
Original Research Article

Post-Prison Social Reintegration in Bangladesh: Institutional Scarcity, Relational Brokerage, and the Conversion of Social Resources

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Article No: 010 | **Accepted:** 14 September 2026 | **Published:** 10 October 2026

Abstract: Post-prison reintegration is a socially negotiated process in which legal release must be translated into livelihood, belonging, trust, and a sustainable law-abiding life. This qualitative comparative case study examines how that process is shaped by institutional constraints and relational processes in Bangladesh. Drawing on 24 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions, the study analyses family support, employment, stigma, reputation, community relations, informal brokerage, and post-release institutional assistance. The findings show that relationships frequently perform practical functions that formal systems do not consistently provide: families supply shelter and emotional security; trusted individuals broker employment and acceptance; and visible, lawful work helps rebuild credibility. At the same time, these resources are conditional and unevenly distributed. The analysis develops an institutional-relational interpretation in which institutional scarcity alters the practical value of relational resources, increasing reliance on informal networks while potentially reproducing exclusion. The findings support a policy approach centred on continuity, brokerage, and coordinated community-based aftercare.

Keywords: Social Reintegration; Institutional Scarcity; Relational Processes; Relational Brokerage; Desistance; Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Release from prison is a legal event, but reintegration is a social process. A person may regain legal liberty while remaining economically insecure, socially distrusted, relationally unsettled, and institutionally unsupported. Contemporary reentry scholarship accordingly treats employment, housing, family relationships, social support, public

programmes, context, identity, and personal change as multidimensional outcomes rather than reducing success to recidivism (Siennick & Porter, 2026). Earlier work similarly positions reentry across pre-incarceration, imprisonment, and post-release transition (Visser & Travis, 2003). Systematic evidence indicates variation in the ability of reentry interventions to support behavioural and social outcomes (Berghuis, 2018).

In Bangladesh, probation, aftercare, and rehabilitative structures coexist with unemployment, stigma, family and community pressures, limited aftercare capacity, and weaknesses in rehabilitation and mental-health provision (Shiblezzaman, 2020; Khan et al., 2021; Sharmin et al., 2021; Nabi et al., 2024; Mia et al., 2025; Tarzid & Islam, 2026). Research also identifies fragmentation, staffing and logistical limitations, weak coordination, manual processes, and underused probation capacity (Razzaque, 2026), while methodological work highlights gatekeeping and the difficulty of tracing institutional, network, and economic processes together (Kabir, 2026). The problem is therefore not simply whether institutions exist, but whether formal provision becomes a continuous and navigable reintegration pathway.

This distinction exposes a theoretical gap. Social Bond Theory explains attachment and commitment; Social Support Theory and social capital explain relational resources; General Strain Theory explains blocked opportunities and negative treatment; Social Disorganization Theory explains community organisation; stigma and labelling explain status loss; and desistance and life-course perspectives explain change through work, family, routine, identity, and turning points (Agnew, 1992, 2006; Coleman, 1988; Cullen, 1994; Goffman, 1963; Hirschi, 1969; Link & Phelan, 2001; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Relational sociology further emphasises that outcomes emerge through relations among people, institutions, and social positions (Emirbayer, 1997). These perspectives do not, however, specify how institutional discontinuity changes the convertibility of relational resources into actual post-release access and recognition.

The central analytical problem is therefore one of conversion. A relationship matters not merely because it exists, but because it can be mobilised to produce housing, work, guidance, documentation, social acceptance, or legitimacy. Institutional scarcity differs from institutional weakness, service fragmentation, capacity deficit, and institutional absence. Weakness describes limited institutional capacity; fragmentation describes disconnection among services; capacity deficit concerns insufficient organisational ability to perform a function; absence denotes a missing programme. Scarcity instead describes the experienced condition in which formal arrangements fail to connect release to usable, continuous, and navigable resources, even when individual services exist.

Under scarcity, practical coordination is redistributed. Families may provide shelter, monitoring, emotional security, and introductions to work; elders and community leaders may provide endorsement; employers may convert a recommendation into employment; and visible work may create social proof. Relationships therefore, become informal infrastructure. Yet dependence on that infrastructure is double-edged: it can compensate for

fragmented institutions while also privileging people who possess dense and trusted networks.

