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Research Article

The Socio-Psychological Impact of the Juvenile Justice Act: Understanding Its Role in Juvenile Rehabilitation and Reintegration

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Abstract

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act is India's resolution for child-centred justice, focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment. In this review, the social-psychological aspects of juvenile justice in India are analysed, focussing on the impact of laws on rehabilitation and reintegration. Building on the developmental, criminology and social work literature, this paper evaluates the psychological well-being, identity development, and social integration of young offenders under the Act. The review identifies successes and ongoing challenges in India's juvenile justice system, such as stigmatisation, institutional limitations, and socio-economic factors to reintegration. Results indicate that the legal framework is relatively progressive; however, there are implementation gaps with a direct impact on rehabilitation effectiveness.

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INTRODUCTION

India's Juvenile delinquency is a pivotal crossroads of developmental psychology, child welfare and criminal justice policy. In India, 30,000 to 40,000 children are arrested every year for different crimes, and the statistic accounts for the pressures of urbanisation as well as social and economic disparities (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000, which was later amended in 2015 and in 2021, is the primary legislation regulating the current juvenile justice system in India. This bill is transformative in terms of a shift towards restorative justice and an end to punishment for children, who these laws acknowledge as vulnerable people in need of care and protection rather than retribution. The sociopsychological effects of childhood justice are broader than immediate legal

consequences, with effects on identity creation, mental health, education pathways and overall social integration. International research has shown that the way in which society responds to juvenile offending can have a major impact on reconviction rates, psychological adjustment and successful community reintegration (Steinberg & Scott, 2003). But the peculiar sociocultural context of India with its variegated economic situations, caste interactions, family network and regional variations needs a local interpretation of such impacts. This comprehensive review paper explores the socio-psychological aspects of India's Juvenile Justice Act for rehabilitating and reintegrating juveniles. Through the integration of empirical studies, case reports and theoretical models, this review seeks to offer a comprehensive examination of the Act's impact in order

to reveal potential policy gaps and programmatic deficits that should be addressed.

Historical Context and Legislative Framework

Evolution of Juvenile Justice in India

The juvenile justice system in India has been transformed substantially since independence. The Children Act 1960 is said to have been an early recognition of the need for special provision for offenders under the age of 21, but it was still run on spotty lines across the country. The JJ Act of 1986 was the first nationwide law that separated the juveniles from their adult counterparts. But, this act was deficient and not able to fulfill new demands of child rights and wellbeing issues (Chakraborty, 2018). The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000, marked a watershed moment, aligning Indian legislation with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This Act established child-friendly procedures, specialised institutions, and emphasised rehabilitation. The 2015 amendment, though controversial, introduced provisions for trying 16–18-year-olds as adults in heinous offences, reflecting societal pressure following high-profile crimes while simultaneously raising concerns about the developmental appropriateness of such measures (Kumari, 2016).

Important Principles and Provisions

The Act embodies several core principles derived from child development theory and human rights instruments. All should be carried out with the principle of “best interest of the child”, which demands both physical, mental and psychological needs of children to be taken care of. The Act guarantees presumption of innocence, dignity and immunity from stigma. It has institutionalised mechanisms such as the Juvenile Justice Boards for trial, Child Welfare Committees for care and restoration orders to specialised homes (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2016). The Act also promotes a time-bound system of processing, as experience shows that the protracted periods of waiting for justice take a toll on children’s mental and emotional well-being. The act also ensures provisions for Individual Care Plans, frequent case reviews and post-release follow-up, indicating legislative realization of rehabilitation as a continuum that needs intervention beyond institutional placement (Deb et al., 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Juvenile Rehabilitation

Developmental Psychology Perspectives

The developmental status of the adolescent brain is important for understanding juvenile behaviour and determinations regarding juveniles’ potential for rehabilitation. Neuroscience evidence suggests that the development of the prefrontal cortex, where impulse control, planning and risk assessment are controlled, extends into the mid-twenties (Steinberg 2008). This immaturity leaves us especially open to peer pressure, environmental shaping and emotional excess, but also capable of greater neuroplasticity and readiness for transformation. According to Erikson, adolescence is a stage of development

where one struggles to establish his/her identity across stages like identity achievement and role confusion. For law-referred juveniles, the institutional experience is a powerful and shaping environment in these processes. Negative labelling and stigmatisation may solidify delinquent identities, whereas supportive rehabilitative environments can assist in the reconstruction of positive identity (Maruna & LeBel, 2010).

