

Street Children and Re-integration Challenges in Pakistan: A Social Work Perspective on Structural Barriers, Psychosocial Vulnerabilities, and Sustainable Rehabilitation

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Abstract

Although governmental and non-governmental rehabilitation programs have been in place since decades, the issue of street children in Pakistan continues to be a pertinent child protection and social justice issue to date. It is estimated that there are 1.5-2 million children in the streets working or living in them and this is a sign of long-term structural inequalities that comprise poverty, high urbanization rates, ineffective social protection frames, and poor child welfare governance. Research Objectives of this study are: To study the structural factors (e.g., poverty, urban marginalization, educational exclusion, child protection gaps) that facilitate the involvement of the streets and make the reintegration of street children in Pakistan impossible. To evaluate the psychosocial weaknesses such as trauma exposure, stigma, mental health issues, and interrupted family relations which influence the outcome of rehabilitation and sustainable reintegration. To measure the efficacy of current governmental and non-governmental rehabilitation and reintegration in fostering long-term social incorporation, educational continuity, and psychosocial prosperity of the street-linked children. To recommend a unified, trafficum, and rights-based, trauma-informed social work model in respect of sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration of street children in the Pakistani socio-cultural and policy environment. The research design chosen in this study was a qualitative research design to investigate structural barriers and psychosocial vulnerability to the reintegration of Pakistani street children. The research has been carried out in the selected cities in Pakistan where street children were very visible and where there were rehabilitation services. The target population consisted of children attached to the streets, social workers, the NGO employees, and child protection authorities. Participants having first hand experience of street involvement and reintegration were selected through purposive sampling. A sample of about 20-25 interviewees was taken until the data was saturated. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion and key informant interview were used to collect data. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data through systematic procedures of coding. The first procedure was open coding in which frequently occurring ideas were identified after which they were grouped into broad themes.

Keywords: Street Children, Reintegration Problems, Structural Barriers, Psychosocial Vulnerabilities, Sustainable Rehabilitation.

Introduction

Street children in Pakistan form one of the best-known, though still peripheral layers of the population, which represent more profound socio-economic cleavages that are determined by the

factors of poverty, inter-generational deprivation, rural urban migration, and the exclusion of the system. Street-connected children are the broadly defined group of children to whom the street has become their home or place of sustenance (UNICEF, 2012) and street-related children involve themselves in various survival tactics involving begging and informal work, vending and picking garbage. Empirical studies show that there is a complicated interaction of structural determinants, including the lack of access to education, job insecurity among adult caregivers, and lack of efficient social protection systems and the incidence of street involvement (Ali, Shahab, Ushijima, and de Muynck, 2004). These structural factors are exacerbated by high rates of urbanization in Pakistan, where informal settlements and unregulated labor markets take in masses of displaced families but do not offer sufficient infrastructure and exit mechanisms out of poverty (Abdullah et al., 2014). This means that the street children are systematically denied fundamental rights, such as access to formal education and health care, registration of their births and legal identity, to perpetuate marginalization and invisibility (State of Children, n.d.).

In a loose attachment to this, reintegration initiatives that seek to re-acclimatize the street children into family and community settings are not without the deepest of challenges that go beyond surface rehabilitation or temporary welfare programs. Sustainable reintegration, in terms of a social work approach, should be conceptualized in the framework of human rights, psychosocial well-being, and structural justice which understand that individual outcomes are highly integrated within wider socio-cultural and policy contexts (Healy, 2014; Payne, 2014). The studies in Pakistan highlight the role of psychosocial risks that may include trauma, stigma, disrupted attachment patterns, and unmet mental health needs in diminishing resilience and reducing the effectiveness of the traditional rehabilitation programs focused on providing shelter and subsistence instead of emotional healing and social integration (Haq and Farooq, 2025; Ayub, 2025). The stigma and discrimination experienced in the society adds to these psychosocial dimensions and may limit access to education, professional training and community acceptance, which perpetuates cycles of exclusion in the face of reintegration efforts (Wahid, Shah, Wahid, and Lashari, 2025). The shortcomings of the current policy frameworks, which are typified with disjointed implementation, poor coordination between governmental and nongovernmental constituents as well as insufficient monitoring, highlights the pressing need to adopt integrated frameworks that tie the protection frameworks with culturally sensitive therapeutic assistance and community-based care (Tahir, 2025).

