



Navigating adversity in custody: A phenomenological study of children in conflict with the law

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ABSTRACT

Children in conflict with the law constitute a highly vulnerable population within juvenile justice systems, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts where institutional resources are constrained. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 10 detained children residing in a social development centre in the Philippines. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed using Moustakas' modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Six themes emerged: disrupted educational trajectories, constrained family support, emotional and psychological distress, ambivalent perceptions of rehabilitation, unmet vocational needs, and institutional limitations. Building from these findings, the study advances custodial opportunity strain theory, which conceptualizes detention as a form of secondary strain that stabilizes behaviour while simultaneously restricting access to educational, vocational, and relational opportunities necessary for long-term desistance. Findings highlight the importance of opportunity-restorative rehabilitation and have direct implications for counselling practice, trauma-informed care, and reintegration-focused interventions for justice-involved youth.

Key Words Juvenile justice; children in conflict with the law; rehabilitation; custodial strain; phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

Within juvenile justice systems, detention is intended to function as a rehabilitative intervention rather than a punitive response. International frameworks and child-rights instruments emphasize that justice-involved children should be placed in developmentally appropriate environments that prioritize education, psychosocial support, family ties, and preparation for reintegration (Luna, 2022). However, empirical studies across diverse contexts show that custodial settings often struggle to fulfill these goals due to limited resources, institutional rigidity, and weak coordination with community-based services (Rawanda, 2021). Police-initiated contact frequently serves as the first formal point of system involvement for vulnerable youth, many of whom present complex mental health and psychosocial needs (Frantzen et al., 2025). Similar findings were reported among former children in conflict with the law (CICL) in the Philippines, where struc-

tured rehabilitation promoted growth, yet social isolation and limited freedom presented significant challenges during confinement and reintegration (Paca & Sabijon, 2025).

In the Philippine context, the enactment of Republic Act No. 9344, or the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act, marked a paradigm shift toward a restorative, rights-based juvenile justice system. The law emphasizes diversion, rehabilitation, and reintegration, mandating that children be treated in accordance with their best interests and developmental needs (Luna, 2022). Amendments to the law further strengthened the role of social development centres (SDCs) as key institutions responsible for providing care, rehabilitation, and temporary custody to CICL. Despite this progressive legal framework, several studies suggest persistent gaps between policy intent and actual institutional practice, particularly in education provision, mental health services, and reintegration planning (Abot, 2018).

Research consistently documents psychosocial vulnerabilities among CICL, including depression, anxiety, trauma,

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and low self-esteem, often exacerbated by family separation, stigma, and uncertainty about the future (Poudel et al., 2020; Puspitawati et al., 2021). Family support remains a key protective factor but is frequently constrained in custodial settings (Gonowon, 2023).

Beyond emotional well-being, educational disruption remains a central concern for CICL. Detention frequently interrupts formal schooling, limits access to qualified educators, and relies on self-directed or modular learning approaches that may not adequately address learning gaps (Nurhamdah et al., 2022). The absence of meaningful vocational and skills-based training further constrains reintegration prospects, increasing the risk of dropout, unemployment, and recidivism after release (Khampirat, 2020). From a theoretical standpoint, strain theory suggests that when legitimate opportunities for success are blocked, individuals – particularly youth – may turn to delinquency as an alternative pathway (Merton, 1938). Conversely, social learning theory emphasizes the importance of positive role models, skill acquisition, and reinforcement in fostering adaptive behaviour (Bandura, 1977).

Although prior studies have examined specific aspects of juvenile justice involvement, such as mental health outcomes or reintegration challenges, fewer have explored how CICL themselves interpret their experiences within custodial rehabilitation settings, particularly in urban Philippine contexts. Understanding children's lived experiences is essential for assessing whether institutional practices align with rehabilitative goals and for identifying leverage points for reform (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative phenomenological research is uniquely suited to capturing these subjective perspectives, as it centres participants' voices and meanings rather than relying solely on administrative or outcome-based indicators.

