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A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF AFTERCARE SUPERVISION IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA: THE NEED FOR LEGAL REFORMS

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ABSTRACT

Despite the recent decline in juvenile crimes in Malaysia, children across the country continue to face formal processing and incarceration. Many children find it challenging to transition back into the community following their release from the institutions—especially given the lack of legal framework and guidelines in Malaysia for supporting children during the aftercare or re-entry process. To explore what system actors perceive as factors contributing to the challenges of aftercare supervision or re-entry, this study conducted 12 qualitative interviews with probation officers who supervise children during the aftercare process, and psychology officers who work with children during incarceration. A qualitative analysis of these interviews produced results that highlight critical gaps in Malaysia's system of juvenile aftercare supervision. Results indicated that children often did not receive adequate support from the existing system of aftercare supervision and, therefore, face difficulty overcoming several aftercare challenges identified by system actors. These included negative peers and environment, and the lack of family involvement. The study has provided several recommendations for key stakeholders to spearhead reforms in addressing the needs of children participating in the aftercare supervision process in Malaysia. This study is significant as it will ensure that the children, following their release from the formal institutions, and in line with the international legal framework, are given the necessary support they need in aftercare supervision to help them during the reintegration process.

Keywords: Aftercare supervision, juvenile justice system, risk factors, protective factors, system actors.

INTRODUCTION

Children have been detained globally, but reports show a decreasing trend in their detention in prisons and remand centers. The latest report notes about 259,000 children detained at the end of 2024, (UNICEF, 2025), down from 261, 200 in 2020 (UNICEF, 2021a), in line with the need to legally protect every child from being subjected to detention (UNICEF, 2021b). In Malaysia, statistics indicate a decline in the number of children committing crimes in 2023 (2,743) compared to 2022 (3,013). Of these, 228 were serving sentences, while more were detained pending trial (Department of Social Welfare Statistics Report, 2023; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). The juvenile justice system in Malaysia is governed by *Part X* of the Child Act 2001, and Section 2 of the Child Act 2001 defines a child as a person under 18 years of age. However, a child can only be criminally responsible upon reaching the age of 10, in accordance with Section 82 of the Penal Code. Table 1 demonstrates that a significant number of male children were the ones who committed crimes, compared to female offenders, and outlines the most common crimes committed according to gender, at the end of 2023.

Table 1

Types of Offences and Gender of Children Who Committed Crimes at the End of 2023

No	Types of Offences	Male	Female	Total
1	Crime against persons	747	26	773
2	Traffic offences	678	4	682
3	Drug related offences	457	40	497
4	Crime related property	462	29	491
5	Gambling	92	29	121
6	Immigration related offences under the Immigration Act 1959/63	27	6	33
7	Minor Offences Act	22	8	30
8	Poisons Act 1952	23	2	25
9	Weapon/Firearms	13	0	13
10	Violation of supervision terms	4	0	4
11	Others	62	12	74
12	Total	2,587	156	2, 743

Notes. Source is the Department of Social Welfare Statistics Report, 2023.

An integral part of juvenile justice processing, juvenile re-entry or aftercare supervision refers to the support and supervision provided in the community as children reintegrate into society. This process often requires collaboration between juvenile justice agencies and their surrounding communities (Weaver, 2011). Once a child enters the juvenile justice system in Malaysia, the Court for Children has discretionary powers under Section 91(1) of the Child Act 2001, to impose appropriate orders on a child offender, taking into account the gravity of the offences and the particulars of the case. Under the Child Act 2001, the Court for Children will decide whether to place a child in the Approved School or the Henry Gurney School, or to subject the child to imprisonment under Section 91 (1) (f) and Section 91 (1) (h) of the Child Act 2001 respectively. The child is then placed under a probation officer or a person appointed by the Child Welfare Team for one year of aftercare supervision after release from an institution. As noted above, about 2,743 children were involved in crimes in Malaysia at the end of 2023, including 228 serving sentences and more had been detained pending trial (Department of Social Welfare Statistics Report, 2023; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). Hence, effective aftercare supervision is crucial to prevent cases of recidivism among those released.

Findings from previous meta-analyses have shown that aftercare supervision can reduce the rate of recidivism under specific conditions (Bouchard & Wong, 2018; James et al., 2013; Weaver & Campbell, 2015; Wong et al., 2024; Selimi et al., 2025). While there is ample literature from the West on the effectiveness of aftercare supervision, there is a dearth of studies on its effectiveness in Malaysia. Although the legal framework in Malaysia provides for children to undergo aftercare supervision following their release from institutions, there is no structured legal framework governing aftercare supervision, and no specific services are routinely provided to support returning children's transition back to their communities. It is reported that even though children placed under aftercare supervision must meet with probation officers monthly, the meetings are cursory and the aftercare plan does not state the goals of aftercare supervision, nor does it provide guidance for what the process should entail (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & UNICEF, 2013).

