
ANALYZING SOCIAL FACTORS CAUSING RECIDIVISM OF JUVENILES: A CASE STUDY OF MALENGACHANZI COMMUNITY, NKHOTAKOTA DISTRICT

***Emily Kachiswe, Treazer Kabiya**

Department of Social Work, DMI St. John the Baptist University Lilongwe Campus, Malawi.

Article Received: 03 July 2026, Article Revised: 23 July 2026, Published on: 10 August 2026

***Corresponding Author: Emily Kachiswe**

Department of Social Work, DMI St. John the Baptist University Lilongwe Campus, Malawi.

Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.7729>

ABSTRACT

Juvenile recidivism remains a major challenge within the criminal justice system because many young offenders continue to reoffend despite undergoing rehabilitation programs. This study examined the social factors contributing to recidivism among juvenile offenders in Traditional Authority Malengachanzi, Nkhotakota District, Malawi. A qualitative case study design was employed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of juvenile offenders and key stakeholders. Twenty participants comprising juvenile offenders, social workers, probation officers and community leaders were purposively selected. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings revealed that peer influence was the most significant contributor to juvenile recidivism, followed by family instability, poverty, lack of educational opportunities and weak community support systems. Although rehabilitation and reintegration programmes provide counselling, education and vocational training, their effectiveness is constrained by inadequate resources, limited staffing and weak post-release follow-up mechanisms. The study concludes that juvenile recidivism is influenced by interconnected social and economic conditions rather than individual behaviour alone. Sustainable reduction of recidivism therefore requires coordinated interventions involving families, schools, communities, rehabilitation institutions and government agencies.

The study recommends strengthening family support programmes, expanding educational and vocational opportunities, improving community-based reintegration services and increasing investment in rehabilitation institutions. These interventions would contribute significantly to reducing juvenile reoffending and promoting successful reintegration into society.

KEYWORDS: Juvenile recidivism, juvenile offenders, rehabilitation, reintegration, social factors, Malawi, social work.

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile offending continues to present significant social, economic and criminal justice challenges throughout the world. While many juvenile offenders successfully reintegrate into society after rehabilitation, a considerable number relapse into criminal behaviour. This repeated involvement in criminal activities, commonly referred to as recidivism, undermines rehabilitation efforts, and increases public insecurity and places additional pressure on correctional institutions and social welfare systems.

Globally, governments continue to invest in rehabilitation programmes intended to reduce juvenile offending through education, counselling, vocational training and psychosocial support. Despite these interventions, many countries continue to report high rates of juvenile recidivism because underlying social determinants are often inadequately addressed. These determinants include unstable family environments, poverty, poor educational opportunities, negative peer influence and weak community support systems.

In Malawi, juvenile offenders are primarily rehabilitated through approved schools and reformatory centres, including Chilwa Approved School and Mpemba Reformatory Centre. These institutions focus on behavioural change, education, vocational training and counselling. However, despite these interventions, many juveniles continue to reoffend after their release, indicating that rehabilitation programmes alone may be insufficient without adequate family and community support.

Traditional Authority Malengachanzi in Nkhosha District has experienced increasing cases of juvenile recidivism. According to information presented in the study, local social welfare offices continue to receive cases involving juveniles who return to criminal activities after completing rehabilitation or while under probation supervision. These recurring cases motivated the present study to investigate the social conditions influencing juvenile recidivism within the community.

Understanding these social factors is essential for designing evidence-based interventions capable of strengthening rehabilitation programmes and improving reintegration outcomes for juvenile offenders.

Objectives of the study

Main Objective

To analyse the social factors causing recidivism among juvenile offenders and determine how these factors influence the likelihood of reoffending.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the major social factors that increase juvenile recidivism.
2. To assess the role and effectiveness of rehabilitation, support and reintegration programmes in addressing these social factors.
3. To propose evidence-based recommendations for reducing juvenile recidivism by addressing the identified social determinants.

Literature Review

Juvenile recidivism has received increasing scholarly attention because of its implications for public safety, child protection and sustainable community development. Previous studies consistently demonstrate that juvenile offending is rarely caused by a single factor but rather results from complex interactions between individual, family, school and community environments.

The reviewed literature identifies poverty, family instability, peer pressure, substance abuse and limited educational opportunities as the primary social determinants associated with juvenile recidivism. Family environments characterised by neglect, conflict and inadequate supervision significantly increase the likelihood of repeated offending. Likewise, association with delinquent peers reinforces criminal behaviour through observation and social acceptance.

