation (Frimpong-Manso & Bosomprah, 2025; Reed & Wagner, 2026).

Institutional exclusion can be implicit. Continuous requests for information about an old case; sharing identifying information; particularly strong scrutiny or lack of a means of contesting refusal can signal to a child that he or she is still suspect. Particular decisions and the rules about them, and young people's accounts of their treatment, need to be investigated if these potential mechanisms are to be understood. The relevance of confidentiality is that the JJSA lays down the limitation on the publication of identification details (except on certain conditions) and not an automatic deletion of records (Government of Pakistan, 2018).

Additional evidence on the prevalence of stigma in recent years warns against relying on awareness as an outcome. A systematic review identified the following: Knowledge and attitudes were more consistently improved than behaviour; fewer than half (2/8) of studies assessing behavioural outcomes reported positive results and no study was from a LMIC (Majeed et al., 2025). Punjab interventions must therefore be based on decisions and access. If children are still unable to attend school, a positive response to the survey by the school leader is less significant. Programmes should not require children to share their stories and demonstrate that they are to be treated with special sympathy.

School Closures and Cncertain Return

Both are an outcome and a place in which belonging can be re-built: education. Returning learners might require recognition of learning undertaken elsewhere, placement appropriate to their attainment level and support for missing learning prior to the period of detention. A systematic review of school reentry practices sheds light on barriers, and practices that need to be coordinated between justice and education settings (Kubek et al., 2020). Its relevance is organisational – a successful return will be dependent on the responsibility being allocated to those who will be involved in admission and records and subsequent support. Based on the reviewed literature, it is not clear which of these procedures is in place and working well in the districts of Punjab.

A simple administrative explanation is complicated by the expectations of the young people themselves. Findings from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (SYRP) revealed that while there were high educational aspirations, there were also low expectations of achieving these aspirations, with a lack of interest in going to school being the most common and significant reported barrier to higher aspirations (Noorman & Brancale, 2023). Do not interpret this as proof that opportunities are not being taken up and that youth are rejecting them. Attention to relationships, prior learning experiences, relevance and

confidence may need attention to promote disengagement. However, those explanations need to be explored and not assumed to have been tested in that study.

Research with 19 formerly incarcerated Latine youth aged 15–18 reveals that institutional expectations can limit educational aspirations, and that youth are actively engaging in the process of interpreting and challenging these expectations (Cabral, 2026). The accounts provide a relational dimension to school return – enrolment is an administrative action, and recognition as a capable learner is based on many interactions. The study doesn't come up with an estimate for how prevalent such experiences are outside of its context.

The promise of relational intervention evidence is limited. A process in which a youth shares their intentions and expectations with a teacher of their choice was found to decrease the likelihood of re-engaging in detention during the following semester from 69% to 29% in an initial US field test with 47 youth. A separate study with 349 teachers, pre-registered, looked at their responses (Walton et al., 2021). As the sample size is small and follow-up is short, the magnitude of the difference cannot be considered a good indicator for Punjab. The mechanism still raises a pragmatic issue: what about the role of a named educator in helping a child who has been returning to become known by means of aspirations and strengths?

In a longitudinal study, 1216 first-arrested boys had stronger teacher relationships correlated with more positive expectations after 6 months, which predicted higher grades and less offending after 12 months (Smith et al., 2025). This helps to explore school relationships in relation to admission. In its expansion of this cohort, it is another Crossroads analysis, and does not represent a replication or a random test of teacher support.

More than a normal readmission is needed for disability and learning needs. Youth-perspective research does focus young people with special needs needs when it comes to reentry (Mathur et al., 2020). A separate quasi-experimental study also revealed greater engagement in the community and lower rates of reoffending in the intervention group than in the comparison groups, but with limitations due to nonrandom allocation (Mathur et al., 2021). Accessible assessment and learning support, and continuity across settings would be necessary for Punjab adaptation. Thus, reading, comprehension and participation should also be part of transition planning, in addition to individual assessment (Mathur et al., 2021; Mathur et al., 2020).

