

Article

“I Am a Person Who Entered the Store Naked and Left with Clothes on”: The Rehabilitation Process in the Eyes of Young Rehabilitators

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Abstract

This study investigated the rehabilitation process of justice-involved youth in Shushan rehabilitation centers, marking the first evaluation of this program. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 male participants at various stages of rehabilitation. Results revealed three primary themes: the challenges of the rehabilitation process, participants’ perspectives on success, and how young individuals perceive the outcomes of the process. The study concludes that rehabilitation is a dynamic and multifaceted process that extends beyond the institutional setting. It underscores the importance of post-rehabilitation support systems, such as mentoring and employment assistance, in ensuring sustainable reintegration. The article offers practical suggestions for policymakers.

Keywords: justice-involved youth; youth rehabilitation; social reintegration; post-incarceration support; therapeutic challenges



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1. Introduction

Imprisonment exerts significant societal impacts, including economic repercussions (Bhuller et al., 2020), and affects prisoners through health complications (Hjalmarsson & Lindquist, 2022), mental health issues (Edgemon, 2022), and increased mortality rates (Daza et al., 2020). Young ex-prisoners encounter distinct challenges, such as social stigmatization (Chui & Cheng, 2013), difficulties in re-entering the labor market (Durnescu, 2021), and an elevated risk of recidivism due to developmental and psychological factors (Trang & Khoi, 2023). In light of these considerations, it is imperative to develop rehabilitation programs that facilitate reintegration into society, particularly for youth and young adults. Although rehabilitation has been extensively studied in relation to adult populations, relatively little empirical work has focused on the perspectives of young offenders undergoing community-based or semi-structured rehabilitation programs. This study plays a crucial role in addressing this gap by examining the specific experiences of young rehabilitators at the Shushan Centers, which operate under the auspices of the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority in Israel.

By focusing on the voices and lived experiences of young people, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how rehabilitative interventions are perceived, negotiated, and internalized by participants themselves—a dimension often overlooked in outcome-based evaluations. Understanding these subjective experiences is essential for

designing youth-centered, evidence-based programs that foster meaningful reintegration, reduce recidivism, and promote long-term desistance. This approach aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing the importance of incorporating service users' perspectives in the development of effective rehabilitation policies and practices (e.g., [Barry, 2013](#)).

1.1. Implications of Imprisonment on Justice-Involved Youth

Incarceration exerts significant psychological, social, and economic effects on young offenders. Empirical evidence indicates that extended periods of incarceration elevate the risk of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms ([Acar et al., 2019](#); [Allely & Allely, 2020](#); [Haney, 2003](#); [Lambie & Randell, 2013](#)). Furthermore, individuals who have been incarcerated encounter substantial obstacles to societal reintegration due to social stigmatization and employment restrictions, which further impede their successful reentry ([Buck et al., 2022](#); [Trang & Khoi, 2023](#)). These challenges disproportionately affect young offenders, curtailing their rehabilitation opportunities and heightening their likelihood of recidivism.

The negative repercussions of incarceration for young offenders extend beyond psychological distress. Research suggests that imprisonment disrupts educational and vocational pathways and reinforces patterns of social exclusion ([Ramaswamy & Freudenberg, 2012](#)). School suspension and disciplinary actions are early indicators of future incarceration, perpetuating a cycle of involvement in the criminal justice system ([Hemez et al., 2020](#)). Although some incarcerated youth exhibit positive personality changes, such as reduced depressive symptoms, they also experience slower decreases in impulsivity compared to their non-offending peers ([Bollich-Ziegler et al., 2020](#)). Moreover, the duration of incarceration is closely associated with adverse long-term outcomes, including poor physical health, persistent depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation ([Barnert et al., 2017](#)). Even short-term incarceration, lasting less than a month, has been shown to increase the risk of depression. Conversely, sentences exceeding one year are linked to severe functional impairments and mental health challenges ([Porter & DeMarco, 2019](#)).

Given these detrimental effects, researchers have increasingly explored alternative approaches to address youth offenses and mitigate the long-term consequences of incarceration. Wilderness therapy and adventure-based intervention programs have emerged as promising strategies for reducing antisocial behaviors among justice-involved youth ([Mohan et al., 2022](#)). These programs utilize outdoor settings and counselor relationships as potential moderators of behavioral change, fostering resilience and social development. Finding underscores the importance of diversion programs prioritizing rehabilitation and mental health support over punitive sanctions ([Cauffman et al., 2023](#)).