Social Learning and Ecological Systems Theory

Bandura’s social learning theory posits that behaviors are learned through observation, imitation and reinforcement in the social environment. One factor that contributes to social disorganisation is the cycle of delinquency that accompanies adolescents living in poverty. The success of rehabilitation could, therefore, depend on the supply of other role models which are positive, prosocial learning opportunities and reinforcement of adaptive behaviour (Bandura 1977). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provides an overarching framework for understanding juvenile behaviour as situated within an array of nested environmental systems: microsystem (family, peers), mesosystem (interaction between microsystems), exosystem (community resources), and macrosystem (cultural values, policies). The effective rehabilitation will have multiple ecological levels to be addressed, acknowledging that for reintegration to be sustainable, both the person and certain aspects of the environment need to change (Boxer et al., 2009).

Labelling Theory and Stigmatisation

Labelling theory suggests that when individuals are sanctioned formally, the effect may be deviant behaviour to the extent that social stigmas are labelled on them, accepted by them and internalised as an identity. Furthermore, when youths are stigmatised as “delinquents” or “criminals,” they may face limited life chances, community rejection, and self-fulfilling prophecies of further criminal involvement. India’s Juvenile Justice Act has provisions to minimise labelling effects – by way of confidentiality with respect to juvenile identities, proscriptions on publication related to juveniles and reference to non-stigmatising language (Lemert, 1967).

Socio-Psychological Impacts of Juvenile Justice Interventions

Psychological Effects of Institutionalisation

Studies of Indian juvenile facilities suggest that there may be complicated psychological effects to institutionalisation. Research has found higher prevalence rates of depression, anxiety and trauma-related symptoms among incarcerated populations, compared to those in the community (Ghosh & Chaudhuri, 2019). But results can be wildly different depending on the quality of the institution, staff training, peer interactions and length of stay. Positive experiences with the institution in terms of supportive staff relationships, skill-building opportunities, and therapy can contribute to psychological growth. On the other hand, combining overpopulated institutions with a lack of resources, trained staff, and punishment-harsh environments reproduces adverse childhood

experiences that can further increase psychological problems. A study by Malviya et al. (2018) observed that juveniles living in observatory homes with adequate facilities have developed more emotional self-regulation and a higher decline in their level of aggression over time; those who are residing at under-resourced institutions demonstrated a marginal improvement or even deterioration.

Identity Formation and Self-Concept

Involvement in the juvenile justice system plays a profound role in shaping identity. Indeed, for a majority of such young offenders from marginalised backgrounds, placement in and of itself marks their first intensive involvement with service systems. This experience can lead marginalised identities to either further electrify or create possibilities for identity transformation through education, job training and therapeutic interventions. In narrative accounts of juveniles involved in the criminal justice system, Sharma and Kumar (2017) found that those who successfully reintegrated had engaged in "narrative reconstruction," developing coherent life stories acknowledging wrongs done while championing current prosocial identities. In contrast, those youth who were subjected to severe institutional sanctions or community exclusion continued to have inflexible delinquent identities as a form of cover against humiliation and disgrace.

Social Skills and Emotional Competence

Many juvenile offenders have shortfalls in social skills, the ability to control emotions and the way to handle conflicts that can result from negative developmental environments. Successful rehabilitation programs along the lines of life-skills training, anger control and developing empathy appear to be encouraging. In a multi-site longitudinal study across Indian states, juveniles engaged in organised psychosocial programs showed significant gains in perspective taking, emotional understanding, as well as prosocial behavior than those who were not offered any such structured interventions alongside custodial care (Singh & Tiwari, 2019).

However, transferring institutional training to real life settings is a difficult task. The organised, restrictive environment of juvenile homes is nothing like the complex social surroundings that juveniles are sent back to, and therefore, some form of bridging intervention and a community-based follow-up is necessary.