This study explores the views of probation and psychology officers on the challenges and legal barriers in aftercare supervision for children released from institutions. Under the Child Act 2001, probation officers are responsible for ensuring that children are legally protected in every stage of the juvenile justice system; from their arrest through supervision for one year, and following their release from institutions. On the other hand, psychology officers oversee children's well-being in institutions and before release. Among system actors, these officers have the closest contact with children and can observe what supports or hinders aftercare supervision. Using a qualitative approach, the present study is aimed at better understanding aftercare supervision in Malaysia and identifying changes that could support children and improve their aftercare success. This study, thus reports qualitative findings from the first Malaysian study of the views of probation and psychology officers on the challenges and legal barriers in implementing aftercare for children upon their release from institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

Challenges to Successful Aftercare

After discharge, formerly committed or incarcerated individuals often experience a period of community corrections supervision, called aftercare, parole, or post-release supervision (Astrada, 2018). For children, the aftercare period may last from several weeks to months, or even years (Altschuler & Brash, 2004). Abrams (2006) highlighted the unique challenges faced by children upon their release from institutions. For example, children are expected to develop the psychosocial skills of young adults and take on adult responsibilities. However, during their time in institutional facilities, children miss suitable opportunities to develop the skills needed for adulthood (Abrams, 2006; Altschuler & Brash, 2004).

After their release from institutions, formerly detained or incarcerated children face many challenges as they transition from custody to the community, and from adolescence to adulthood (Panuccio, 2021; Panuccio et al., 2012). Most research on aftercare has focused on the challenges adults face upon release from incarceration (e.g., La Vigne et al., 2004; La Vigne & Kachnowski, 2005; Visher et al., 2006). However, research on the challenges faced by children released from institutions remains underexplored (Abrams, 2006; Bullis et al., 2002; Pannuccio et al., 2012). The limited extant research in this area has identified the following obstacles as children's chief concerns following facility discharge: they do not have a place of residence, are dependent on family members, have trouble remaining drug-free or staying away from negative peers, and have to shoulder adult responsibilities (e.g., employment, financial independence) (Panuccio et al., 2012).

During aftercare supervision, children must reestablish social bonds and connect to social institutions that can help mitigate existing risk factors (e.g., attitudes, cognitions, peer influence) that may have contributed to their legal system contact (Abrams & Tam, 2018; Gill & Wilson, 2017; Lebel et al., 2008). Although family can play an essential role in aftercare success, children's expectations of family support following institutional discharge may differ from reality, contributing to strained family relationships and adverse aftercare outcomes (e.g., La Vigne et al., 2004; Visser et al., 2006). Furthermore, family members may have high expectations for the children's behavior upon their return, and if the children cannot meet them, family relationships may be further strained (Martinez & Abrams, 2013). Other familial and environmental outcomes that could impede successful aftercare periods include the following: experience physical abuse from a family member (Visser et al., 2004), access to and use of illicit substances, trapped in familial poverty, associate with gang members and others who engage in illegal activities, and live in under-resourced neighborhoods with high rates of crime (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011; Liu et al., 2021; Sinclair et al., 2021). Instability in living conditions, transportation problems, and pressure to provide for their own families may also hinder children's successful aftercare (Abrams, 2006; Martinez & Abrams, 2013).

Additionally, although some children receive services or enroll in programs providing aftercare supervision, not all are willing to participate, and not all who do ultimately benefit (Panuccio et al., 2012). Although these findings might suggest that some children lack motivation, in reality, the programs on offer may not be sufficiently tailored or engaging for children (Panuccio et al., 2012). Aftercare services must meet the needs of children by providing support in ways that appeal to them and help them feel they are not facing aftercare challenges alone (Abrams, 2012).

Protective Factors

For children released from legal system facilities, close family relationships and family support can serve as critical contributors to aftercare success (Davis et al., 2012; Steinberg et al., 2004; Visser & Courtney, 2007; Rock et al., 2025). For example, family members can provide children with shelter and financial support (La Vigne & Kachnowski, 2005; Visser et al., 2004; Visser et al., 2006), which has been linked to future employment and reduced risk for recidivism. In addition, returning children with closer and stronger family ties are less likely to be involved with drugs following facility discharge (Solomon et al., 2006).

Mothers, in particular, appear to be critical sources of support for children returning to their communities (Vander, 2018). Children and adolescents can also find support from extended family members, who often serve as valuable resources for finding employment, providing encouragement, and at times, more tangible instrumental support, including transportation, housing, and financial assistance (Barnert et al., 2020; Hanrahan et al., 2005; Martinez & Abrams, 2013). Subsequently, children released from legal system facilities often report that emotional and financial support from their families serves as a fundamental factor that prevents them from returning to detention (Visser & Courtney, 2007).

Additional protective factors against repeat legal system contact include engaging with prosocial peers, as they can help children become involved in prosocial activities and even compensate for a lack of family support (Mowen & Boman, 2019; Steinberg et al., 2004). In addition, having a positive attitude towards school, being employed, and having a high motivation to succeed have been identified as protective factors for children and youth re-entering the community (Beal, 2014). This is true, even for those young people initially charged with violent offenses (Lodewijks et al., 2010).

Aftercare Supervision

Past studies have demonstrated positive developments among children who had received formalized support services during aftercare supervision. Social support from program staff who provide mentoring services, group counseling, and direct assistance with basic needs, has been linked to aftercare success (Panuccio et al., 2012). Similarly, returning children and adolescents who received help enrolling in school and accessing employment within six months of their release were found to be less likely than those who did not receive such services to return to detention in the year following their discharge (Bullis et al., 2002; Bullis et al., 2004). Importantly, some interventions could be undertaken before discharge, that is, while the children were still institutionalized. This can help reduce their risk of future contact with the legal system (Todis et al., 2001). These interventions may be specifically meant to reduce risk factors (e.g., substance use treatment, anger management) or promote positive youth development (e.g., educational programs, job skill development, executive functioning skill development). It is likely that a combination of supportive services before and after discharge will have the greatest positive impact on the aftercare process.