1.2. Rehabilitation of Youth Post-Incarceration

Studies examining rehabilitation programs for both adult and juvenile have generally demonstrated only modest effects in reducing recidivism ([Andrews & Bonta, 2006](#); [Andrews et al., 2012](#); [Gendreau & Ross, 1987](#); [MacKenzie, 2006](#)). However, research also suggests that well-designed intervention programs tailored to youth offenders can yield significant reductions in recidivism, particularly when they incorporate a holistic, evidence-based approach ([Lipsey, 2009](#)).

This emphasis on evidence-based approaches reassures the audience about the validity of the strategies. The rehabilitative model posits that intervention programs equip justice-involved youth with essential skills and support systems that facilitate their successful reintegration into society while contributing to public safety (e.g., [Cullen et al., 2017](#)). In contrast, the punitive model argues that imposing stricter penalties, such as incarceration or intensive community supervision, serves as a deterrent by reinforcing the consequences

of criminal behavior, ultimately discouraging future offenses (e.g., [Bouchard & Wong, 2018](#)). In a recent meta-review, [Pappas and Dent \(2023\)](#) demonstrated a notable reduction in recidivism rates (17.4%) among justice-involved youth who participated in intervention programs compared with those who did not. This finding highlights the potential of rehabilitation programs to reduce recidivism, enhance public safety, and facilitate offender reintegration into society.

The theoretical foundation of youth rehabilitation is grounded in several key frameworks. Social Support Theory ([Cullen, 1994](#)) posits that sustained social support, whether from family, mentors, or community organizations, is critical in preventing reoffense by fostering positive relationships and reducing the appeal of delinquent peer influences. Rational Choice Theory ([Cornish & Clarke, 1986](#)) also suggests that youth offenders weigh the costs and benefits of criminal activity. Rehabilitation programs that enhance employability, provide psychological support, and create stable social environments can shift the perceived benefits of a law-abiding lifestyle and reduce recidivism ([Ward & Maruna, 2007](#)).

Juvenile rehabilitation occurs in two primary ways. The first is during incarceration when they receive educational rehabilitation programs, vocational training, anger management workshops, and psychological therapy. The second is through alternative imprisonment programs within the community, where they acquire interpersonal and social skills conducive to adopting a normative lifestyle ([Savatia & Ruth, 2020](#)). Post-release community-based rehabilitation models have proven particularly effective in reducing recidivism. [Farrington et al. \(2016\)](#) systematically reviewed community-based interventions, including individual-, family-, and school-based programs. They found that such interventions resulted in an average 5% reduction in delinquent behavior among juvenile offenders.

Former prisoners often face significant challenges in the post-release period. The extent to which they can overcome these obstacles largely depends on the availability of services, supervision, and support. [Peled-Laskov et al. \(2021\)](#) examine the personal experiences of ex-prisoners, revealing pathways to achieving 'better lives' through a successful reintegration process. In a separate study on paroled lifers post-release, the findings indicated that self-efficacy plays a pivotal role. Unlike traditional social factors, such as family ties and employment, which are more critical for individuals with shorter incarceration periods, self-efficacy is a key determinant for long-term prisoners ([Liem & Garcin, 2014](#)).

Moreover, meta-analytic studies of family-based prevention programs have demonstrated the potential of these initiatives. They significantly reduced recidivism, offering hope for the effectiveness of such programs ([De Vries et al., 2018](#)). Additionally, therapeutic rehabilitation programs incorporating cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) have been shown to enhance the emotional regulation and decision-making skills of juvenile offenders, ultimately reducing their likelihood of re-offending ([Deković et al., 2011](#)).

1.3. Israel Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority and Shushan Centers

The Israeli Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority is responsible for facilitating the reintegration of former inmates into society, with a focus on young adults and adolescents. The primary objective is to support their transition to a law-abiding lifestyle while minimizing the likelihood of recidivism. To this end, the authorities employ various strategies, including individualized and group counseling, customized rehabilitation plans tailored to specific needs, and initiatives promoting social engagement. A key initiative within this framework is the Shushan program, which targets the rehabilitation of individuals up to the age of 23 years. Currently, four Shoshan centers operate throughout Israel, offering structured interventions in three key areas: (1) Social Skills Development—including interpersonal communication training, nurturing social networks, and preparation for community involvement. (2) Professional Empowerment—providing professional courses,

skill-building opportunities, and job placement assistance. (3) Personal Support—providing individual counseling to deal with emotional, family, and practical challenges related to re-entering the workforce.

