

EVALUATING COMMUNITY-BASED REHABILITATION FOR CHILD OFFENDERS IN MALAYSIA: CHALLENGES FACED BY COMMUNITY AGENTS

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Abstract

Community agents play a pivotal role in the rehabilitation of child offenders, highlighting the importance of community-based rehabilitation as an effective strategy for supporting this population. Countries that are signatories to international child welfare conventions, including Malaysia, actively involve various community agents such as families, educational institutions, religious organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in implementing community-based rehabilitation programmes. To examine the challenges these agents encountered, a qualitative survey was conducted in Kuala Lumpur. The survey was conducted among nine children subject to the Bond of Good Behaviour Order and selected community agents responsible for its implementation, including probation officers, counsellors, court advisors for the Court for Children, parents, and guardians. In-depth interviews were conducted using a structured protocol to collect primary data, which was analysed through manual coding. The study identified several critical challenges that hinder the effectiveness of community agents in delivering rehabilitation programmes. These challenges comprise the lack of a standardised community-based rehabilitation module, bureaucratic obstacles, limited participation of informal community agents, insufficient multi-agency coordination, and the changing nature and severity of child offences. The findings emphasise the urgent need for empowerment initiatives to enhance community agents' capacity to implement

rehabilitation programmes for child offenders effectively. Such empowerment is necessary to ensure these programmes achieve their goals and to enhance these agents' responsibilities.

Keywords: *community-based rehabilitation, community agents, child offenders, diversion approach, juvenile justice system*

INTRODUCTION

Extensive research (e.g., Hamja & Al-Ghifari, 2024; Koehler & Lösel, 2024; Wong et al., 2024; Matheka et al., 2023; Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & United Nations Children's Fund Malaysia, 2013) has identified significant challenges faced by community agents in implementing community-based rehabilitation interventions. One major issue is insufficient interagency collaboration, which undermines the effective management of child offenders and limits the integration of local services for families and children (Sagun et al., 2025; Renbarger et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2024). Addressing this issue requires strengthened interagency collaboration to improve the outcomes of rehabilitation programmes.

A significant challenge is the passive or ineffective involvement of family members, who often receive inadequate support throughout the rehabilitation process (Aldersey et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2023; Donato, 2025; Sjolseth et al., 2026). In addition, the lack of a standardised, community-based rehabilitation model leads to role ambiguity and confusion among community agents responsible for programme delivery (Koehler & Lösel, 2024; Mohd Mazlan & Mustafa, 2023; Siti Balqis et al., 2021). This systemic deficiency is exacerbated by a predominant focus on children in institutional care, leading to the neglect of those engaged in community-based rehabilitation (Kajawo & Johnson, 2023; Mohamad et al., 2024; Sharma & Gupta, 2024). Furthermore, limited resources within communities hinder effective programme implementation. This scarcity is further exacerbated by insufficient awareness among community agents, particularly those in informal roles, of available rehabilitation initiatives (Ahmed et al., 2025; Ramakulukusha et al., 2022).

The effectiveness of rehabilitation initiatives largely depends on the workforce's capacity to rehabilitate officers and counsellors, with the counsellor workforce's professional performance compromised by excessive caseloads (Banks, 2025; Eryalçın & Eryalçın, 2025; Manuel & Joseph, 2025). Within child welfare and juvenile justice systems, probation officers are tasked with a range of responsibilities, including compiling pre-sentence reports, locating family

members or legal guardians, attending juvenile court proceedings, and managing extensive administrative requirements (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & United Nations Children's Fund Malaysia, 2013). These cumulative demands limit their ability to conduct thorough case analyses or provide individualised, trauma-informed care. Persistent shortages of time, personnel, and institutional resources further intensify these limitations, impeding the delivery of comprehensive risk and needs assessments and intensive supervision. As a result, case management frequently defaults to standardised, desk-based reviews of existing documentation rather than active field engagement. This resource-constrained context ultimately prevents probation officers from establishing the therapeutic rapport and meaningful alliances necessary to support justice-involved youth, thereby raising concerns about the overall effectiveness of community-based juvenile probation services (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & United Nations Children's Fund Malaysia, 2013).

Although operational bottlenecks are well documented in global criminological literature, empirical evaluations of community-based rehabilitation and diversion programme implementation in Malaysia and the broader Southeast Asian context are limited. This significant empirical gap highlights the need to examine the lived experiences and systemic challenges faced by juvenile justice practitioners and community stakeholders who implement Malaysia's community-based rehabilitation initiatives for children in conflict with the law.

Diversivory frameworks in the Malaysian juvenile justice system represent a recent paradigm shift. In 2013, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) implemented this approach through a pilot project introducing the Good Behaviour Bond Order. This statutory, community-based diversion mechanism targets justice-involved youth who commit non-serious offences that do not warrant custodial sentencing. Although the order serves as a primary vehicle for community-based rehabilitation, there is limited empirical scrutiny of its implementation. There is also a notable absence of localised research evaluating these community practices using evidence-based modalities such as Multisystemic Therapy (MST). Despite global academic consensus supporting restorative and community-centric juvenile justice interventions, the operational challenges faced by front-line community agents implementing these orders remain critically under-researched. Addressing this gap is essential, as it advances theoretical discourse on non-custodial rehabilitation in post-colonial or developing legal systems and provides empirical insights to inform policy modifications to improve rehabilitative outcomes and reduce youth recidivism.

The absence of localised data necessitated a qualitative inquiry (2019–2022) to assess the operational feasibility of juvenile diversion programmes in Malaysia. As juvenile justice systems throughout Southeast Asia increasingly emphasise restorative and community-based interventions, the empirical findings from this Malaysian case study provide valuable insights for regional policymakers and practitioners addressing similar systemic challenges. Cross-jurisdictional literature demonstrates a regional shift toward diversion and rehabilitation in preference to traditional institutionalisation, reflecting broader alignment with international youth justice standards (Jiao, 2022; Koehler & Lösel, 2024; Wong et al., 2024).

This study aims to critically analyse the operational and systemic challenges encountered in implementing community-based rehabilitation programmes for justice-involved children. Examining the barriers faced by frontline programme implementers, specifically community agents and statutory actors, is essential. The empirical findings provide a data-driven basis for optimising non-custodial rehabilitation frameworks, which are crucial for promoting the holistic welfare, successful reintegration, and legal protection of juvenile offenders within the community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Socio-Ecological Architecture of Community-Based Rehabilitation

Community-based rehabilitation (CBR) for children in conflict with the law is grounded in the criminological principle that sustainable desistance and effective reintegration require coordinated interventions across multiple social ecologies surrounding the juvenile. Bronfenbrenner’s social-ecological framework provides a comprehensive theoretical perspective for analysing how reciprocal interactions across nested systemic layers shape behavioural trajectories and developmental outcomes among justice-involved youth (Sheerin et al., 2023). Bronfenbrenner’s social-ecological framework provides a comprehensive analytical tool for examining how systemic friction and operational barriers at the exosystemic (institutional) and macrosystemic (community) levels intersect to influence the rehabilitative trajectories of justice-involved youth. In this context, rehabilitation is understood not solely as a function of individual characteristics, but as an emergent property resulting from the complex interactions among the microsystem (family units), mesosystem (peer groups and educational institutions), exosystem (community resources and local justice actors), and macrosystem (broader socio-legal structures and statutory policies).