Work and Conditions for a Prosocial Identity

The most transparent directly relevant publication in Punjab looked at 30 youths aged between 13-17 years in an eight-month paid employment programme. The interviews, observations and probation officer reports were analysed using the narrative approach that linked structured tasks and mentorship to prosocial identity development. Stigma and insecure employment following the programme continued to be barriers (Ahmed et al., 2025). Qualitative design brings to light the enlightenment of how structured employment can bring recognition and a future role. The extent and longevity of these benefits needs to be further investigated, especially once programme support is no longer provided.

Experimental evidence shows that a related barrier in subsequent work is identified. A mock hiring study of 1,054 potential applicants showed that a juvenile record negatively affected the adult applicant, especially when disclosure was in conflict with a background check (Reed & Wagner, 2026). The simulated hiring cannot be used to create real employer behaviour in Punjab. It does illustrate however,

the importance of proper and confidential treatment of juvenile records for opportunities beyond childhood.

In 2026, a qualitative study was conducted at a juvenile facility in the United States following a focus group with seven youth to discuss experiences with vocational. Participants shared skills and career aspirations and a desire for increased opportunities and engagement with the community (Hester et al., 2026). It was not examined if training resulted in employment after release. These sources offer a nice idea that there is a difference between a course and an opportunity for learning. When nobody knows about the completion certificates or travelling to work is too expensive or working is unsafe, the "value" of completion certificates is limited.

Livelihood support needs to be ageappropriate and education and child protection friendly for Punjab. Reintegration programmes should not be defined as successful if every child is put into paid work, especially if the right developmental pathway is to school. For older adolescents, lawful, supervised training with recognised progression may be of benefit, and for younger children, education continuity and home support will be primarily important. Programme design should incorporate relevant legal requirements, local labour-market prospects and include the young person's education aims and preference.

There is also a relational aspect of employment. A good supervisor can offer feedback, lend credibility, and make connections to larger networks, as opposed to insecure or degrading circumstances that can reverse the very changing of identity that training is designed to promote. Evaluation should differentiate access, quality and retention (was an opportunity provided, was participation safe and meaningful, and did the pathway continue? If seats for training were the only ones counted, the central reintegration question would remain unanswered. Mentorship and continuity are processes that are relevant in the Punjab study but it is not possible to determine which sectors, placements or length of programme leads to continued benefits (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Family Relationships and Social Network

Families can offer housing, comfort and emotional support, help with appointments and practical day-to-day supervision. Many have the ability to store some of it, but not all of it, and going home isn't always going to safety. A qualitative study in Dir Valley with 20 released juveniles and 20 family members revealed that family involvement was both supportive and highlighted the barriers of relationship strain, absence of family members, and economic pressures and family circumstances (Hussain & Sajid, 2024). The study finds that family dynamics and resources need to be evaluated on a case to case basis for reintegration planning in Punjab, despite being located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Family connectedness can mitigate some of the effects of stigma, but not the outside stigma. US research showed that mother–youth close relationships were related to less anticipated stigma after being stopped by the police, rather than to less experienced stigma. A focus on the protective association was among young people who experienced nonintrusive stops (Turney et al., 2023). This difference is relevant in terms of intervention design. Counselling cannot on its own force a school, employer or public official to make a fair decision, but it can help the school, employer or public official to anticipate interaction with greater confidence. Emotional support and institutional accountability deals with different aspects of the issue.

Evidence is also emerging that suggests family support profiles differ. Within 1,354 adjudicated youth, those with low parental support had a higher rate of subsequent psychological problems, and those with a high rate of support had lower rates of anxiety and aggression (Stutts et al., 2025). The results indicate that it is important to evaluate the quality and nature of family relationships instead of simply documenting whether family contact was present or not as a protective factor.

Thus, family-based work should start with the child's experiences of safety and relationships. If there is positive contact, services may be able to assist families with educational opportunities, health appointments and legal considerations. In situations where there is violence, rejection or exploitation, automatic reunification can leave the child vulnerable to a further experience of violence. An alternative arrangement with a trusted adult or in supported living may be required. These possibilities need to be assessed individually; in the Pakistani context, interviews reveal support and strain, while longitudinal studies demonstrate variability in support profiles (Hussain & Sajid, 2024; Stutts et al., 2025). Having a child in poverty should not be a comment on their moral ability but treated as a fact that care givers can provide unlimited unpaid coordination.

