

The Role of the Family in the Social Reintegration of Juveniles after Their Release from Custody in Burundi

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How to cite this paper: Ntampera, J. D., & Sindayigaya, I. (2026). The Role of the Family in the Social Reintegration of Juveniles after Their Release from Custody in Burundi. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 613-621.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.147037>

Received: March 21, 2026

Accepted: July 27, 2026

Published: July 30, 2026

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Abstract

This work addresses the social reintegration of formerly incarcerated minors, highlighting social interaction as a means of forgetting the prison experience and facilitating reintegration. It underscores the importance of family in the socio-professional reintegration of released minors, with an emphasis on their financial and social support. Through qualitative methodology, realized via semi-structured interviews and life narratives conducted with the released children, their family members, and their social networks, the results of this study reveal the various practices undertaken by families to enhance the success of their children's post-incarceration social reintegration. Furthermore, restorative justice is discussed as a means of reconciliation between victims and offenders, promoting conflict resolution and reducing distrust. Families are also involved in professional reintegration, vocational training, or the resumption of schooling, and in providing financial assistance to these children. Post-incarceration health is a critical issue, highlighting the necessity for appropriate health monitoring.

Keywords

Child, Child Identity, Burundi, Child Offenders, Juvenile Justice, Custody, Social Reintegration, Family

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of incarcerating minors is widespread across the world. It is

within this context that several researchers revisit the issue of their post-release social reintegration (Nyabenda & Sindayigaya, 2024; Sindayigaya, 2020, 2023b, 2025b; Sindayigaya & Nyabenda, 2022), emphasizing its complexity and, therefore, the need for the involvement of multiple actors (Tougas, 2015). The simplest way to approach the problem of post-release social reintegration of minors is probably to begin planning their reintegration from the very first day of their incarceration (Sindayigaya, 2024a, 2025a). This approach, which consists of systemic-type interventions, is referred to as “continuous support.”

In different countries, families adopt various practices to address this issue. In Canada, researchers such as Strimelle and Poupart, cited by Doyon (2019), show that families primarily focus on strengthening family ties (Manegabe et al., 2025, 2026; Ndayisenga et al., 2026). In the United States, families take in minors released from prison by providing them with accommodation, as demonstrated by Dolwick Grieb et al., cited by Doyon (2019). In Belgium, family housing is considered fundamental (Monchaux, 2021). In Morocco, according to the Ministry of Justice (2016), certain sanctions are implemented in the best interest of minors, including returning them to their families (39% of all decisions), as noted by Bassou & Kidai (2019).

In Burundi, incarcerated minors face numerous challenges when attempting to reintegrate into society after serving their sentence. The question is: how do families help these children reintegrate? In this article, we examine the role of the family in the post-release social reintegration of minors in Burundi (Shabani, 2019; Sindayigaya, 2022, 2024b; Sindayigaya & Hitimana, 2016). To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with formerly detained minors, as well as with some of their family members and members of their social environment (Nijimbere et al., 2025a, 2025b; Sindayigaya, 2022). The results show that families play a crucial role in the success of their post-release social reintegration by carrying out a wide range of supportive actions.

2. Methods and Methodology

Our study, aimed at identifying the actions undertaken by families to reintegrate their children after release, is qualitative in nature. Semi-structured interviews and life histories were used as data collection techniques. Using an interview guide, we gathered the views of 15 participants (from different families with a child under 18 who had been convicted of an offense) regarding the actions taken to support their post-release social reintegration.

The interviews were conducted in various parts of the country with (3) formerly detained minors, (6) parents of former detainees, and (3) members of the child’s extended family. Life histories were collected from (3) formerly detained minors. A content analysis of the corpus was carried out using NVivo software. Our analyses therefore made it possible to identify the main activities undertaken by families in the social reintegration of minors after their release.