At the microsystemic level, justice-involved children participate in direct interactions with primary agents of socialisation, including parents, guardians, peers, and educational institutions. These interactions collectively constitute the foundational context for behavioural modification and rehabilitation. Within contemporary developmental criminology, robust familial support is consistently identified as a critical protective factor against juvenile recidivism (Fang et al., 2025). Evidence-based, family-centred interventions enhance parental efficacy, improve systemic communication, and directly address dynamic criminogenic risk factors such as domestic instability, inadequate supervision, parental substance misuse, and dysfunctional familial relationships (Basto-Pereira et al., 2024; Jangam et al., 2022).

At the mesosystemic level, attention is directed toward the intersections and reciprocal linkages among the juvenile's immediate micro-environments. Within the juvenile justice system, effective rehabilitation depends on multi-agency collaboration and systemic cohesion among parents, educational institutions, probation officers, counsellors, and community-based service providers. Establishing coordinated partnerships among these institutional and familial stakeholders strengthens the children's ecological support network, thereby enhancing oversight and promoting compliance with mandated therapeutic and rehabilitative programmes.

At the exosystemic level, juvenile rehabilitation is shaped by external institutional environments and structural support systems that, although not involving children as direct participants, significantly influence their rehabilitative trajectories and outcomes. In the context of the Malaysian juvenile justice framework, this layer includes statutory bodies and institutional actors designated under the Child Act 2001 [Act 611], such as the Department of Social Welfare (*Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat*), juvenile probation officers, Child Protection Teams, educational authorities, healthcare services, law enforcement agencies, and community-based organisations. These formal networks determine the allocation of institutional resources, provide systemic oversight, and implement structural interventions, thereby establishing the broader infrastructure required to support the effective societal reintegration of justice-involved youth.

The macrosystem comprises the broader ideological, cultural, and political environments that shape institutional paradigms. International human rights conventions and domestic statutory frameworks establish the normative and jurisprudential principles governing the treatment of children in conflict with the law. In Malaysia, this macro-level structure is defined by domestic legislation, specifically the Child Act 2001 [Act 611] and the Child (Amendment) Act 2016 [Act A1511], alongside global normative instruments such as the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Beijing Rules, the Tokyo Rules, and the Riyadh Guidelines. Collectively, these instruments codify a global juvenile justice ethos that emphasises restorative approaches and non-custodial rehabilitation, systematically discouraging institutional confinement in favour of community-based diversion.

Global Mandates and Domestic Realities in Juvenile Diversion

Global juvenile justice frameworks have experienced a substantial jurisprudential shift, moving from retributive approaches to restorative and community-based interventions. This international consensus is reflected in Article 37(b) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which requires that deprivation of liberty be used only as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period. Consistent with this standard, the Beijing Rules, Tokyo Rules, and Riyadh Guidelines collectively promote diversionary mechanisms within institutions. These instruments require the use of local community resources to support the sustainable rehabilitation and social reintegration of justice-involved children, thereby discouraging reliance on incarceration (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018).

Contemporary juvenile justice discourse increasingly reflects international human rights instruments that mandate a shift away from carceral models, acknowledging that institutionalisation perpetuates criminogenic risks. Empirical evidence demonstrates that custodial placements intensify social stigmatisation, disrupt essential familial networks, and increase recidivism rates, consistent with labelling theory. As a result, there has been a transition toward community-based diversionary frameworks. These alternatives aim to maintain the children's socio-ecological context by engaging local stakeholders, such as families, educational institutions, and community organisations, to provide structured rehabilitative interventions without the adverse effects of confinement (Novakovic et al., 2021).

A substantial body of empirical research in contemporary criminology indicates that community-based rehabilitative approaches produce markedly better outcomes than carceral models. Evidence-based systemic interventions, including Multisystemic Therapy (MST), Functional Family Therapy (FFT), and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), have been shown to reduce recidivism and promote prosocial behaviour among justice-involved children by addressing dynamic criminogenic needs within their natural contexts (Hobbs et al., 2025; National Centre for Juvenile Justice, 2022). In contrast, punitive and deterrence-oriented interventions, such as juvenile boot camps, "Scared Straight" programmes, and statutory transfers of minors to adult criminal courts, are counterproductive. These adversarial strategies often result in iatrogenic effects,

increasing the likelihood of future offending through mechanisms such as institutional labelling and deeper system involvement (McCuish et al., 2025).

In alignment with evolving international human rights jurisprudence, Malaysia has progressively institutionalised diversionary frameworks within its juvenile justice system, primarily through the Child Act 2001 and the Child (Amendment) Act 2016. These legislative measures represent a significant departure from traditional carceral models by prioritising localised, rehabilitative strategies that aim to preserve the child's socio-familial environment. Statutory mechanisms such as the Bond of Good Behaviour (Section 91 of the Child Act) and the Community Service Order exemplify the operationalisation of restorative justice principles. By replacing custodial placement with structured, non-custodial obligations, these measures redirect the justice system's focus from retributive punishment to holistic, community-based accountability.

Despite progressive statutory developments, a persistent divide remains between legislative intent and operational reality within the Malaysian juvenile justice system. This divide exemplifies the classic dichotomy between *law-in-books* and *law-in-action*. Although the de jure framework aligns with international best practices, the de facto implementation of community-based rehabilitation is fundamentally constrained by structural capacity, resource allocation, and coordination among grassroots actors. As a result, the effectiveness of diversionary dispositions is often undermined by implementation bottlenecks, underscoring a significant disconnect between high-level legislative mandates and localised enforcement mechanisms.

Institutional and Structural Bottlenecks in Community-Based Rehabilitation

Although there is a broad international consensus supporting diversion and community-based rehabilitation, a substantial body of empirical literature highlights persistent operational challenges that undermine these interventions. Contemporary juvenile justice scholarship attributes this implementation gap to three primary systemic vulnerabilities: chronic resource shortages, fragmented inter-agency coordination, and significant role strain among frontline practitioners. These institutional constraints collectively create operational bottlenecks, resulting in diversionary mandates that are underfunded and inconsistently implemented in practice.

Resource and Programme Deficits

The effectiveness of community-based rehabilitation depends on infrastructure that includes sufficient human resources, standardised empirical protocols, and

strong multi-sectoral service networks. Nevertheless, persistent resource limitations often undermine this model. Chronic staff shortages and insufficient specialised rehabilitative infrastructure significantly impede the implementation and fidelity of diversionary interventions (Hamja & Al-Ghifari, 2024). Joint assessments by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the United Nations Children's Fund Malaysia (2013) similarly report that acute workforce shortages and fragmented inter-agency support constrain the operational capacity of probation services. As a result, these administrative challenges limit the provision of intensive supervision and comprehensive support essential for justice-involved children and their families.