Trauma and Mental Health Considerations

An appreciable percentage of juvenile offenders have suffered various forms of trauma, such as physical and sexual abuse, neglect and community violence. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) has been an important lens to understand the impact of cumulative adverse experiences on behaviors, mental health, and system involvement (Felitti et al., 1998). Indian researches indicate high rates of trauma histories among the institutionalised juveniles, with reported estimates from 60-80% for reporting at least one significant traumatic experience (Patel & Srivastava, 2020). But many juvenile homes have insufficient mental health services, trauma-informed approaches or trained counsellors. This gap is a crucial

limitation to the success of rehabilitation, as untreated trauma frequently results in behavioural problems, substance misuse and relationship issues.

Rehabilitation Programs and Interventions

Educational and Vocational Training

Education is an essential component of reformation, a path to marketable skills and legitimate prospects. The Juvenile Justice Act has laid down a curriculum for education in the institutions, but the implementation is far and wide. The urban juvenile homes generally have better educational resources, whereas the ones in a rural setting often lack trained teachers, as well as teaching aids (Desai & Nair, 2021). The focus of the vocational programs is to increase employability and economic self-sufficiency. Successful programmes coordinate training with area needs, give industry-acknowledged certification and offer placement support. Nevertheless, obstacles remain, such as the lack of programme diversity, obsolescence of skills being taught and employers' resistance to employ ex-institutionalised youth because of their label. One-year post-release employment was 45% higher for youth who completed intensive vocational programs than for those receiving little or no training in the study of Gupta and Saxena (2020).

Counselling and Psychosocial Support

Planned individual and group counselling provides emotional care, behaviour change, and counter-balancing of identity. But access is severely limited due to the very low number of qualified counselors. National statistics report that psychologist-to-juvenile ratios in most of the nation are often greater than 1:100, sometimes less than recommended (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). New interventions, such as art therapy, music therapy and sport-based programs, are being used to reach resistant youth in schools. This was demonstrated by a drama therapy pilot project in Maharashtra that saw increases in empathy, communication skills and behaviour adaptation (Mehta & Joshi, 2018).

Family Involvement and Support

The role of family. Family dynamics play a crucial role in the rehabilitation and reintegration. The majority of juveniles originate from dysfunctional homes with issues including poverty, drug abuse, domestic violence and parental imprisonment. Nevertheless, even troubled families could potentially serve as a locus for positive change when the right interventions are implemented. Family therapy, sessions on parenting skills and gradual home visiting should be provided to prepare the juvenile as well as his or her family for reunification. Studies showed that youth who keep frequent contact with their families while being in an institution and who are provided family-based interventions after release show significantly reduced recidivism rates (Rao & Sekar, 2019). Obstacles such as geographical distance for rural families, financial impediments introduced by making family visits impossible in the case of others or having a harmful home environment.

Community-Based Alternatives

The modelling of the Juvenile Justice Act focuses on community-based solutions as opposed to institutional ones during sentencing. Alternatives include foster care, group homes and community service programs. These options can help diminish the stigma, keep teens connected to community and offer normalised developmental experiences. But the literature on community alternatives is scarce in India. Juvenile law offenders. The systems, such as care nurturing centres for juvenile law violators, are few, people's awareness is low, and supervision strength is weak. Successful state-based community initiatives in Kerala and Tamil Nadu suggest some advantages, such as improved educational continuance among children, strengthening of family ties and lessening justice costs (Thomas & Joseph, 2021).

Challenges in Reintegration

Stigmatisation and Social Exclusion

Despite legal injunctions to the contrary, juveniles often are stigmatised upon returning to the community. Justice-involved individuals could be shunned socially, denied educational opportunities and discriminated against in employment by neighbours, schools or potential employers who learn of their justice involvement through networks. Such stigmatisation can lead to psychological distress, challenges in self-esteem and higher exposure for re-offending as genuine options become unavailable (Bala & Chatterjee, 2020). Stigmatisation effects are also mediated by caste/class dynamics. For juveniles from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, criminogenic disadvantages already interact with profiles of delinquent behavior generating a reintegration context that is particularly hostile. Some studies point out that in rare cases, upper-caste or better-off families mobilise social capital to reduce the effect of stigma, while these weaker resources are unavailable for poorer families.