The multifaceted nature of reintegration of the street children in Pakistan necessitates a sustainable, systemic and rights based solution that extends beyond the ad hoc efforts of reintegrating the street children and facilitating structural transformation and outcomes that is resilience based. To be effective, the strategies should incorporate macro-level reforms which include the enhancement of child protection laws, the provision of universal access to education and health services, and the creation of social security nets with the integration of micro-level support, which is characterized by the emphasis on trauma-informed care, the development of life skills, and meaningful involvement of children and families in the process of decision-making (Saleebey, 2013; Ungar, 2011). Best practice models of international practice promote multi-sectoral partnerships to mobilize knowledge of social workers, psychologists, educators and community stakeholders in order to co-create contextually sensitive and sustainable reintegration routes (Murray and Gray, 2008). In addition, the studies also note that longitudinal monitoring and evaluation is significant in determining the long-term effects of reintegration programs on academic achievements, emotional health, financial security, and societal integration, where some interventions should only alleviate immediate survival requirements but create the chances of developing positively over a lifetime. With the placing of the strength, voices and agency of the street children themselves in the centre, social work practices can promote transformative policy and practice that tackles the

structural issues and also the individual vulnerability of the street children as a foundation of an equal and sustainable rehabilitative process.

Background of the Study

The issue of street children in Pakistan can be interpreted as a result of the decades-old underlying socio-economic and governance challenges that have existed over the decades and that have led to the abject poverty, family breakdown, and systemic exclusion of poverty-related children (estimates suggest that there are about 1.5 to 2 million of these children living and working in street conditions in Pakistan) (Sohail, Maan, and Sohail, 2021; CSC, n.d.; SPARC survey data cited in State of Children in Pakistan, 20). Such children are sometimes identified as ones who spend all/majority of their time in the streets and those who work during the day but come back to their families at night (Abdullah et al., 2014). A combination of societal factors (such as lack of access to education, unstable employment of care givers, high rates of urbanization, and poor social protection systems) together as structural determinants drive children into the street work and homeless pathways (Ali, Shahab, Ushijima, and de Muynck, 2004; State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). In addition to financial difficulties, family breakdown caused by domestic violence, loss of either parent and migration further deteriorate protective environments forcing children into the open, where they are forced to survive on the streets (Iqbal, 2000; Pakistan Today, 2025). As a result, street children continue to be among the most vulnerable groups in Pakistan, which is marginalized through complete systematic exclusion of access to basic services and rights that can alleviate the negative developmental effects in the long term.

On becoming dependent on the streets, such children are faced by a range of structural and psychosocial vulnerabilities, which precondition their marginalization and limit future life opportunities. The exposure to exploitation, violence, unsafe labour practices, and sexual abuse is rampant with studies showing an alarming rate of unsafe sexual activity and forced survival behaviours among street-connected children (Sohail et al., 2021). Lack of a stable shelter, legal identity and access to healthcare makes them even more vulnerable to malnutrition, infectious diseases and psychological trauma (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024; Pakistan Today, 2025). Imperfect institutional facilitation, including lengthy and cumbersome processes of birth registration and bureaucratic challenges to school access, unavailable child-specific protective services, and so forth only add to the challenges in reintegrating street children into formal care and education systems (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024; SPARC survey findings). Such systemic inefficiencies support societal exclusion and stigmatization, which reduces the opportunities of such children in addition to perpetuating generations of poverty and social invisibility.

Due to the interaction between structural obstacles and psychosocial vulnerabilities, the process of reintegration and rehabilitation in Pakistan is marred by numerous difficulties that require multidimensional and right-oriented answers. The efforts by the government and non-governmental actors are often uncoordinated, insufficiently resourceful, and not long-term, leading to the results of the short-term relief instead of the long-term reintegration (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024; CSC, n.d.). Even though non-formal education centers, shelters, and outreach programmes play a vital role, their ability is constrained by missing links in mainstream inclusion, psychosocial rehabilitation, and employment opportunities (Abdullah et al., 2014; CSC, n.d.). An increasing amount of evidence supports a set of interventions that enhance legal protections, increase access to high-quality education, implement psychosocial support based on the notion of trauma, and partner with families and communities in the reintegration (Healy, 2014; Payne, 2014; Saleebey, 2013). These holistic measures are necessary not just to mitigate the risk that street children are exposed to at any given time, but also to ensure that the children experience

sustainable growth, resilience, and fair representation in the society, which is among the most underserved and neglected groups of people in Pakistan.