A central tenet of the program is the belief that young people, even after involvement in crime and imprisonment, possess inherent strengths and abilities that can be harnessed for successful reintegration. Accordingly, the program emphasizes exposing participants to positive experiences that reinforce pro-social behaviors, strengthen personal identity, and foster a sense of belonging. Each center is staffed by a multidisciplinary team, including a program manager, social workers, employment counselors, rehabilitation counselors, and volunteers. Each participant is assigned a designated therapist, who establishes contact during incarceration to build trust and assess the young person's personal and family environment. This early intervention enables the development of an individual rehabilitation plan, which is jointly created with the participant and approved through a treatment contract with the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority. Upon approval by the committee, eligible participants may receive a one-third reduction in sentence and continue the program as "licensed prisoners" under community supervision.

Participation in the program involves clear and strict conditions. These include random drug testing, maintaining distance from criminogenic networks, actively participating in therapeutic and group activities, maintaining consistent employment, and complying with parole requirements. The literature review suggests that prisoner rehabilitation is a complex, multidimensional process that necessitates interventions during incarceration. Theoretical frameworks from the domains of incarceration and rehabilitation offer insights into the challenges and processes associated with rehabilitating young prisoners, highlighting the significance of personalized approaches and supportive services. This study aimed to elucidate these processes by examining the perspectives of young rehabilitators. Consequently, the research questions were: What challenges do they encounter? From this perspective, how is success defined within the rehabilitation process? How do they perceive the future outcomes of the rehabilitation process, and what are their expectations regarding these outcomes?

2. Method

The study utilized the qualitative grounded theory framework as articulated by [Glaser and Strauss \(2017\)](#). This approach, known for its systematic methodology for collecting and analyzing qualitative data, placed a strong emphasis on understanding social reality from the participants' perspective ([Higgins, 2009](#); [Spector-Mersel, 2010](#)).

2.1. Participants

A total of 18 male participants, aged 17 to 23 years ($M = 20.7$), were recruited from the four rehabilitation centers in Shushan for this study. The sample was intentionally balanced, with 50% of participants in the early stages of the rehabilitation process and 50% nearing the end of the program, in order to capture a wide range of perspectives across the different stages of rehabilitation. At the time of recruitment, the total number of 100 youth enrolled varied between centers. All youth approached agreed to participate in the study, and therefore, no refusals were recorded.

All interviews were conducted on-site at the Shushan rehabilitation centers, in spaces familiar and accessible to the participants. Prior to recruitment, all rehabilitators at each center received a clear explanation of the study's purpose and its voluntary nature. This ensured that everyone would be aware of the research taking place and could decide independently whether to participate. Those who expressed interest were then personally contacted by the interviewing researcher, provided with further details, and given written

informed consent prior to the interview. Participant recruitment was carried out in a structured manner: center directors provided only general information about the study without disclosing its specific aims, to minimize potential bias in responses.

2.2. Interviews

The primary author conducted a comprehensive semi-structured interview using a methodology harmonizing structure with adaptability. This framework enabled a thorough examination of the essential elements of the rehabilitation process while allowing the interviewer flexibility to delve into and prioritize the unique narratives of each participant. The interview protocol commenced with inquiries regarding the participants' criminal experiences, familial relationships, and challenges encountered during rehabilitation. These discussions naturally transitioned to more focused questions concerning their interactions with the Shushan therapeutic team and fellow members of the rehabilitation program. This interview structure facilitated the systematic data collection and the emergence of unforeseen themes.

