



Challenges Affecting the Reintegration and Economic Sustainability of Youth Graduating from Rehabilitation Centers case study Gisozi Sector, Kigali

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published Online: 06 June 2026	Youth rehabilitation has become an important strategy for promoting social reintegration and economic transformation among vulnerable youth in Rwanda. Despite government efforts through rehabilitation centers such as Iwawa, Gitagata and Nyamagabe, many rehabilitated youth continue to face difficulties after returning to their communities. This study examined the challenges affecting the reintegration and economic sustainability of youth graduating from rehabilitation centers, focusing on Gisozi Sector in Kigali. The study adopted a desk review research design using qualitative approaches. Data were collected from secondary sources including journal articles, government reports, policy documents and institutional publications published between 2010 and 2026. The study was guided by the Social Reintegration Theory and Human Capital Theory. Findings revealed that stigma, unemployment, limited access to startup capital, mismatch between vocational training and labor market demands, and weak institutional follow-up continue to affect rehabilitated youth after discharge. The study also found that family and community support play an important role in successful reintegration. The study concludes that rehabilitation programs should go beyond vocational training and strengthen long-term community-based support systems to improve economic sustainability and social reintegration among youth in Rwanda.
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INTRODUCTION

Youth rehabilitation is a part of conversations about social protection and crime prevention especially in developing countries. The goal is not just to punish people but to help them change their behavior and have better lives. In Rwanda the government started rehabilitation centers in 2010 to help people who were involved in crime or had problems with drugs. These centers, like Iwawa, Gitagata and Nyamagabe were meant to be places where young people could learn skills and become better people.

However, with these efforts it is still hard for youth to reintegrate into society. They face challenges like not being able to find jobs being stigmatized and not having enough support. Some youth end up going to rehabilitation centers because they cannot cope with these challenges.

Background of the Study

The focus on youth rehabilitation shows that societies recognize that helping young people is important for social

stability. Rehabilitation is not about punishing young people but about helping them become better people. In Rwanda rehabilitation programs have been developed to combine reform with vocational and life skills training.

However, the journey of a person does not end when they leave the rehabilitation center. They face challenges when they try to reintegrate into their families and communities. Many youths struggle to find jobs not because they lack skills but because there are not enough opportunities. They also face difficulties and lack of support.

Paper Organization

This paper follows an academic structure. It starts with an introduction and background then moves on to objectives literature review, methodology and findings. It ends with reflections on research and limitations.

Study Objectives

The main goal of this study is to understand the challenges that youth face when they leave rehabilitation centers in Gisozi

Sector. The study wants to explore the economic barriers that affect reintegration examine the effectiveness of current rehabilitation programs and look at the employment opportunities available to these youth.

RELATED WORKS

Economic barriers affecting reintegration of youth

Economic instability stands as one of the biggest challenges affecting youth after leaving rehabilitation centers. Many young people complete rehabilitation programs with hope of starting a better life but once they return to society they often encounter unemployment, poverty and limited opportunities. According to the International Labour Organization (2018), vulnerable youth in developing countries continue to experience high unemployment levels despite the expansion of vocational training initiatives.

In Rwanda, National Rehabilitation Service (NRS) were established to equip youth with discipline and practical skills. However, studies suggest that economic reintegration remains difficult for many graduates. Ndabaga, E. and Bahizi, B. (2022) found that although youth at Iwawa Rehabilitation Centre gained vocational skills many still struggled to secure sustainable employment after returning to their communities. The researchers observed that lack of startup capital, limited mentorship and poor access to markets affected the ability of youth to use the acquired skills productively.

Similarly, the World Bank (2016) argued that vocational training alone cannot guarantee economic sustainability among vulnerable youth. The report emphasized that access to finance, mentorship and community support are equally necessary for successful reintegration. Without these supportive structures, many rehabilitated youth remain economically vulnerable even after completing training programs.

Effectiveness of rehabilitation programs

Rehabilitation programs are intended to transform the behavior of youth while preparing them to become responsible and productive members of society. In Rwanda, centers such as Iwawa, Gitagata and Nyamagabe provide civic education, vocational training and behavioral rehabilitation. The government has invested considerable resources into these programs as part of broader social protection and crime prevention strategies.

However, several studies indicate that the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs should not only be measured by activities conducted within the centers but also by the long-term outcomes experienced by graduates. Nsanzimana, G. (2019) observed that rehabilitation programs in Rwanda contributed positively toward reducing deviant behavior among youth. Nevertheless, the study further revealed that many rehabilitated youth faced difficulties during reintegration because community support systems remained weak.

In addition, the National Commission for Human Rights (2024) reported that follow-up mechanisms after rehabilitation are still inadequate in many areas. Some youth return to environments characterized by poverty, family conflict and social rejection, making reintegration more complicated than expected. In some cases, local leaders and families are not fully involved in supporting rehabilitated youth after discharge from the centers.