Statement of the Problem

Regardless of governmental and non-governmental rehabilitation programs and efforts made by the government over decades to tackle the issue of street children, the issue of street children in Pakistan remains a child protection and a social justice issue. It is estimated that there are 1.5 to 2 million children living or working in the streets, and this is the manifestation of structural imbalances such as chronic poverty, urbanization, weak social protection, and disjointed child welfare regulations (Ali, Shahab, Ushijima, and de Muynck, 2004; Sohail, Maan, and Sohail, 2021; UNICEF, 2024). Although there are legislative frameworks including provincial laws on child protection, they have not been properly implemented due to insufficient funding to ensure good results on prevention and re-integration (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). Besides, current interventions tend to focus on short-term shelter, rescue services, and subsistence over the systematic drivers such as educational exclusion, informality in the labour market and family instability (Abdullah et al., 2014). Thus, a large number of children are cycling through the streets and temporary care centers, which is an indication of structural failure in guaranteeing sustainable re-having and the long-term inclusiveness in the social context.

Devoid of these structural barriers are deep-rooted psychosocial vulnerabilities that are still not well incorporated into reintegration programming and social work practice. Children connected to the streets in Pakistan are disproportionately subjected to trauma, violence, exploitation, substance abuse, and unsafe sex, which lead to complex mental health and developmental issues making it difficult to reintegrate them (Sohail et al., 2021; Abdullah et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the models of rehabilitation often do not incorporate trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and family-focused psychosocial interventions to treat the disruption of attachment, stigma, and community rejection (Healy, 2014; Payne, 2014). Lack of multi-sectoral strategies especially those that integrate structural reform with therapeutic and strengths-based social work interventions continues to push individuals into cycles of marginalization and back to the streets. Accordingly, there is an urgent gap in the literature and practice based on the intersection of structural determinants and psychosocial vulnerabilities to influence the outcomes of reintegration, and the operationalization of sustainable, rights-based social work frameworks in the Pakistani socio-cultural and policy context to influence the long-term rehabilitation.

Research Questions

1. What is the role of structural impediments such as poverty, lack of access to education, ineffective child protection systems and marginalization of street children living in urban areas in the reintegration success of street children in Pakistan?
2. Which psychosocial risk factors including exposure to trauma, stigma, disrupted family attachment and mental health issues impact the sustainability of rehabilitation and reintegration into community among Pakistan street-connected children?
3. What are the ways of designing and implementing social work-led, rights-based, and trauma-informed intervention models to facilitate sustainable rehabilitation to cast street children into long-term social inclusion in Pakistan?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the structural determinants (e.g., poverty, urban marginalization, educational exclusion, and child protection gaps) that contribute to street involvement and hinder the reintegration of street children in Pakistan.

2. To assess the psychosocial vulnerabilities including trauma exposure, stigma, mental health challenges, and disrupted family relationships that affect rehabilitation and sustainable reintegration outcomes.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing governmental and non-governmental rehabilitation and reintegration programs in promoting long-term social inclusion, educational continuity, and psychosocial well-being of street-connected children.
4. To propose a comprehensive, rights-based, and trauma-informed social work framework for sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration of street children within Pakistan's socio-cultural and policy context.

Conceptual Framework:

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural Barriers • Psychosocial Vulnerabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable Family Reintegration • Educational Reintegration and Retention • Psychosocial Well-being • Social Inclusion and Community Integration

Conceptualization & Operationalization

Independent Variables

Structural Barriers

- Relates to global influences which may include poverty, inability to access education, ineffective child protection systems, marginalization of the urban poor, and inadequate social protection facilities.
- Such macro-level limitations limit the possibilities of safe reintegration and permanent social inclusion.

Psychosocial Vulnerabilities

- Includes exposure to trauma, mental health issues, stigma, risk of substance abuse and interrupted family attachment patterns.
- Such personal and social variables determine the resilience, emotional stability and reintegration abilities of children.

Dependent Variables

Sustainable Family Reintegration

- The long term positive attendance at families without returning to street life.
- Indicators of continuity of residence and family functioning and lack of return-to-street patterns were used to gauge the same.

Educational Reintegration and Retention

- Participation, attendance and continuous enrollment in formal or non-formal systems of education.
- Reflects access to education and less educational marginalization.

Psychosocial Well-being

- Mental health status improvement, emotional resilience, self-esteem, and decreased women trauma symptoms.