2.3. Procedure

Each participant engaged in a single interview session at the Shushan Center to ensure a familiar and comfortable setting. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were audio-recorded in Hebrew to capture authentic expressions and nuances. All interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim, with pseudonyms assigned to protect participant confidentiality. Before each interview, participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's voluntary nature and confidentiality measures, and all completed informed consent forms acknowledging their agreement with the audio recordings. The primary researcher emphasized the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage without repercussions. The sampling continued until 'categorical saturation' was achieved ([Saunders et al., 2018](#)), indicating that no new themes emerged from additional interviews. To maintain linguistic accuracy, selected quotes underwent rigorous translation and back-translation by native speakers during the writing phase, ensuring the optimal preservation of the original content and meaning. The interviews were analyzed using the thematic coding methodology outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2021\)](#), adhering to a systematic process. The study received full ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board and the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority.

3. Results

The findings chapter will elucidate three primary themes: the challenges associated with rehabilitation in Shushan centers, the participants' perceptions regarding the efficacy of the rehabilitation process, and the perspectives of young individuals on the outcomes of the process itself. Originally registered interviewees were kept for authenticity.

3.1. Challenges in the Rehabilitation Process

The challenges articulated by the participants revealed the multidimensional complexity inherent to the rehabilitation process. Practically, persistent tension exists between employment obligations and rehabilitation commitments, resulting in significant conflicts. Participants highlighted that the requirement to attend the center twice weekly leads to reduced income and constant pressure from employers. This situation places individuals undergoing rehabilitation in a financial rehabilitative dilemma, where the necessity for income conflicts with the need for a meaningful rehabilitation process.

Coming here twice a week is not easy. I started working straight away as I was released, and suddenly, my employer found out that I had to come here twice a week. I would go to the Shushan Center and then return to work, even if I had to return for two hours. I wanted to show that I was serious at work.

Another explains: “It’s hard because we need to get here two days a week, so I get to work only three days a week.” And his friend added: “I must work more because no one can help me financially. I don’t get paid that much because I can’t get more shifts, and that makes me anxious and nervous.”

The tension between economic survival and rehabilitation underscores young individuals’ structural challenges. Although financial independence is crucial for reintegration, the rigid structure of rehabilitation programs can inadvertently create new obstacles to long-term stability.

On an emotional level, the findings revealed a psychological burden of constant self-reflection. The metaphor of “touching a wound,” as expressed by one participant, illustrates the emotional pain involved in therapeutic processing. This process necessitates confronting past traumas, problematic behavioral patterns, and the consequences of previous choices while attempting to construct new lives. The emotional challenge is further amplified by changing the social dynamics at the center. Participants struggled to form stable relationships as fellow rehabilitants entered and exited the program. As described by one participant: “Every two weeks I experience a breakup and make a new friend. It is difficult for me. Because I have a long third, and many have a short third.” This turnover highlights the transient nature of social bonds in the rehabilitation process and suggests the need for mechanisms that foster stability and support long-term peer connections.

The reflections of one of the young men, who was in an advanced stage of his rehabilitation program at the time of the interview, underscored the importance of providing a platform for young individuals to confront and surmount their challenges. He articulated that

treatment is a way of touching a wound, and I don’t like it. To go back to messing with him after he heals, to open him up again is painful, it hurts, and it brings you back to things you don’t want, but mostly it was good. I learned something; I took what was good for me and didn’t take what was not good for me.

3.2. How Can One Define Success?

The analysis of participants’ statements revealed a nuanced understanding of success that transcends conventional definitions of rehabilitation. Success is perceived as a continuous transformation and personal growth process rather than merely avoiding criminal behavior. Participants underscored the significance of perseverance as a measure of success while acknowledging the challenges inherent in maintaining commitment to a process that is not always pleasant or straightforward. The findings suggest that the perception of success is predicated on three primary components: (1) the capacity to persist despite adversities, (2) the acquisition of tools for daily coping, and (3) the development of personal responsibility.

From the participants’ narratives, it appears that success is manifested in the ability to rectify their chosen paths, disengage from the criminal world, and emerge after the process. Additionally, strength is derived from values such as perseverance and attaining personal goals. As articulated by some young men, “I want to fix many things in myself, and I will succeed. Now, in group therapy, I talk about the trauma I went through, and I want to change my shyness”.

Many participants equated success with perseverance, emphasizing the ability to commit to a process that is often arduous and uncomfortable: “Persistence is a success for me. Persevering is one of the hardest things for me here. And that’s my success.”