One other issue that family-focused planning can miss is the place of housing. Analyzing 1,115 Crossroads participants, formally processed youth were more likely to report street homelessness even after considering detention and other factors observed (Chlebuch et al., 2025). This is a finding which goes beyond rearrest to residential security and indicates a relationship that needs to be explored in other institutions such as Punjab. It is important that a transition assessment be conducted that determines where the child will be located safely and what supports are available in the event that this is unsuccessful.

There are relationships outside the home that should be considered. Liu (2026) found that communication skills were statistically associated with lower rates of recidivism among confined youth; this relationship was mediated by bonds with prosocial adults and prosocial peers. Observational mediation does not establish that teaching communication will result this. It does, however, realises that relational access is a process that could be worthy of investigation in addition to individual skills. Together with what we know about friendship formation after formal processing, this evidence advocates for opportunities to foster friendships not only for limiting friendships (Rowan et al., 2023).

Health Needs and Discontinuity of Care

Health issues can be reintegration issues, as distress, substance problems and unmet learning or development needs can impact on school, work and relationships. Beaudry et al. (2021) conducted an international review of 47 studies across 19 countries and demonstrated significant psychiatric morbidity among detained adolescents, as well as differences between boys and girls. Its pooled estimates are not to be interpreted as estimates of prevalence for Punjab. A US evaluation of youth with low levels of previous justice involvement also found high health and social needs and concluded that support is needed for all youth, not just for youth with longer custodial records (Barnert, Applegarth, et al., 2020).

There is longitudinal evidence that health needs can continue beyond the time frame typically included in release planning. There was continuity and comorbidity of psychiatric disorders, documented over 15 years, in the Northwestern Juvenile Project (Teplin et al., 2021). An analysis of service use revealed that less than 20% of the sample received services, and the median age was 32 years (Luna et al., 2024). These are publications on a US cohort with partially the same participants. What matters is their meaning which is the potential for ongoing unmet need, rather than it being evidence of the same disorder profile and service coverage in Punjab.

Practical arrangements are also important for access. Parent and provider interviews highlighted the need for continuity, transportation and family involvement in post incarceration healthcare (Barnert, Abrams, et al., 2020). Punjab adaptation should consider the child knows where to go, can access the service, can understand the referral and whether they can access help confidentially. No care can be claimed on a written referral. Completed contact and child's record of its usefulness would give more meaning; health confidentiality would be maintained; disclosure would be limited to a legitimate purpose.

Care must be sensitive to adversity and not assume that every child involved in the justice system has a psychiatric disorder. Screening needs to have a way to get the support needed if it does not, it can create another label. There is a need to differentiate distress, communication needs, treatment needs, and behaviour needs, and not group them into failure to comply (Jones et al., 2025; Liu, 2026). An additional planning question that arises when a young person reaches their 18th birthday is continuing access. Severe transitions between child and adult services can disrupt relationships at the critical time when legal supervision or family support might also be shifting.

Weak Institutional Structure and Inadequacies

The evidence in Pakistan indicates a disconnect between formal planning and support for rehabilitation. A study involving three juvenile male cases and a probation department interview in Karachi found that the settings under investigation were failing to achieve full implementation and only providing limited rehabilitation (Khoso & Kousar, 2022). The small case-based design provides a glimpse of implementation process. The NCRC (2026) also identifies gaps in diversion, probation capacity and institutional coordination on a national level. The organisation of support across agencies is an important area for assessment in Punjab at district level in view of these findings.

There is no one-size-fits-all intervention for aftercare. It may include a variety of tasks, such as supervision, counselling, family work, educational support and case co-ordination, to varying degrees. A 2024 systematic review did not report any clear impacts of the aftercare programmes assessed on arrests, convictions or incarceration, and highlighted issues of staff turnover and gaps immediately after release (Wong et al., 2024). A Pennsylvania assessment also found no observable recidivism impact from the five reform counties compared to other counties (Mielke, 2024). Both outcomes point to the fact that there's no need to pull away useful services. Both dispute the notion that an activity’s name is an indicator of its effectiveness when it is termed aftercare.