System actors and program staff—whether working with children before or after their discharge from correctional facilities—who develop positive relationships with children and model responsible adult behavior can contribute to positive outcomes for children returning to their communities (Bullis et al., 2002). To encourage the development of such relationships, formal aftercare supervision or re-entry support programs should ensure that staff-to-children ratios do not exceed 1:10 or 1:15; staff conduct functional assessments related to the youth's work, living, and social skills; staff engage young people and their families in developing and following the youth's case plans; staff help the youths develop relevant and necessary skills, with an emphasis on helping them find jobs and educational opportunities; and sufficient time is built into programming for the development of positive rapport and meaningful relationships (Bullis et al., 2002; Sinclair et al., 2021).

Underpinning the success of aftercare supervision or re-entry is the effective implementation of the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model that is built on the following three critical pillars: “what services and programs are offered” (i.e, health, literacy, housing, economic empowerment), “how they are delivered” (i.e, utilizing a case management model that tailors an individual's risks, needs, responsivity and causes of crimes), and “when they are provided” (i.e, as soon as the offender enters the institution and continue through the transitional and post-release stages) to offenders when they exit the institutions (Bonta & Andrews 2007; Majeed et al., 2025). Subsequently, studies have shown that the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model can have positive, impactful outcomes for children during the reintegration process after they are released from institutions (Rocque et al., 2014; Brogan et al., 2015; Majeed et al., 2025).

Results from previous meta-analytic studies have demonstrated that aftercare supervision can reduce reoffending rates under specific conditions (Bouchard & Wong, 2018; Weaver & Campbell, 2015; James et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2024; Selimi et al., 2025). Although past meta-analyses have examined the effectiveness of aftercare programs for children, the results were somewhat mixed. For instance, past studies revealed that aftercare supervision that successfully met the needs of participating children resulted in significant and small overall effects on recidivism rates for formally incarcerated children (James et al., 2013; Bouchard & Wong, 2018; Wong et al., 2024). Similarly, the results of a more recent study concluded that aftercare supervision resulted in significant and small overall effects on recidivism rates for formally incarcerated children (Selimi et al., 2025). Conversely, the findings of other meta-analysis studies have demonstrated that the effect of aftercare programs in reducing the recidivism rates of juvenile offenders was not significant. However, it has been reported that well-implemented after-

care supervision for youths older than 16.5 years old, who had committed violent offences showed positive effects and reduced recidivism rates (Weaver & Campbell, 2015). This result is echoed in a recent study that highlights the fact that reforms on aftercare programs do not necessarily show any discernible effects on recidivism rates (Mielke, 2024).

In light of the discussion in the preceding paragraphs, it is crucial to note that although the results of the meta-analysis varied, studies have also found that the quality of aftercare supervision and its implementation were critical for reducing recidivism among incarcerated children (Selimi et al., 2025). In this regard, some scholars have pointed out that the divergence in results may be attributed to the following factors: (a) some aftercare supervision adopt broad and varied framework (supervision carried out in residential or community-based settings) (Kurlychek et al., 2011); (b) various types of aftercare programs are implemented in aftercare supervision (Mielke, 2024); and (c) the integration of a complex belief/religious components in some aspects of the aftercare supervision (Ferolino & Yap 2023).

Even though the literature is replete with studies examining the effectiveness of aftercare supervision or re-entry processes for children, particularly the positive impact of aftercare supervision on reducing recidivism, there is a notable gap in the literature specific to the Malaysian context, on its effectiveness. Moreover, there is a significant gap in understanding the challenges children face during aftercare supervision in Malaysia (Ahmad et al., 2022). In Malaysia, although children are required to report to probation officers monthly, the meetings are cursory, with no structured reintegration plans for the children (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & UNICEF, 2013). Subsequently, due to gaps in the legal framework and guidelines governing aftercare supervision in Malaysia, and the lack of specific aftercare programs or services available to them, children are deprived of the support they need after their release from institutions as (Ahmad et al., 2022).

The present study extends the scope of earlier studies by analyzing the quality and implementation of aftercare supervision in Malaysia, as well as the protective and risk factors facing children released from institutions. Aftercare supervision is crucial, especially when recent statistics demonstrate that more children are now involved with gambling institutions, crime against persons, traffic offences, drug involvement, and crime against property (Department of Social Welfare Statistics Report, 2023). Thus, effective aftercare supervision that meets the needs of the children is pivotal to prevent reoffending among children who have been released from institutions. By interviewing probation officers and psychology officers, the present study has sought to develop a better understanding of aftercare supervision in Malaysia and how changes in the system might better support children; thereby increasing the likelihood of aftercare success for them.

Legal Framework

Section 83 of the Child Act 2001 recognizes that the arrest, detention, or trial of every child who comes into contact with the juvenile justice system in Malaysia shall be undertaken in conformity with the provisions in the Child Act 2001. Hence, the law seeks to protect a child offender from the pre-trial stage, trial proceedings, and post-trial stage, including the aftercare supervision stage, when the child is released from the institutions. Section 10 of the Child Act 2001 vested the probation officers with the power to oversee the well-being of a child offender from the point of arrest until the end of the aftercare supervision period.

