

Beyond Walls: Identity Reconfigurations and Social Drivers of Post-Release Reintegration of Juvenile Offenders in Burundi

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Abstract

This article explores the socio-relational dynamics shaping the post-release reintegration of juvenile offenders in Burundi, with a focus on identity reconfigurations and community-based support systems. Adopting an interpretive qualitative approach, the study combines semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted between January and April 2025 in Bujumbura-Mairie and Gitega provinces. A purposive sample of 17 participants (including formerly detained youth, family members, institutional actors, and community stakeholders) was analyzed using inductive thematic coding. The analytical framework draws on social capital theory and stigma theory to examine how social ties and societal perceptions influence reintegration trajectories. Findings reveal that, in a context marked by weak institutional support, reintegration is largely driven by informal and localized actors. Family support emerges as a central factor, providing not only material assistance but also emotional validation and identity reconstruction. Local associations play a complementary role by facilitating access to training and income-generating activities, although their impact remains constrained by limited resources. Community and religious mentors act as brokers of trust, helping youth regain social legitimacy and navigate stigma. Additionally, sports and cultural activities contribute to positive identity transformation by fostering self-esteem and social inclusion. Overall, the study highlights the importance of strengthening community-based mechanisms to support sustainable reintegration pathways.

Keywords

Child, Child Identity, Burundi, Child Offenders, Juvenile Justice

1. Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, the reintegration of juvenile offenders following their release from detention centers constitutes a critical societal challenge. Having experienced incarceration under conditions of vulnerability, these minors often face ongoing marginalization, heightened precarity, and a deficit of social recognition (Gacuko, 2012). Empirical evidence suggests that detention severely impairs minors' psychological well-being, erodes self-esteem, and diminishes their capacity to forge positive social connections (Yé et al., 2015). In Burundi, institutional resources to support the reintegration process remain scarce or non-existent, and post-release experiences are underexplored in academic literature (Sindayigaya, 2023, 2025b). This research interrogates the feasibility of reintegration in the absence of conventional institutional mechanisms, proposing instead the potential of community-driven and informal social dynamics as alternative avenues for rehabilitation (Nijimbere et al., 2025; Sindayigaya, 2024b, 2025a). The study examines how informal environments may enable released minors to reconstruct a stable sense of identity and rebuild weakened social bonds (Manegabe et al., 2025, 2026; Ndayisenga et al., 2026).

Going beyond punitive frameworks, reintegration is understood not merely as preventing recidivism as critiqued by Euvrard (2021), but as a process requiring the mobilization of affective, relational, and symbolic resources that are often overlooked. Findings from Ntampera (2022) in Burundi, Zoua Nna (2021) in Cameroon, and reports from CFSI & GRET (2013) highlight the tangible influence of informal support systems on post-release trajectories. Theoretical frameworks employed include labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951), resilience theory (Cyrlunik, 2003), and life narrative anthropology (Jodelet, 2003; Goguel d'Allondans & Lachance, 2019), which collectively illuminate the role of social proximity, relational practices, and valorization spaces in the reintegration process.

This study adopts a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews with released juveniles (Cimpaye et al., 2025, 2026; Ndayisenga & Sindayigaya, 2024a, 2024b; Ndericimpaye & Sindayigaya, 2023), participant observation within community organizations, and thematic analysis of life narratives. The principal objective is to identify forms of informal social support that foster successful reintegration. The central hypothesis posits that identity reconstruction and restoration of social ties are contingent not on penal or institutional interventions, but on the quality of proximate interactions within the juvenile's social environment.

2. Methods and Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The analytical framework draws on social capital theory to examine support networks and Goffman's (1968) concept of stigma to highlight the social challenges faced by released juveniles. The research aims to explore the trajectories of socio-professional reintegration through a diverse range of methodological tools. Fieldwork was conducted between Janu-

ary and April 2025 across urban and rural zones in Bujumbura-Mairie and Gitega provinces. The sample comprised 17 purposively selected participants. The core group included 6 minors aged 17 to 23, 4 males and 2 females. Among the boys, three were engaged in income-generating activities such as phone repair and woodworking, while one lacked stable employment. Of the two girls, one worked as a tailor, while the other had no economic activity. Additional participants included 3 close contacts of the released minors a parent actively involved in their child's reintegration, an older brother serving as a guide, and a guardian with limited engagement. From institutional settings, the sample involved 3 reintegration professionals (two NGO social workers and one psychologist), 2 representatives of the justice system (a juvenile court judge and the director of a rehabilitation center), and 3 community actors (a teacher, a local neighborhood chief, and a craftsman-employer).