In the interviews with 43 youth about parole revocation, substance use and unaddressed mental health and poor communication with the officers were common issues (Jones et al., 2025). These accounts are placed in terms of continuity of relationships and services. They're not sure which part of supervision they would want to take to ensure it would not be revoked but they say that enforcement and engagement should be looked at together.

Juvenile intervention evidence is a bit more positive more broadly. A meta-review revealed a small overall link between participation and decreases in recidivism, with significant variations in the effects of participation by programme and study features (Pappas & Dent, 2023). That finding does not supplant more specific, mixed evidence on aftercare. A review of reviews found similarly low or very low levels of confidence in estimates of transitional interventions; 95% of primary study populations were from the United States (Kvamme et al., 2022). The correct conclusion is: selective investment, evaluation, not universal endorsement of a named programme package.

The definition of fragmentation for Punjab should be based on observable disconnections. A child can have multiple evaluations and no one is accountable for taking the next step. A referral can be marked as successful by a service even if they have no capacity to take the referral. There might also be a change of responsibility after a change of district, age. These discontinuities can be explored via referral records, service journeys and young people's experiences. The overall evidence points to the need to specify the next action, responsible person, receiving service, and response if first action does not succeed (Barnert, Abrams, et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUNJAB

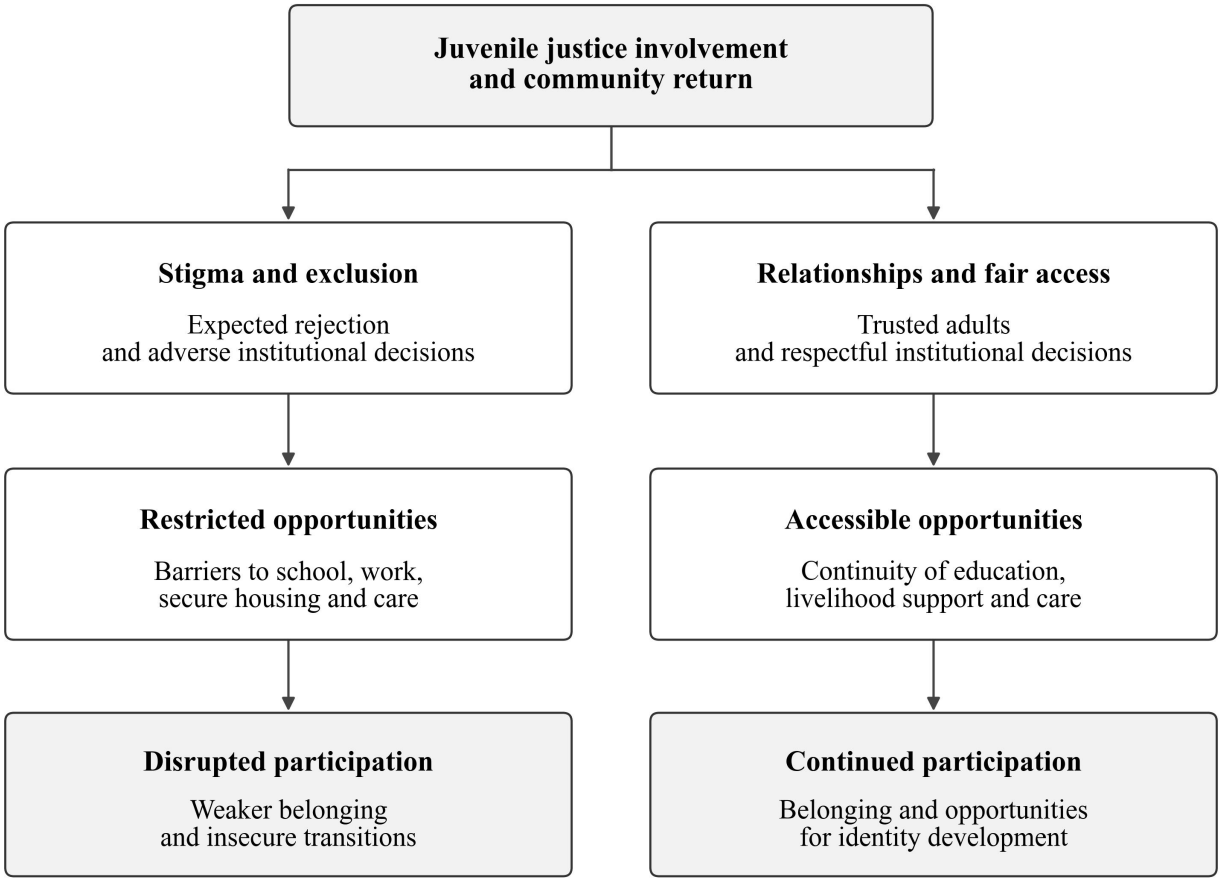
The synthesis suggests that the linkage of social recognition and available opportunities are essential to juvenile reintegration. This interpretation draws parallels between the employment study conducted in Punjab, which found that prosocial identity was promoted by mentorship and structured work, and the longitudinal research that found a link between justice processing and educational and relational disadvantage (Ahmed et al., 2025; Cauffman et al., 2021; Rowan et al., 2023). These results question theories that place the responsibility for reintegration 100% in the individual's motivation. They also need to be discrimination of mechanisms—altered peer networks, restricted employment, interrupted care are related issues, but each needs its own evidence and institutional response.