Beyond perseverance, success is also conceptualized regarding identity reconstruction and behavioral change. Several participants clearly distinguished between their pre-rehabilitation and current selves: One said: “I want to be proud of myself for having accomplished rehabilitation and treatment and changed myself successfully. I can say I am done”. And another shared: “I started something in life and finished it on the best side”.

All the participants indicated that rehabilitation facilitated the development of a personal set of skills and strategies. The emphasis on responsibility as a core value is noteworthy, signifying a substantial departure from previous cognitive and behavioral patterns. This recurring theme of responsibility manifests in the obligations of managing household tasks, adhering to cleaning and cooking schedules, participating in therapy groups, punctuality for work and treatment meetings, maintaining a lifestyle devoid of psychoactive substances, and avoiding environments conducive to criminal recidivism. Furthermore, a pivotal element of success is the internalization of responsibility, transitioning from an externally imposed structure (such as incarceration) to self-motivated discipline. One participant exemplified this transformation in their perspective on responsibility:

“If you want to come to the meetings, it is up to you to arrive on time. In prison, if you don’t come, you go to the dungeon. Here it is your responsibility. I think ahead; for example, if I want to beat someone. Before the rehabilitation, I said, “Well, let’s beat him, and then we’ll see what happens.” now I say, if I beat him, what will happen after that? What do I have to lose? I realized that I am responsible for my life and that every action has consequences.”.

This shift towards personal responsibility suggests that successful rehabilitation extends beyond merely avoiding criminal behavior to adopting a new, self-regulated approach to interacting with the world.

3.3. The Rehabilitation Process Outcomes

The findings reveal a profoundly transformative process occurring during rehabilitation. The change manifests in three main dimensions: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. On the cognitive level, participants report changes in thinking patterns and self-perception. On the behavioral level, there are noticeable changes in behavioral patterns and daily choices, including distancing from negative influences and returning to the workforce. On the emotional level, participants report developing the ability to identify and express emotions and improving self-image.

They bravely shared their journey:

“Here I found the courage to open up. I have learned to steer my thoughts away from negativity. When faced with a challenge, I now have the tools to prevent it from escalating.”

“Today, I have the tools to understand how to act in a romantic relationship. I always remember where I was and where I am today. My self-confidence and self-image are higher. I began to connect more with my emotions and to understand the severity of my actions, what I did to others, what I did to my family, and what I did to myself.”

“I am evolving, and thanks to the treatment, I am discovering aspects of myself I never knew. It’s empowering, making me feel mature, responsible, and capable of overcoming and succeeding.”

It is a testament to the participants' deep understanding of the center's support. The metaphor of climbing a ladder step by step captures their view of rehabilitation as a gradual process, requiring constant adaptation to a changing reality.

"Outside is something else where you can share your problems, but outside, you do not have anyone who listens to your concerns".

"It is like having to acclimate to prison and then acclimate to the Shushan Center, so now I have to acclimate to a world without it. That is how it is, step by step. You cannot go up the ladder all at once. You go up one step each time".

This apprehension, which is often expressed by participants, underscores the need for ongoing support mechanisms that extend beyond the formal rehabilitation period. It is not just about the fear of relapse, but also about the comfort and security that the center provides. This need for ongoing support is a crucial aspect of the rehabilitation process.

The rehabilitation process can be seen not merely as a journey of crime avoidance but as a profound process of personal growth, new identity construction, and acquiring tools for dealing with life's challenges. The apprehension about leaving the center emphasizes the need to develop continuous support mechanisms to help maintain rehabilitation achievements over time.

4. Discussion

This study delves into the unique perspective of young offenders who have participated in the Shushan rehabilitation program, a program administered by the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority in Israel. The research focuses on the processes occurring at Shushan Centers and the personal transformations experienced by these participants, who are clients of the Law Enforcement System and have served prison sentences for various offenses. The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective experience of being a young rehabilitation professional.

The findings of this study suggest that participation in rehabilitation programs involves complex negotiations between practical and therapeutic needs. The success of the process is closely linked to the development of internal motivation and the ability to sustain new behavioral patterns while gradually reducing reliance on the program's structured support system. Furthermore, the participants' narratives reveal a nuanced understanding of "success" in rehabilitation, extending beyond traditional metrics of recidivism prevention to include personal development, emotional growth, and the construction of a new self-identity. This broader conception of success suggests that effective rehabilitation programs must address multiple dimensions of participants' lives and provide tools for sustained change beyond the program's formal conclusion.