Data collection involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews, guided by respondent profiles. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, was conducted under informed consent, and fully transcribed. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic coding via NVivo, allowing for the identification of recurring categories such as stigma, access to resources, family involvement, schooling, and institutional roles. To ensure validity, triangulation of testimonies was rigorously applied. Ethically, confidentiality and anonymity were strictly upheld, in accordance with participant requests. The study's objectives were clearly communicated, and informed consent was explicitly obtained.

Within a reintegration context marked by institutional neglect and social stigmatization of formerly detained minors, this research identifies the relational, social, and symbolic mechanisms that facilitate post-release reintegration. Through immersion in the lived experiences of participants, the findings reveal multiple and complementary forms of support provided by actors often overlooked in public policy including extended families, grassroots associations, informal mentors, and cultural or sports-based spaces. These testimonies underscore key resilience factors not only of material nature but also affective, identity-related, and community-based. Despite their informal and localized nature, such dynamics enable released juveniles to reconstruct meaningful life trajectories. The following section presents these findings through four analytical domains: family support, local associative initiatives, community mentorship, and cultural/sports-based practices.

3. Main Results Analysis

3.1. Family Support

In the absence of institutional assistance post-release, family support emerged as a central cross-cutting theme in the narratives of formerly detained youth. Participants emphasized varied degrees of familial involvement, which appeared to serve as a protective factor against recidivism by actively contributing to the reconstruction of social ties. These roles ranged from consistent support to indiffer-

ence or outright rejection.

Eric (17, carpenter) recounted: “My mother insisted I join the workshop because I had the tools. Otherwise, I’d still be wandering the streets. Once I joined, she made sure to wake me up every morning. I can tell she believes in me now.”

This narrative illustrates not only logistical and material support but also affective and moral encouragement. His mother’s involvement reflects a reintegration rooted in interpersonal care, confirming that aligning with effective reintegration is primarily driven by grassroots actors, notably families.

Grâce (16, tailor) described her brother’s pivotal role: “As soon as I arrived, my brother advised me not to sell the sewing machine. He promised to help find a workspace. Two months later, he went with me to the center, helped me rent a room, and told me I could start earning money again.”

Such fraternal mediation represents a critical yet often overlooked factor in reintegration. Multidisciplinary support systems where families assume strategic roles are essential. These findings advocate for co-responsibility models integrating families, peers, and educators in restorative approaches.

In contrast, Joël (18), who lived with his uncle post-release, reported alienation and stigma:

“My uncle was rarely home. His children treated me like a criminal, constantly monitoring me. At the dinner table, no one spoke to me. Eventually, my aunt suggested I leave so she could help me return to school. Now I’m doing better.” Such experiences indicate that family support must go beyond passive reception it requires consistent, recognizably supportive actions. Access to income-generating opportunities, school reintegration, and family mediation in the community serve as core resilience drivers. Importantly, family support encompasses not just material aid housing, financial help, guidance but also symbolic encouragement, expressions of trust, and affirmation of worth. These elements facilitate a forward-looking self-image that counters stigma and the risk of behavioral relapse (Goffman, 1968). Ultimately, the family emerges as a critical interface between formal reintegration mechanisms (e.g., NGOs, judicial institutions, educational systems) and the identity reconstruction of released youth. An effective reintegration policy in Burundi must therefore prioritize family involvement through targeted awareness, mediation training, and psychosocial support. The family should not be perceived merely as a post-detention shelter, but as a primary agent of sustainable social rehabilitation.

3.2. Local Associations

Findings from this study underscore the critical role of local associations in the social reintegration of juveniles post-release. In the context of institutional vacuum and limited state resources, these organizations fill a significant gap by offering diverse forms of support. As Sinigaglia-Amadio (2007) notes, in marginalized neighborhoods, associations adapt their interventions to local realities in response to systemic deficiencies. Similarly, Cordeil (2008) highlights how mutual aid as-

sociations (MAAs) provide frameworks for social integration, particularly for individuals with psychological vulnerabilities.