Recognition relates to whether a young person is accepted as a student, trainee or community participant whose future is not related to justice involvement. Resources are related to the practical ways to fill those positions. Teacher relationship research aligns with supportive recognition to future expectations, and the Punjab study aligns with meaningful work and mentorship with identity development (Ahmed et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2025). In contrast, the mock-hiring study reveals that juvenile-record information can affect hiring decisions even after the age of 18 (Reed & Wagner, 2026). All these studies suggest a need to look at what institutions they provide and how they are treated on return. The different designs of their operation do not determine one general causal path.

There is a specific diversion intervention for which there is the strongest causal evidence in this evidence map. The Make-it-Right trial shows that restorative conferencing results in fewer rearrest than prosecution in its context (Shem-Tov et al., 2024). In contrast, evidence of postcustody aftercare is mixed, including a large county-level evaluation that failed to show a recidivism impact (Mielke, 2024; Wong et al., 2024). Therefore, in Punjab, distinction needs to be made between the following when choosing interventions: diversion and preparation and post-release support through detention. Achievement in one phase cannot guarantee success in another. The legal availability under the JJSA gives a basis for implementation and local delivery and outcomes need to be assessed separately (Government of Pakistan, 2018).

These relationships are combined in two proposed pathways in Figure 1. Exclusion pathway = stigma to limited opportunities to participation disruption; support pathway = trusted relationships and fair access to continuity and belonging. The framework guides assessment in Punjab: each connection identifies a process that can be investigated, and the receiving institution remains responsible for the practical decisions taken that lead to access being granted or withheld (Chlebuch et al., 2025; Luna et al., 2024; Rowan et al., 2023; Walton et al., 2021).

Figure 1: **Proposed pathways linking stigma and support to juvenile reintegration in Punjab**



Note. Developed for this review from original empirical studies on justice processing and peer ties (Rowan et al., 2023), school relationships (Smith et al., 2025; Walton et al., 2021), employment and record stigma (Ahmed et al., 2025; Reed & Wagner, 2026), housing (Chlebuch et al., 2025), and care (Luna et al., 2024). Arrows indicate possible relationships to be explored locally.

Children's accounts should feed into that assessment during the transition. Youth with special needs and formerly incarcerated Latine youth highlight why institutional descriptions often fail to capture the priorities of young people; their educational aspirations and experiences of control (Cabral 2026; Mathur et al. 2020). Participation should involve identification of a trusted contact, practical issues and checking if arrangements are still appropriate. This means communicating in languages children can understand and providing alternatives to written instructions, as required, in Punjab. These are suggested adaptations based on the participation findings and should be pilot tested with local children and practitioners for acceptability and feasibility.

The synthesis develops six interrelated priorities. First, responsibility for accommodation, education, health access and any required documentation must be set up through transition planning. Parent and provider interviews reveal barriers to healthcare connectivity, and youth experiences of parole revocation highlight the potential for unmet healthcare needs and poor communication to accompany unsuccessful

healthcare and justice system transitions (Barnert, Abrams, et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2025). A named coordinator should be appointed to keep a record of who/what service receives the information and to follow up key contacts. The pathway should also include short-term accommodation and unplanned discharges and support should be offered where a referral is unsuccessful. Administrative completion should result in the child being delivered to the next service.

