

**EFFECTS OF REINTEGRATION APPROACHES ON REINTEGRATION OUTCOMES
AMONG CHILDREN TRANSITIONING FROM INSTITUTIONAL CARE TO
COMMUNITY LIFE: EVIDENCE FROM MERU CHILDREN'S HOME, MERU
COUNTY, KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

Reintegration of children from Charitable Children's Institutions (CCIs) into family and community settings remains a critical child protection concern in Kenya. Although the National Care Reform Strategy (2022–2032) promotes family-based care as the preferred alternative to institutionalization, evidence on factors associated with successful reintegration remains limited. This study examined the influence of institutional support, legal and policy frameworks, and post-reintegration services on reintegration outcomes among children reintegrated from Meru Children's Home in Meru County, Kenya. The study adopted a mixed-methods case study design and collected data from 96 respondents using structured questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings showed that most reintegrated children lived with their parents and remained enrolled in school or vocational training, indicating positive social and educational adjustment. Institutional support, legal and policy frameworks, and post-reintegration services each contributed to successful reintegration outcomes. Children who received adequate preparation before reintegration, including counseling, emotional support, participation in decision-making, and family involvement, adjusted better to family and community life. Effective child protection systems, monitoring mechanisms, and awareness of children's rights also enhanced reintegration experiences. Continued psychosocial support, educational assistance, follow-up services, and provision of basic needs after reintegration further promoted children's well-being, resilience, and social integration. Institutional support emerged as the most influential predictor of successful reintegration. The study concludes that reintegration is not a one-time

placement event but a continuous process that requires coordinated support before, during, and after a child leaves institutional care. The study recommends strengthening pre-reintegration preparation, enhancing the implementation and monitoring of child protection policies, and expanding post-reintegration support services to improve the long-term well-being and successful adjustment of reintegrated children.

Keywords: Child reintegration; family-based care; Charitable Children's Institutions (CCIs); institutional support; post-reintegration services; child protection policy; Meru County; Kenya.

1.0 Introduction

The care, protection, and development of children without adequate parental care remain a critical concern within global child welfare systems because millions of children experience separation from their families due to poverty, neglect, abuse, abandonment, orphanhood, disability, conflict, and family instability (Better Care Network, 2021; UNICEF, 2022). In response to these vulnerabilities, institutional care systems, including residential care facilities and Charitable Children's Institutions (CCIs), have historically been established to provide protection, shelter, education, healthcare, and basic needs for children requiring alternative care arrangements (UNICEF, 2022; Better Care Network, 2021). However, although institutional care may provide immediate protection and essential services, extensive research has demonstrated that prolonged institutionalization can negatively affect children's emotional, social, and developmental outcomes due to limited individualized caregiving, unstable attachment relationships, and reduced opportunities for family interaction (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020; Phillimore et al., 2022).

Globally, millions of children continue to live in institutional and residential care settings despite evidence that many have living parents or extended family members who could potentially provide care if adequate social and economic support systems were available (UNICEF, 2022; Better Care Network, 2022). The continued use of institutional care has generated concern among child protection researchers because children raised in such environments are more likely to experience emotional neglect, weakened social relationships, disrupted identity development, and challenges transitioning successfully into adulthood (Better Care Network, 2021; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). Consequently, international child protection frameworks have increasingly promoted deinstitutionalization, emphasizing family preservation, reunification, kinship care, and community-based alternatives as more appropriate approaches for ensuring children's rights and long-term well-being (United Nations, 2010; UNICEF, 2022).

The transition of children from institutional care to family and community environments is increasingly recognized as a complex child protection process rather than a single relocation event (Better Care Network, 2023). Reintegration requires restoration of family relationships, rebuilding of social networks, emotional adjustment, educational continuity, community acceptance, and access to essential services after children leave institutional settings (Petrowski et al., 2017; Save the Children, 2021). Evidence indicates that reintegration programmes that combine child

preparation, counselling, family assessment, caregiver engagement, community sensitization, economic strengthening, and structured follow-up mechanisms achieve more sustainable outcomes compared with poorly planned reunification processes (Better Care Network, 2023; Save the Children, 2021).