Research further indicates that educational attainment and vocational skills reduce the risk of recidivism by increasing employment opportunities and strengthening social integration. Community-based rehabilitation programmes that provide mentorship, counselling and continuous supervision have also demonstrated positive outcomes in reducing juvenile reoffending.

The study adopted **Social Learning Theory** and **Social Control Theory** as its guiding theoretical frameworks. Social Learning Theory explains that juveniles learn criminal behaviour through observation and interaction with peers, family members and community influences. Social Control Theory argues that strong attachment to family, schools and communities discourages delinquent behaviour, whereas weakened social bonds increase the likelihood of criminal involvement.

Together, these theories provide an appropriate framework for understanding how social relationships shape juvenile behaviour and influence successful reintegration following rehabilitation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study research design to examine the social factors contributing to juvenile recidivism in Traditional Authority Malengachanzi, Nkhotakota District. A qualitative approach was selected because it provides an in-depth understanding of human experiences, perceptions and behaviours. Rather than measuring variables statistically, qualitative research enables participants to explain their experiences in their own words, making it appropriate for exploring the complex social circumstances surrounding juvenile offending.

The case study approach allowed the researcher to investigate the phenomenon within its real-life context and to obtain detailed information from juvenile offenders and key stakeholders directly involved in rehabilitation and reintegration processes. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility for probing and clarification while ensuring that all major research questions were addressed.

Study Area

The research was conducted in Traditional Authority Malengachanzi in Nkhotakota District, Malawi. The area is predominantly rural, with most residents depending on fishing, subsistence agriculture and small-scale trading for their livelihoods. Traditional leadership structures remain influential in local governance and community decision-making.

The area was selected because of increasing reports of juvenile reoffending following rehabilitation and because it represents a typical rural Malawian community where poverty, unemployment and limited educational opportunities continue to affect child development and social welfare. The community therefore provided an appropriate setting for examining the social factors associated with juvenile recidivism.

Target Population

The study targeted juvenile offenders aged between 12 and 17 years who had previously been involved in the juvenile justice system and were either at risk of reoffending or had already reoffended. In addition, key informants were purposively selected because of their professional experience in juvenile justice.

These included: Social workers, Probation officer, Community leaders and other professionals working with children in conflict with the law

The inclusion of both juvenile offenders and professionals allowed the researcher to obtain diverse perspectives on the causes of recidivism and the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to identify respondents with relevant knowledge and experience regarding juvenile offending and rehabilitation. Unlike probability sampling, purposive sampling focuses on selecting information-rich participants capable of providing detailed responses to the research questions.

Twenty respondents were selected for participation in the study. This sample size was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation within the qualitative research design.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected using semi-structured interview guides. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to discuss their experiences concerning: Family relationships, Educational experiences, Economic conditions, Peer relationships, Rehabilitation experiences, Community reintegration.

Interviews also enabled the researcher to probe emerging issues and obtain detailed explanations beyond predetermined responses.

Before the main study, a pilot study involving five respondents outside the study sample was conducted to test the clarity, reliability and appropriateness of the interview guide. Feedback obtained from the pilot exercise informed minor revisions before actual data collection commenced.

Data Analysis

Interview responses were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher first transcribed interview responses before carefully reading the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data.

Codes representing similar ideas were developed and grouped into broader themes reflecting recurring social factors influencing juvenile recidivism.

The major themes identified included: Peer influence, Family instability, Poverty, Educational challenges, Weak community support, Rehabilitation experiences

Thematic analysis enabled systematic interpretation of participants' experiences while maintaining consistency with the study objectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before interviews were conducted.

Confidentiality and anonymity were protected by excluding personal identifiers from interview records. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

Because juveniles constituted a vulnerable population, particular attention was given to protecting their welfare during interviews. Sensitive questions were handled carefully to minimise emotional distress, and participants' rights and dignity were respected throughout the research process.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Response Rate

The study targeted twenty respondents, all of whom participated successfully in the interviews, resulting in a response rate of 100 percent. No respondents withdrew from the study or declined participation.

A complete response rate strengthened the credibility of the findings by ensuring that all selected participants contributed their perspectives regarding juvenile recidivism within the study area.

Table 1. Response Rate.

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Targeted Participants	20	100%
Responded Participants	20	100%
Non-Respondents	0	0%
Total	20	100%

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Age Distribution

The majority of respondents (40%) were juveniles aged between 12 and 17 years. Respondents aged 41–50 years accounted for 30%, while respondents aged 51–60 years

represented 20%. Those aged between 30 and 40 years comprised the smallest proportion at 10%.