Educational Disruption and School Reentry

Justice system involvement often disrupts a young person's education in dramatic fashion. Prolonged institutional stays lead to learning loss, and many schools won't readmit youths with justice histories. Even in the event of formal re-entry, peer rejection and teacher prejudice may support disrupted educational participation (Krishnan & Iyer, 2018). There are alternate channels of education through open schools or vocational institutes, but they too have a stigma problem. In some states in India, the National Institute of Open Schooling has partnered with juvenile justice systems to provide flexible avenues for learning. But lack of coordination and awareness that some employees are eligible for continuing coverage means the program is not reaching its intended population.

Economic Marginalisation and Employment Barriers

Economic reintegration is by far the most pressing form of reintegration. They largely hail from poor communities, and criminal involvement reduces the chances of ever finding work. Employer bias, innate unemployable abilities and lack of job placement aid serve as onerous impediments (Verma & Malhotra, 2019). Microenterprise development programs have

been a success in some situations, giving some money and coaching for self-employment. Government interventions, such as skills schemes on paper offer access for these vulnerable youth, but in practice it hardly reach the populations of young people in conflict with the law due to different information flows, challenges around application and lack of coordination between justice and employment systems.

Peer Networks and Substance Abuse

Peer relations strongly determine the post-release paths. Young people returning to communities where delinquent peer groups are still intact can be highly susceptible to repeat offending. On the other hand, youth who are forming prosocial peer relationships show more favourable adjustment consequences. Drug abuse is both a risk and a result of delinquency. Many juveniles already have substance use histories before they are justice-involved, and confinement can sometimes disrupt but is seldom therapeutic for the addiction underneath. Ineffective substance abuse prevention in juvenile justice systems with restricted community-based interventions results in many juveniles at risk of recidivism and crime when released (Sinha & Roy, 2020).

Regional Variations and Implementation Challenges Urban-Rural Disparities

There is a huge gap between the implementation of JJA in urban and rural areas. It is often easier in urban areas, where infrastructure is more developed and where there are juvenile homes that specialise in taking care of juveniles, as well as trained personnel and services exist. But urban areas also has its particular drawbacks, including gang activity, commercial sexual exploitation and a lack of accountability due to anonymity. Further, many rural areas do not have basic juvenile justice infrastructure and must transport youth to more distant placements that undermine family contact and community ties. Child observation homes in rural areas are underutilised, while urban homes remain overcrowded, pointing to the hierarchical system's inefficient deployment of resources (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2020).

State-Level Implementation Variations

India's federal system leads to stark differences at the state level in juvenile justice. In this regard, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Delhi are exceptions where these works have been laid a foundation headed with significant investment in infrastructure, training and innovative programmes. For others, just meeting the minimum is prohibitive, with no facilities or trained staff and budgets to get them organised. Implementation quality was decisively shaped by political commitment, administrative infrastructure and civil society participation. Superior results are visible in states where both a vibrant coalition of NGOs and judicial oversight is at work than only the machinery of government. The Supreme Court's final oversight, with public interest litigations have improved accountability, but it is not a substitute for political will at the state level.

Resource Constraints and Infrastructure Gaps

Most states suffer from insufficient funding for rehabilitation. Approved posts remain unfilled, infrastructure deteriorates for want of maintenance and the quality of the Programs falls because budgetary allocations are inadequate. The per child cost in most juvenile homes goes below the minimum required, and it influences nutrition, education, health-care and treatment facility to the children (Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2019). The infrastructure gaps are in the form of inadequate observation homes, lack of special homes for girls, non-provision for separate stay arrangements between age groups and shortage of open shelters under after care. Those gaps necessitate compromises that compromise the aims of rehabilitation - whether that is housing juveniles in adult jails or holding them in police stations while they are waiting to be transferred.

Gender Considerations

Girls in the Juvenile Justice System

Girls are only a small minority of the juvenile delinquency population, usually from 5-10%. Nevertheless, the experiences and needs of girls vary significantly from those of boys; they thus demand gender-sensitive responses. Girls are more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system for offences of morality, status, or as victims turned criminalised (running away; prostitution). Studies reflect a higher prevalence of sexual assault, trafficking experiences, and mental health problems among girls involved in the juvenile system (Kaur & Singh, 2018). Few facilities offer facilities-based programming for girls, so they either enter male-dominated vocational training or are pigeonholed with gender-biased choices—none of which is relevant in the job market. There are some gender-informed strategies focused on trauma-informed care, relationship-based interventions and concrete life skills (e.g. relationship building) that hold potential; however, they are not common.