In developing countries, including those in sub-Saharan Africa, implementation of family-based care reforms remains challenging because poverty, weak social protection systems, limited child welfare infrastructure, inadequate community services, and insufficient resources continue to contribute to unnecessary separation of children from their families (Better Care Network, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). These structural challenges mean that successful reintegration requires interventions that address not only children's immediate needs but also the social, economic, and relational conditions influencing family capacity to provide safe and sustainable care (Delap, 2020; Save the Children, 2021).

Kenya reflects these broader child protection challenges, where institutional care has historically been used to support children separated from families due to orphanhood, abandonment, neglect, abuse, poverty, and family-related vulnerabilities (National Council for Children's Services [NCCS], 2023; UNICEF, 2022). Charitable Children's Institutions (CCIs) have played an important role in providing care and protection; however, concerns remain regarding their ability to support children's long-term emotional development, family relationships, and successful transition into community life (Better Care Network, 2021; Phillimore et al., 2022). In Kenya, thousands of children continue to reside in CCIs despite evidence that many maintain connections with parents or extended family members, suggesting the need for stronger family strengthening and reintegration mechanisms (UNICEF, 2022; NCCS, 2023).

The persistence of institutional placement in Kenya is associated with multiple social and economic factors, including household poverty, family breakdown, stigma, limited parenting support, inadequate community-based services, and weak preventive child protection mechanisms (Delap, 2020; Save the Children, 2021). These challenges demonstrate that reducing reliance on institutional care requires not only policy reform but also effective reintegration approaches that prepare children, strengthen families, and support communities in receiving children back into safe environments (Government of Kenya, 2022; Better Care Network, 2023).

In response to these concerns, Kenya introduced the National Care Reform Strategy for Children in Kenya (2022–2032) to transform the child care system from institutional-based approaches toward family and community-based care alternatives (Government of Kenya, 2022). The strategy emphasizes prevention of unnecessary separation, strengthening family-based care options, improving reintegration processes, and enhancing monitoring and accountability mechanisms for children transitioning from institutional care (Government of Kenya, 2022). This reform direction is consistent with the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, which

recognize family environments as central to children's development, identity formation, and realization of their rights (United Nations, 2010; UNICEF, 2022).

Despite these policy developments, successful reintegration of children leaving institutional care remains a major challenge because positive outcomes depend on the availability, quality, and continuity of support before, during, and after transition (Better Care Network, 2023). Studies indicate that children exiting institutional care may experience challenges related to emotional adjustment, family acceptance, social integration, education continuity, and economic stability when adequate support systems are absent (Save the Children, 2021; UNICEF, 2022). Weak monitoring systems, limited financial resources, inadequate follow-up services, and inconsistent implementation of reintegration procedures continue to undermine sustainable reintegration outcomes in many settings (Better Care Network, 2022; Phillimore et al., 2022).

Successful reintegration is therefore influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including institutional support, legal and policy frameworks, and post-reintegration services. Institutional support mechanisms such as preparation before exit, counselling, child participation, caregiver engagement, and transition planning contribute to children's emotional readiness and adjustment after leaving care (Petrowski et al., 2017; Better Care Network, 2023). Similarly, supportive legal and policy frameworks provide standards for safeguarding children's rights, guiding reintegration processes, and ensuring accountability among child protection actors (Government of Kenya, 2022; United Nations, 2010). Post-reintegration services, including psychosocial support, education assistance, family strengthening, and follow-up visits, are critical in promoting children's resilience, stability, and successful integration into community life (Save the Children, 2021; Better Care Network, 2023).

However, despite increasing recognition of the importance of reintegration support, empirical evidence remains limited regarding how specific reintegration approaches influence outcomes among children transitioning from institutional care, particularly within local Kenyan contexts. Existing studies have largely focused on the need for deinstitutionalization and child protection reform, with less attention given to evaluating which approaches contribute most effectively to successful reintegration outcomes (Better Care Network, 2023; UNICEF, 2022).