- Refers to overcoming negative experiences in the street and increased coping strategies.

Social Inclusion and Community Integration

- Reduced stigma, level of acceptance, and involvement in community life, and access to social services.
- Shows a lasting inclusion and safeguarding of marginalization in the society.

Literature Review

In both international and Pakistan-specific studies, structural and socio-economic factors are discovered to be the major factors driving children into street life. Child poverty, high rates of urbanization, family dysfunctions, as well as access to formal education and health are common underlying factors that require children in Pakistan to provide street labor or lead lives that are street-dependent (Ali, Shahab, Ushijima, and de Muynck, 2004; Abdullah et al., 2014). Household vulnerabilities increase because of large families, lack or low levels of parental employment, migration to cities in search of economic opportunities, and lack of a well-developed system of social protection which translates to children contributing to the family income or moving out altogether to earn a living (Ali et al., 2004; Abdullah et al., 2014). Quantitative and qualitative research provides examples of socio-economic hardship and gendered relationships of labor, i.e. male children are more conspicuous in the street economies, whereas female children (as well as hidden domestic labor) are no less disadvantaged but under-researched (Ali et al., 2004; State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). These structural determinants are not only precipitating factors of street involvement, but also long-term non-participation in mainstream socio-economic and educational opportunities, further strengthening intergenerational disadvantage.

When children are introduced to the street life they believe in a constellation of psychosocial vulnerabilities that exacerbate their marginalization and make reintegration difficult. Children become exposed to violence, exploitation, substance use, unsafe sexual experiences, chronic stress, and stigma in the street environment, leading to severe psychological damage, as well as social alienation (Sohail, Maan, and Sohail, 2021; The News, 2023). Research observes that children develop poorly in terms of cognition and emotion after repeated trauma exposures which compromises their perceptions of safety, self-esteem and future expectations (Sohail et al., 2021; State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). In a different qualitative description, the children noted changed roles in their lives and premature responsibilities that were due to crisis in their homes like the illness or death of parents, which further entrenched them in the hazardous street economies and increased psychosocial stressors (Abdullah et al., 2014). Societal stigma and exclusion tend to contribute to the aggravation of these vulnerabilities, which reduce the ability of children to receive psychosocial support, access healthcare, and community networks to facilitate recovery and long-term reintegration into families or education. As a result, psychosocial needs of street children have to be met through more than just simple welfare; it is essential to traumatize and strengths-based interventions that acknowledge the multispecified effect of street exposure on child development.

The issue of educational exclusion comes out as a major hindrance to reintegration and long-term empowerment within street-connected children. Studies highlight that being out of school is a risk factor and predisposes a person to engaging in the street and reduces socio-economic mobility (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024; recent educational development study). A qualitative research examining the educational experiences of street children in Pakistan (2026) concluded that flexible and informal educational services can increase the agency of street children by limiting structural aspects linked to cost, time, and stigma so that they can use those to find their ways into formal education systems. Nevertheless, the formal schooling systems of the conventional nature tend to be closed off because of the strict enrollment rules, superfluous expenses, invisibility, and

discrimination as a means of perpetuating marginalization (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). Besides, the lack of access to non-formal and informal education spaces leads to the perpetuation of exclusion, which subjects street children to the inability to gain crucial literacy, numeracy and life skills that are required to adequately reintegrate into society and be able to participate in economic activities. These obstacles point to the importance of being able to have flexible, inclusive and contextualized models of education that can help to accommodate the lived realities of the street children.

Pakistan Interventions targeting street children have been historically disjointed and reactive, but have not been based on long term and sustainable results. Research also documents that welfare institutions, including shelters or child protection units, are prone to meet the short-term needs of people, including food, shelter, or temporary care, but do not incorporate psychosocial and educational strategies as well as family reunification strategies into overall reentry opportunities (Haqu and Farooq, 2025; State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). The research study involving children in institutional care contains qualitative data and indicates the lack of psychosocial support services, therapeutic interventions, and family engagement processes that are needed to reach the underlying factors of street involvement and achieve long-term reintegration (Haq and Farooq, 2025). Structural entry points of support such as policy frameworks such as district child protection units and non-formal education initiatives have been implemented too slowly, with too little funding and unevenly across regions. Multi-sectoral and international programs, such as sports-based rehabilitation programs operated by such organizations as ICESCO, provide new avenues of psychosocial support and development of life-skills, but the interventions are not very large in scale and scope (ICESCO, 2025). The ongoing existence of implementation loopholes suggests that current practices fail to make the most out of evidence-based, child-centred, and contextual grounded models that should be used in sustainable rehabilitation.