The study asks three questions: (1) how do released prisoners experience and negotiate social reintegration in Bangladesh; (2) how do family, employment, reputation, community relations, stigma, and institutional support shape these processes; and (3) how does institutional scarcity affect the mobilisation and conversion of relational resources into post-release stability? Dhaka and Jashore are treated as contrasting contextual cases, not statistically representative urban and rural populations. Because participant-level site identifiers are not consistently retained in the supplied interview records, locality-specific claims are restricted to evidence that can be securely attributed.

The contribution is threefold. Conceptually, the article defines institutional scarcity as a problem of continuity and usability rather than programme absence. Mechanistically, it specifies relational brokerage as the process linking relationships to endorsement, access, participation, and community recognition. Distributionally, it shows that when brokerage becomes infrastructural, unequal access to trusted networks can become unequal access to reintegration opportunities. The Institutional Relational Model is therefore presented as a provisional, empirically grounded synthesis rather than a universally validated theory.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Reintegration, Reentry, and Desistance

Reentry research increasingly rejects the equation of post-prison success with the absence of reconviction. Visser and Travis (2003) conceptualised reentry as a transition shaped by pre-incarceration histories, imprisonment, and post-release conditions, while recent scholarship emphasises housing, employment, family support, social context, identity, and institutional programmes (Siennick & Porter, 2026). McNeill (2012) treats rehabilitation as multidimensional, and recent models foreground belonging and restored social roles (Cid & De la Encarnación, 2026; Rubio-Arnal, 2026). Desistance theory adds temporal and agentic dimensions: Maruna (2001) emphasises identity reconstruction, while Sampson and Laub (1993) and Laub and Sampson (1993) show how family, work, routine, and social roles can become turning points. These perspectives imply that lawful intentions depend on access to roles through which change can be enacted and recognised.

2.2 Social Bonds, Social Support, and Social Capital

Hirschi's (1969) Social Bond Theory directs attention to attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief; Cullen's (1994) Social Support Theory emphasises material and emotional resources; and Coleman (1988) conceptualises social capital as resources embedded in social relations. Family, employment, and conventional routines can therefore stabilise post-release life, but relationships can also constrain (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Mowen & Boman, 2019; Taylor, 2016). Recent work distinguishes forms of social support and cautions against equating larger networks with greater usable support (Simonds, 2024; Wang et al., 2026). Bangladesh evidence indicates that probation and aftercare remain constrained while family assistance and economic self-reliance remain important

(Shiblezzaman, 2020; Nabi et al., 2024). The unresolved issue is *conversion*: what relationships make possible, for whom, and under which institutional conditions.

2.3 Strain, Stigma, and Community Organisation

General Strain Theory explains how blocked goals and negative treatment can accumulate after release, while supportive relationships may buffer these pressures (Agnew, 1992, 2006; Cullen, 1994). Social Disorganization Theory directs attention to community organisation and social control (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Liu, 2020). Place is relevant here because it structures who knows a returning person, how reputation circulates, and who can intervene. Stigma and labelling explain why release does not automatically restore social membership; criminal records can generate durable employment and participation penalties, while reintegrative responses can instead support reacceptance (Becker, 1963; Braithwaite, 1989; Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001; Pager, 2003). Asian research likewise documents discrimination, shame, labour-market barriers, and community exclusion (Chui & Cheng, 2013; Jasni et al., 2019; Li & Lin, 2025; Li, 2026; Minoura, 2018; Mohamad et al., 2024; Santhosh & Mathew, 2021; Singh et al., 2026a, 2026b; Zhang, 2025).

2.4 Relational Sociology and the Institutional-Relational Gap

Relational sociology provides the conceptual bridge. Emirbayer (1997) rejects treating individuals, institutions, and social positions as self-contained; outcomes emerge through relations in which resources, judgements, and opportunities move. In reintegration, a relative may recommend a person, an employer may translate endorsement into work, work may establish visible evidence of reliability, and repeated participation may alter community judgement. Conversely, a network may transmit stigma or close opportunities. Comparative Asian evidence shows that institutional and community arrangements vary, while Bangladesh scholarship identifies interaction among family, employment, social attitudes, and constrained post-release coordination (Chui & Cheng, 2013; Jasni et al., 2019; Minoura, 2018; Ministry of Justice, Government of Japan, 2025; Santhosh & Mathew, 2021; Zhang, 2025; Li & Lin, 2025; Wang et al., 2026; Shiblezzaman, 2020; Sharmin et al., 2021; Nabi et al., 2024; Mia et al., 2025; Razzaque, 2026; Tarzid & Islam, 2026). The unresolved question is how institutional discontinuity changes the reach, credibility, and durability of relational resources.