Responding to this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to examine how detained youth experience education, family separation, emotional well-being, rehabilitation programming, and future aspirations. Building on these findings, the study advances custodial opportunity strain theory (COST), which conceptualizes custody as a source of secondary developmental strain.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do CICL describe their lived experiences of custodial rehabilitation in an SDC?
2. How do detained children interpret the effects of educational disruption, family separation, and institutional constraints on their emotional and psychological well-being?
3. How do children perceive the role of rehabilitation programs in shaping their readiness for reintegration after release?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An integrative framework drawing on strain theory, social learning theory, and resilience theory guided this study. Strain theory posits that deviance arises from blocked access to socially valued goals (Merton, 1938), reflected in participants' experiences of disrupted education and limited

vocational opportunities that may perpetuate strain during detention (Nurhamdah et al., 2022). Social learning theory emphasizes behaviour shaped through observation and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977); however, limited access to structured education, skills training, and positive role models in custody may constrain opportunities for prosocial learning (Khampirat, 2020). Resilience theory highlights the role of supportive relationships and future orientation in adaptation (Garmezy, 1985), yet restricted family contact and limited psychosocial services may hinder resilience development (Poudel et al., 2020; Puspitawati et al., 2021).

While these frameworks provide important lenses, they often treat detention as a neutral context. Building on participants' accounts, this study extends these perspectives by conceptualizing custody itself as a source of developmental strain.

PHILIPPINE JUVENILE JUSTICE AND REHABILITATION CONTEXT

The Philippine juvenile justice system is anchored in a rights-based, rehabilitative framework under Republic Act No. 9344, which promotes diversion, rehabilitation, and reintegration while prioritizing the best interests and developmental needs of CICL (Luna, 2022). The law emphasizes community-based interventions and assigns SDCs and Bahay Pag-asa facilities to provide custody, education, and psychosocial support when detention is necessary, with amendments under Republic Act No. 10630 strengthening institutional coordination.

Consequently, many CICL continue to experience environments that insufficiently support recovery and reintegration, particularly those with repeated system contact and complex mental health needs (Frantzen et al., 2025). These challenges are intensified in urban settings characterized by overcrowding and fragmented social environments, increasing the complexity of rehabilitation efforts (Gonowon, 2023). Overall, the Philippine experience reflects broader patterns in low- and middle-income contexts, where progressive policies are constrained by institutional capacity, highlighting persistent tensions between legal ideals and practice (Abot, 2018).

METHOD

Study Design

A qualitative phenomenological design grounded in Moustakas (1994) was used to explore CICL lived experiences, prioritizing participants' meanings through researcher bracketing. Phenomenological inquiry has been widely used in juvenile justice and social work research to illuminate voices that are often marginalized in policy and administrative discourse (Rawanda, 2021). Given the vulnerability of CICL and the complexity of their institutional experiences, this design enabled the researchers to capture emotional, psychological, and social dimensions that may not be adequately reflected in quantitative indicators.

Participants

Ten CICL (aged 12–18 years) were selected through purposive sampling based on their ability to articulate experiences of detention and rehabilitation. Sample size was guided by data saturation.

The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, which was reached when no new themes or significant insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Previous qualitative studies involving justice-involved youth suggest that small, information-rich samples are sufficient for achieving thematic depth when the research focus is narrow and the context is well defined (Gonowon, 2023).

Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups using semi-structured guides. Sessions (45–90 minutes) were conducted in Hiligaynon, audio-recorded, and focused on education, family support, emotional well-being, and reintegration.

All interviews and focus group discussion (FGDs) were conducted in Hiligaynon, the participants' preferred language, to ensure comfort and authenticity of expression. Sessions lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant assent and guardian consent. Conducting interviews in participants' native language has been shown to improve rapport and the depth of qualitative data, particularly when working with vulnerable youth populations (Poudel et al., 2020).

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from a private university's research ethics committee. Given that participants were minors involved in the juvenile justice system, heightened safeguards were implemented, including written informed consent from legal guardians and assent from participants. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or impact on their institutional standing. Confidentiality was ensured through coded identifiers, with no personally identifying information included in transcripts or reports. Measures were also taken to minimize psychological distress, such as avoiding coercive questioning and providing post-interview debriefing. These procedures align with established ethical standards for research involving children and justice-involved populations (World Medical Association, 2013).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) modified Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen phenomenological method. The process began with bracketing, wherein researchers engaged in reflexive journaling to identify and set aside personal assumptions. This was followed by horizontalization, during which all significant statements were initially treated as having equal value. The complete set of significant statements extracted from participants' narratives and their corresponding formulated meanings is presented in Table S1.