New scholarship proponents are in favor of comprehensive, rights-based approaches that balance structural reformation, psychosocial treatment and community involvement into reintegration approaches. The report on child-centred, rights-based practices presented by UNICEF State of Children in Pakistan highlights the necessity to focus on protection, development, reintegration based on international standards (General Comment No. 21) and go beyond the notion of paternalistic or reactive responses (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). Interventions based on socio-economic empowerment, access to education, and psychosocial interventions using a trauma-informed approach are essential to increasing the resilience and agency of children and including family and community involvement in reintegration processes is important. Similarly, the best practice models in the sphere of child welfare research focus on the multi-sectoral coordination, long term monitoring, and participatory practices that place children in the centre stage of defining their reintegration paths (UNICEF, 2012; comprehensive service models). These integrative models are in line with social work values of human rights, justice and strengths based practice and can provide avenues through which policies and programmes can be developed that have the potential to create a sustainable rehabilitation process and social inclusion of street-connected children in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research paper used a qualitative research design to understand the structural obstacles and psychosocial risks to the reintegration of Pakistan street children. A paradigm was an interpretivist one that helped to comprehend the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants. It used a phenomenological approach to gain in-depth information on the street life and the rehabilitation processes.

Research Setting

The research was in some of the chosen urban centers in Pakistan where street children were very eminent and rehabilitation centers existed. Shelters, child protection units and non-formal education centers were sampled to gather the data. These environments were able to gain access to children who were being reintegrated and professionals that were in rehabilitation.

Population and Sampling

The research population covered the street-connected children, social workers, NGO staff, and child protection officials. Purposive sampling was applied to choose those participants who had a direct experience of street engagement and reintegration. A total of about 20-25 respondents were recruited until data saturation was realised.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was done using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and key interviews. The interview guides were grounded on psychosocial and structural themes. All the interviews were recorded on tapes with the participants permission and transcribed word-to-word.

Data Analysis

The systematic coding of the data involved the thematic analysis. The initial step was the use of open coding in order to determine recurring concepts and then grouping them into larger themes. The evaluation was based on the structural barriers, psychosocial vulnerabilities, and reintegration outcomes.

Trustworthiness

Triangulation of various sources of data and member checking were used to ensure credibility. There was maintenance of audit trail to enhance reliance. Detailed accounts of the context enhanced transferability whereas reflexive journaling facilitated confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Data collection was done after receiving ethical approval. Informed consent and child assent were obtained and the confidentiality ensured using pseudonyms. The participants were given the option of withdrawal and in case of emotional distress, referrals were made.

Data Analysis and Findings

Introduction

This chapter gave the results of thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews done with the children of the streets and the relevant stakeholders. The patterns observed during the analysis were similar to the previous studies concerning structural inequality, psychosocial trauma, and reintegration instability among street children in Pakistan (Ali, Shahab, Ushijima, and de Muynck, 2004; Abdullah et al., 2014). The themes have been structured based on the conceptual framework of the study with the interaction of structural barriers and psychosocial vulnerabilities being highlighted to influence the outcomes of rehabilitation.

Theme 1: Structural Barriers to Reintegration

Poverty and Economic Instability

The participants were always able to cite poverty as the major cause of street behavior and reintegration failure. Most children also indicated that they had to go back to the streets because of the financial pressure in their families, confirming previous reports that economic deprivation forces children into the income-earning street behaviors (Ali et al., 2004). Social workers highlighted that sustainable livelihood support of caregivers was the only way to make reintegration processes long-term, which resonated with the opinion of Abdullah et al. (2014) that poverty is a structural factor in cases of inability to overcome street dependency.

Educational Exclusion

The subtopic of educational obstacles appeared several times, and the participants reported problems related to enrollment in schools because of the absence of documents, financial reasons, and social stigma. Such results correlated with the national reports which reveal systemic denial of vulnerable children access to formal education systems (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). In line with the past researchers, inflexible institutionalization and discriminatory behavior were observed to detract long-term school attendance among children of reintegration (Abdullah et al., 2014).