Table 1. Analytical derivation of the model.

Empirical pattern	Higher-order category	Mechanism	IRM component
Referrals without sustained follow-up	Institutional discontinuity	Formal resources fail to become a continuous pathway	Institutional scarcity / continuity
Relatives or respected persons recommend returning individuals	Endorsement	Trusted relationships reduce uncertainty and open access	Relational brokerage

Recommendations lead to jobs or opportunities	Access	Credibility is converted into participation	Conversion
Sustained lawful work changes others' judgements	Visible reliability	Participation generates social proof	Recognition
Criminal stigma discounts recommendations or restricts opportunity	Gatekeeping	Stigma interrupts credibility conversion	Stigma constraint
People with influential networks obtain opportunities more easily	Unequal brokerage	Network resources produce differentiated access	Stratification

The Institutional Relational Model is derived through a transparent movement from empirical observation to theoretical abstraction rather than introduced as a pre-specified explanatory scheme. Process-focused codes were first retained close to participants' accounts; related codes were then grouped into empirical categories; categories were compared for recurrent relational and institutional mechanisms; and those mechanisms were examined for conditions, consequences, and countervailing cases. The resulting mechanism map links institutional discontinuity to increased reliance on relational brokerage, brokerage to access and participation, participation to visible evidence of reliability and recognition, and stigma or gatekeeping to interrupted conversion. The five propositions are therefore treated as higher-order analytical statements generated from recurring relationships and remain open to refinement in subsequent research.

2.5 Institutional Relational Model

Analytically, institutional scarcity is identified at the point of use rather than by institutional inventory. The relevant question is not whether a programme, office, referral, or service formally exists, but whether a released person can navigate a connected sequence from release to usable assistance and onward participation. Institutional weakness may reduce capacity; fragmentation may disconnect organisations; capacity deficit may limit performance; and absence may indicate that a function is unavailable. Scarcity captures the resulting access condition when formal resources, despite existing in some form, do not reliably connect the returning person to a continuous and usable pathway. The empirical indicators in this study are discontinuous follow-up, referrals that do not produce access, information that does not become service uptake, and assistance that does not extend into sustained case management.

The Institutional Relational Model addresses this gap through a distinction between support and *conversion*. *Institutional scarcity* does not mean a complete institutional vacuum and cannot be reduced to a count of missing programmes. A service may exist but remain difficult to navigate; information may not become access; a referral may not become a livelihood pathway; and short-term assistance may not become case management. Scarcity therefore redistributes reintegration labour from formal institutions toward individuals, families, and networks.

Five provisional propositions organise the analysis. *Proposition 1, Substitution*: weaker institutional continuity increases reliance on relational brokerage. *Proposition 2, Conversion*: brokerage converts relational resources into access, participation, and recognition. *Proposition 3, Institutional amplification*: stable formal pathways increase the durability of relationally generated opportunities. *Proposition 4, Stratification*: dependence on brokerage can reproduce unequal reintegration because influential relationships are unevenly distributed. *Proposition 5, Stigma constraint*: stigma and gatekeeping reduce the credibility and reach of relational resources.