Second, retention in school should involve a relationship that can sustain participation. The school-return field trial indicates that there may be a potential advantage in conveying a child's aspirations to a chosen educator, and longitudinal teacher research points to a potential intermediate process—future expectations (Smith et al., 2025; Walton et al., 2021). A trusted school contact and learning support should therefore be included with the readmission procedures. Evidence about the situation of young people with disabilities bolsters the argument for individualized supports (Mathur et al., 2021). The final result should not be a matter of enrolment, but attendance, progress of learning and belonging after admission should be recorded. The extent of the field-trial effect in the United States should not be predicted to guide results for Punjab.

Third, livelihood support needs to link age appropriate training to safe and recognized livelihoods. The Punjab study finds that mentorship, structured tasks and instability in the immediate aftermath of the programme are all important elements, and that vocational interviews reveal an interest among youth in more expansive opportunities and community ties (Ahmed et al., 2025; Hester et al., 2026). Younger children's plans focus on education and household support, and there is the option for supervised progression towards work for older adolescents, who are eligible for this. Monitoring should include treatment, learning, payment (if applicable) and continuity. The job experiment also facilitates the process of reflection on the request, recording and interpretation of juvenile information, which does not imply the applicability of the record sealing system of the United States in Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, 2018; Reed & Wagner, 2026).

Fourth, institutional behaviour is a way of assessing anti-stigma work. A positive correlation was found between family closeness and lower anticipated stigma but not experienced stigma, illustrating the need for separate indicators of emotional reassurance and external access (Turney et al., 2023). The mock-hiring experiment also focuses on gatekeepers' decisions (Reed & Wagner, 2026). Pilot projects should consider completed school placements and fair treatment and confidentiality, while public education may contribute. The wider intervention literature shows that attitudes are more responsive than behavioural outcomes which underlines the need to measure actions (Majeed et al., 2025). Without children publicly narrating their cases, they should be able to receive services.

Fifth is the support which ought to integrate suitable treatment with safe and quality relationships. Uneven family circumstances are reported in Pakistani families, and there is a distinct pattern of psychological vulnerabilities, identified in the prospective research of support profile (Hussain & Sajid, 2024; Stutts et al., 2025). Family contact is therefore, not an adequate measure of support. Nonparental bonds should also be considered in the context of trusted teachers, mentors or other adults when caregivers are not present (Liu, 2026). Health planning should support completed contact and continuity as documented by long-term follow-up which shows persistent need and low service use (Luna et al., 2024; Teplin et al., 2021). A supportive relationship should be kept separate from a referral, a family visit.

Sixth, there must be capacity and ongoing commitment to coordination. In the case studies in Pakistan, implementation gaps were identified, and evidence from aftercare reveals service discontinuity and

inconsistent delivery (Khoso & Kousar, 2022; Wong et al., 2024). These responsibilities may be set as a minimum standard in provincial plans; district plans could determine receiving institutions that are available and identify the unmet demand. Initial pilots should include a variety of different service contexts and should be able to report on staffing, funding, referral completion and children's experiences. A coordinator will not replace missing school spots, accommodations or clinical services. Monitoring will need to differentiate failure of co-ordination from scarcity of provision, therefore, if it is to result in the right response.

There should also be a distinction between evaluation and not having any justice contact recorded. Crossroads research also establishes a connection between formal processing and street homelessness, demonstrating that the path from a street to shelter can be seen in the consequences that formal processing reveals that are not captured by rearrest alone (Chlebuch et al., 2025). Longitudinal health and educational outcomes also support wellbeing, school engagement and access to services (Luna et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2025). Safe accommodation, supportive relationships, lawful developmental opportunities and perceived belonging are all parts of a balanced assessment. Justice outcomes continue to be relevant; technical violations and observation periods are not counted against the denominator, and missing data is reported. This enables children's circumstances to explain apparent success or failure.