Inter-Agency Collaboration Challenges

Effective rehabilitation within juvenile justice frameworks relies on a coordinated, multi-agency ecosystem that includes social welfare authorities, educational institutions, law enforcement, healthcare providers, community organisations, and the juvenile's family. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates that systemic fragmentation and inadequate communication among these stakeholders often undermine the effectiveness of diversionary mandates (Mohammad et al., 2019). Although the Child Welfare Team, established under the Child Act 2001, was designed to institutionalise collaborative and restorative interventions, there is a notable lack of rigorous empirical evaluation of its operational effectiveness. As a result, a significant knowledge gap remains concerning the structural capacity and actual practice of multi-agency collaboration in supporting sustainable, community-based juvenile rehabilitation in Malaysia.

Role Overload among Probation Officers

In the administration of juvenile justice, frontline practitioners are central to implementing diversionary mechanisms. Under the Child Act 2001, probation officers are assigned extensive statutory responsibilities, such as conducting diagnostic interviews, preparing pre-sentence social inquiry reports, providing expert testimony in Court for Children proceedings, and overseeing post-adjudication case supervision in conjunction with complex inter-agency coordination. Nevertheless, systemic resource limitations significantly undermine these statutory expectations. Institutional assessments by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the United Nations Children's Fund Malaysia (2013) indicate that persistent manpower shortages and fragmented inter-agency infrastructure severely limit the time available for comprehensive rehabilitative interventions. This institutional strain is further exacerbated by

recent findings from Hamja and Al-Ghifari (2024), who contend that increasing caseloads and competing administrative demands fundamentally compromise case management, shifting the focus from proactive rehabilitation to reactive crisis management.

Family Constraints and Informal Community Agents

In juvenile justice, parents and guardians serve as the primary agents of informal social control and are fundamental to effective rehabilitation. Empirical literature indicates that families frequently encounter overlapping vulnerabilities, such as severe socio-economic disadvantage, limited parenting skills, reduced self-efficacy, and insufficient social capital, all of which undermine juveniles' adherence to non-custodial rehabilitation orders (Siti Balqis et al., 2020). These persistent domestic challenges suggest that lasting desistance from delinquency cannot be accomplished solely through institutional interventions. Instead, comprehensive juvenile rehabilitation requires a dual approach that reinforces both formal justice systems and the informal community and familial networks that support youths' daily lives.

Although existing literature has thoroughly examined the macro-level efficacy and statutory framework of diversionary and rehabilitative initiatives, most scholarship remains limited to evaluative or jurisprudential analyses. There is comparatively little empirical investigation into the complex array of institutional and socio-ecological barriers faced by both formal and informal community actors responsible for implementing diversionary orders within the Malaysian juvenile justice system. Additionally, a significant theoretical and empirical gap persists concerning the interconnected, cross-systemic dynamics of these challenges, particularly regarding how micro-, meso-, and macro-level frictions collectively hinder the effective implementation of community-based rehabilitation.

A systematic, empirical investigation into the operational experiences of community actors responsible for implementing the Bond of Good Behaviour Order is urgently needed. Clarifying these systemic and socio-ecological barriers is essential, as the effectiveness of diversionary policies depends not only on statutory mandates but also on the structural and relational capacities of state institutions, families, and community networks to realise legislative objectives as substantive rehabilitative outcomes. By focusing on implementation rather than legal theory, this study addresses a significant policy-to-practice gap. It offers insights into how the Malaysian juvenile justice system can better support and rehabilitate children in conflict with the law.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Unit of Analysis

To comprehensively examine the operational impediments faced by community agents responsible for implementing the Bond of Good Behaviour Order under Section 91(1)(b) of the Child Act 2001, this study employed a qualitative, single-case study design. This methodological framework is particularly appropriate for investigating complex, contemporary phenomena within their distinctive, real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are indistinct (Yin, 2018). Unlike a qualitative survey design, which emphasises broad, surface-level mapping of thematic variations across large populations, a single-case study approach enables a detailed, holistic, and vertically integrated analysis of a bounded system. This design facilitates the identification of multi-layered, cross-systemic interactions and relational dynamics among the various stakeholders involved in operationalising this specific diversionary mandate.

The analytical anchor, or unit of analysis, for this inquiry is the operational implementation of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order as governed by the statutory framework of the Child Act 2001. To ensure contextual depth, the case was bounded within the metropolitan context of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a high-density urban environment characterised by a complex socio-ecological nexus of formal institutional authorities and informal community actors jointly negotiate community-based juvenile rehabilitation. Employing a single-case design within these defined spatial and temporal parameters facilitated a detailed, multi-perspectival examination of the institutional, systemic, and familial impediments that intersect to shape and often constrain the efficacy of this diversionary mechanism.

The conceptualisation and structural planning of this inquiry began in late 2018, with fieldwork initiated in 2019. However, the empirical trajectory was significantly disrupted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. State-mandated movement restrictions and institutional closures severely limited access to field sites and participants, resulting in substantial delays during the data collection phase. To maintain methodological integrity and ensure participant safety, the data collection strategy was iteratively adapted. Consequently, the qualitative interview process and subsequent thematic analysis extended over multiple years.

Informant Selection and Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected using a purposive criterion sampling strategy to ensure the collection of high-fidelity, nuanced data. This non-probability sampling method limited the sample to key informants with direct experiential proximity and specialised operational knowledge of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order. In qualitative research, purposive criterion sampling is widely recognised as a rigorous approach for identifying and selecting information-rich cases that possess significant epistemic privilege regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). By targeting stakeholders directly involved in this diversionary mandate, the strategy increased the depth, utility, and contextual relevance of the data, aligning with the research objectives.

The empirical cohort for this study consisted of nine key informants, divided into formal and informal community actors to ensure a comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon. The formal group included statutory agents embedded within the state apparatus, such as probation officers and certified counsellors from the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (DSWM), enforcement officers from the National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA), and court advisors affiliated with the Court for Children. The informal group comprised lay stakeholders, specifically parents and legal guardians of juveniles subject to the Bond of Good Behaviour Order. Access to this sample was facilitated by the DSWM, which acted as the primary administrative channel for identifying and contacting eligible participants.

Potential key informants were initially identified in consultation with probation officers from the Children Division of the Department of Social Welfare (DSWM), Kuala Lumpur. Inclusion criteria required participants to have direct operational or lived experience in supervising, administering, or supporting juveniles under the Bond of Good Behaviour Order. Although statutory gatekeepers helped map the initial participant pool, the research team maintained full epistemic control over final selection decisions to reduce institutional gatekeeping bias and ensure the inclusion of critical or dissenting perspectives. However, the potential for referral or snowball bias remains a limitation of this recruitment approach, as gatekeepers may have inadvertently directed selection toward more compliant or successful cases.

Consistent with qualitative inquiry standards, the sample size was determined by information richness and thematic saturation, rather than the statistical representativeness typical of quantitative research. Data collection continued iteratively until conceptual redundancy was achieved, at which point additional interviews produced no new codes or thematic dimensions. Due to the

highly bound and specialised nature of the case, a cohort of nine key informants, representing a range of formal and informal stakeholder groups, provided sufficient empirical depth and interpretive adequacy. This multi-perspectival approach enabled robust data triangulation, ensuring comprehensive and credible identification of the systemic and socio-ecological challenges affecting the implementation of the diversionary order.