Fabrice (17), a beneficiary of a local association, shared: “After my release, no one from the commune or neighborhood reached out. It was the local association that helped me through my brother working with them to secure a loan. I used it to enroll in training and learned how to repair phones and electronic devices using the small kit I had.” This testimony reflects a proactive and material support dynamic. Rather than merely welcoming the released minor, the association initiated actionable reintegration strategies.

Petit (2020) refers to this as social experimentation, where associations act as intermediaries between the state and civil society to generate context-specific public interventions.

Claudine (16), reintegrated in a rural setting, explained: “I had learned sewing before, and when I arrived with my machine and kit, the SANGWE hilltop association provided funds for advanced training. They also give me fabric to work with during community meetings and events. Now I can help my mother.”

Such support goes beyond income generation it fosters dignity, self-worth within the family, and social recognition. Kouza & Szwed (2025) conceptualize such accompaniment as helping young people translate aspirations into tangible possibilities at the intersection of reality and personal dreams. This sentiment is echoed by community members. One parent observed: “If these released youth are doing well now, it’s often thanks to the associations helping and supporting them. We maintain connections with them because these youth need community recognition. Without that, they’d likely be forgotten.”

This inter-institutional linkage is pivotal for successful community integration, especially where public systems are weak or absent. Bala-Arabé (2023) emphasizes that in institutional voids, associative actors respond strategically, actively shaping policy adaptation through grassroots expertise. However, several testimonies revealed structural vulnerabilities. Some youth reported abrupt discontinuation of support, citing resource constraints or leadership changes. Dupont (2024) cautions that while local associations offer tailored opportunities, they remain dependent on institutional dynamics and financial stability. Mauger (2001) further identifies economic reintegration structures as specialized pathways managing employability, often under-resourced. Despite their crucial role, local associations remain under-consolidated. Their proximity, contextual knowledge, and capacity for innovation such as seed funding and solidarity networks render them essential reintegration agents (Gérome, 2017). Gérome also argues that these associations contribute to sector professionalization and help define relevant performance indicators. The sustained impact of local associations will largely depend on their ability to align with current public policies through structured partnerships with state institutions and local communities. Broadly, this analysis calls for formal recognition and systemic reinforcement of these associations. Once consolidated, they could become powerful levers for an inclusive and sustainable national rein-

tegration policy, particularly for disadvantaged children and released youth.

3.3. Community and Religious Mentorship

This study identifies community and religious mentors as vital figures in the post-release lives of formerly detained youth. These mentors whether formal (e.g., teachers, neighborhood chiefs) or informal (e.g., pastors, imams, village elders) often serve as first responders, working in concert with families to stabilize the reintegration process. [Albertson et al. \(2015\)](#) argue that informal interventions, frequently anchored in mentorship, help individuals reshape self-perceptions and establish renewed social connections. In contexts where institutional structures are absent, such support plays a pivotal role in fostering prosocial identities and deterring criminal relapse.

Patrice (18), now employed in a welding workshop, recounted: “When I was released, I couldn’t see how to start this project, even though I had the kit. During a meeting, the hill chief mentioned that someone needed help to get their life structured—it was me. He agreed to rent the space where I now work for five months, and others contributed as they could. Later, he introduced me to a welder, and that’s how I got started.”

This account exemplifies the mentor’s role as a broker of trust. The hill chief leveraged his social capital to help Patrice overcome the stigma associated with his incarceration and establish a meaningful trajectory. In a similar vein, Inès (15), who had been expelled from school and detained, shared: “After I was released, my former teacher came to see me. She advised me to go back to school and advocated for me with another school’s principal. She convinced him to let me return and continue my studies like everyone else.”

Here, the teacher mediated between institutional norms and the student’s lived reality, providing not only administrative access but emotional and moral reinforcement. This reflects [Brown & Ross’s \(2010\)](#) view of mentorship as integral to the development of social capital especially for women released from custody by connecting individuals with supportive networks and credible references. Mentors function as agents of social resilience, bridging the divide between released youth and their communities. Their moral authority and relational proximity help restore symbolic recognition, counteract societal distrust, and encourage a more accepting view of formerly incarcerated individuals. Analytically, mentors mediate between collective norms and individual pathways, often compensating for relational voids created by family rejection or institutional abandonment.