Employment opportunities and social reintegration

Employment is widely considered an important factor in successful reintegration. Youth who secure stable employment are more likely to regain confidence, independence and social acceptance. However, many rehabilitated youth continue to experience discrimination during recruitment processes because employers often associate them with delinquency or criminal behavior.

According to the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (2023), youth unemployment in urban areas remains a major challenge. This situation affects rehabilitated youth even more because many of them have interrupted educational backgrounds and limited work experience. As a result, even those with vocational skills frequently struggle to compete in the labor market.

Social reintegration also depends on family and community acceptance. Research shows that stigma and labeling continue to affect many rehabilitated youth after they return home. Some families find it difficult to trust them again while communities sometimes isolate them socially. These experiences create emotional stress and discourage some youth from fully engaging in productive activities. In certain situations, rehabilitated youth begin to feel that society has permanently judged them, which weakens their motivation and sense of belonging.

Existing research shows that employment, social acceptance and institutional support are important for reintegration. Youth who leave rehabilitation programs often face challenges like unemployment, stigma and uncertainty. In Rwanda many urban youth struggle to find jobs even with vocational training.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Social Reintegration Theory and the Human Capital Theory. These theories help explain the social and economic challenges faced by youth graduating from rehabilitation centers in Rwanda. The theories were considered relevant because reintegration involves both social acceptance and economic empowerment.

Social Reintegration Theory

The Social reintegration theory advanced by Travis Hirschi (1969), explains that individuals who pass through rehabilitation require acceptance support and active participation within society in order to rebuild their lives successfully. Reintegration is therefore not simply about leaving a rehabilitation center. It also involves reconnecting

with families, communities, employment opportunities and social identity. The theory further suggests that when rehabilitated individuals continue to face stigma and rejection from society successful reintegration becomes difficult.

This theory is relevant to the current study because many youth graduating from rehabilitation centers in Gisozi Sector continue to experience social rejection, discrimination and weak community support after returning to their communities. These challenges affect their confidence, relationships and ability to establish stable livelihoods. In some cases, youth feel isolated even after completing rehabilitation programs which weakens their motivation to fully reintegrate into society.

Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory developed by Gary Becker (1964) emphasizes that education training and skills development increase an individual's productivity and economic value. According to the theory, investment in human skills improves a person's ability to participate effectively in economic activities and improve their living conditions.

Rehabilitation centers in Rwanda provide vocational and life skills training with the expectation that youth will become productive members of society after rehabilitation. However, the theory also recognizes that skills alone may not guarantee economic success if opportunities and resources remain limited. Findings from this study indicate that many rehabilitated youth complete vocational training but still face unemployment, limited startup capital and inadequate financial support after discharge from rehabilitation centers.

Together, these theories provide a broader understanding of the social and economic dimensions affecting reintegration and economic sustainability among rehabilitated youth. The theories somehow complement each other because one focuses on social acceptance while the other focuses on economic empowerment and skills development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a desk review research design using qualitative approaches. The design involved systematic review and analysis of existing literature related to youth rehabilitation, reintegration and economic sustainability. A desk review was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gather broad insights from already published studies, institutional reports and policy documents without conducting primary field research.

The design also allowed comparison of findings from different scholars and organizations concerning the challenges affecting rehabilitated youth in Rwanda and beyond. Although the study did not involve direct interviews or questionnaires, the reviewed materials provided valuable analytical understanding of the problem under investigation.

Sources of Data

The study relied mainly on secondary data obtained from different sources including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Government reports
- National Rehabilitation Service reports
- Ministry publications
- Research dissertations and thesis
- International organization reports
- Newspapers and policy briefs
- Gisozi sector reports

Most of the reviewed documents were published between 2010 and 2026 because this period corresponds with the establishment and development of rehabilitation programs in Rwanda.

KEY FINDINGS/RESULTS

Stigma and social rejection as a barrier to reintegration

One of the major findings from the reviewed literature is that stigma continues to affect many youth after leaving rehabilitation centers. Even after completing rehabilitation programs and vocational training, many community members still associate these youth with criminality, drug abuse or deviant behavior. This makes reintegration very difficult. Several studies reviewed in this research showed that some families and neighbors struggle to fully trust rehabilitated youth again. In some communities, young people who return from centers such as Iwawa are viewed with suspicion and sometimes excluded from social activities or opportunities.

Nsanzimana, G. (2019) observed that social rejection weakens the confidence of rehabilitated youth and affects their emotional well-being. Some youth reportedly feel isolated and discouraged after realizing that society still judges them based on their past mistakes rather than their present efforts to change. This finding suggests that rehabilitation does not end at the center itself. The community also has a role in accepting and supporting these youth so that they can rebuild their lives in a meaningful way. Without social acceptance, even motivated youth may slowly lose hope and return to negative behaviors again.