Data Collection Procedures

Primary empirical data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. To address the varied operational contexts and experiences of participants, two distinct semi-structured interview protocols were developed. The first protocol targeted the formal institutional cadre, including probation officers, certified counsellors, National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA) officers, and court advisors, focusing on statutory execution, systemic bottlenecks, and inter-agency workflows. The second protocol was designed for the informal community cadre of parents and legal guardians, emphasising familial vulnerabilities, domestic stressors, and experiences with non-custodial compliance. This dual-instrumentation approach ensured that data collection was aligned with each stakeholder group's specific perspective, thereby enhancing the depth and contextual validity of the narrative data.

Interview questions were developed deductively, guided by the primary research objectives and grounded in existing literature on community-based rehabilitation and socio-ecological determinants of juvenile delinquency. To enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the instruments, both protocols underwent expert peer review by experienced scholars and practitioners in social work and juvenile justice. This process ensured content relevance, conceptual clarity, and contextual appropriateness. Interviews were conducted primarily in *Bahasa Melayu* to accommodate informants' linguistic preferences and through face-to-face sessions to capture detailed paralinguistic cues. With explicit informed consent, each interview was digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to maintain the semantic integrity of the narrative data for subsequent thematic analysis.

In addition to primary interview data, a comprehensive analysis of secondary sources was conducted to triangulate the data. This methodological strategy strengthened multifaceted textual research and substantiated the arguments. The corroborated literature comprised relevant statutes, international instruments, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and policy documents. Additionally, extensive reports from governmental and non-governmental organisations engaged in the rehabilitation of children in conflict

with the law were systematically reviewed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Data Analysis

A reflexive qualitative paradigm was adopted, with data collection and analysis conducted concurrently to enable an iterative process of constant comparison and refinement of emerging conceptual categories. The empirical material, consisting of verbatim interview transcripts, was manually analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework. To capture both structural and nuanced insights, a hybrid inductive–deductive coding approach was implemented. This approach allowed theory-driven conceptual frameworks to guide the initial analysis while maintaining openness to data-driven themes that emerged from participants' lived experiences.

The analytical process began with an immersive phase of data familiarisation, during which the researchers repeatedly reviewed interview transcripts and field-based reflective notes. Subsequently, initial codes were manually generated from distinct, meaning-bearing segments of the text. To capture both structural and nuanced insights, a hybrid coding strategy was employed. Deductive coding was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Model, systematically categorising data according to nested environmental systems: individual, microsystem (family), mesosystem/exosystem (institutional), and macrosystem (societal) levels. Simultaneously, an inductive approach was maintained, allowing codes to emerge organically from participants' verbatim narratives. This ensured flexibility to capture serendipitous or unexpected phenomena not fully addressed by the a priori framework.

After the initial coding phase, conceptually similar codes were grouped into broader, distinct categories through axial clustering. An iterative process of constant comparative analysis was employed to rigorously review and refine these categories, resulting in overarching themes that reflected consistent patterns in participants' lived experiences. To ensure both internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, each theme was clearly defined and named to maintain analytical clarity. Reflexive transparency was upheld throughout the analysis by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail, including field notes, coding matrices, and a reflective journal, which documented the conceptual development of the data and supported the dependability of the findings.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the empirical findings, the study adhered strictly to the methodological criteria outlined by Shenton (2004): credibility,

dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through data source triangulation by engaging a diverse group of key stakeholders, including probation officers, counsellors, court advisers, National Anti-Drug Agency officers, and parents or guardians. This multi-perspective strategy was further strengthened using member-checking protocols, in which synthesised interpretations and factual extractions were returned to selected participants. This communicative validation process ensured that the final analytical construction accurately reflected participants' lived experiences, thereby safeguarding both the descriptive and interpretive validity of the data.

Dependability and confirmability were established through the systematic maintenance of a rigorous audit trail, which included archiving raw interview recordings, verbatim transcripts, conceptual coding notes, reflective journals, and analytical memos. This transparent record-keeping enabled explicit traceability of the analytical process and minimised investigator bias. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted periodically among research team members to critically examine coding decisions, thereby enhancing inter-coder consensus and managing potential subjectivity. Transferability was supported by providing a thick description of the research context and participant demographics, allowing readers to assess the applicability and relevance of the findings to similar settings.

Despite administrative challenges and institutional disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the study maintained strict adherence to the ethical requirements established by the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). Formal institutional approval was also obtained from the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (JKMM). Before data collection, a rigorous informed consent process was implemented. Participants received comprehensive briefings on the study's objectives, potential risks, and procedural details, and written consent was obtained before any audio recording. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all empirical materials were systematically de-identified. Unique pseudonyms were assigned to participants, and all microdata or identifiable information was removed from interview transcripts and research reports.

RESULTS: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis indicated that community agents responsible for implementing the Bond of Good Behaviour Order faced systemic and operational limitations during the rehabilitation process. The following sections present these challenges, structured according to the primary thematic categories identified in the analysis.

Absence of a Standardised Community-Based Rehabilitation Module

A central theme identified in the analysis is the lack of a formalised, dedicated Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) framework for juveniles subject to a Bond of Good Behaviour Order. Participants consistently reported that rehabilitative interventions depended largely on the individual discretion and personal initiative of presiding officers, resulting in a fragmented implementation process. Institutional stakeholders frequently emphasised an operational gap, marked by the absence of standardised guidelines for permissible and effective interventions. Court Adviser Ummi articulated this systemic inconsistency, stating:

“I have been wondering if there is a specific module designed for rehabilitating child offenders into the community. Currently, we rely solely on our experience and knowledge when working with children involved in crime, and we are uncertain about the activities or programmes used during the rehabilitation process.”

Similarly, Probation Officer Ali stated:

“There is no specific module for probation officers, nor is there a method to address the issue of parents who lack commitment and cooperation in improving their children's environment.”

Furthermore, the absence of a formalised rehabilitation framework led to institutional dependence on probation officers, who consequently became central coordinators across various agencies. Instead of functioning within a coordinated, multi-sectoral network synchronised across multiple sectors responsible for managing cross-agency collaboration, which created coordinating systemic bottlenecks. As a result, Patrick described the operational strain resulting from this structural reliance:

“Probation officers act as a liaison to various organisations, such as the Education Department, vocational training institutions, and counsellors.”

Collectively, these findings indicate that the lack of a standardised framework leads to significant implementation deficits and disrupts the multi-agency network essential for effective juvenile justice administration. The absence of formalised institutional roles marginalises external stakeholders and weakens the collaborative environment required to support comprehensive child offenders' rehabilitation.

Bureaucratic and Resource Constraints

The second overarching theme focuses on systemic bureaucratic barriers and significant organisational resource constraints that hinder programme effectiveness. Respondents consistently highlighted that entrenched administrative protocols and procedural mandates created substantial operational challenges, limiting their ability to provide timely and comprehensive interventions to justice-involved youth and their families. Court Adviser Umami articulated the effects of this institutional bottleneck on service delivery, stating:

“Everything we do requires a clear written directive from the government. However, due to the absence of a comprehensive procedure, we often face various bureaucratic limitations.”