Their contributions active listening, consistent presence, and capacity to mobilize local actors position them as transformative figures in post-release journeys. Yet, access to such mentorship is not universal. Prosper lamented:

“If someone had spoken on my behalf so I could get that kind of support... maybe I would’ve gone back to school or started a project to earn money.”

This illustrates the structural gap left when mentorship is absent, especially in environments lacking formal reintegration frameworks. Ultimately, community

and religious mentors offer more than material assistance they confer social legitimacy upon released youth. Enhancing their roles through training, formal recognition, and integration into official reintegration systems could significantly strengthen policy effectiveness. While they cannot replace the state, they humanize its presence and render it more accessible within local contexts.

3.4. Sports and Cultural Activities

Sports and cultural practices play a crucial, though often underestimated, role in the post-release reintegration trajectories of formerly detained youth. Beyond recreational value, these activities offer avenues for social engagement, foster self-esteem, and channel young people's energy in constructive and stabilizing ways. Didier (16), formerly incarcerated in Ruyigi, shared: "At the center, we had a football field. When we played with others who came from outside, we stopped thinking about everything else. We felt like everyone else. After my release, I continued playing thanks to a neighborhood coach who invited me to join the local team."

Football, in this context, transcends leisure and acts as a gateway to social normalization. For Didier, the pitch became a transitional space, bridging incarceration and reintegration through collective dynamics. Other participants highlighted the empowering effects of cultural engagement. Clémence (15) remarked:

"When I dance with other girls from the cultural group at weddings in different neighborhoods, I feel like someone of value again. Today, people see me as an artist, not as a former detainee."

Such activities reshape symbolic identity, reversing stigmatized perceptions and replacing them with recognition of artistic talent. As Baudinet (2023) observes, cultural initiatives serve as levers for post-carceral normalization and reintegration.

According to professionals, the transformative power of these activities lies less in the activity itself and more in the identity forged through interaction. Bernard, a psychologist, noted:

"Truthfully, it's not the cultural activity that changes the released youth it's the identity constructed through encounters with others. When playing or dancing, they're no longer seen as a case to monitor, but as a teammate, a dancer, a citizen."

This insight aligns with Siganos (2008), who posits that artistic engagement mitigates the dehumanizing effects of incarceration and initiates reintegrative processes. These spaces enable positive identity reconstruction, often absent in formal institutional pathways. However, their structural marginalization remains evident in juvenile centers and post-release environments manifested by a lack of resources, qualified facilitators, and sustained funding. Some interviewees voiced regret over missed opportunities:

"If they had played theater in the rehabilitation center about children's rights, drug harms, and juvenile delinquency—maybe they'd leave with a more positive outlook. Even after release, many don't engage in such events."

Despite their perceived secondary status, sports and cultural activities fulfill

therapeutic, educational, and social functions. They boost self-esteem, foster group cohesion, and bridge individual pasts with dignified futures (Gras, 2005; Duroché & Pédrón, 2019). When institutionalized within both rehabilitation centers and community settings—and integrated with schools, municipalities, and cultural organizations, these practices can concretely address the reintegration needs of formerly detained youth. Ultimately, sports and cultural expression offer youth a chance to reframe their histories not through fault, but through creativity. For many, these spaces represent the first tangible form of a “second chance” post-incarceration. As Alex (2019) affirms, cultural engagement helps individuals reclaim personal worth and reconnect with their identities.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Findings from this study underscore the pivotal role of social and community actors in the post-release reintegration of juvenile offenders in Burundi. In the absence of robust institutional mechanisms, resilience pathways for formerly detained youth are shaped through familial support, associative engagement, informal mentorship, and cultural or athletic practices. These local dynamics resonate with broader scholarly literature, enriching the analysis with multi-level perspectives.

Family support emerges as a cornerstone in the reintegration process. Participants’ narratives reveal that family structures offer moral, identity-based, and economic scaffolding essential for rehabilitation. A multidisciplinary accompaniment framework, positioning family as a strategic co-actor in children’s educational recovery. It must, for further, emphasizes co-responsibility, advocating for the mobilization of close kin within restorative processes. In African contexts, Joliveau et al. (2024) argue for the institutionalization of family support as a component of resilience-oriented juvenile justice policy.