Once a child offender came into contact with the juvenile justice system in Malaysia, the Court for Children is vested with the discretionary powers under Section 91 (1) of the Child Act 2001 to impose on proof of offence, the following appropriate orders on a child offender,; (a) admonish and discharge

the child offender; (b) discharge the child offender upon executing a bond of good behavior and compliance with all the conditions imposed by the Court; (c) placing the child offender in the care of a relative or other fit and proper person for a specified period and following the conditions set by the Court; (d) require the child offender to make payment for fines, compensation and costs; (da) make a community service order; (e) make a probation order under Section 98 of the Child Act 2001; (f) place the child offender in an Approved School or the Henry Gurney School; (g) whipping (but this order was removed by the Child (Amendment) Act (2016)); (h) subjecting a child offender (aged fourteen (14) years and above) to a term of imprisonment that could be awarded by the Session Court if the child committed an offence punishable with imprisonment. The order that can be imposed under Section 91 (1) of the Child Act 2001 is applicable to a child offender and must be distinguished from orders that can be imposed on an adult offender under different provisions of the law (*PP v MFHA [2018] 2 SMC 214*). Underpinning the purpose of the imposition of an order under Section 91 (1) of the Child Act 2001 against a child offender is the twin principle of "welfare-driven" and "justice-driven". In exercising the discretionary powers to make orders, the court takes into account the facts and circumstances of the case while cognizant of the impact the order will have both on the welfare of the child offender and the just expectation of society (*PP v. KM (A Child) & Anor [2010] 9 CLJ 605*).

After taking into account the facts, circumstances and the gravity of the offence committed by the child offender, the Court for Children can make the appropriate order to place a child in the Approved School or the Henry Gurney School, or subjecting the child to imprisonment under Section 91 (1) (f) and Section 91 (1) (h) of the Child Act 2001 respectively. Though the Court for Children has the power to send children to the institutions for the purpose of rehabilitation and reformation, the courts recognized that placing a child in the institutions should be a measure of last resort and should be reserved in exceptional cases, and the child cannot be reformed in any other way (*PP v. KM (A Child) & Anor [2010] 9 CLJ 605*; *Pendakwa Raya lwn LKL [2018] MLJU 2140*; *Arbae' yah bt Zakaria v. Public Prosecutor [2024] 10 MLJ 567*). The approach adopted by the court is in line with the international legal framework, which provides that the arrest, detention or imprisonment shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest time (*Article 37 (b) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)*; *Beijing Rules, Rule 19.1*; *General Comment No. 24 (2019) on Children's Rights in the Child Justice System, para 85*; *UNICEF, 2021b*; *UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025 Goal Area 3*).

Subsequently, upon their release from the Approved School or the Henry Gurney School under Section 70 and Section 75 (b) (i) of the Child Act 2001, respectively, children will be placed under the supervision of a probation officer or any person appointed by the Child Welfare Team for one (1) year during the aftercare process. During the aftercare supervision, children are required to report monthly to a probation officer (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & UNICEF, 2013). Additionally, under Section 7A of the Child Act 2001, each member of the district's Child Welfare Team is vested with the power to co-ordinate services that can be offered to families and children, if the children have come into contact with the juvenile justice system and have been found guilty of committing a crime. However, it is reported that their engagement with children has been minimal, and they are not much engaged in providing children with the guidance, mentorship, and support they need (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & UNICEF, 2013). Further, the legal framework lacks guidelines on how to support children during aftercare supervision, as no written reintegration plans have been prepared for children upon their release from institutions (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & UNICEF, 2013; Ahmad et al., 2022).

Given that Malaysia ratified the CRC in 1995, it should adhere to the article specifying that legally involved children should be treated in a way that “promot[es] the child’s reintegration and the child’s assuming a constructive role in society” (*Article 40.1, CRC*). Additionally, the international legal framework also advocates for stakeholders to strengthen and to provide the necessary support to children during their reintegration process, to minimize the prejudice the society may have against them, when they are released into the society (*Beijing Rules 1990, Rule 29.1; General Comment No. 24 (2019) on Children’s Rights in the Child Justice System, para 76; UNICEF, 2021b*).

As highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, it is reported that at the end of 2023, approximately 2,743 children were involved with crime in Malaysia, and from this figure, approximately 228 children were serving their sentences, and a larger number of children were detained, pending trial (Department of Social Welfare Statistics Report, 2023; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). Thus, addressing gaps in the legal framework is pivotal in ensuring that children receive effective aftercare supervision in order to prevent reoffending and reduce recidivism, in accordance with the Child Act 2001 and in line with the CRC and existing provisions in international legal framework.

METHODOLOGY

Using an exploratory qualitative design (Creswell, 2009), the present study sought to understand what juvenile justice personnel in Malaysia—specifically, probation officers responsible for the supervision and rehabilitation of youth, and psychology officers who provide mental health assessments and interventions—perceive as the most significant challenges facing children after release from detention and institutions, after serving the court’s order. These officers work directly with children from the pre-trial stage, trial proceedings, and post-trial stage, including the aftercare supervision stage, when the child is released from an institution. As a result, they share perspectives developed over several years working with many returning children. The researchers have hoped to elicit perspectives directly from the returning children, but the Movement Control Order (MCO), which was intended to contain COVID-19, and enforced during the study period, prevented this. Study procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the first author’s university and by the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare.