Similarly, Probation Officer Ali observed:

“The primary challenge revolves around policy and Standard Operating Procedures. Some agents are willing to get involved but do not have access to relevant information.”

In addition to administrative challenges, participants consistently identified significant human capital shortages and substantial fiscal limitations as major barriers to effective intervention. Respondents reported that these combined resource constraints directly weakened the agency's operational capacity, thereby restricting both the scope and quality of juvenile oversight. Probation Officer Amri further contextualised these structural deficiencies, stating:

“Previously, the workload was distributed among three probation officers, but now it falls to just one person.”

Counsellor Diana further highlighted the issue of inadequate funding:

“There is insufficient budget allocation, including difficulties in paying guest speakers and organising activities.”

Empirical evidence indicates that the intersection of administrative rigidity, chronic personnel deficits, and fiscal austerity significantly compromises the effectiveness of community-based juvenile rehabilitation. Instead of functioning as dynamic mechanisms for youth reformation, these programmes are limited by

systemic resource scarcity, which ultimately undermines the rehabilitative ideal within the juvenile justice system.

Limited Engagement of Informal Community Agents

A significant challenge identified in the data is the limited activation of informal social control mechanisms, as evidenced by the disengagement of parents, guardians, educators, and neighbours. Institutional actors frequently encountered systemic resistance or apathy when seeking cooperation from familial and community networks, which disrupted the overall ecology of the rehabilitation process. Probation Officer Ali articulated this breakdown in community-level synergy:

“Some parents resist allowing probation officers to interact with teachers because they do not want information regarding their children's involvement in criminal activities to become widely known.”

Likewise, Court Adviser Patrick observed:

“Some families are reluctant to engage with government agencies and show little interest in non-governmental organisations.”

This absence of external cohesion was reflected in the accounts provided by the families; parents and guardians reported a pronounced sense of social isolation, attributing this to a significant lack of informal support from both extended family networks and the wider community. Instead of functioning within a supportive environment, these primary caregivers managed the rehabilitation process while facing systemic vulnerability. The resulting isolation and emotional burden were articulated by Guardian Auntie Som, who stated:

“Who wants to help me take care of my nephew? His biological father has abandoned his responsibilities.”

Similarly, Mother Tin stated:

“The neighbours are focused on their own concerns. I manage everything on my own.”

A synthesis of these narratives and empirical evidence indicates that insufficient familial and community engagement creates substantial institutional

strain and imposes an inequitable administrative burden on formal community agents. This systemic disengagement also disrupts the ecological network essential for youth reformation, thereby weakening the collective efficacy and social capital necessary for sustainable, long-term rehabilitation.

Fragmented Multi-Agency Coordination

A recurrent theme identified by participants is the acute lack of inter-institutional coordination among the various agencies responsible for juvenile rehabilitation. The absence of formal communication channels and systematic follow-up mechanisms has resulted in significant operational silos, severely impeding continuity of care and cross-agency information exchange. Probation Officer Amri highlighted the impact of this systemic fragmentation on case management, stating:

“When there is a disconnect between PDRM and NADA, we miss out on important information regarding the child's progress.”

Court Adviser Patrick similarly noted:

“Once the court session concludes, our responsibilities also end. We do not conduct follow-up meetings or monitoring outside of our advisory function.”

Building upon the identified coordination deficits, Probation Officer Ali emphasised the need to establish a formalised multisectoral network to address existing institutional divides. The participant elaborated on this recommendation for an integrated inter-agency infrastructure, stating:

“This challenge is one of the greatest we are currently facing. We need a networking concept or a national database to ensure continuity among agencies.”

Overall, empirical findings indicate that fragmented institutional structures, together with the lack of formal communication protocols, systematically destabilise the juvenile justice system. Instead of supporting an integrated environment for child offenders' reformation, these administrative gaps significantly hinder the implementation of comprehensive rehabilitation and interrupt the essential continuity of care for children in conflict with the law.

Changing Nature and Increasing Severity of Child Offending

The final theme addresses the evolving criminogenic landscape and the increasing complexity of juvenile delinquency in Malaysia. Respondents consistently identified a significant shift in offending typologies, with justice-involved children increasingly participating in severe and multifaceted infractions. This behavioural diversity is especially evident in the growing incidence of complex drug-related offences and sexual misconduct, both of which present substantial challenges to traditional rehabilitative approaches.

NADA Officer Aishah explained:

“Almost daily, children report themselves to NADA. The drug problem among children is worsening and becoming increasingly severe.”

Similarly, Probation Officer Ali observed:

“Children today are different from those of previous generations. Their environments are much more complex, which contributes to more sophisticated crimes.”

Building on the discussion of evolving offending typologies, Probation Officer Amri emphasised the increasing challenges posed by cyber-criminogenic environments, particularly the rise of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation. The participant contextualised the shift to digital platforms and its implications for modern juvenile supervision as follows:

“Nowadays, young girls are selling nude pictures just to earn RM40 or RM50 for mobile top-ups.”

In summary, these findings reveal a substantial transformation in the criminogenic landscape, indicating that modern juvenile delinquency now extends beyond traditional, minor offences to encompass more serious, technology-driven behaviours. This shift redefines the scope of juvenile oversight. As a result, frontline practitioners must address increasingly complex and multidimensional cases, which require integrated, multidisciplinary, and community-based interventions rather than solely punitive or isolated approaches.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides a critical evaluation of community-based rehabilitation for juvenile offenders under the Bond of Good Behaviour Order in Malaysia. The data highlight the pivotal role of community agents in facilitating diversion and rehabilitation, while also revealing entrenched structural, institutional, and social barriers. These challenges collectively result in a fragmented system in which progressive legislative intent and operational realities constrain one another.

The view that community agents are essential to the rehabilitation process is consistent with contemporary restorative justice discourse, which emphasises shifting juvenile reform from carceral, state-centric institutions to the offender's immediate social environment (Bazemore & Schiff, 2015). Community agents, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local leaders, possess the cultural capital and proximity required to support prosocial reintegration without the stigmatising labelling effects associated with formal incarceration (Becker, 1963).

However, the study identifies a significant structural paradox. Although community agents are theoretically empowered, their effectiveness is substantially limited by what Garland (2001) describes as "responsibilisation," in which the state shifts the moral and operational burden of crime control to civil society without providing adequate authority, resources, or specialised training. As a result, community-based rehabilitation in Malaysia functions more as an under-resourced, informal safety net than as a robust public-private partnership.

A major systemic barrier identified in this research is the absence of a standardised rehabilitation framework. In the juvenile justice literature, program integrity, which is the extent to which an intervention adheres to its intended design and theoretical foundations, is essential for reducing recidivism (Lipsey, 2009). The lack of a standardised protocol under the Bond of Good Behaviour Order results in institutional arbitrariness, making the quality of rehabilitation contingent on geographical location and individual caseworker discretion rather than evidence-based criteria.

Fragmented inter-agency relationships exacerbate this framework deficit, a systemic vulnerability often described in public policy literature as "institutional siloisation." Effective juvenile rehabilitation requires multidisciplinary collaboration among the Department of Social Welfare (JKM), the Ministry of Education, healthcare providers, and law enforcement. The findings suggest that these agencies frequently operate in isolation. When communication breaks down, the juvenile justice system shifts from a cohesive safety net to a fragmented structure. For example, a probation officer's therapeutic interventions become

ineffective if institutional barriers within the public school system prevent a child's re-enrolment, thereby perpetuating cycles of marginalisation.