Masculinity and Male Juvenile Offenders

Sensitivity to masculinity paradigms is essential for effective work with male youth, the dominant component of the justice population. For many, they come from an environment where aggressive, hard masculinity, taking risks and defying authority are positively rewarded as masculine traits. Rehabilitation systems that question these concepts and provide alternate forms of masculine identification can promote change. Those that include prosocial male role models as mentor figures, sports and active play that positively direct aggressive energy, and direct conversations about healthy masculinity work. However, gender-sensitive programming is still confined to the majority of interventions being gender blind, even for populations that are predominantly male.

Successful Models and Best Practices

Rajasthan's Integrated Approach

Rajasthan has evolved a relatively comprehensive juvenile justice model with the involvement of multiple stakeholders, strong training programmes and community participation.

Recruitment of local staff and regular training, including co-operation with civil society, have been key in service improvement. Outcome studies have been done that show lower rates of return to detention and better educational outcomes than are typical across the country (Sharma, 2021).

Kerala's Community-Based Model

Kerala's focus on community interventions and restorative justice measures are of useful lesson. The state has moved away from institutionalisation with programs like foster care networks, community service and victim-offender mediation. These methods help in destigmatisation, and keep the person connected to family and community while being cost-effective in making rehabilitate outcome more positive (Nair & Kumar, 2019).

Delhi's Aftercare Initiatives

Delhi is also investing heavily in aftercare, as it knows that post-release support is the key to successful reintegration. Plans for the transition system indicate that living supports, educational support, job connection and available counselling should be part of services to facilitate this transition. Over a lifetime, fuller aftercare reduces re-offending by 30% more than minimal follow-up (Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights, 2020).

Table 1: Important Aspects of the Juvenile Justice System in India

Aspect	Details
Age Definition	Person below 18 years of age
Main Legislation	Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015
Primary Objective	Rehabilitation and reintegration (not punishment)
Key Adjudicating Body	Juvenile Justice Board (JJB)
Types of Institutions	• Observation Homes (temporary custody)
	• Special Homes (after adjudication)
	• Place of Safety (for special cases)
Maximum Detention Period	3 years or till age 21 (whichever is earlier)
Key Programs	• Education and vocational training
	• Counselling and psychological support
	• Life skills development
	• Family involvement
Main Challenges	• Stigmatization
	• Inadequate resources
	• Staff shortage
	• Reintegration difficulties
Annual Cases (Approx.)	30,000 - 40,000 juveniles apprehended per year
Protection Measures	• Confidentiality of identity
	• No media publication of name/photo
	• Separate proceedings from adults
	• Right to legal aid

Source: Based on the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and NCRB data

CONCLUSION

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act is a forward-looking law with the principles of child rights at its core and with a rehabilitative rather than a retributive approach. However, there is still a broad difference between what the law aspires to accomplish and the influence it actually has. Differential social-psychological effects of juvenile justice interventions are in large part a function of the quality of institutions, the competence they exhibit and the availability of programs as well as support following release. Effective rehabilitation and reintegration demands a multi-dimensional response to psychological trauma counselling, educational remediation and training, family strengthening work and the promotion of healthy communities. Such interventions need to be continued over time, acknowledging that adolescent development and changes in behaviour are slow processes and time must be taken for patience.

Diverse sociocultural realities in India require not standardising but local customisation for flexibility. Yet there should be some universal principles: dignity for juveniles, optimism for positive change, prevention of stigma to the person or their family and sufficient funding to produce quality implementation. In the future, in order to improve contributions of juvenile justice, it needs political commitment, adequate resources, capacity building and a steadfast nurturing of children's rights. In the end, success is not increased conviction rates or more institutional capacity but rehabilitated lives; juveniles who successfully grow into productive adulthood and contribute to their communities instead of reappearing through criminal justice doors.

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