Participants

Using purposive sampling, the study recruited twelve (12) participants—seven (7) probation officers and five (5) psychology officers—based on their occupational roles and experience working with children who became involved with the legal system in Malaysia (Beitin, 2014; Davies, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Appropriate sample sizes for qualitative studies can vary considerably and are challenging to predetermine (Beitin, 2014). More importantly, unlike most quantitative studies, qualitative sampling does not typically aim for representativeness, but instead aims to reflect the diversity of thought and enable comparisons among participants (Rosaline, 2011). Some scholars recommend recruiting between five (5) and twenty-five (25) participants, whereas others suggest a range of two (2) to ten (10) participants (Beitin, 2014).

The selected participants worked in different geographical regions of Malaysia. Two probation officers (29%) had 20 years of experience in the role, two officers (29%) had 10-15 years of experience, one officer (14%) had 2-5 years of experience, and two officers (29%) had less than 1 year of experience in the role at the time of their interview participation. To recruit these participants, the study obtained

approval from the Department of Social Welfare, Putrajaya, and had to send written letters to heads of the Department of Social Welfare in selected states to request recommendations about potential interview participants. Subsequently, the first author contacted the identified probation and psychology officers to request for an interview.

Among probation officers ($n = 7$), 71% of participants were women, 29% were men, all them were identified as Malay. Four probation officers (57%) worked in the south region of Peninsular Malaysia, and three (43%) worked in the central region of Peninsular Malaysia. Two probation officers (29%) had 20 years of experience in the role, two officers (29%) had 10-15 years of experience, one officer (14%) had 2-5 years of experience, and two officers (29%) had less than 1 year of experience in the role at the time of their interview participation.

Among psychology officers ($n = 5$), 60% of participants were women, 40% were men, while 60% of psychology officers were identified as Malay and 40% identified as Chinese. Individually, each of the five officers had experience working in the following regions respectively: east region of Peninsular Malaysia, south region of Peninsular Malaysia, central region of Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak region of East Malaysia, Sabah region of East Malaysia. All five psychology officers had 2-5 years of experience in the position they held.

Procedure

After reviewing the literature and consulting with a panel of experts, for example officers and juvenile justice experts, the researchers developed interview protocols for the study's two participant groups: probation officers and psychology officers. Our aim was to understand the perspectives of probation officers and psychology officers on children's aftercare experiences, using questions tailored to each target group. Questions were open-ended and focused on barriers children face during aftercare supervision. The study also asked in detail about the gaps in current legal frameworks and about measures stakeholders can take to address them (Hermanowicz, 2002). The questioning routinely repeated participants' responses to allow both probation officers and psychology officers the opportunity to clarify or supplement their answers (Rosaline, 2011).

Participants were interviewed online via Google Meet, as in-person interviews were prohibited under the Movement Control Order in effect in Malaysia during the study period. Interviews were predominantly conducted by the first author, with the second, third, and fourth co-authors joining. While the first and second author have legal backgrounds, the third and fourth authors are equipped with psychology backgrounds, but all authors are specifically trained in conducting semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted between 60 and 105 minutes and were recorded with the participants' consent. Recordings were later transcribed verbatim, and the resulting transcripts were used for qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

Relying upon grounded theory (Smith & Davies, 2015), the study thematically analyzed the qualitative data collected. It took an inductive approach to data analysis, letting the data drive the creation of codes and categories instead of searching for predetermined themes (Gibbs, 2021). After reading the transcribed interviews, the researchers sorted and labeled the data using a semantic coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then, they searched for patterns and grouped similar codes into preliminary categories and themes before reviewing and refining them in line with the research questions, generating

sub-themes where appropriate. Finally, the study examined the themes and sub-themes identified across participants and mapped further connections. Through this constant comparative approach, the study sought to understand participants' shared perspectives and differing views (Gibbs, 2021; Rosaline, 2011; Silverman, 2010). Saturation was attained through the analytical comparisons process when the probation and psychology officers' responses became repetitive—specifically, they highlighted the same or similar challenges facing children re-entering their communities (Gibbs, 2021; Smith & Davies, 2015).

RESULTS

Qualitative data analysis of probation and psychology officer interview transcripts produced seven (7) themes related to officer-identified barriers and challenges to children's successful aftercare following facility discharge. To better convey the perceptions, perspectives, and voices of probation and psychology officers, interviewees' full verbatim responses were included, as frequently as possible in the results section.

Lack of Programming and Guidelines for Aftercare Supervision

Probation officers highlighted the need for more programming for youth during aftercare supervision, and more guidance about how best to execute their roles as aftercare supervisors. "There are no specific guidelines for probation officers to follow...there is nothing to indicate how the aftercare process should be carried out so it can be implemented uniformly in all districts" (*Probation Officer 7*).

Probation officers routinely emphasized the need for aftercare supervision to go beyond brief meetings (e.g., to include targeted services and other supports). Further, psychology officers recognized the importance of ongoing social support as a crucial protective factor for children returning to society after discharge.

Additionally, most participants agreed that guidelines would be beneficial for newly hired probation officers. "The guidelines are necessary so new officers know what to do... it is difficult to act on our own...we do not know whether we are doing the right thing or not...through my experience, the first two years of doing this job is very stressful" (*Probation Officer 1*).

Instead, officers often rely on advice from senior officers. "We do not get any training about how to carry out the aftercare programs... so what we do is based on the questions we asked the experienced probation officers... how they carry out the aftercare process... so we just follow what has been done before" (*Probation Officer 6*).