The personal growth and the construction of a new self-identity are particularly inspiring, as they demonstrate the potential of rehabilitation programs to transform lives. However, the urgency of addressing the issue of employment in the rehabilitation process is also highlighted. Numerous challenges are confronted by those who require or wish to undergo rehabilitation, which leads to desistance from crime. Economic challenges represent significant obstacles that can impede the process of reintegration into society. As Pogrebin et al. (2014) indicate, immediate employment is one of the primary needs of individuals transitioning from prison back into their communities. The current study expands on these findings and emphasizes the importance of employment, highlighting how receiving a monthly salary contributes to the empowerment process to the extent that participants appear torn between the desire to remain at their place of work and even work extra days and the desire to succeed in the rehabilitation process and persist in attending group and individual meetings. Our findings reveal that Shushan centers

emphasize structured employment pathways for young people, enabling them to set goals and plan for a better future as individuals pre-and post-release (Doyle et al., 2022).

One of the primary challenges encountered by the research participants was the emotional challenge, which manifests as the necessity to confront their life choices and the subsequent consequences of those choices. The rehabilitation of youth offenders presents significant emotional challenges, as highlighted by various studies that underscore the multifaceted emotional landscape that rehabilitators must navigate to foster successful outcomes in youth rehabilitation (Chomczyński, 2017; Hovey et al., 2017; Saadati & Saadati, 2023).

A study on effective rehabilitation programs for serious juvenile offenders (ages 12–21) analyzed 30 experimental and quasi-experimental studies with 2831 treated juveniles and 3002 controls. The findings indicated a modest positive effect, with cognitive-behavioral approaches being the most effective in reducing reoffense, leading to a 7% reduction in recidivism (Genovés et al., 2006). This underscores the importance of cognitive-behavioral approaches in reducing reoffense and encourages their implementation. A recent systematic review examined 12 intervention types to reduce juvenile offending and antisocial behaviors. The most effective interventions were parent training, focused deterrence, child skills training, cognitive-behavioral therapy, mentoring, and family therapy. Anti-bullying and pre-court diversion programs showed moderate effectiveness, whereas school exclusion reduction, after-school programs, and boot camps were least effective (Farrington et al., 2022).

The current study's findings demonstrated that success in the Shushan rehabilitation program is closely tied to three fundamental levels of participant development. Perseverance represents the ability to continue treatment despite challenges and setbacks. Second, participants must build a comprehensive toolbox of coping strategies and skills for application during daily life within and after program completion. Third, developing a robust sense of responsibility enables participants to own their actions and choices, fostering sustainable behavioral change. These three key components work synergistically to create meaningful transformations in the program participants.

These critical success factors are cultivated through a sophisticated treatment system operating at individual and group levels. The therapeutic approach incorporates cognitive-developmental therapy principles, emphasizing understanding thought patterns and developing more adaptive cognitive frameworks. The individualized nature of treatment allows for personalized intervention, whereas group work fosters peer learning and support. The findings of this study strongly corroborate previous research in the rehabilitation field, adding valuable empirical evidence on effective intervention strategies. The alignment of the Shushan program's approach with existing literature not only strengthens its validity but also builds trust with the audience. It highlights the importance of integrated multilevel treatment models in successful rehabilitation outcomes and the need for continued research and development in this field.

The current findings can be categorized into three dimensions when examining perceptions of success within rehabilitation programs. The results indicated a notable cognitive transformation among participants, manifested as alterations in thinking patterns and self-perception. This transformation aligns with the cognitive-behavioral approach (Beck, 1964), which underscores the influence of thoughts and beliefs on behavior (Henning & Frueh, 1996; Pearson et al., 2002). According to this approach, modifications in thinking patterns precipitate behavioral changes, potentially mitigating criminal behavior. Empirical evidence suggests that rehabilitation programs grounded in cognitive behavioral principles effectively reduce recidivism rates (Blattman et al., 2023).