Unemployment and limited economic opportunities

The study also found that unemployment remains one of the strongest challenges affecting economic sustainability among rehabilitated youth. Although rehabilitation centers provide vocational skills such as carpentry, tailoring, welding and agriculture, many graduates still fail to secure stable employment after returning home. In many cases, the problem is not only lack of skills but also lack of available opportunities in the labor market.

Ndabaga, E. and Bahizi, B. (2022) found that several youth graduating from rehabilitation centers remained unemployed for long periods despite completing vocational training. Some

employers hesitate to recruit rehabilitated youth because of fear, stereotypes or concerns about trust. Others simply lack experience and professional networks needed to enter the labor market. The findings further indicate that urban unemployment in places like Kigali makes competition for jobs even harder. Because of this, some rehabilitated youth end up doing unstable casual work while others become economically dependent on their families again. Honestly, this creates frustration for many of them because they expect rehabilitation to help them start independent lives.

Mismatch between vocational training and labor market demands

Another important finding is the mismatch between skills offered at rehabilitation centers and the actual needs of the labor market. While vocational training remains an important component of rehabilitation, some studies reviewed in this research indicate that the training provided does not always correspond with current economic realities. A number of youth graduate with technical skills but struggle to apply them in practical income-generating activities.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020) emphasized that training programs are more effective when they are linked directly to labor market demands. Similarly, studies have shown that educational and vocational institutions in developing countries often fail to align training programs with industry expectations and emerging economic opportunities (Mwebaza et al., 2026). According to Mwebaza et al. (2026), the mismatch between academia and the Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) industry in Uganda has contributed to unemployment and reduced productivity among graduates due to inadequate practical and market-oriented skills.

Findings from this study suggest that some rehabilitation programs still focus on generalized training without fully assessing employment trends and market opportunities. For example, many youth may receive similar vocational training even in areas where demand is already limited. In a way, this creates overcrowding in certain trades while other emerging sectors remain unexplored. Some youth therefore complete training but later discover that there are very few customers, tools, or business opportunities available to support their survival.

Limited access to finance and startup capital

The findings further revealed that limited access to finance is a major obstacle affecting the economic sustainability of rehabilitated youth. Many youth leave rehabilitation centers with practical skills and willingness to work but without the financial resources needed to start businesses or projects. Accessing loans from banks or microfinance institutions is often difficult because most youth lack collateral, savings or guarantors.

According to the World Bank (2016), financial inclusion is very important in helping vulnerable youth transition into economic independence. However, the reviewed literature indicates that many rehabilitated youth in Rwanda continue to face exclusion from financial opportunities. Some young people reportedly return to poor households that are already struggling economically and cannot support business startup initiatives. Others attempt small businesses but fail because of insufficient capital and lack of mentorship. In some cases, youth become discouraged after repeated failures and begin losing confidence in the rehabilitation process itself. The situation becomes even harder especially for those without strong family support.

Weak institutional follow-up after rehabilitation

The study also established that institutional follow-up after rehabilitation is still relatively weak. While considerable attention is given to youth during their stay in rehabilitation centers, support mechanisms after discharge appear limited in many situations. Follow-up programs intended to monitor progress, provide counseling or assist youth during reintegration are not always consistent.

The National Commission for Human Rights (2024) noted that sustainable reintegration requires continuous collaboration between rehabilitation centers, local leaders, families and communities. However, findings from the reviewed literature suggest that this coordination is sometimes inadequate. Some youth return home and are left to navigate economic and social challenges largely on their own. In rural and urban settings alike, there seems to be gaps in monitoring how rehabilitated youth adapt after leaving the centers. Because of this, early signs of relapse, emotional stress or economic hardship may not be identified quickly enough. Little by little, some youth begin drifting back into risky environments and behaviors.

Importance of family and community support

Another finding from the study is that family and community support greatly influences successful reintegration. Youth who return to supportive families are generally more likely to adapt positively compared to those returning to hostile or unstable environments. Emotional encouragement, guidance and acceptance from family members appear to strengthen confidence and motivation among rehabilitated youth.

The reviewed studies suggest that communities also play an important role in shaping reintegration outcomes. Where local leaders, churches and community groups actively support rehabilitated youth, reintegration tends to become smoother and more sustainable. In contrast, environments characterized by rejection and discrimination tend to increase emotional stress and social isolation. Some reports even suggest that a few youth prefer staying away from their home communities because they fear humiliation or constant judgement from people around them. This shows that rehabilitation is not only an institutional responsibility but also a community process requiring patience, understanding and shared responsibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study suggests that interventions should be more connected and responsive. Reducing stigma requires community engagement and genuine dialogue. Vocational training should align with market demands and partnership with employers could bridge the gap. Financial access needs attention and youth-focused funding mechanisms, mentorship and start up could help.

FUTURE WORKS

Future research could track rehabilitation youth, over period to see how their lives evolve over time. There is also room to explore skills, innovation and new forms of employment that might offer alternative pathways for youth.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY NOTES

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