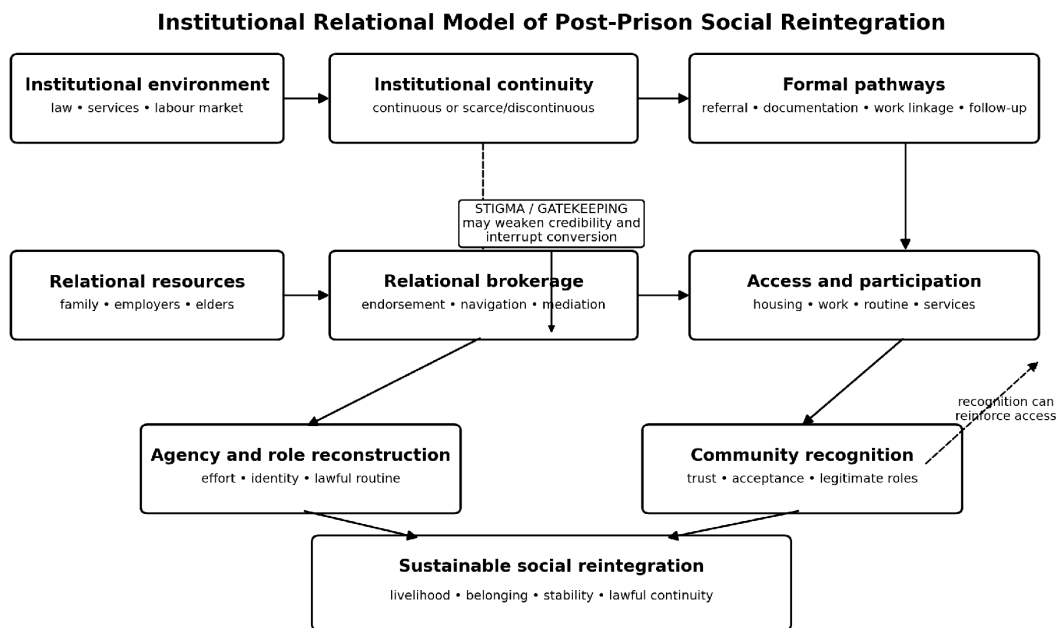


Figure 1. The Institutional Relational Model of post-prison social reintegration. Institutional continuity conditions the pathway; relational brokerage converts credibility into access; participation can generate recognition; and stigma/gatekeeping can interrupt conversion.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Case Boundaries

The study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design in which Dhaka and Jashore constitute contrasting contextual cases. Individual post-release accounts and

focus-group discussions provide embedded evidence. Comparison is contextual rather than statistical. Reflexive thematic analysis is used to identify patterned meanings while retaining the social setting (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018). The study is not grounded in theory; the Institutional Relational Model is an analytical synthesis developed from recurring empirical patterns.

The dataset comprises 24 individual interviews and two focus groups of eight participants each. Interviewees were aged 23–48 years ($M = 34.4$); 17 were married and seven single; 18 reported a first imprisonment and six a second. Time since release ranged from 12–24 months, and imprisonment terms from one to three years. Offence categories included theft, robbery, fraud, misappropriation, drug dealing, trafficking, and sexual assault. Purposive sampling sought variation in age, imprisonment history, offence, economic activity, and family support.

Table 2. Profile of individual interview participants.

Characteristic	Value
Interviews	24
Age range	23–48 years
Mean age	34.4
Married	17
Single	7
First imprisonment	18
Second imprisonment	6
Time since release	12–24 months
Imprisonment term	1–3 years
Offence categories	7

Participant-level urban-rural identifiers are not consistently retained in the interview records. The analysis therefore does not assign locality to an individual quotation unless the field archive securely supports it. Urban-rural interpretation is limited to documented site context and evidence that can be securely attributed.

3.2 Recruitment, Data Collection, and Analytical Procedure

Recruitment and sampling were purposive and variation-oriented. The interview guide was open-ended and addressed release and transition, family and social relationships, stigma, economic and psychological challenges, community actors, governmental and non-governmental support, and definitions of successful reintegration. Focus groups used a comparable guide designed to elicit comparison and disagreement. Facilitation notes characterised FG1 as moderately supportive and FG2 as more heterogeneous, with stronger accounts of strained family trust, employment loss, stigma, and informal networks; these notes are contextual rather than prevalence evidence.

Analysis involved repeated reading, process-focused initial coding, grouping codes into higher-order themes, comparison across the full dataset, attention to confirming and disconfirming instances, and theoretical interpretation of institutional-relational mechanisms. Illustrative codes included family providing housing, recommendations for

opening employment, stigma-reducing trust, referrals lacking follow-up, and community actors mediating acceptance. Existing theories served as sensitising resources rather than a closed coding template (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). Reporting was checked against SRQR and COREQ principles (O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007).