Meaning units were then clustered into themes that represented shared patterns across participants' narratives. Textural descriptions (what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how they experienced it within institutional contexts) were developed and integrated into a composite description of the phenomenon. Trustworthiness was strengthened through peer debriefing and adviser consultation, consistent with qualitative rigour standards (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Reflexivity was integral to the research process, given the sensitivity of custodial settings and inherent power dynamics. The researchers acknowledged that their backgrounds in criminal justice and social sciences could influence interpretation; to mitigate this, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document assumptions and emerging insights.

Trustworthiness was ensured through established qualitative strategies. Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement, data triangulation (interviews and focus groups), and peer debriefing. Dependability was strengthened through a transparent audit trail, while confirmability was achieved by grounding interpretations in participant quotations and reflexive bracketing. Transferability was enhanced through detailed contextual descriptions, allowing assessment of applicability to similar settings.

RESULTS

This section presents findings from interviews and focus group discussions with CICL. Six themes emerged, reflecting challenges in education, family support, emotional well-being, rehabilitation experiences, skill development, and institutional constraints. These themes align with documented vulnerabilities faced by justice-involved youth in custodial settings (Rawanda, 2021). The significant statements and formulated meanings from which these themes were derived are provided in Table S1.

Educational Disruption and Reintegration Concerns

Participants consistently described interrupted educational trajectories resulting from detention. Although modular learning was available, participants reported difficulty understanding the lessons without direct teacher guidance. Educational disruption during detention has been identified as a key barrier to reintegration, particularly when instructional support is limited (Luna, 2022; Nurhamdah et al., 2022).

Several participants expressed anxiety about falling behind academically and uncertainty about returning to school after release. Previous studies similarly note that prolonged disengagement from formal schooling increases the risk of dropout and restricts post-release opportunities for CICL (Abot, 2018; Nurhamdah et al., 2022).

For many participants, uncertainty about returning to formal education heightened fears about limited employment opportunities, reinforcing perceptions of marginalization and exclusion.

Participant 3 (individual interview) expressed that:

I am struggling with my studies now because I'm only doing modular learning. I wish I could go to school and attend classes. (*Gaka budlyan ko sakon pag eskwela subong kay naga modular lang ko gusto ko tani nga ga kadto kadto ko gyapon sa skwelahan para maka attend sa klase.*)

Participant 1 (focus group):

I stopped going to school, sir, when I went there. I haven't been able to go back since. They just told me I could only go back to school when I get out. (*Nag untat ko eskwela sir*

sang nag sulod ko di wala na ko kabalik skwela asta subong, gin hambalan lang ko nila nga mabalik lang ko eskwela kung maka gwa na ko di.)

Constrained Family and Social Support

Family support emerged as a critical but limited resource during detention. Participants reported restricted visitation schedules and infrequent phone access, which intensified feelings of loneliness and emotional distress. Research consistently shows that perceived family support functions as a protective factor for justice-involved youth, buffering stress and promoting psychological well-being (Poudel et al., 2020).

Participants described communication restrictions as particularly difficult for those whose families lived far from the facility or lacked financial resources. Similar barriers to sustained family engagement have been reported in custodial settings across low-resource contexts (Gonowon, 2023; Rawanda, 2021).

Participant 3 (individual interview) expressed that:

“It’s hard for me to communicate with my family because we have very little time to talk. We’re only allowed to call them on Tuesdays.” (Nabudlayan ko maki pag communicate sa akon na pamilya kay gamay lang ang amon oras nga maka istorya sa akon pamilya kay kada martes lang kami gina pasugtan nga maka tawag sa ila.)

It was then supported by the response of participant 2 (focus group):

“It’s hard for me to communicate with my family because we can only talk to them on Tuesdays. That’s the only day we’re allowed to call them.” (Gaka budlayan ko mag communicate sa akon pamilya kay kis a lang kami maka istroyahanay kay kada martes lang kami gina pasugtan nga maka istroya sa ila.)