The presence of both juveniles and experienced professionals enriched the study by providing perspectives from those directly affected by recidivism as well as those responsible for rehabilitation and social welfare services.

Gender Distribution

Male respondents accounted for 60% of participants, while females represented 40%.

This distribution reflects the predominance of male juvenile offenders within the study while still incorporating female perspectives from professionals and community stakeholders involved in rehabilitation services.

Educational Background

Half of the respondents had attained primary education, while 30% possessed tertiary education. Respondents with secondary education and those with no formal education each represented 10%.

These findings suggest that limited educational attainment remains common among juveniles involved in offending, highlighting the importance of educational interventions within rehabilitation programmes.

Family Background

Family composition varied considerably among respondents. 20% lived with both parents, 10% lived with a single parent, 10% lived with guardians, and 60% were key informants rather than juvenile participants.

Although the sample included professional respondents, the findings indicate that many juvenile offenders originated from unstable family environments characterised by limited parental supervision and support.

Interpretation of Major Findings

Analysis of interview data produced several dominant themes explaining juvenile recidivism within Traditional Authority Malengachanzi.

Peer Influence

Peer influence emerged as the strongest factor contributing to juvenile recidivism. Participants consistently reported that juveniles often returned to criminal activities after re-establishing relationships with delinquent friends following release from rehabilitation centres.

The desire for acceptance, belonging and social identity encouraged many juveniles to imitate criminal behaviour previously learned within their peer groups. Participants emphasised that

successful rehabilitation becomes difficult when juveniles return to unchanged social environments dominated by delinquent peers.

Family Instability

Family instability was identified as another major determinant of recidivism. Participants described family conflict, broken homes, inadequate supervision and parental neglect as conditions that undermine successful reintegration.

Without emotional support and positive parental guidance, many juveniles experienced difficulties adapting to lawful lifestyles after release from rehabilitation institutions, thereby increasing their vulnerability to reoffending.

Educational Challenges

Participants highlighted poor school attendance, school dropout and limited educational opportunities as important contributors to juvenile offending.

Education was viewed as a protective factor because it provides knowledge, hope, employment opportunities and positive social relationships. Conversely, exclusion from education increased juveniles' vulnerability to poverty and criminal behaviour.

Community Support

Weak community support emerged as another recurring theme. Participants reported that many communities stigmatise former juvenile offenders instead of supporting their reintegration.

The absence of mentorship programmes, counselling services and community follow-up mechanisms limited successful reintegration and increased the likelihood of repeated offending. Respondents therefore emphasised the need for stronger community involvement in rehabilitation efforts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that juvenile recidivism in Traditional Authority Malengachanzi is influenced by multiple interconnected social factors rather than by individual behaviour alone. The qualitative evidence gathered from juvenile offenders and key informants indicates that peer influence, family instability, poverty, limited educational opportunities and weak community support systems collectively shape the likelihood of reoffending. These findings are consistent with the study objectives and reinforce the importance of addressing social determinants through comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration strategies.

Peer Influence and Juvenile Recidivism

Peer influence emerged as the most significant factor associated with juvenile recidivism. Participants consistently explained that many juveniles returned to the same friendship groups that had influenced their initial criminal behaviour. The desire for acceptance, belonging and social identity encouraged continued involvement in criminal activities after release from rehabilitation institutions.

These findings support the study's theoretical framework based on Social Learning Theory, which argues that behaviour is learned through observation, imitation and reinforcement within social environments. Juveniles exposed to delinquent peers are more likely to adopt criminal behaviour because such behaviour is normalized within their social networks.

The findings also correspond with the literature reviewed in the study, which identifies peer association as one of the strongest predictors of juvenile offending and repeated criminal behaviour. The results therefore suggest that rehabilitation programmes should incorporate peer mentoring and structured youth development initiatives that encourage positive peer relationships.

Family Instability

Family-related challenges emerged as another major determinant of juvenile recidivism. Respondents described broken homes, poor parental supervision, neglect and family conflict as factors that reduce emotional support and guidance for young people.

The findings support Social Control Theory, which proposes that strong attachment to parents and family members discourages criminal behaviour. When these relationships are weak, juveniles become more vulnerable to negative external influences.

Participants emphasized that successful reintegration depends largely on supportive family environments capable of providing supervision, encouragement and emotional stability following release from rehabilitation centres.