Meru County provides an important context for examining reintegration approaches because it has participated in child care reform initiatives and community-based child protection interventions aligned with Kenya's broader care reform agenda (Government of Kenya, 2022). Meru Children's Home has implemented interventions aimed at transitioning children from institutional care into family and community environments; however, limited empirical research has examined how these reintegration approaches influence children's post-care experiences, including social adjustment, educational continuity, emotional well-being, and community acceptance.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this knowledge gap by examining the effect of reintegration approaches on reintegration outcomes among children transitioning from institutional care to community life, using Meru Children's Home in Meru County, Kenya, as a case study. The findings are expected to contribute empirical evidence for strengthening family-based care models, improving reintegration programming, and supporting sustainable child protection reforms in Kenya and comparable developing-country contexts.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite Kenya's ongoing shift from institutional care toward family and community-based reintegration, there is limited empirical evidence on how different reintegration approaches influence reintegration outcomes for children after exit from care. Existing reports indicate that 75% of children leaving CCIs struggle with reintegration and 50% experience housing instability within one year (UNICEF, 2022), yet the underlying mechanisms explaining why certain reintegration strategies work while others do not remain unclear. Although counties such as Meru were among the earliest pilot sites under the National Care Reform Strategy (2022–2032), research on Meru's specific reintegration practices and their effect on children's post-care outcomes is scarce. This creates a critical knowledge gap, especially given that Meru Children's Home has reintegrated a significant number of children, with recent reports showing that many still encounter challenges related to social adjustment and economic stability (Tree of Life Agency, 2023).

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Resilience theory

2.1.1 Resilience Theory

This study is anchored in Resilience Theory, which explains how children adapt and recover positively despite adversity, including the transition from institutional care to family and community settings. Resilience is understood as a dynamic process through which children develop the capacity to cope with challenges arising from institutionalization, family separation, and other vulnerabilities.

The theory emphasizes that resilience is not an inherent trait but is shaped by the interaction between risk and protective factors. Internal protective factors include self-efficacy, problem-solving abilities, and temperament, while external factors include supportive relationships, access to services, and stable environments. In the context of child reintegration, these factors influence whether children successfully reconnect with families and communities or experience challenges such as school dropout, emotional distress, or re-institutionalization.

Ungar (2004, 2011) highlights that resilience is context-specific and influenced by social, cultural, and economic conditions. In Kenya, reintegrated children often return to households facing poverty and limited access to essential services. Therefore, promoting resilience requires not only

psychological support but also strengthening family livelihoods, improving access to education, and building community support systems.

Resilience Theory supports this study's conceptual framework by explaining how institutional support, legal frameworks, post-reintegration services, and socioeconomic conditions influence children's ability to adapt after leaving CCIs. However, the theory has been criticized for placing too much emphasis on individual capacity while overlooking structural challenges such as poverty, weak policies, and institutional limitations. This study addresses this limitation by applying a broader systems perspective, recognizing that successful reintegration depends on both children's abilities and the availability of supportive environments.