These findings mirror broader evidence indicating that weakened parental involvement and disrupted family relationships heighten emotional and behavioural risks among vulnerable youth (Castillo et al., 2022). Former CICL also reported that personal growth during rehabilitation significantly improved familial relationships upon release, highlighting the role of family acceptance in sustaining reintegration gains (Paca & Sabijon, 2025).

Ambivalent Perceptions of Rehabilitation Programs

Participants expressed mixed views toward rehabilitation programs. Spiritual activities, recreational sessions, and moral guidance were generally perceived as helpful for maintaining discipline and emotional stability. However, many participants felt these programs did not adequately prepare them for life after release. Prior research suggests that rehabilitation perceived as symbolic rather than skills-oriented has limited long-term impact on reintegration outcomes (Nurwati & Achmad, 2023).

Youth narratives echoed findings from studies of former CICL, indicating that programs emphasizing practical responsibilities and vocational engagement were perceived as more meaningful than purely moral instruction (Paca & Sabijon, 2025).

Participant 3 (individual interview) expressed that:

“The perspective of the people changed because we did something wrong, and we find it hard to approach them.” (Nag lain ang panulok sa amon sang mga tawo kay naka obra kami sang indi inchakto, nabudlayan na kami mag palapit sa ila.)

Participant 3 (focus group):

I’m ashamed of the people who know me because they know I did something wrong and what happened to me. They know why I’m here at SDC. (Nahuya ko sa mga tawo nga naka kilala sa akon kay kabalo sila naka obra ko sang sala kag kung ano natabo sa akon kag nga ari ko di subong sa SDC.)

Emotional and Psychological Distress

Emotional distress was a dominant feature of participants’ accounts. Feelings of sadness, anxiety, and shame were frequently linked to separation from family and uncertainty about post-release stigma. Justice-involved youth have been shown to experience elevated risks for depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms, particularly in custodial environments (Puspitawati et al., 2021).

Participants’ accounts align with evidence that youth with repeated system contact often present complex and unmet mental health needs, underscoring the psychological burden associated with detention (Frantzen et al., 2025).

Participant 3 (individual interview) expressed that:

“For me it’s really difficult and sad, being far from family and not being visited often, especially by my grandmother. Distance and lack of funds truly have a big impact on family connection.” (Para sa akon sir budlay kag ka subo mn bala haw kay ako sir kis a lng ko diri gina bisita kay ang lugar namon layo kag indi diri ka kad2 si lola ko sa akon para mag bisita kay wala mn sa kwarta mag kadto diri.)

It was then supported by participant 4’s (focus group) statement:

“It’s sad, because we can’t always call our family since we’re only allowed to call them every Tuesday.” (Subo man kis a sir kay indi man permi maka tawag kami sa amon pamilya kay taga Tuesday lng mn kmi pwede ka tawag sa ila.)

These accounts are consistent with evidence indicating that youth encountered by police – particularly those with repeat system contact – often exhibit complex and unmet mental health needs (Frantzen et al., 2025).

Skill Development and Future Aspirations

Despite adverse experiences, participants expressed strong aspirations for self-improvement and lawful employment. Many identified vocational skills, such as carpentry, welding, or mechanical work, as pathways to financial stability. Career aspirations and skill acquisition are known to enhance self-esteem, future orientation, and resilience among at-risk youth (Khampirat, 2020).

Accounts from former CICL similarly indicate that vocational training during rehabilitation played a crucial

role in post-release employment and reduced the likelihood of reoffending (Paca & Sabijon, 2025).

Participant 3 (individual interview) expressed that:

“It would be nice, sir, if there was someone here who could also teach us welding and other kinds of work.” (*Nami pagid tani sir kong may ari di may ma tudlo mn di sa amon sang mga welding kag iban pgd nga klase sang ubra.*)

Participant 5 (focus group):

“It would be good to learn other kinds of work too, sir, so that we’ll know many things while we’re here inside SDC. That way, when we get out, we’ll have learned many skills.” (*Mga iban pgd tni nga ubra sir para damo kmi may ma bal an samtang ari kmi di sa sulod SDC kay para kong maka gwa na kami damo kmi nabal an nga mga ubra.*)

Institutional Constraints and Reintegration Planning

Participants identified institutional limitations including rigid rules, restricted autonomy, resource shortages, and limited reintegration planning. These constraints reflect broader systemic challenges documented within juvenile justice institutions, particularly in urban and resource-limited settings (Abot, 2018; Gonowon, 2023).