The data indicate an unsustainable and disproportionate reliance on probation officers (POs). From an institutional design perspective, concentrating responsibility on a single role creates a critical point of failure. In Malaysia, POs are required to balance administrative compliance with therapeutic mentorship. When caseloads surpass empirically established thresholds, POs shift from empathetic mentors to bureaucratic "box-checkers" focused primarily on legal compliance rather than comprehensive behavioural change (Steiner et al., 2011). This excessive reliance suggests that the current implementation of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order depends more on individual capacity among civil servants than on sustainable, institutionalised infrastructure.

Finally, this study also challenges the assumption within juvenile justice discourse that families and communities are inherently prepared to function as supportive ecosystems. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, effective rehabilitation depends on the stability of the child's immediate microsystem (family) and mesosystem (community). The findings reveal that many juvenile offenders in Malaysia come from economically disadvantaged families lacking the structural, financial, or emotional resources necessary to support rehabilitation. The Malaysian community often exhibits punitive cultural attitudes and deep-seated social stigma toward justice-involved children. Rather than acting as an inclusive space for restorative reintegration, the community frequently functions as an exclusionary space that perpetuates secondary deviance. Expecting sustainable rehabilitation in an environment characterised by domestic instability and societal rejection is a fundamental contradiction in terms.

In summary, although the Bond of Good Behaviour Order represents a progressive legislative move toward diversion and community-centred justice, its implementation remains limited. Achieving a genuine shift from a punitive model to a holistic, community-based rehabilitation paradigm in Malaysia requires more than legislative reform. It necessitates comprehensive systemic changes, including the establishment of a standardised, multi-agency framework, the professional and financial empowerment of community agents, and targeted, state-led interventions to strengthen the economic and social stability of vulnerable families.

Strengthening Community-Based Rehabilitation Through Structured Organisational Frameworks

The study demonstrates that Malaysia's juvenile justice system lacks a specialised, standardised community-based rehabilitation module. In the absence of a structured framework to ensure programme integrity, formal diversionary efforts, such as the Bond of Good Behaviour Order, often fail to achieve their intended outcomes. Frontline actors, including probation officers, are compelled to function as street-level bureaucrats, relying predominantly on personal discretion and ad hoc experiences rather than consistent institutional protocols.

As a result, rehabilitation outcomes are inconsistent and unpredictable. The prospects for a child's reform largely depend on the specific caseworker assigned, undermining the legal principle of equity. Without therapeutic modules and given high caseloads, officers tend to focus on administrative compliance rather than delivering substantive cognitive-behavioural interventions. The system depends on the resilience of individual personnel rather than a robust institutional infrastructure.

Consequently, caseworker burnout or staff turnover frequently leads to the breakdown of localised rehabilitation efforts. Although Malaysia's legislation increasingly supports community-centred diversion, its practical implementation remains structurally deficient. In the absence of a codified and standardised module to establish institutional maturity and professional benchmarks, community-based rehabilitation persists as a fragmented collection of individual initiatives rather than a sustainable alternative to detention.

This study identifies a significant disconnect between the progressive objectives of Malaysia's juvenile diversion framework, such as the Bond of Good Behaviour Order, and its practical implementation in Kuala Lumpur. Frontline probation officers experience institutional ambiguity, as they are assigned legal mandates without adequate operational resources. Drawing on comparative criminology and policy transfer theory, the analysis contends that Malaysia should not uncritically adopt foreign models but should consider regional neighbours as structural references to address local deficiencies. For example, Japan employs specialised probation offices and structured risk-needs assessment protocols. By combining professional officers with a formalised Volunteer Probation Officer (VPO) network, Japan converts unpredictable, ad hoc discretion into a predictable, professionalised, and consistent practice. Similarly, Thailand implements a multisystemic rehabilitation framework that unifies judicial, social welfare, and community health networks under a single mandate. This approach redistributes the responsibility for youth reform from a single, overburdened agency to a coordinated institutional ecosystem. The operational anxiety and paralysis

observed among probation officers in Kuala Lumpur are not individual shortcomings, but rather the foreseeable outcome of an absent macro-structural framework. To achieve sustainable juvenile justice, Malaysian policymakers can transition from an informal network dependent on individual initiative to a formalised, specialised, and multisystemic organisational structure that ensures institutional consistency.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Social-Ecological Model, this analysis contends that juvenile rehabilitation is shaped by a complex ecosystem of environmental influences rather than individual willpower alone. The findings indicate a severe, cascading breakdown across these ecological layers within Malaysia's juvenile justice system. The most significant failure occurs at the exosystem level, which includes formal state institutions, regulatory bodies, and service delivery frameworks. The absence of standardised rehabilitation modules, fragmented inter-agency communication, and excessive reliance on a single group of probation officers have created an "administrative vacuum."

Rather than providing structural integrity and effective tools to support youth, the state framework lacks consistent resources and clear guidelines. This institutional failure triggers a destructive domino effect on the child's microsystem, comprising their immediate, face-to-face environments. Key actors are compelled to assume responsibility for rehabilitation without adequate state support or preparation. Impoverished and marginalised families are expected to manage complex behavioural reforms without sufficient financial or psychological support.

In the absence of official protocols connecting the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, schools often resort to stigmatisation and exclusion instead of reintegrating the child. Local agents are assigned the moral responsibility to reform juveniles but lack the necessary legal authority, thereby contributing to social isolation and secondary deviance among affected youth. The current implementation of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order transforms a progressive law into an unsustainable, ad hoc experiment. Rehabilitation efforts now depend on the isolated and exhausting work of individual officers or families, rather than a cohesive system. Addressing these issues requires Malaysian policy to move beyond a sole focus on individual children or families. Instead, a comprehensive overhaul of the exosystem is needed, including the development of a codified, multi-systemic framework that bridges agency divides and establishes a collaborative, resilient institutional support network.

Promoting Multisystemic Collaboration Among Community Agents

This study identifies a significant breakdown in network governance within Malaysia's juvenile justice system. Insufficient communication, weak referral mechanisms, and the absence of formal follow-up protocols among key statutory bodies, including JKM, AADK, schools, and law enforcement, have led to pronounced service fragmentation. In the absence of a unified case-management infrastructure, these institutional silos generate information gaps and disrupt the continuity of care required to prevent juveniles from being overlooked. As a result, probation officers are compelled to act as the sole coordinators of multidisciplinary services. This concentration of responsibility creates a single point of failure, leading to excessive workloads, burnout, and administrative paralysis among probation officers, who must compensate for systemic deficiencies without institutional support. The reformative objectives of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order cannot be achieved through isolated legislative measures. Sustainable rehabilitation requires a policy shift toward a collaborative, integrated network governance model, supported by legally binding cross-agency protocols and centralised data management.