Other Structural Issues with Aftercare Supervision

Although participants acknowledged the importance of aftercare supervision to facilitate children's reintegration following facility discharge, the officers reported lacking the time to connect with the children during the supervision stages because of their busy caseload (i.e., 10-15 new cases per month or more). As a result, some participants noted that they only met with their supervisees once a month, whereas others reported that they could only meet with theirs once every three months.

As a probation officer, our workload is relatively high... in one month, 10 to 15 court cases are referred to us. ... To monitor the child once a month... we cannot afford to do that... best if we can increase the number of probation officers to ensure the child will be monitored consistently and become successful. However, due to the heavy workload, we only meet the child once every three months in our office (*Probation Officer 5*).

Most of the officers interviewed expressed the view that their heavy workload prevented them from getting to know the child placed under their supervision. "When the child comes and meets us, we will just ask random questions... we do not have any guidelines that can help us ask the questions. Sometimes we do not even have the time to ask the child any questions... the child will just sign the attendance form" (*Probation Officer 2*).

Participants cited workforce shortages as the primary reason for their increased workload. Therefore, despite reporting that they would like to meet with returning children for aftercare more regularly, officers had little time to guide and mentor their supervisees. "Meeting the child once a month during the aftercare process is quite difficult. ... I am the only probation officer in my district... I cannot afford to do everything alone; we need to increase the number of probation officers" (*Probation Officer 6*).

Negative Environmental Factors

Participants identified negative peers of the children as a critical barrier to children's success during aftercare. "From my experience, children will return to their old ways when they reconnect with their old friends" (*Probation Officer 4*). In particular, officers cited vulnerability to negative peer influence as a primary concern for children returning to their communities and felt that children may need to generate a new group of friends to avoid it.

Influence from friends is a big factor ... children may stay out of trouble if they meet their old friends once ... but they may be tempted to return to their old ways after meeting their friends in the second, third or fourth meeting... so they need to change their friends (*Psychology Officer 4*).

Even beyond antisocial peers, participants described challenges associated with returning to children's home neighborhoods, as often these areas were under-resourced and experienced high rates of criminal activity. This was the remark made by one of the probation officers:

When we meet the family, we also ask them how their child can change if they return to their own home. ... Some families said that children would return to their old neighborhood, which is considered a red zone... which is a hot area for committing crimes... like drugs... we do not encourage them to return to their old neighborhood since their old friends are still there (*Probation Officer 4*).

As this participant reported, some probation officers seek to help children avoid the perceived dangers of their original neighborhoods by advising them to live with relatives in a different area. However, participants also expressed their concerns about their ability to strike a balance between wanting the child to start afresh in a new place, to be able to feel comfortable and connected to family and other supports in a new, safe place.

Lack of Familial Resources

Participants discussed how children returning to families with limited economic resources may struggle to feel comfortable at home. “Children from low-income families and homes located in poverty-stricken areas have parents whose focus is in making ends meet... hence providing children with a comfortable environment at home is not a priority” (*Probation Officer 3*). Officers noted that such children may be tempted to engage in illicit activity to earn money or find another place to stay. “Some children will re-offend due to the economic factor of the family... if the family comes from a poor background, a child can steal... or can even break into a building” (*Probation Officer 6*).

One participant described how probation officers can assist families in need of support. For example, they noted that officers can connect families with financial assistance programs provided by the Department of Social Welfare and even help family members pursue and obtain employment opportunities.

Insufficient Support from Family Members and an Unconducive Home Environment

Most participants noted that children returning to their communities after discharge from confinement often require support from their family members—in varying forms—to succeed during the aftercare period. For example, the viewpoint expressed below:

The support given is not just in the form of money, but giving support also includes how the family monitors the child... does the family exert some control and discipline at home over the child? ...if the child goes out at night, parents will not be able to locate the child (*Probation Officer 3*).

In fact, participants indicated that parents and family members were able to play a far more critical role than probation officers during the aftercare process. One psychology officer noted that “receiving support such as emotional and psychological support from family or significant people in their lives are so important for the child when they are released from the institutions” (*Psychology Officer 1*).

However, some participants shared concerns about families not providing sufficient support for their returning children, noting the difficulties that children faced when hoping to remain out of trouble. “Some children received no support from family members...family members just do not want to know about their children...not concerned about the child at all...and relations with family have also gone bad...they can go back to their old ways” (*Psychology Officer 5*). In some cases, parents may even refuse to allow their child to return home, as highlighted in the following remarks:

One child who has been released from our institutions, but the parents refused to accept the child back... it is an unfortunate incident...the child cried a lot. But he is no longer able to stay in the institutions...even though the parents refused to accept the child, the probation officer will have to find a suitable place for the child to stay (*Psychology Officer 2*).

Participants also reported cases where families had difficulty or did not prioritize providing a home environment conducive for successful aftercare for their returning children. “Some houses I visited are just very dusty, crowded with family members sleeping everywhere... there is even a room full of rubbish... how can we expect the child to stay in the house... how do we expect re-offending not to

happen?” (*Probation Officer 3*). Another participant reported that sometimes probation officers went beyond the call of duty and helped to clean a child’s home to ensure the returning child would have a comfortable environment and not seek other, potentially unsafe, places for refuge.