While structure and discipline were acknowledged as necessary, participants described emotional strain associated with social isolation and limited family contact. Comparable findings have been reported among detained youth, highlighting the tension between institutional control and developmental needs (Rawanda, 2021).

Participant 3 (individual interview) expressed that:

“It’s really difficult, sir, because you can’t just do what you want here inside SDC since there are many limitations. And it’s especially hard, sir, because my family isn’t here with me. When I was outside, I was always with my family.” (*Budlay gid sir kay indi kadi kapa gusto sir kay damo diri limitation sa sulod SDC kag budlay gid sir kay indi ko diri upod pamilya ko lain ya nga ara ko sa gwa kay upod koto permi pamilya ko.*)

Participant 6 (focus group):

“It’s really difficult for us, sir, because we can’t do what we want here since there are many limitations. It’s not like when we’re outside, we can do whatever we please. And another thing, sir, almost all of us here are having a hard time because, again, our families aren’t with us. It’s not the same as outside where we’re always with our families.” (*Budlay gid sir para sa amon kay indi kmi diri kapa gusto kay damo limitation indi ya nga kong ara kmi isa gwa ma himo namon ang gusto namon kag isa pgd sir halos tanan man kmi di budlayan kay isa pagid indi namon upod amon pamilya indi parehos sa gwa upod to namon permi pamilya namon.*)

While discipline was acknowledged as beneficial, former CICL also described social isolation and restricted interaction – particularly for new entrants – as emotionally challenging aspects of rehabilitation environments (Paca & Sabijon, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight a gap between rehabilitative policy and institutional practice. Disruptions in education, limited family contact, and restricted access to skills training reflect forms of secondary strain that may hinder long-term reintegration.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the COST framework, which frames custody as a setting that may stabilize behaviour while simultaneously constraining developmental opportunities. Limited access to education and vocational pathways restricts legitimate means for achieving future goals, while reduced family support weakens key protective factors.

These conditions suggest that rehabilitation efforts remain incomplete when they focus on behavioural control without restoring access to opportunity structures necessary for sustained desistance.

Educational Disruption Through the Lens of Strain Theory

The findings related to disrupted education can be critically examined through strain theory, which emphasizes the consequences of limited access to legitimate means of achieving socially valued goals (Merton, 1938). Participants’ narratives demonstrate how detention interrupts formal schooling, restricts academic support, and produces uncertainty about future educational attainment. When access to education – an essential pathway to social mobility – is constrained, children experience heightened strain that may undermine rehabilitation and increase vulnerability to reoffending.

Educational disruption in custodial settings not only affects cognitive development but also erodes self-esteem and future orientation. In this study, children’s concern over falling behind academically reflects broader institutional failures to mitigate strain through meaningful educational interventions. These findings reinforce prior research demonstrating that when juvenile justice systems fail to restore access to legitimate opportunities, they may inadvertently reproduce the very conditions that contribute to delinquency (Nurhamdah et al., 2022).

Family and Social Support as a Resilience Mechanism

Family and social support emerged as a crucial protective factor in participants’ experiences. Resilience theory posits that supportive relationships play a central role in enabling children to adapt positively despite adversity (Garmezy, 1985). In the present study, restricted communication with family members intensified emotional distress and weakened motivation, suggesting that institutional policies may unintentionally undermine resilience.

Previous studies consistently show that perceived social support is strongly associated with psychological well-being and reduced risk behaviour among justice-involved youth (Poudel et al., 2020). The limited visitation and communication schedules described by participants highlight a tension between institutional security protocols and developmental needs. While regulation is necessary, overly restrictive policies may deprive children of emotional resources essential for rehabilitation and reintegration.

Rehabilitation, Skill Development, and Social Learning Processes

Participants' desire for vocational training and practical skills can be understood through social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of modelling, reinforcement, and experiential learning in shaping behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Opportunities to observe and practice prosocial skills – such as vocational competencies – serve not only as economic preparation but also as behavioural reinforcement for lawful lifestyles.