Adaptation should be considered from the beginning, taking gender and disability into account. In interviews with 10 young women who have been sentenced to youth service in Sweden, education and normal life aspirations have gained centre stage, while specialised research in education highlights needs that are not always the focus of general educational provision (Azad & Carlsson, 2026; Mathur et al., 2020). These results call for the need of incorporating girls, children with disabilities, minority-language speakers and young people without stable caregivers in Punjab consultation and research. Consideration to be given with participants for transport and appointment arrangements and communication support. In the definition of eligibility and results of the programmes, it is necessary to see exclusions to avoid a successful overall result being achieved at the cost of a systematic exclusion of specific groups.

Research Priorities and Constraints

The immediate research needs are the need for a provincial account regarding what happens after release or another juvenile justice transition. A prospective multi-district cohort might document pretransition circumstances and then track educational engagement, accommodation, access, stigma and justice engagement at clearly defined points in time. Children on short term stay and under trial children should also be recruited as well as convicted children. Researchers should differentiate between children released from custody and those receiving community sanctions and should include age at the event for each. Such differences would allow us to explore the point at which barriers appear and which groups that are not covered by current services.

Children, carers, teachers, vocational staff, employers and those who provide frontline services should be included in qualitative research. There may be some who disengaged from the programme or were turned down for participation who would not be recruited through successful programmes. Interviews might explore real-life opportunities for decisions and how these decisions were made, without asking children to provide public disclosure of historic identities. Stigma measures should differentiate between anticipated stigma, experienced stigma (treatment) and internalised stigma (judgement) as differences in both family-stigma and scale-development studies have shown (Turney et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2026). Cognitive testing and meaning would need to be done if there is a need for adaptation in Urdu, Punjabi or

other locally relevant languages. The reliability of a previously imported questionnaire does not prove that the questionnaire captures stigma in Punjab.

Mechanisms and harms should be part of intervention evaluation; outcomes. Small pilots could test the effectiveness of either a receiving-school contact or transport support or an accompanied referral to enhance completed access. In a study where randomisation is not feasible, then a well-specified comparison, transparent allocation process and repeated measurement may provide greater inference. Evaluation should include the following: who received the intervention; what support was provided and why participation ceased. The potential unintended consequences of the measure are: disclosure of justice status; dependency on short term funding; displacement from education to unsuitable work; additional monitoring which leads to an increase in violations being recorded but not an increase in wellbeing.

There are methodological constraints associated with the review. Discovery via the Web may be more likely to find accessible, English-language, better indexed literature—Urdu research may not be fully represented, and unpublished evaluations and administrative evidence may not be found. Some publications were only accessible as abstracts. Selection and interpretation biases are possible due to the single-reviewer selection and charting, and lack of formal risk-of-bias assessment. Several empirical papers study common cohorts, and reviews overlap with underlying studies. In keeping with this, the evidence map displays publications and not independent replications and the conclusions to the map focus on thematic relationships and not pooled effects.

The main substantive restriction is geographical transfer. One included publication directly studies a reintegration programme in Punjab, two other Pakistani studies are based in Karachi and Dir Valley. Most of the other empirical literature is in a U.S. context, but with some work from Ghana, Sweden and China. Portability is restricted by differences in institutions and education, family situation and resources of the services. Publication years also vary from the years in which the data was actually gathered, making it difficult to draw conclusions as to the current situation of services. This review determines that plausible mechanism and priorities could be identified, but that the issue of the prevalence across the provinces or present coverage of services and effectiveness of programmes is not resolved.

CONCLUSION

Juvenile reintegration is understood as access to ordinary development after justice involvement in Punjab. The evidence mapped indicates that stigma can combine with disrupted education, precarious income, family stressors, unfulfilled care needs, and poor institutional linkages. There is limited direct local literature and the international literature about aftercare is mixed (Ahmed et al., 2025; Mielke, 2024; Wong et al., 2024). A credible answer thus involves the provision of practical assistance, reasonable institutional decisions, and an assessment of children's actual experience.

The proposed priority is an individually planned transition with named responsibility, confidential communication, providing educational continuity and appropriate linkages to care and livelihoods. Families/communities can contribute – their support needs to be evaluated, not taken for granted. Future research in Punjab should track children after their participation in a programme and collect data on participation and safety and belonging, and explicitly defined justice outcomes. Second chances are made meaningful through accessible institutions and sustainable opportunities (Ahmed et al., 2025, Walton et al., 2021) and the young person's attempt to change.

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