3.3 Anonymity, Evidentiary Boundaries, and Reflexivity

Interview and focus-group materials were anonymised for reporting. The study uses the identifiers P1–P24 for individual interviews and FG1-P1–FG1-P8 and FG2-P1–FG2-P8 for focus-group participants. These are reporting identifiers only and disclose no direct personal identifiers. Quotations are used as illustrative evidence for analytically developed themes, not as measures of prevalence. Individual and focus-group accounts are distinguished analytically, recognising that focus-group contributions reflect group interaction. FG1 was characterised as moderately supportive, while FG2 was more heterogeneous; these differences are treated as contextual rather than prevalence evidence.

The study does not treat recidivism as a validated quantitative outcome because the records provide no longitudinal recidivism measure. References to desistance, therefore, describe participants' reported orientations toward lawful change rather than objectively verified outcomes. Participant-level locality is reported only where securely supported by the field records. Because urban-rural identifiers are not consistently retained, quotations are not assigned a locality where attribution cannot be established.

Data were analysed through repeated reading, process-focused coding, thematic comparison, and examination of confirming and disconfirming cases, informing the identification of institutional-relational mechanisms and development of the analytical model. Quotations are anonymised and used to illustrate the themes developed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and institutional approval was secured through the doctoral research process. Interviews and focus groups were conducted under academic guidance and supervision, with confidentiality and anonymity maintained throughout.

4. Findings

4.1 Release as a Changed Social Position

Across the corpus, release was described as a return to a changed social position rather than a simple return to a life left waiting. One interview participant (*P1*) explained: "At first I found ordinary freedom surprisingly stressful. I had to relearn how to deal with neighbours, employers and family expectations." Households had adjusted during imprisonment, and communities did not automatically restore trust. Reintegration was therefore temporally uneven: legal freedom was immediate, while social trust, economic security, and settled identity required repeated interaction.

4.2 Family as Relational Infrastructure

Family emerged as the most consistent immediate source of practical and emotional support. Relatives provided housing, food, money, introductions to work, reassurance, and monitoring; several accounts stressed the importance of having someone close enough to

vouch for the returning person. Yet support was conditional. One focus-group participant (*FG2-P1*) described family control as “suffocating.” Family thus operated as a social bond, support network, regulator, and brokerage infrastructure, absorbing functions that institutional scarcity might otherwise distribute across formal services.

4.3 Employment as Material and Symbolic Conversion

Employment was repeatedly described as relational rather than purely transactional. Participants referred to recommendations, introductions, trusted contacts, employers, elders, relatives, and local leaders who could open work opportunities. One focus-group participant (*FG1-P1*) stated: “A recommendation can matter more than an application.” The mechanism has two stages: endorsement reduces uncertainty and opens access; sustained employment then produces visible evidence of reliability. Employment therefore links relational brokerage with both material stability and community recognition.

4.4 Stigma, Reputation, and the Credibility of Change

Stigma was often experienced through ordinary caution rather than overt hostility. Participants described reduced trust, restricted responsibility, background questions, social distance, and quiet avoidance. One participant (*P2*) characterised discrimination as “quiet”; a focus-group participant (*FG2-P2*) described reputation as an “informal record” affecting work, money, marriage, and participation. Stigma therefore operates on the *conversion* process itself: it can cause an endorsement to be discounted, restrict opportunity, and lengthen the time required for lawful participation to become credible.

4.5 Informal Brokerage and Relational Gatekeeping

Informal actors repeatedly appeared as brokers of opportunity and legitimacy. Participants referred to elders, employers, religious figures, relatives, and community leaders who could create employment opportunities, reassure neighbours, or reduce hostility. One participant (*P3*) described community actors as “gatekeepers of everyday acceptance.” Brokerage was nevertheless ambivalent: influential actors could control reputation and leave people without comparable connections behind. Informal capital therefore compensates for institutional gaps while creating a distributional problem.

4.6 Institutional Continuity and the Release–Community Gap

Formal support was not described as wholly absent; it was more often described as discontinuous. Participants mentioned information, referrals, one-off assistance, or organisational contact without sustained follow-up. One participant (*P4*) described “a gap between formal release and ordinary community life” and emphasised the absence of sustained case management. The central distinction is between an intervention and a pathway: information does not automatically become access, a referral does not guarantee employment, and initial contact does not ensure follow-up. Coordination consequently shifts to the individual and family.