In this study, the perceived absence of robust skill development programs limited children's confidence in their post-release prospects. This aligns with existing literature indicating that rehabilitation perceived as symbolic or moralistic, rather than practical and future-oriented, has limited effectiveness in reducing recidivism (Khampirat, 2020). Providing structured vocational training within SDCs may therefore function as both a rehabilitative tool and a mechanism for social learning.

Strengthening Reintegration Pathways for Children in Conflict with the Law

Reintegration is a critical yet underdeveloped phase of the juvenile justice process, requiring sustained support beyond custodial rehabilitation. Findings indicate that CICL experience a significant gap between in-custody programs and post-release realities, particularly in education, employment, and family reintegration.

These challenges are compounded by social stigma, as returning youth are often labelled as "offenders," limiting access to schooling, employment, and positive social networks. Such stigma reduces social capital, increases isolation, and elevates the risk of recidivism (Rawanda, 2021).

Effective reintegration requires coordinated intervention among juvenile justice institutions, families, schools, and community service providers. Transitional planning should begin during detention rather than at release, incorporating educational assessment, vocational placement, and psychosocial readiness. Participants in this study expressed uncertainty about their post-release futures, suggesting that such structured planning remains insufficient or poorly communicated.

Family reintegration likewise requires deliberate support. Although families serve as key protective factors, barriers such as conflict, poverty, and limited resources may constrain their capacity to assist returning youth. Interventions including family-based counselling, mediation, and post-release case management can facilitate smoother transitions and reduce emotional strain. Consistent evidence shows that sustained family engagement plays a critical role in long-term desistance among justice-involved youth (Garmez, 1985; Poudel et al., 2020).

Community-based reintegration programs – such as mentorship initiatives, school reintegration support, and employment partnerships – help bridge institutional and community contexts, strengthening the continuity of rehabilitation after release. These linkages align with restorative justice principles and improve the sustainability of reintegration outcomes.

Participants' emotional distress and insecurity further reflect broader patterns among youth experiencing family

disruption, where reduced parental involvement and school disengagement increase behavioural risk (Castillo et al., 2022).

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, consistent with phenomenological research traditions, this study prioritized depth of understanding over statistical generalizability. The findings reflect the experiences of a small group of children in one urban SDC and may not capture variations across rural settings or other institutional environments. Nevertheless, qualitative transferability is facilitated through detailed contextual description.

Second, reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of social desirability and recall bias. Participants may have framed experiences in ways they perceived as acceptable or beneficial. While rapport-building and confidentiality assurances were employed, future studies may benefit from triangulating youth perspectives with institutional observations or caregiver interviews.

Third, the study did not include a longitudinal component, limiting insight into post-release outcomes. Future research should track children after release to assess how institutional experiences influence educational attainment, employment, and recidivism. Longitudinal designs would strengthen causal interpretation and policy relevance.

Future studies could also examine comparative institutional practices across regions or countries to identify structural conditions that facilitate effective rehabilitation. Incorporating perspectives from social workers, educators, and family members would provide a more holistic understanding of juvenile justice processes and reform opportunities.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry significant implications for juvenile justice policy and institutional practice in the Philippines and comparable contexts. While the legal framework governing juvenile justice emphasizes rehabilitation and reintegration, the lived experiences of CICL indicate a need for stronger alignment between policy objectives and institutional implementation.

Evidence from former CICL underscores the importance of sustained vocational programs and family reintegration support, which contributed to long-term employment stability and improved household relationships after rehabilitation (Paca & Sabijon, 2025).

Given that police encounter a disproportionate number of youth with complex mental health needs, early identification and coordinated mental health intervention are critical components of juvenile justice reform (Frantzen et al., 2025).

Strengthening Educational Continuity

Policy reforms should prioritize educational continuity for CICL during detention. This includes deploying trained educators within SDCs, integrating formal schooling pathways, and coordinating with local schools to facilitate reintegration upon release. Education must be treated not as an ancillary service but as a core rehabilitative interven-

tion essential to reducing recidivism and social exclusion (Nurhamdah et al., 2022).

Expanding Vocational and Skills-Based Programming

Institutional practice should incorporate comprehensive vocational training aligned with local labour market demands. Partnerships with technical education institutions, non-governmental organizations, and private sector stakeholders can enhance skill development and post-release employability. By addressing blocked economic opportunities, such programs directly mitigate structural strain and support lawful reintegration pathways (Khampirat, 2020; Merton, 1938).