Family Members Seem Uninvolved in the Aftercare Supervision

Most participants expressed frustration over the lack of cooperation from returning children's family members. “If the family is not giving us the cooperation to help rehabilitate their child, it is difficult for us” (*Probation Officer 1*). Officers noted that some parents did not attend scheduled meetings, making it difficult for them to understand their child’s progress during the aftercare period; sometimes, parents who attend did so only because the officers had to force them to do so. “When we asked parents to come and see us, some will come, but some parents only visit us when we forced them to come to the office” (*Probation Officer 4*).

Officers discussing home visits also raised concerns about their inability to reach some parents. “If family members do not give us the right information... we will do the house visitation, but some families do not give the right address... their numbers keep changing” (*Probation Officer 4*). In extreme cases, participants reported needing a police escort to home visits for their safety because of the threat of a family conflict. Overall, participants expressed their feelings of disappointment or helplessness; they felt as though family members did not want to work with them to support their child.

Children Appear Disengaged in Aftercare Supervision

Participants opined that for a child to succeed during aftercare, the child had to be committed to changing. “If the child cooperates, we can do our work, but if they do not... it is difficult... the child himself must want to succeed” (*Probation Officer 2*). Participants also noted that it was challenging to help children who were unwilling to help themselves.

Participants sometimes referenced the seeming unwillingness of children to meet with their probation officers as evidence of their disengagement. “We give them a date for them to come and see us... but they give us many excuses not to come... such as work, long hours of traveling, no money and others” (*Probation Officer 1*). Occasionally, when officers faced difficulty in reaching children, they reported trying several other methods of getting in touch. “Sometimes we do not have the children’s phone number... or when we called, we cannot reach them... when we are unable to reach them, we have to visit their house... or contact their family members” (*Probation Officer 3*).

However, children and their families occasionally leave their homes without notifying the officers. This problem limited the officers’ ability to provide support and supervision. “If the child does not turn up... we will call them... if the child does not answer our call... we will go to their house... but when we visit the house, the child has moved away... where are we going to find them?” (*Probation Officer 2*).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Children released from correctional institutions often faced a difficult transition back to their communities. In Malaysia, children are supervised by probation officers from the Department of Social Welfare or one of the persons appointed by the Child Welfare Team, for one (1) year after discharge. The study had interviewed probation officers and psychology officers who worked directly with legally

involved children to learn what they perceived as the most significant challenges children faced during aftercare supervision. Participants named many factors linked to future legal system contact, including antisocial peers, environments with high rates of criminal activity, poverty, and insufficient family support (e.g., Abrams, 2006; Jones et al., 2023; Martinez & Abrams, 2013).

Importantly, though some responses reflected challenges within children's control, most participants identified external challenges to children's successful aftercare supervision, including those related to children's families, their environments, and even the aftercare supervision process itself. Based on the findings of the present study, the following four (4) main recommendations were made to address gaps in the legal framework governing aftercare supervision in Malaysia and to better support children returning to their communities following their release from institutions in Malaysia.

Recommendation 1: Increase Support for Family Members of Returning Children

In line with past studies, participants identified the importance of children receiving support from their families upon returning to their communities and homes after release from institutions. However, based on the officer feedback of this study, children do not always receive the necessary needed support, whether because family members lacked the resources needed to provide it, or they encountered obstacles that precluded their capacity to provide it, or chose not to provide it. Given the links among insufficient family support, limited resources, and future legal system contact (Panuccio et al., 2012), probation officers and the Department of Social Welfare must still invest in ways to facilitate, encourage, and support family involvement in children's aftercare supervision. For example, officers might meet with caregivers early in the process to emphasize the value of families engaging as partners in helping their returning children succeed. Officers can also use these meetings to assess pertinent family issues (e.g., conflict and financial challenges) and then help address those issues by connecting families to needed services such as counseling, support groups, and financial assistance (Myers et al., 2021).

To provide necessary support to the families of returning children, probation officers must coordinate with other government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community partners. As a result, the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare should establish a specific system to document familial needs and refer families to available services as appropriate. Families should also have a way to provide feedback to the Department of Social Welfare about their experiences with aftercare supervision. Collecting this information would allow the Department of Social Welfare to adjust existing operations to better serve children and their families.

Recommendation 2: Increase and Improve Services Provided to Children under Aftercare Supervision

Participants noted that they sometimes perceive the children under their care as disengaged from the aftercare supervision process, for example, when they did not attend their scheduled meetings. Disengagement may stem from the lack of structured programs for children under aftercare supervision. Aftercare programs to address returning children's emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual needs can mitigate potential risk factors for future contact with the legal system (Heilbrun et al., 2000; Kennedy et al., 2019; Mears & Travis, 2004). In particular, programs that allow frequent and meaningful communication with probation officers can provide needed social support and increase motivation and engagement among children discharged from institutions (Chamberlain et al., 2018; Mizel & Abrams, 2020; Spencer & Jones-Walker, 2004; Majeed et al., 2025). Incorporating behavioral

health services into aftercare supervision would also be critical to holistically supporting children's well-being during aftercare, including challenges related to substance use (Jones et al., 2025).