Local associations serve as critical responses to institutional voids, assuming operational roles in post-release care. As highlighted by Sinigaglia-Amadio (2007), such organizations compensate for public service deficits by tailoring support to local realities. Bala-Arabé (2023) notes that associative actors deploy grassroots strategies to reinforce or substitute state interventions. Mbonjawo Makeune (2020), for instance, demonstrates how associations in Cameroon contribute to educational continuity post-incarceration. However, as Dupont (2024) cautions, these structures remain vulnerable due to inconsistent funding and lack of formal institutional recognition. Mauger (2001) presents associations as intermediaries navigating between social innovation and the management of precarity. Gérome (2017) adds that professionalization is imperative for ensuring sustainable reintegration outcomes.

Community and religious mentors emerge as agents of social legitimization for released juveniles. Informal figures teachers, local leaders, and religious guides act as powerful mediators in reintegration, often leveraging social capital to facilitate acceptance. Albertson et al. (2015) identify mentorship as instrumental in foster-

ing alternative self-conceptions and forging new social bonds. Brown & Ross (2010) consider mentorship particularly influential in promoting desistance among young women. Dardouri (2023) and Cancellieri-Decroze & Deffontaires (2023) advocate for active mentorship models rooted in trust, mutual recognition, and sustained engagement.

Sports and cultural activities function as symbolic spaces for identity requalification. Testimonies highlight that these practices offer pathways for self-worth, social visibility, and community integration. Gras (2005) and Duroché & Pédrón (2019) contend that sport within carceral and post-carceral settings channels energy, fosters cohesion, and rebuilds threatened self-esteem. Bodin et al. (2007) conceptualize sport as navigating dual objectives social control and collective pacification. Piot (2007) reflects on expressive embodiment through physical activity, while Sempé et al. (2007) identify its liberatory symbolic function. Cultural interventions, as described by Siganos (2008) and Alex (2019), counter incarceration-induced stigmas and reconstruct self-narratives. Likewise, Sawadogo (2022) and Joliveau et al. (2024) underscore the role of cultural expression in educational and social recognition processes for justice-involved minors.

5. Conclusion

In a context marked by the absence of institutional frameworks for the social reintegration of juvenile offenders in Burundi, this article sheds light on the diverse informal and community-based mechanisms that contribute to the reconstruction of post-release trajectories. Drawing from life narratives and in-depth interviews, the findings demonstrate that reintegration is not solely an administrative process, but a socially embedded dynamic built on trust, recognition, and collective engagement across multiple local actors. Active and constructive family support emerged as a central pillar of resilience, affirming insights from Joliveau et al. (2024). The involvement of extended families in the educational and professional journeys of released minors offers essential moral and identity anchoring often overlooked in public reintegration policies. Local associations, despite structural precarity, proved indispensable by tailoring their support to the lived realities of released youth (Sinigaglia-Amadio, 2007; Bala-Arabé, 2023; Gérome, 2017). Their role should be formally recognized and institutionally supported through inclusive national policies capable of embedding such actors in restorative justice frameworks (Niyongabo et al., 2023; Sindayigaya, 2024a). Community and religious mentors emerged as key figures of social legitimization, educational mediation, and social reintegration. Their influence aligns with the concept of social capital (Brown & Ross, 2010; Albertson et al., 2015; Dardouri, 2023; Bourdieu, 1979), enabling identity reconfiguration in communities that embrace and value formerly detained youth. Lastly, sports and cultural activities often relegated to secondary status revealed themselves as powerful levers of identity requalification and symbolic reintegration. Literature from Gras (2005), Siganos (2008), Bodin et al. (2007), and Alex (2019) supports the notion that these practices foster self-

esteem, group cohesion, and dismantle stigmatized labels linked to incarceration. Taken together, the formal and informal reintegration mechanisms identified in this study call for a profound reconfiguration of post-release reintegration policies in Burundi (Nyabenda & Sindayigaya, 2023; Sindayigaya, 2022, 2023; Sindayigaya & Nyabenda, 2022). These reforms must be multidisciplinary, inclusive, and context-sensitive, responding to the real-life needs of released youth. The goal is not merely to reintegrate them into a society that keeps them at arm's length but to co-construct a better future alongside them, acknowledging grassroots actors as co-architects of social repair (Ndayisenga et al., 2025; Sindayigaya, 2020, 2024b, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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