Addressing the structural isolation and systemic vulnerabilities within Malaysia's juvenile diversion framework, including caseworker uncertainty, weak family engagement, and excessive reliance on individual probation officers, requires a shift from insular, state-centric supervision to a decentralised, multi-systemic network. Empirical benchmarks from Thailand, Singapore, and Japan should guide this transition. Thailand's *TEAM* model and Singapore's family-centred interventions, such as Functional Family Therapy, illustrate how institutional overload can be mitigated by distributing rehabilitative responsibilities among judicial bodies, families, schools, and private enterprises. In parallel, Japan's approach applies Social Capital Theory to reduce social stigma through legally structured public-private-community partnerships, systematically engaging youth mentors (Big Brothers and Sisters), maternal support groups (WARA), and cooperative employers to strengthen the offender's social and economic support systems. Collectively, these regional frameworks demonstrate that effective juvenile reform cannot be accomplished by government agencies acting in isolation. Therefore, transforming Malaysia's Bond of Good Behaviour Order into a sustainable mechanism necessitates codifying a regulated, multi-stakeholder ecosystem that integrates civil society and private entities into the core rehabilitative structure.

Regional models from Thailand, Singapore, and Japan serve as critical empirical proofs of concept for Malaysia when analysed through policy transfer theory and structural functionalism. Testimonies from frontline practitioners,

such as Officers Ali and Amri, reveal a significant systemic issue: operating within an institutional vacuum imposes considerable psychological and administrative burdens, forcing probation officers to act as isolated crisis managers. The adoption of a structured, multi-systemic framework based on institutional pluralism would allow Malaysia to formalise the roles of civil society, educational institutions, and private entities under a unified state mandate. This redistribution of responsibilities would transform ad hoc facilitation from a haphazard, high-risk activity dependent on individual officer resilience into a predictable and systematic process distributed across specialised sectors.

Furthermore, the integration of non-governmental actors through public-private-community partnerships addresses the current single point of failure, in which the Department of Social Welfare (JKM) holds exclusive responsibility for rehabilitation. Transitioning from a rigid bureaucratic hierarchy to a collaborative governance model would legally incorporate non-governmental stakeholders into the child's ecological system. Such integration would establish a resilient institutional safety net, enabling failures in one area, such as domestic instability, to be compensated for by others, such as school mentorship or NGO vocational support. This study demonstrates that Malaysia's centralised and isolated probation model is fundamentally flawed in its design. Meaningful progress requires policymakers to move beyond superficial intra-agency adjustments and strategically adapt regional models to create a codified multi-stakeholder ecosystem, thereby transforming the Bond of Good Behaviour Order into an ecologically resilient framework for juvenile reform.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Model reveals a fundamental design flaw in Malaysia's Bond of Good Behaviour Order: it prioritises individual juvenile rehabilitation while neglecting the integrity of supporting macro-infrastructures. This systemic failure manifests across three nested ecological layers. The lack of shared databases, unified case management, and formal mandates causes key regulatory bodies, including JKM, law enforcement, and the Ministry of Education, to operate in isolation, resulting in an "administrative vacuum." Such institutional separation undermines the essential connections among the children's primary environments. Rather than forming a coordinated network in which home, school, and probation requirements reinforce one another, these links remain fractured.

Consequently, juveniles can navigate conflicting and isolated systems, which generates significant system-induced stress and confusion. This structural fragmentation deprives the youth's immediate environments of essential protective factors against recidivism. Without state-provided financial or psychological support, vulnerable families often become too burdened by stress to

offer effective prosocial supervision. Concurrently, inadequate referral tracking enables schools to exclude and stigmatise children in conflict with the law, leaving them academically unsupported and increasingly vulnerable to criminogenic peer influences. To establish a sustainable path toward desistance, Malaysia can consider moving beyond isolated, intra-agency efforts. Instead, it is necessary to implement a multi-systemic governance framework that legally requires cross-agency communication and creates interactive, collaborative channels among caseworkers, schools, and families.

Reconsidering the Role of Community Probation Officers

This study identifies a significant operational bottleneck in Malaysia's juvenile justice system, arising from the severe role overload experienced by probation officers (POs). As overburdened street-level bureaucrats, POs are confronted with an unsustainable array of responsibilities, including case management, statutory report preparation, court appearances, home visits, administrative tasks, and programme implementation, all of which are carried out without adequate institutional manpower. POs need to navigate the conflicting demands of legal enforcement and therapeutic rehabilitation. The excessive time required for administrative paperwork and court obligations diminishes the cognitive and emotional resources available for meaningful therapeutic intervention. Chronic understaffing and excessive workloads undermine the integrity of interventions. Rather than providing comprehensive, individualised, and evidence-based support to vulnerable children and families, POs are compelled to focus on crisis management and basic compliance monitoring. The current implementation of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order is unsustainable, as it relies on the endurance of an overextended frontline workforce rather than on a robust organisational structure. Achieving holistic and sustainable juvenile rehabilitation requires the state to increase the institutional workforce and clearly separate administrative compliance functions from therapeutic case management.

Comparative criminology demonstrates that advanced juvenile justice models in Thailand, Brunei, and Singapore do not limit probation officers (POs) to compliance monitoring roles. Instead, these jurisdictions establish the PO as a specialised case manager responsible for conducting validated risk-needs assessments and coordinating multi-disciplinary interventions. Guided by the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model, the regional standard, particularly in Singapore and Thailand, positions the PO at the core of a therapeutic ecosystem. Officers employ structured diagnostic tools to identify dynamic criminogenic needs and facilitate youth access to community resources. This proactive case-

management approach ensures high intervention fidelity, which is directly associated with reduced recidivism.

When analysed through the lens of Resource Dependency Theory, Malaysia's framework reveals significant resource constraints, leaving officers isolated within institutional structures. The regional models provide a two-pronged solution: supporting legal mandates with funding for diagnostic software, professional training, and manageable caseloads, and clearly defining the PO's role as therapeutic case management to prevent administrative drift and role ambiguity. The operational challenges confronting Malaysian POs are structurally remediable. Regional examples illustrate that community-based juvenile justice systems require more than legislative intent. To fully realise the Bond of Good Behaviour Order, Malaysian policymakers must reform frontline infrastructure by transitioning the PO from an overburdened administrative generalist to a well-resourced, specialised case manager, thereby ensuring institutional consistency and rigour.

This study conceptualises probation officers (POs) as critical actors who bridge two structurally distinct domains: the rigid mandates of the legal system and the dynamic, therapeutic functions of community social support networks. By operating at the intersection of the judiciary and civil society, POs serve as the primary connective element within the Bond of Good Behaviour Order, reducing information friction and constructing an integrated socio-legal safety net for the child.

The operational efficacy of POs depends on dual competencies: comprehending and enforcing court-mandated statutory compliance and assessing domestic dysfunction while mobilising external community resources such as non-governmental organisations, schools, and welfare programmes. However, acute institutional deprivation, chronic understaffing, and excessive caseloads within the Malaysian juvenile justice system force POs to shift from proactive agents of change to reactive crisis managers. These structural constraints create two significant vulnerabilities. First, navigating inter-agency silos without automated, formal cross-agency protocols results in severe role strain and undermines the capacity to build external community partnerships. Second, lacking administrative support, POs are overwhelmed by paperwork and court schedules, which marginalises the essential work of localised resource matching and family engagement.