Poverty and Economic Challenges

Although peer influence received the greatest emphasis during interviews, respondents also identified poverty as an important contributor to juvenile offending.

Economic hardship limits educational opportunities and employment prospects while increasing the temptation to engage in theft and other criminal activities to meet basic needs. Participants indicated that many juveniles returned to crime because they lacked legitimate income-generating opportunities after completing rehabilitation.

These findings suggest that rehabilitation should extend beyond behavioural counselling to include livelihood support and economic empowerment initiatives.

Educational Opportunities

Education emerged as a protective factor against juvenile recidivism. Respondents reported that school attendance, vocational training and skills development increase juveniles' chances of securing employment and developing positive life goals.

Conversely, school dropout and limited access to education leave many juveniles with few alternatives other than returning to criminal behaviour.

These findings reinforce the importance of strengthening educational reintegration programmes alongside rehabilitation services.

Community Reintegration

The study found that community attitudes significantly influence rehabilitation outcomes.

Participants explained that former juvenile offenders often experience stigma, rejection and discrimination after returning home. Such experiences reduce self-confidence and limit opportunities for successful reintegration.

Respondents recommended expanding community mentorship programmes, counselling services and local support groups to improve reintegration outcomes and reduce repeat offending.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that juvenile rehabilitation should not end upon release from correctional institutions. Sustainable rehabilitation requires continued community involvement and coordinated support systems.

Major Findings of the Study

The study identified several important findings.

First, peer influence emerged as the strongest social determinant of juvenile recidivism. Juveniles who returned to delinquent peer groups after release were significantly more likely to reoffend.

Second, unstable family environments characterised by poor supervision, neglect and conflict contributed substantially to reoffending.

Third, poverty increased juvenile vulnerability to criminal behaviour by limiting access to education, employment and other opportunities.

Fourth, educational participation and vocational training served as protective factors that enhanced successful reintegration.

Finally, although rehabilitation programmes provided counselling, education and vocational training, their effectiveness was constrained by inadequate funding, insufficient staffing and weak post-release support mechanisms.

Collectively, these findings indicate that juvenile recidivism is a multidimensional social problem requiring integrated interventions rather than isolated institutional responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed.

Strengthening Family Support

Government ministries, social welfare departments and community organisations should implement family strengthening programmes aimed at improving parenting skills, parental supervision and family relationships.

Family counselling should become an integral component of juvenile rehabilitation programmes.

Improving Educational Opportunities

Schools, community organisations and rehabilitation centres should strengthen educational support programmes to prevent school dropout among vulnerable children.

Greater investment should be made in vocational education and life-skills development to improve future employment opportunities.

Economic Empowerment

Government and development partners should expand poverty reduction programmes targeting vulnerable households.

Vocational training, entrepreneurship support and youth employment initiatives should be integrated into rehabilitation programmes to reduce economic pressures associated with reoffending.

Strengthening Rehabilitation Services

Rehabilitation institutions should receive increased funding to improve staffing levels, counselling services and vocational training facilities.

Post-release monitoring systems should also be strengthened to ensure continuous support for juveniles during community reintegration.

Community-Based Reintegration

Communities should establish mentorship programmes involving traditional leaders, religious organisations, schools and community volunteers.

These initiatives would help reduce stigma while promoting acceptance of rehabilitated juveniles.

Multi-sectoral Collaboration

The Ministry responsible for social welfare, law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, civil society organisations and local communities should strengthen coordination in implementing juvenile rehabilitation programmes.

Collaborative interventions are more likely to address the multiple social determinants identified by this study.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the social factors contributing to juvenile recidivism in Traditional Authority Malengachanzi, Nkhosha District, Malawi.

The findings demonstrate that juvenile recidivism results from complex interactions between peer relationships, family circumstances, poverty, educational opportunities and community support systems. While rehabilitation institutions play an important role in behavioural change, institutional interventions alone cannot effectively prevent reoffending without sustained family and community involvement.

The study therefore concludes that reducing juvenile recidivism requires holistic, community-based approaches that address both individual behavioural change and broader social conditions. Investments in education, family support, economic empowerment and community reintegration will significantly improve rehabilitation outcomes and contribute to safer communities.