4.7 Network Substitution and Desistance-Related Change

Former peer networks were described as both a source of risk and a source of belonging. Several participants deliberately narrowed their social circles; others noted that unemployment, suspicion, and isolation could make previous networks more attractive. One focus-group participant (*FGI-P2*) observed that “old contacts can become a temptation when legitimate work is unavailable.” Reintegration therefore involves network substitution, not simple withdrawal: people need credible alternative relationships that provide work, belonging, recognition, accountability, and routine. This is consistent with desistance perspectives without treating desistance as directly measured here.

4.8 Urban–Rural Context as Relational Architecture

The comparative field context indicates two configurations rather than a simple urban advantage or rural disadvantage. Dhaka is characterised in the field materials by greater anonymity, a more competitive labour market, and complex routes through formal organisations. Jashore is more socially embedded, with family, kinship, reputation, and local recognition more immediately woven into interaction. The same mechanisms, trust, stigma, brokerage, recognition, and institutional discontinuity, therefore operate through different relational architectures. One focus-group participant (*FGI-P3*) observed: “In a rural area reputation travels quickly. A few respected people speaking positively about me made a noticeable difference.” Because participant-level geographic coding is incomplete, these are contextual mechanisms rather than locality-specific effects.

5. Discussion

5.1 Reintegration as a Chain of Conversion

The findings indicate that reintegration is produced through linked interactions rather than delivered by a single actor. Family support can stabilise housing and routine; relational endorsement can open employment; employment can generate visible evidence of reliability; and repeated participation can alter community judgement. Existing theories explain individual components, but the Institutional Relational Model specifies how they connect: relational resources must be converted into access and participation, and that *conversion* is conditioned by institutional continuity and interrupted by stigma or gatekeeping.

5.2 Institutional Scarcity and the Redistribution of Reintegration Labour

Institutional scarcity does more than reduce resources; it changes who performs the work of connecting resources to everyday opportunities. Where formal services are fragmented, personal contacts perform brokerage functions that institutions do not reliably perform. A recommendation can substitute for formal screening; an elder can provide endorsement; a relative can perform functions resembling case management; and an employer can become both livelihood provider and social legitimiser. Scarcity therefore reallocates reintegration labour rather than merely reducing services.

The analysis also distinguishes support from *conversion*. A family can provide shelter without creating a job; a programme can provide training without employment linkage; and a community organisation can reduce shame without being connected to public services. The issue is whether a pathway converts available support into durable participation. Institutional continuity can amplify relational resources, while scarcity increases dependence on informal brokerage. Because social capital is unequally distributed, that dependence can reproduce inequality (Coleman, 1988; Simonds, 2024).

5.3 Brokerage as a Double-Edged Mechanism

Relational brokerage is neither simply a protective factor nor an informal equivalent of formal service delivery. It is a *conversion* mechanism: endorsement reduces uncertainty, access creates participation, and participation can produce visible evidence of reliability. Employment is especially important because it links material and symbolic *conversion*. A recommendation may open a job; sustained work may change how employers, neighbours, and relatives interpret the person's past.

The mechanism also has a stratifying side. A person with a respected relative, elder, employer, or community leader possesses endorsement opportunities not equally available to someone whose network has been damaged by imprisonment, poverty, family conflict, or migration. Under institutional scarcity, that difference matters more because formal pathways are less able to compensate. Inequality is therefore amplified when relationships become the principal infrastructure of access.

5.4 Stigma, Gatekeeping, and the Fragility of Conversion

Stigma affects reintegration partly by reducing the credibility and reach of relational support. This locates stigma inside the *conversion* mechanism. A recommendation is also a claim about reliability; when the criminal label remains dominant, the claim may be discounted. Conversely, repeated work and lawful participation can create evidence that gradually changes the social meaning of the past. Braithwaite's (1989) distinction between stigmatizing and reintegrative responses is therefore relevant to whether communities permit new evidence about identity and conduct to accumulate.