Promoting Family-Centred Rehabilitation

Given the central role of family support in resilience, juvenile justice institutions should adopt more family-centred approaches. Expanding visitation opportunities, utilizing supervised virtual communication, and providing family counselling can strengthen emotional bonds without compromising security. These interventions are consistent with international best practices in child-centred justice (Poudel et al., 2020).

Integrating Trauma-Informed Mental Health Services

Finally, the prevalence of emotional distress among CICL underscores the need for trauma-informed mental health services within SDCs. Access to trained psychologists, regular counselling, and psychosocial interventions can support emotional recovery and reduce maladaptive coping behaviours (Puspitawati et al., 2021). Trauma-informed care should be institutionalized as a standard component of rehabilitation rather than a supplemental service.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to juvenile justice scholarship by foregrounding the lived experiences of CICL within a custodial rehabilitation context. Through a phenomenological lens, the research highlights how education disruption, constrained family contact, emotional distress, limited skill development, and institutional constraints intersect to shape children's perceptions of rehabilitation and reintegration.

The findings underscore a persistent gap between the rehabilitative ideals articulated in juvenile justice policy and the realities experienced by detained children. While SDCs provide structure and short-term support, the absence of robust educational continuity, vocational preparation, and reintegration planning undermines long-term outcomes. These challenges are not isolated institutional failures but reflect systemic tensions between policy objectives and implementation capacity.

Importantly, the study also reveals resilience among CICL. Despite significant adversity, participants expressed aspirations for education, employment, and social acceptance. Recognizing and supporting these aspirations is essential for effective rehabilitation. Juvenile justice institutions must therefore move beyond custodial compliance toward reintegration readiness, ensuring that rehabilitation addresses both present behaviour and future opportunity.

By centring children's voices, this research advocates for a more developmentally responsive, child-centred juvenile justice system. Strengthening educational programming,

family engagement, trauma-informed mental health services, and community reintegration pathways is critical to reducing recidivism and promoting positive youth development. These insights are relevant not only in the Philippine context but also for juvenile justice systems globally that seek to balance accountability with rehabilitation.

CANONICAL THEORETICAL INTEGRATION AND POSITIONING OF CUSTODIAL OPPORTUNITY STRAIN THEORY (COST)

Building on participants' accounts and sustained engagement with strain-based and developmental criminology, this study advances COST as a theoretical framework that extends strain-based criminology by situating custody itself as a source of secondary developmental strain. COST reconceptualizes custodial rehabilitation – particularly in juvenile justice contexts – not as a neutral or merely corrective intervention, but as a potential source of secondary developmental strain. While detention may temporarily stabilize behaviour through institutional discipline, it can simultaneously constrain access to educational, vocational, relational, and psychosocial opportunities that are central to long-term desistance. This study explicitly engages foundational criminological theorists and positions COST as a theoretically generative contribution that extends, rather than merely applies, existing frameworks. COST synthesizes strain, social learning, life-course, critical punishment, and resilience perspectives to reconceptualize custody itself as a developmental and institutional site of strain.

Strain, Structural Inequality, and Institutionalized Opportunity Loss

The study's findings align with key strain theories, particularly Merton's concept of blocked opportunities, evident in detained youth facing disrupted education, limited training, and uncertain employment (Merton, 1938). Despite rehabilitative intentions, structural barriers persist. Agnew's general strain theory highlights emotional responses such as anger and hopelessness, extended here to show how detention itself generates strain (Agnew, 1992, 2001). This supports institutional anomie theory, where weakened institutions constrain integration (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994, 2001). SDCs may unintentionally reinforce deprivation through rigid or under-resourced systems, stabilizing behaviour short term while hindering long-term reintegration.

Social Learning, Institutional Socialization, and the Absence of Opportunity

Drawing on Bandura's social learning theory, the study shows that behaviour change requires access to meaningful learning environments that support observation, modelling, and skill development (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Participants reported limited academic instruction, mentorship, and skill-building, undermining self-efficacy and prosocial learning. Akers' framework highlights the role of differential reinforcement in shaping behaviour (Akers, 1973, 1998). COST extends this by emphasizing institutional design, where programs that are symbolic or compliance-driven provide weak reinforcement. Consequently, opportunity-poor custodial settings hinder identity transformation, while opportunity-rich environ-

ments with mentorship and skills training are essential for sustained behavioural change and reintegration.