REFERENCES

1. Abraham, L. S., Kim, & Anderson-Nathe, B. (2017). Paradoxes of reintegration: Youth reentry after juvenile justice. *Youth Justice*, 17(1). 3-18.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/147322541664837>
2. Anna Zefferys (2023) the Crucial Role of Reducing Recidivism Rates in Transforming Lives and Communities <https://www.thrivingcommunities.org/post/the-crucial-role-of-reducing-Recidivism-rates-in-transforming-lives-and-communities>
3. Baglivio, M. T., Wolff, K. T., Piquero, A. R., & Epps, N. (2015). *The relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and juvenile offending*. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 44(11), 1800–1817. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0335-4> (doi.org in Bing)

4. Banda Andrew and N. R. Raselekoane (2018), a Study of Multiple Causes of Recidivism among Youth Offenders at Thohoyandou Female/Juvenile Correctional Centre in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa, Institute for Gender and Youth Studies, School Of Human and Social Sciences, University of Venda, South Africa
5. Bello Paul Oluwatosin and Muthaphuli p. (2024) Exploring the Factors That Promote Recidivism in a Sample of Parolees Article, International Journal of Social Science Research and Review
6. Craig, J. M., & Piquero, A. R. (2022). *Childhood abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and juvenile recidivism: The mediating role of social bonds*. Journal of Criminal Justice, 84, 102002. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2022.102002> (doi.org in Bing)
7. Craig, J. M., Wolff, K. T., Pierce, K., Zettler, H., & Baglivio, M. T. (2022). *Childhood abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and juvenile recidivism: The mediating role of social bonds*. Journal of Criminal Justice, 82, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2022.101998>
8. Craig, J. M., Wolff, K. T., Pierce, K., Zettler, H., & Baglivio, M. T. (2022). *Childhood abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and juvenile recidivism: The mediating role of social bonds*. Journal of Criminal Justice, 82, 101998. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2022.101998>
9. Dvis, L. M., Steele, J.L., Bozick, R., Williams, M. V., Turner, S., Miles J., Saunders, J., & Steinberg, p. S. (2015). How effective is correctional education and where do we go from here? The results of comprehensive evaluation. RAND Corporation.
10. Dzuka, J. & Baloyi, L. (2017). Factors influencing the occurrence of juvenile delinquency: The Case of selected rural and urban secondary schools in Malawi. Journal of Education and Practice, 8(25), 72-79 Garcia Christine Burk- (2014) Participatory Action Research: Reducing Juvenile Recidivism Rates
11. Farrington, D. P., Loeber, R., & Howell, J. C. (2016). *Young people who commit crime: Risk factors and successful interventions*. In R. Loeber & D. P. Farrington (Eds.), from juvenile delinquency to adult crime: Criminal careers, justice policy, and prevention (pp. 1–21). New York: Oxford University Press.
12. James, C., & Smith, R. (2025). *Wiping the slate clean: A meta-analysis of post-detention aftercare programs for young offenders*. Clinical Psychology Review. Science Direct.
13. Lösel, F., & Bender, D. (2021). *The 40-year debate: A meta-review on what works for juvenile offenders*. Journal of Experimental Criminology, 19, 1–25. Springer.

14. Robertson, A. A., Fang, Z., Weiland, D., Joe, G., Gardner, S., Dembo, R., McReynolds, L., Dickson, M., Pankow, J., Dennis, M., & Elkington, K. (2020). *Recidivism among justice-involved youth: Findings from JJ-TRIALS*. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 47(9), 1059–1078. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820922891> (doi.org in Bing)Walters, G. D. (2023). *Dynamic risk trajectories, community context, and juvenile recidivism*. Journal of Criminal Justice, 86, 102070. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2023.102070> (doi.org in Bing)
15. Robertson, A. A., Fang, Z., Weiland, D., Joe, G., Gardner, S., Dembo, R., McReynolds, L., Dickson, M., Pankow, J., Dennis, M., & Elkington, K. (2020). *Recidivism among justice-involved youth: Findings from JJ-TRIALS*. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 47(9), 1059–1078. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820922891> (doi.org in Bing)Walters, G. D. (2023). *Dynamic risk trajectories, community context, and juvenile recidivism*. Journal of Criminal Justice, 86, 102070. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2023.102070> (doi.org in Bing)
16. Robertson, A. A., Fang, Z., Weiland, D., Joe, G., Gardner, S., Dembo, R., McReynolds, L., Dickson, M., Pankow, J., Dennis, M., & Elkington, K. (2020). *Recidivism among justice-involved youth: Findings from JJ-TRIALS*. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 47(9), 1059–1078. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820922891> (doi.org in Bing)
17. Walters, G. D. (2023). *Dynamic risk trajectories, community context, and juvenile recidivism*. Journal of Criminal Justice, 86, 102070.