3. Main Results Analysis

In this section, before identifying the activities undertaken by families to ensure the reintegration of their children after release and presenting the views of the participants, we first outline the socio-demographic characteristics of our respondents (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

Profile	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Education level
Parents	Kaneza	37	F	Farmer	Primary
	Irakoze	43	F	Farmer	Primary
	Bukeyeneza	56	M	Trader	Secondary
	Niyonkuru	52	M	Farmer	Primary
	Dusabe	47	F	-	Primary
	Nkenguburundi	58	M	-	Primary
Family members	Nsabimana	41	M	Teacher	University
	Nsengiyumva	36	F	Health worker	Secondary
	Niyokwizera	63	M	Farmer	Primary
Released minors	Bigirimana	17	M	-	Basic
	Muhimpundu	18	F	Tailor	Basic
	Ndayizeye	20	M	Trader	Basic
	Nshimirimana	19	M	Motorcycle taxi driver	Basic
	Nteziminwe	21	M	Motorcycle taxi driver	Basic
	Ntungane	20	F	Student	Post-basic

Note: Age (at the time of the survey); F: Female; M: Male.

Our analysis of the field data made it possible to identify several activities undertaken by families of released minors to support their reintegration after release. The main ones are presented below.

3.1. Advocating for Restorative Justice

Appearing before the courts is one way of reaching consensus if the verdict satisfies the victim. However, according to our respondents, some prefer alternative approaches that enhance social cohesion. They turn to restorative justice, also known as reparative justice, which, according to the Louvain Declaration (2007) on preventing reoffending, aims “to compensate for harm done to victims and contribute to maintaining peace and security in society”. Through her statement, Kaneza explains why they adopted this approach: “Even if the offender spends many years in prison, the conflict may persist [...] We chose to meet, as families, two years after the crime, to reach an understanding with the victim’s family and the community, and to allow my child, once released, to return to a less hostile environment. When he came back, we prepared banana beer, invited the hill chief,

the victim's family, and others, and asked for forgiveness. It led to positive outcomes."

This illustrates the value of restorative justice in promoting reconciliation within the offender's community. It involves not only the victim and offender but also extended family and community members. Bigirimana adds: "Asking for forgiveness made me aware of the suffering of others and helped me reflect on myself. It shows I do not want to reoffend." However, not all respondents share this view. Muhimpundu states: "What is the point of asking for forgiveness after spending years in prison?"

Despite differing opinions, restorative justice appears to reduce conflict, mistrust, fear, and anger, while increasing the chances of reconciliation and compensation.

3.2. Professional Reintegration

Since released minors often lack income, they are vulnerable, making socio-professional reintegration a priority. Families play a key role in this process.

3.2.1. Income-Generating Activities

Engaging in income-generating activities is a key factor in successful reintegration. As Dickson (2014a) notes, having an employment plan after release reduces reoffending within the first six months. Nsengiyumva explains: "After his release, we welcomed him and showed him small activities to earn money. It helped him become independent and integrate with peers." Similarly, Kaneza states: "We encouraged him to continue the small business he had before his arrest, which stabilized him."

However, some families lack the means to provide such support, which can hinder reintegration and increase the risk of reoffending.

3.2.2. When Parents Lack Solutions

Some parents admit they do not know how to help their children find employment due to their own economic difficulties. This lack of support can increase vulnerability and the likelihood of recidivism.

3.3. Accommodation within a Host Family

Family support immediately after release is crucial. Many families provide shelter, food, and emotional support.

Nsengiyumva states: "After his release, we welcomed and supported him." Such support strengthens reintegration by reconnecting the individual with everyday life and social networks. However, some families are unable to provide accommodation due to limited resources or weak prior relationships.

3.4. School Reintegration or Vocational Training

Since the Burundian prison system does not provide adequate education, some minors return to school after release, particularly those who were in post-basic

education. Nsengiyumva notes: “After his release, we helped him return to school, and he successfully adapted.” Others pursue vocational training instead. Irakoze explains:

“He chose to learn tailoring instead of returning to school and now works in a workshop.” Education and training play a key role in reducing reoffending and promoting social integration.