Although probation officers can play an essential role during aftercare supervision, helping promote positive characteristics and outcomes for children—and not just preventing negative ones—will likely require additional opportunities and support. Therefore, the Department of Social Welfare should consider supporting the development and implementation of aftercare programming designed specifically for returning children. Such a program will likely be in collaboration with community partners (e.g., non-governmental organizations), and to refer the children to such programs during their time under aftercare supervision (McCarter, 2016; Mears & Travis, 2004). To do so successfully, the Department of Social Welfare should establish a database of partner organizations (e.g., educational agencies, employment agencies, health agencies, counseling agencies, religious institutions) and a transparent system for referring children to these programs and documenting their success. Previous research has shown that providing consistent, coordinated support to children through interagency collaboration can help address their immediate needs (Hazel & Bateman, 2021; Majeed et al., 2025; Selimi et al., 2025). In Malaysia, including religious institutions as partners in aftercare programming would provide continuity for returning children, as they often participate in religious classes while detained or serving their sentences in the institutions. Further, religious and spiritual support has been identified as a protective factor for children released from institutions (Stansfield et al., 2018; Ferolino & Yap, 2023).

Recommendation 3: Create Specific Guidelines for Aftercare Supervision in Malaysia

Currently, no specific guidelines for implementing aftercare supervision exist in Malaysia—the Child Act 2001 merely notes that children who leave detention should be supervised by a probation officer (or another person appointed by the Social Welfare Team) for one (1) year following their release from the institutions. As a result, participants reported that new probation officers often feel lost during their first few years in the position and may have difficulty providing children under their supervision with the support they need.

In line with the concerns expressed by the probation officers, it is incumbent on Malaysian policymakers to provide specific guidelines outlining structured frameworks and expectations for aftercare supervision. Meta-analysis studies (Bouchard & Wong, 2018; James et al., 2013; Weaver & Campbell, 2015; Wong et al., 2024; Selimi et al., 2025) and past studies have shown that well-structured aftercare or re-entry programs that meet the children's needs can reduce recidivism rates among returning children (Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008; Mulder, et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2021). In line with other successful initiatives (e.g., BUILD, 2023), such programming might consist of specific modules and focus on developing life skills (problem solving, communication, goal setting), as well as offering specific modules and practical guidance for children on what to do when faced with challenges in their home environment while under aftercare supervision (Mishra & Dutta, 2024).

Recommendation 4: Improve the Quality of Aftercare Supervision

Probation officers in Malaysia described consistently heavy workloads, and as a result, they reported meeting with children either once a month or once every three months. These findings echo previous work indicating that probation officers in Malaysia have limited time and resources to provide individualized support for children during aftercare supervision (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & UNICEF, 2013). These challenges limit probation officers' abilities to

build trusting relationships with children and provide them with needed support—a noteworthy loss, given previously identified links between support from supervising staff during aftercare supervision and reduced likelihood of rearrest and reincarceration among adults (Bares & Mowen, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2018; Mizel & Abrams, 2020), and between effective transition support staff and positive aftercare outcomes for children (Rajah et al., 2014; Sinclair, et al., 2021; Vidal et al., 2015). Past studies have also implicated the importance of children developing rapport and relationships with staff before they are released from institutions (Mizel & Abrams, 2020; Majeed et al., 2025), suggesting that efforts to reach detained children before discharge would strengthen the reintegration plan prepared and would likely improve outcomes for these children (Sankofa et al., 2018).

Thus, the present study strongly recommends that the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare address the heavy workloads among probation officers by creating a newly designated position of assistant probation officer to help with administrative tasks, freeing up probation officers' time to meet more frequently with the children they supervise and to develop more meaningful, supportive relationships with them. Additionally, probation officers would likely benefit from opportunities to develop specialized training to help them serve as more effective supervisors, for instance, by learning more about adolescent development and decision-making and building skills in evidence-based supervision strategies (e.g., Dempsey et al., 2021; Gleicher, 2020; Sankofa et al., 2018), and by learning how to develop strong, supportive relationships with children. Additionally, given that each district in Malaysia has a standing Child Welfare Teams—whose responsibilities include coordinating locally-based services to families and children found guilty of committing crime—the Department of Social Welfare might seek to coordinate with the members of these committees to provide additional, extralegal support to these children beyond what probation officers can provide within the bounds of their position and role.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is among the few to examine the challenges facing children returning to their communities after release from institutions in Malaysia. However, it is not without limitations. First, data were collected from a relatively small number of probation and psychology officers. Such a small sample size is not unusual in qualitative research, particularly when, as in the current study, participants provide similar information—even across roles—indicating thematic saturation. Future research might examine larger officer samples; studies should also seek to interview children who underwent aftercare supervision to provide complementary insights. Not including these children was another limitation of the current study, as national COVID-19 restrictions prevented their recruitment.

Moreover, future research should further explore the themes identified and implement and evaluate the recommendations made in the current study. For example, researchers might examine the types of support provided to families that have the greatest impact, and the potential contributions of assistant probation officers and Child Welfare Teams in making aftercare supervision more effective. Furthermore, exploring the feasibility of interagency cooperation would help better understand how a broader range of services can be leveraged to meet the needs of children returning to society after their release from institutions. Finally, exploring specific guidelines outlining the nature of aftercare supervision can provide probation officers with more guidance as they continue to support the children in aftercare supervision.

CONCLUSION

Children released from institutions face monumental tasks in the reintegration process and need to adjust to feel like useful members of society again. Creating and implementing a structured, evidence-based aftercare supervision framework that facilitates children's positive development—and provides their families with the support they need—seems to be the best way to reduce the risk factors in aftercare supervision and the rate of recidivism during reintegration. Such efforts will likely require collaboration between and among policymakers from various governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, community members, and system-impacted youth and families, all of whom have a vested interest in supporting children as they transition from detention or institutions back to their homes and communities.

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