5.5 Place and the Visibility of Social Governance

The urban-rural comparison reinforces an ecological interpretation of place. Relevant variation concerns how quickly reputation circulates, who can vouch for a returning person, how employers obtain information, and whether formal services connect with community organisations. Place, therefore, conditions the structure and visibility of relationships rather than independently determining reintegration. The present evidence cannot establish locality-specific effects, but it illustrates how the same mechanism can operate through different social architectures.

5.6 Threefold Contribution of the Institutional Relational Model

The contribution is conceptual, mechanistic, and distributional. *Conceptually*, institutional scarcity is defined as failure of formal arrangements to connect release with

usable, continuous pathways into ordinary community life. *Mechanistically*, relational brokerage is the *conversion* process linking relationships to endorsement, access, participation, visible reliability, and community recognition. *Distributionally*, the model explains why institutional dependence on brokerage can make network inequality consequential: where brokerage becomes infrastructural, unequal access to trusted brokers becomes unequal access to reintegration opportunities.

The contribution is integrative rather than merely additive. Social Bond Theory explains attachment and commitment; Social Support Theory and social capital explain relational resources; strain explains blocked reintegration; stigma and labelling explain exclusion; Social Disorganization Theory explains community organisation; desistance and life-course perspectives explain temporal change; and relational sociology explains how these processes become connected. The distinctive claim is that institutional conditions alter the *conversion* and durability of relational resources.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings indicate a continuity problem rather than a single-service deficit. Reintegration should begin before release and continue into community life with a clear point of responsibility for follow-up. The policy task is to create a pathway linking correctional institutions, probation, social services, NGOs, local government, family support, and employment assistance (Shiblezzaman, 2020; Nabi et al., 2024; Razzaque, 2026).

Post-release case management should function as a broker, connecting returning people with documentation, employment, counselling, family assistance, and community resources. Livelihood programmes should connect training to actual work; family interventions should recognise both protective and demanding dimensions; and community actors should be engaged carefully because they can reduce stigma or reproduce gatekeeping. Service design should also reduce dependence on private connections so that people without influential brokers have comparable routes into assistance and employment. The policy principle is not to replace formal institutions with community networks, but to connect institutional continuity to relational resources.

A recommendation from a respected person can open a door; a dependable institutional pathway should keep the door open. Formal systems should therefore amplify legitimate relationships rather than force families and informal brokers to carry the full burden of reintegration.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The theoretical model is supported by patterns demonstrable in the dataset, while unresolved archival fields remain explicitly bounded rather than reconstructed. The study is qualitative and purposively sampled, so its contribution is analytical transferability rather than statistical generalisation. The dataset contains no validated longitudinal measure of recidivism, and no predictive claim about reoffending is made. Participant-level site location is not consistently preserved, so site comparison remains contextual. The quotation

identifiers used here are anonymous reporting labels that require archival reconciliation. Exact ethics-approval, informed-consent, data-security, and positionality details are not contained in the supplied manuscript and must be taken from the approved protocol rather than reconstructed.

The model is not formally tested in the present study. Future longitudinal qualitative research should trace changes in institutional access and relational brokerage after release; comparative research with verified site identifiers could examine contextual pathways; and mixed-method designs could operationalise the propositions using employment stability, social acceptance, service uptake, and recorded or self-reported reoffending. Grounded-theory research could subsequently examine whether the propositions hold, require revision, or develop into more formal theory.

8. Conclusion

Post-prison reintegration is not completed by release. The evidence shows a process in which released prisoners rebuild livelihoods, family roles, social trust, reputation, and everyday stability while navigating uneven formal support. Family relationships often provide protection; employment supplies income and visible evidence of change; community actors can restore or restrict legitimacy; and stigma can persist after sentence completion. These patterns are compatible with, but not reducible to, established theories of bonds, support, strain, community organisation, stigma, desistance, and life-course change.

The principal contribution is the specification of an institutional-relational mechanism. *Institutional scarcity* shifts practical reintegration work toward relationships. Where formal systems provide continuity, relationships can complement institutional support; where continuity is weak, relationships may substitute for it, turning personal connections into gateways to employment, legitimacy, guidance, and belonging. That substitution is neither uniformly protective nor evenly available. The Institutional Relational Model, therefore, proposes that sustainability depends on whether institutional arrangements allow relational resources to be converted into sustained opportunities, legitimate roles, and community recognition.

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