Desistance, Life-Course Theory, and Custody as a Foreclosed Turning Point

Life-course criminology highlights turning points and social bonds in shaping desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2001, 2003). In this study, custody emerges not as a positive turning point but as a disruption, suspending educational and employment pathways. Maruna's theory emphasizes the importance of future-oriented identity narratives (Maruna, 2001), yet youths' aspirations remain unrealized without institutional support. This aligns with Farrall, Bottoms, and Shapland's view that desistance depends on structural opportunities, not motivation alone (Farrall, 2002; Farrall et al., 2010). COST reframes custody as an intervention point; without opportunity-rich environments, it delays turning points and weakens long-term reintegration prospects.

Punishment, Power, and Developmental Critique of Custody

From a critical perspective, the findings reflect Foucault's distinction between discipline and development, with custody emphasizing surveillance and compliance over growth (Foucault, 1977). While order is maintained, developmental supports remain limited. Garland's concept of responsabilization highlights how individuals are expected to reform without adequate structural support (Garland, 2001). Similarly, Wacquant's analysis shows how custodial systems can reproduce marginality through stigma and weakened social ties (Wacquant, 2009, 2010). COST extends these critiques, arguing that without opportunity-rich environments, custody reinforces marginalization rather than enabling meaningful rehabilitation and reintegration.

Resilience as Relational and Structural

Finally, the study adopts Michael Ungar's relational-structural conception of resilience, extending earlier protective-factor models associated with Norman Garmezy. Classical resilience research emphasized individual traits and buffering factors that enabled young people to adapt despite adversity (Garmezy, 1991). In contrast, Ungar (2011, 2013) reconceptualizes resilience as a process that emerges through negotiation between individuals and their social environments, emphasizing access to resources, recognition, and opportunity rather than innate coping capacity.

Participants in this study demonstrated clear aspirations for education, employment, and personal reform, signalling the presence of latent resilience. However, institutional constraints – such as limited educational provision, restricted family contact, and inadequate skills training – curtailed the conditions under which resilience could be expressed or converted into sustained developmental change. Motivation alone proved insufficient when institutional arrangements failed to provide pathways through which resilience could be enacted.

COST advances this relational understanding by conceptualizing resilience as conditional rather than inherent. Resilience emerges only when institutions provide access to opportunity structures that enable individuals to mobilize their aspirations into action. Where opportunities for learning, relational continuity, and skill acquisition are

absent, resilience remains dormant – symbolic rather than transformative. In such contexts, custody may preserve hope without supplying the material and social supports necessary for meaningful advancement.

COST's contribution lies in bridging resilience theory with institutional analysis, repositioning resilience not as a personal attribute but as an outcome of opportunity restoration. By identifying institutional access to education, family connection, and skills development as the mechanisms through which resilience becomes actionable, COST reframes rehabilitation as a process of enabling developmental capacity rather than merely fostering individual grit. Without such opportunity-rich environments, resilience discourse risks obscuring structural constraint under the language of personal perseverance.

Summary Theoretical Contribution

Taken together, COST integrates and extends canonical criminological frameworks by reconceptualizing custody as a site of secondary strain, constrained learning, foreclosed turning points, and conditional resilience. Rather than treating detention as a neutral container for rehabilitation, COST foregrounds institutional opportunity structures as decisive determinants of long-term desistance among CICL.

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An artificial intelligence (AI) language model (GPT-5) was used in a limited manner to assist with rephrasing and clarity. All outputs were critically reviewed, and the authors take full responsibility for the manuscript. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed and revised by the author(s), who assume full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical standards for qualitative research. As the institution does not yet have a formal ethics review committee, the researchers ensured that all procedures involving human participants adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and protection of participants' rights.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study consist of sensitive qualitative narratives and are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality. Further details regarding the methodology and analysis are provided within the article.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material linked to the online version of the paper at https://www.journalcswb.ca/index.php/cswb/article/view/583/supp_material

■ Table S1. Children's significant statements and formulated meanings.

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