Weak Institutional Coordination

Participants also indicated that there was poor coordination of child protection between the child protection units, NGOs, and even government departments thereby leading to disjointed rehabilitation services. This observation manifested recorded gaps in the implementation of child protection systems in Pakistan (Tahir, 2025). It was stated that short-term, shelter-based models lacked the ability to rehabilitate in the long term which supported the criticism of previous research findings of the lack of multi-sectoral strategies (Haq & Farooq, 2025).

Urban Marginalization and Social Inequality

Structural circumstances that kept children vulnerable were found to be urban migration and settlement in informal communities. Overcrowded housing, unemployment, unsafe environments featured among the causes of relapse to the street life, as described by the participants. These findings are also compatible with the situational analyses that reflect that swift urbanization and socio-economic disparity increase the vulnerability of children to exploitation and exclusion (Ali et al., 2004).

Theme 2: Psychosocial Vulnerabilities

Exposure to Trauma and Violence

Most of the participants described the physical violence, exploitation, and violence on the street, which had a serious impact on their emotional condition. These recordings corroborated literature sources that reported high exposure to trauma in street children in Pakistan (Sohail, Maan, & Sohail, 2021). The social workers found that the lack of resolved trauma often interfered with the reintegration process, which was in line with the trauma studies that showed the psychological scars of the protracted street exposure (Abdullah et al., 2014).

Substance Use and Risk Behaviors

Drug abuse was often referred to as a stress coping strategy and hunger coping strategy. The respondents reported that addiction was a barrier to rehabilitation and had to be treated in a specific manner. These results were congruent with the previous researchers reporting the trends of drug use among urban street children in Pakistan as survival mechanisms (Sherman et al., 2005).

Stigma and Social Rejection

Stigmatization turned out to be a significant obstacle to social inclusion, and on reintegrating children, discrimination in schools and communities was reported. This result was complementary to previous indications that labeling in society strengthens marginalization and undermines the sustainability of reintegration (Sohail et al., 2021). Social workers also pointed out that the perceptions of the communities also had a strong impact on the confidence of children and their sense of belonging as they represented the dynamics of social exclusion that were observed in national reports on child welfare (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024).

Disrupted Family Relationships

The family quarrel, neglect, and disintegration were the features of the narratives of the participants. There were those children who feared going back to unsafe domestic environments and this made reunification difficult. These were in line with the studies that have identified familial instability as an etiological and sociological factor of street involvement (Abdullah et al., 2014).

Theme 3: Reintegration Outcomes and Sustainability

Cycles of Reintegration and Relapse

This information showed the trend of reintegration and thereafter relapse into street life as a result of structural pressures. The absence of economic stability and poor follow-up systems were also a cause of instability, which is consistent with earlier studies about the cyclicity of the street involvement (Ali et al., 2004). This supported the claims that sustainable reintegration should be monitored and supported by long-term structures (Tahir, 2025).

Educational Retention and Skill Development

Even though there were instances of enrollment in non-formal or formal education programs, it continued to prove difficult to attend. Lack of finances and uneven academic opportunities derailed the continuum of education as noted in the national data regarding exclusionary educational systems (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). The participants stressed the relevance of being able to have a flexible, skills-based education that would facilitate the long-term process of socio-economic integration.

Psychosocial Recovery and Resilience

Nevertheless, some children were resilient and able to cope adaptively despite the adversity. The use of mentorship and counseling services enhanced emotional stability, which is a strength-based social work practice (Saleebey, 2013). These results were consistent with the resilience theory that focuses on the protective relationships and favorable environment as important variables in recovery (Ungar, 2011).

Community Inclusion and Social Support

The reintegration was closely linked to the positive community acceptance and supportive social network, which were the factors that help people succeed in reintegrating. The participants emphasized that they should be aware of the awareness programs to minimize stigma and encourage inclusion. This is in line with rights-based and community-based rehabilitation frameworks that claim that the interventions should be multi-level to guarantee long-term results (UNICEF, 2012; Tahir, 2025).

Summary of Findings

The thematic analysis revealed that structural barriers and psychosocial vulnerabilities had a strong relationship and worked together to determine reintegration outcomes. Systemic barriers were established by poverty, lack of education and fragmentation between institutions, whereas personal challenges were compounded by trauma and stigma as well as family breakdown. In line with the previous literature, the results highlighted the importance of combined, trauma-informed, and rights-based social work models to ensure sustainable rehabilitation of street-connected children in Pakistan (Abdullah et al., 2014; Sohail et al., 2021; State of Children in Pakistan, 2024).