Consequently, the diversionary order is reduced to a superficial tracking mechanism. The boundary-spanning capacity of POs is strictly limited by institutional infrastructure and personnel density. To optimise rehabilitation outcomes, Malaysian policy need to consider shifting from reliance on individual

efforts by civil servants to structured institutional empowerment. This transition requires expanding the frontline workforce, automating cross-agency referral mechanisms, and formally codifying the PO's boundary-spanning role within a unified, multi-systemic governance framework.

Enhancing Integrated Inter-Agency Coordination

This study examines how entrenched communication gaps among Malaysian state agencies (JKM, AADK, schools, and law enforcement) result in significant service fragmentation. The isolation of these agencies undermines the continuity of juvenile care, a challenge that can be analysed and addressed using comparative governance frameworks and socio-ecological theory. Informed by policy transfer theory and collaborative governance, Brunei's Child Protection Committee (CPC) provides an empirical model. The CPC formalises cross-sectoral collaboration among welfare, health, law enforcement, education, and religious authorities through legally mandated joint case management. Implementing this framework in Malaysia could supplant ad hoc caseworker initiatives with structured, automated cross-agency notifications.

Analysis using Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Model indicates that the absence of an integrated framework initiates a destructive, downward-cascading systemic failure. The absence of standardised tracking software and multi-agency mandates produces an administrative vacuum at the regulatory level, thereby undermining the structural integrity of frontline operations. Institutional isolation disrupts the connections among the child's primary environments, including home, school, and caseworker. As a result, child offenders need to navigate uncoordinated and conflicting systems, leading to significant system-induced stress. Institutional breakdown also deprives the child's immediate environments of essential resources. Vulnerable families, overwhelmed by financial stress, are unable to provide prosocial supervision. Schools often respond with exclusion and stigma instead of restorative re-enrolment, thereby removing critical protective factors against recidivism. Requiring individual behavioural change without addressing fractured macro-infrastructures constitutes a structural contradiction. To achieve the reformative objectives of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order, Malaysia can adopt a multi-systemic governance framework that codifies legally binding cross-agency protocols, shared databases, and collaborative institutional networks.

Introducing Volunteer Probation Officers

This study identifies a significant bottleneck in Malaysia's juvenile diversion framework: excessive reliance on professional probation officers (POs) and a pronounced shortage of auxiliary support personnel. This structure results in POs functioning as overburdened street-level bureaucrats, tasked with extensive legal responsibilities but lacking adequate human resources. In contrast, regional models in Japan, Singapore, Thailand, and Brunei mitigate this issue by employing Volunteer Probation Officers (VPOs) or Volunteer Probation Aides (VPAs). A formalised VPO system constitutes a pragmatic structural intervention, offering four principal operational benefits. First, VPOs assume responsibility for localised field supervision, enabling professional POs to prioritise therapeutic case management rather than administrative tasks and court obligations. Second, by being embedded within the offender's immediate environment, VPOs deliver consistent, low-stigma community monitoring. Third, as civil volunteers rather than state agents, VPOs possess the relational capital necessary to overcome institutional distrust in marginalised households. Fourth, VPOs serve as structural intermediaries, connecting statutory authorities with local NGOs, educational institutions, and private-sector employers to facilitate pathways toward desistance. The Japanese Volunteer Probation Officer Act of 1950 demonstrates that community participation requires formal codification within a state-regulated, professionalised network (*Hogoshi*) to ensure programme integrity through standardised guidelines and mandatory training.

When assessed through Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Model, a formalised VPO system systematically addresses and strengthens a fragmented developmental ecology. At the exosystemic level, introducing a regulated VPO layer redistributes operational responsibilities, alleviating the workload of professional POs and reducing the risk of systemic failure. At the mesosystemic level, VPOs act as boundary spanners, bridging formal legal mandates with informal community networks and transforming isolated initiatives into a cohesive support system. At the microsystemic level, the presence of trained volunteers in the children's immediate environment offers pro-social adult mentorship, reduces administrative burdens on families, and diminishes local social stigma.

Malaysia's dependence on a centralised and under-resourced probation model is structurally unsustainable. To render the Bond of Good Behaviour Order a sustainable and comprehensive mechanism, policymakers need to consider moving beyond legislative mandates and formally establishing a regulated public-private-community partnership (PPCP) that legally incorporates civil society into the core rehabilitative framework.

Theoretical Contribution

This study advances Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Social-Ecological Model by elucidating the mechanisms of structural cross-level disruption within Malaysia's diversionary framework. Institutional failures at the exosystem level directly precipitate a downward cascade that deteriorates the children's immediate microsystem. Rather than serving as a supportive scaffold, fragmented institutional arrangements, resource deprivation, and lack of inter-agency coordination result in an administrative vacuum. This institutional breakdown destabilises mesosystemic connections and deprives the child's direct environments of essential social and economic capital, leading to specific systemic erosions within the microsystem. Low-income, marginalised families are compelled to shoulder the significant supervisory demands of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order without state-provided financial or psychological support, resulting in severe domestic strain and role confusion. In the absence of formal cross-agency mandates between social welfare and educational authorities, schools frequently engage in institutional stigmatisation and exclusionary practices rather than supporting restorative re-enrolment. Community agents are assigned the moral responsibility for youth reform but lack the legal authority, training, or resources to fulfil this role, inadvertently transforming local spaces into sites of social isolation and secondary deviance.

These institutional shortcomings systematically undermine core protective mechanisms, including adult monitoring, school engagement, and prosocial peer alignment, all of which are essential for preventing recidivism. The findings support Bronfenbrenner's central proposition that behavioural reform results from the interplay of interconnected environmental layers, rather than from isolated individual factors or family-level interventions. To address this operational gap and establish a sustainable alternative to detention, it is necessary for Malaysian policy to move beyond superficial, intra-agency adjustments and pursue comprehensive structural reforms. Such reforms can reinforce cross-level ecological interactions through codified multi-systemic governance, integrated service delivery, and the targeted mobilisation of civil volunteer (VPO) networks.

CONCLUSION

This study empirically identifies structural and operational bottlenecks, including the lack of a standardised framework, fragmented inter-agency coordination, limited civil participation, and significant role overload among probation officers, which undermine the implementation of the Bond of Good Behaviour Order under Section 91(1)(b) of Malaysia's Child Act 2001 in Kuala Lumpur. The findings

extend Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Model by demonstrating that macro-level exosystemic deficiencies, such as institutional silos and resource deprivation, cascade downward, weakening essential protective factors within the child's immediate microsystem, including family dynamics, school engagement, and neighbourhood support. Although the study is limited by its qualitative single-case design in Kuala Lumpur and disruptions to data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2022), it provides an empirical basis for future nationwide mixed-methods research and action-oriented pilot programmes evaluating standardised rehabilitation modules and Volunteer Probation Officer (VPO) frameworks. The study concludes that a shift from carceral detention to sustainable community reform cannot succeed if responsibility is placed solely on a single, under-resourced public agency. Instead, it requires a paradigm shift that redefines community care as a coordinated, collaborative, and multi-systemic societal support ecosystem.

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