The reported behavioral changes, including distancing from negative influences and re-entering the labor market, are consistent with social learning models such as the social

structure and social learning theory of crime and deviance (Akers, 1998, 2017). These models highlight the significant role of the social environment in shaping behavior and propose that exposure to positive models and social support facilitates behavioral change, enlightening us about its profound influence. In the present study, key positive figures emerged in the form of rehabilitation center staff. Their commitment to supporting the rehabilitation process of young individuals, coupled with their multifaceted efforts, enables them to experience secure attachment and a renewed, effective socialization system. In their article,

Archer and Flexon (2022) reviewed the role of unstructured peer socialization and its impact on adolescent delinquent behavior from a social learning theory perspective. During adolescence, increased peer interaction and reduced parental supervision (Janssen et al., 2014) increase the risk of delinquent involvement. The study's findings indicate that most variables from social learning theory, alongside self-control, elucidate how meso-level social connections influence deviant behavior. From an alternative perspective, the current study highlights the positive effects of the social environment in Shushan centers and the significance of its structured nature, which can contribute to reducing recidivism and delinquency.

The capacity to identify and articulate emotions, as reported by participants, constitutes a fundamental aspect of the rehabilitation process. The motivational approach (Deci & Ryan, 1991), which emphasizes understanding an individual's intrinsic motivations for change, underscores the significance of empirically exploring an individual's attitudes toward change. Motivational approaches applied to offenders have demonstrated the potential to enhance treatment outcomes (Stinson & Clark, 2017). These approaches can improve retention, engagement, and motivation to change while reducing offending behavior, particularly among substance-misusing offenders (McMurran, 2009). The Good Lives Model offers a framework for integrating motivational factors, concentrating on equipping offenders with skills to achieve personal goals rather than merely managing risk (McMurran & Ward, 2004). The study's findings indicate that interventions incorporating motivational strategies have shown considerable effectiveness in increasing intervention doses and reducing dropout rates by 1.73 times compared with those lacking (Santirso et al., 2020).

5. Limitations and Further Research

One limitation of this study was that the participants were in the early or middle stages of the rehabilitation process. Although this offers valuable, in-depth, and firsthand insights into their experiences, it may also present a limited perspective that does not fully capture the long-term impact of the rehabilitation process. The advantage of this immediacy could be a potential drawback. Therefore, future research could benefit from examining the perceptions of these individuals one year after completing the rehabilitation process and again after approximately five years to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of rehabilitation.

6. Conclusions

This study presents an innovative perspective on rehabilitation by conceptualizing it as a continuous, multidimensional process rather than a singular transition from criminality to conformity. Our findings resonate strongly with the contemporary literature on abstinence, which describes disengagement as a dynamic and ongoing process involving internal cognitive and emotional transformations, as well as critical social and material supports (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Patton & Farrall, 2021). While previous models often framed disengagement primarily in terms of behavioral cessation, more recent research

emphasizes shifts in identity and the construction of self-narratives as central to sustainable change (Maruna, 2001). The current study extends this current understanding by illustrating how these processes unfold among young people participating in Shushan centers operated by the Prisoners Rehabilitation Authority. The model emphasizes the specific interplay between personal agency and structured rehabilitation frameworks and shows how emotional, cognitive, and behavioral transformations are made possible within the unique social context of these residential programs. The study also revealed the inherent tensions between rehabilitation and economic stability, the emotional challenges of self-reflection, and the fragility of social reintegration. Notably, fear of exiting rehabilitation highlights the necessity for sustained post-program support.

Building on these findings, several practical and policy-oriented recommendations emerge to strengthen the effectiveness of rehabilitation for justice-involved youth. At the programmatic level, there is a need to establish structured post-release mentoring schemes, pairing young people with trained community mentors who can support their emotional and practical adjustment. Complementary vocational and educational initiatives should be developed in collaboration with local employers and educational institutions to facilitate immediate access to stable employment or further training. Within the Shushan centers themselves, implementing workshops focused on resilience, identity reconstruction, and future orientation could help participants navigate the psychological challenges of reintegration. At the policy level, it is recommended to institutionalize long-term follow-up support—formally extending rehabilitation beyond the institutional phase through at least one year of coordinated mentoring, mental health counseling, and employment assistance. Policymakers should also integrate qualitative indicators of change, such as identity transformation and emotional well-being, into program evaluation frameworks, rather than relying solely on recidivism data. Finally, securing dedicated governmental funding and promoting cross-sector collaboration between rehabilitation authorities, social services, employers, and community organizations will help ensure that reintegration becomes a sustainable, community-anchored process rather than a temporary intervention.

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