3.5. Social Support Services

3.5.1. Financial Support

In Burundi, there is no formal financial assistance for released minors. Families therefore provide financial support for basic needs. Nsengiyumva explains: “We all contribute money until he can support himself.”

3.5.2. Healthcare

Health is another critical concern due to the harsh conditions of detention. Families often ensure medical check-ups after release. Bukeyenze states: “We took him to the doctor to assess his health despite the high cost.” However, not all families prioritize healthcare, which can increase vulnerability.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the central role played by families in the social reintegration of juveniles after their release from custody in Burundi. The socio-demographic profile of participants shows that most families come from modest socio-economic backgrounds, with parents largely engaged in subsistence farming and possessing low levels of education (Sindayigaya, 2024b, 2024a; Sindayigaya & Nyabenda, 2022). This context shapes both the type and extent of support families are able to provide, confirming that reintegration processes are deeply embedded in structural and relational realities (Paugam, 2002).

One of the most significant findings concerns the use of restorative justice practices. Families often initiate reconciliation processes between the offender and the victim’s family, emphasizing dialogue, apology, and community involvement (Cimpaye et al., 2025; Nijimbere et al., 2025b, 2025a). This aligns with restorative justice principles, which seek to repair harm and rebuild social ties (Sherman & Strang, 2007). Testimonies from respondents, such as Kaneza and Bigirimana, illustrate that these practices can reduce resentment and foster mutual understanding, thereby lowering the risk of recidivism (Nduwimana & Sindayigaya, 2023). However, divergent views, such as that of Muhimpundu, suggest that the effectiveness of restorative justice depends on individual perceptions and the nature of prior conflicts.

The study also underscores the importance of socio-professional reintegration. Families actively support juveniles in engaging in income-generating activities, either by providing initial capital or by encouraging the continuation of pre-incarceration occupations (Jonja et al., 2023, 2024; Nduwimana & Sindayigaya, 2023, 2025; Nijimbere et al., 2025a). This finding is consistent with research show-

ing that stable employment significantly reduces reoffending (Dickson, 2014b; Petersilia, 2003). Nonetheless, the inability of some families to provide such support due to economic constraints highlights a critical gap, as unemployment remains a key risk factor for recidivism (Laub & Sampson, 1993).

Accommodation emerges as another crucial dimension of reintegration. The provision of shelter, food, and emotional support by host families facilitates a smoother transition from prison to community life. This reflects the broader literature emphasizing the role of family support in fostering desistance and social stability (Visher, 2007). However, the study also reveals that not all families are able or willing to provide such support, often due to limited resources or weak prior relationships, thereby exposing some juveniles to heightened vulnerability. Education and vocational training further contribute to successful reintegration. While some juveniles resume formal schooling, others pursue vocational skills such as tailoring. These pathways enhance employability and social inclusion, supporting findings that skill acquisition and education are key factors in desistance from crime (Chatelier, 1987). Yet, the absence of structured educational programs within the penitentiary system remains a major limitation (Ciza & Sindayigaya, 2023b, 2023a; Mperejimana & Sindayigaya, 2023; Sindayigaya, 2024a, 2025a).

Finally, the study highlights the indispensable role of families in providing financial and healthcare support in the absence of institutional assistance. Families often bear the full burden of meeting basic needs and addressing health concerns, which can be exacerbated by poor detention conditions (Margot, 2016). This reliance on family solidarity underscores both its strength and its limits.

In sum, while families in Burundi play a pivotal role in supporting the reintegration of formerly detained juveniles, their efforts are constrained by socio-economic challenges. Strengthening institutional support mechanisms alongside family involvement would therefore be essential to ensure sustainable reintegration outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the crucial role of families in the post-release social reintegration of formerly detained minors. Families promote restorative justice to foster reconciliation, support income-generating activities to ensure stability, provide accommodation and emotional support, facilitate access to education or vocational training, and offer financial and healthcare assistance.

Despite these efforts, some families face economic and social constraints that limit their ability to support reintegration effectively. Given the vulnerability of released minors, family involvement remains essential to help them adapt to a new life and achieve sustainable social reintegration.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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