Discussion

This research showed that the theme of reintegrating street children in Pakistan cannot be interpreted as just a single behavioral problem only, but needs to be placed in a wider context of structural disparities in Pakistan. Poverty, lack of education and poor institutional coordination became a recurrent factor that affected the ability to sustain rehabilitation, which is consistent with previous studies that have found economic deprivation and structural disinterest to be the key factors contributing to involvement in the streets (Ali et al., 2004; Abdullah et al., 2014). The recurrence of temporary reintegration and relapse, lent credence to the observation that temporary shelter-based interventions would not suffice without a set of social protection issues (Tahir, 2025). Also, the non-inclusive policies of formal education systems, such as documentation rules and stigmatizing views, fitted the national reports on child welfare that national institutions were inflexible and had gaps in policy application (State of Children in Pakistan, 2024). In terms of structural social work, these findings imply the need to have macro-level interventions that tackle poverty reduction, inclusive education and multi-agency partnerships to break the poverty-street life cycle.

On the micro and mezzo levels, the research has shed light on the deep psychosocial susceptibility of street-connected children such as exposure to trauma, substance use, stigma, and family instability. These results supported previous data recording high levels of violence, psychological stress and social marginalization of street children in urban Pakistan (Sohail et al., 2021; Sherman et al., 2005). The fact that the stigma continued even after reintegration was an expression of the general attitude in society that perpetuates marginalization and undermines the feelings of belongingness among children (UNICEF, 2012). The discovery of resilience, supportive relationships, and counseling interventions as protective, however, confirmed the strengths-based and resilience-oriented models of social work (Saleebey, 2013; Ungar, 2011). As discussed, this suggests that to achieve sustainable rehabilitation, a multifaceted course of action that involves the combination of trauma-informed care, family mediation, community sensitization, and structural policy changes are required. Unless both systemic inequities are tackled and psychosocial recovery processes are considered simultaneously, reintegration initiatives will most probably remain flimsy and reversible.

Conclusion

This paper determined that street children reintegration in Pakistan was a multidimensional and complicated issue that was predetermined by structural inequalities and the lack of psychosocial susceptibility. Poverty, lack of access to education, institutional fragmentation, and urban marginalization were not just the background processes but dynamic structural processes that reproduced the cycles of street engagement and recidivation (Ali et al., 2004; Abdullah et al., 2014). The results proved that short term rehabilitation programs, when applied without long term economic sustenance, inclusive education process and co-ordination of child protection mechanisms yielded short term results only. Structural social work-wise, the process of sustainable reintegration demanded systemic changes, which should have dealt with socio-economic inequalities, enhanced the cooperation between agencies, and guaranteed the execution of the rights-based policy agenda that is aligned with international child protection frameworks (UNICEF, 2012; State of Children in Pakistan, 2024).

Moreover, the research also indicated that psychosocial recovery was also a key to effective reintegration. Trauma and stigmatization, substance use, and disturbed family relationships were also some of the factors that substantially weakened the emotional stability and sense of belonging in children, which led to a higher risk of failure in reintegration (Sohail et al., 2021; Sherman et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the resilience, supportive relations, and interventions based on trauma were shown to be helpful and proved that recovery was possible when the protective systems were reinforced. The research thus came up with the conclusion that sustainable rehabilitation in Pakistan required a multi-level social work intervention that incorporates structural change, family mediation, community awareness and long-term psychosocial assistance. Reintegration efforts would be feeble and reversible without both macro-level inequalities and micro-level healing processes being addressed concurrently.

Recommendations/Suggestions

- Plan multi-sectoral systems of child protection so as to provide coordinated rehabilitation and long term support of reintegration.
- Implement conditional cash transfer and livelihood programs to families to help in relapse to the street life associated with poverty.
- Create flexible and inclusive models of education (bridge schools, non-formal education, vocational training) of reintegrated children.
- Make trauma-informed care and psychosocial counseling services an institutional practice at all rehabilitation centers.
- Enhance follow-up/case Management systems to track the reintegrated children and avoid re-streetization.
- Conduct community sensitization in order to lower the stigma and social inclusion of children who were once on the streets.
- Offer highly-differentiated substance abuse rehabilitation services to meet the demands of street youth.
- Increase parenting support and mediation programs in families to handle domestic conflict and instability.
- Diversify funding and implementation of policies on child protection units in the government to make the interventions sustainable.
- Incorporate participation styles where street-connected children contribute to the development of rehabilitation and policy programs regarding them.

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