2.1.2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

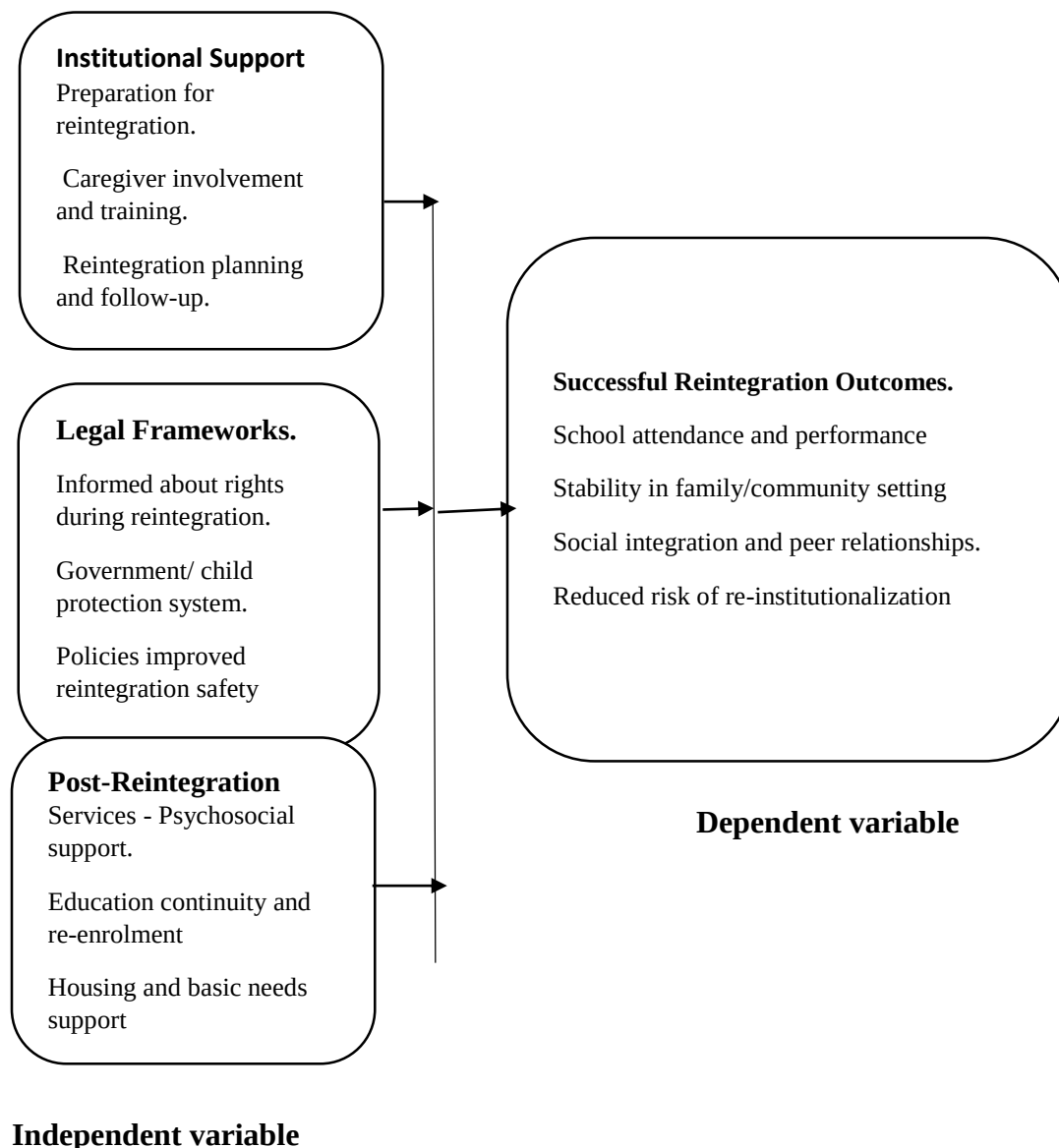
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains how children's development and reintegration are influenced by multiple environmental systems. The microsystem highlights the role of immediate relationships, including family, caregivers, and peers, in shaping a child's adjustment after leaving institutional care. The mesosystem focuses on interactions between these settings, such as collaboration between families, schools, and support providers, which affect reintegration outcomes.

The exosystem includes wider structures such as child welfare services, government programs, and legal frameworks that influence the support available to children and caregivers. The macrosystem considers cultural values, social attitudes, and economic conditions that shape children's acceptance and sense of belonging. The chronosystem emphasizes the influence of time, including changes in family circumstances, policies, and developmental stages, on the reintegration process.

This theory supports a holistic understanding of child reintegration by recognizing that successful outcomes depend on the interaction of individual, family, community, institutional, and policy-level factors. In this study, Bronfenbrenner's framework is applied to examine how these interconnected systems support or hinder the reintegration of children from Charitable Children's Institutions (CCIs) in Kenya.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework is a representation of the relationship between variables of the study, (Swaen & George, 2023). It illustrated the expected relationship between variables in a study. It defines diagrammatically the relevant objectives for research process in a study and maps out how variables came and drew coherent conclusions. The diagram below depicted the conceptual framework that guided the study



3.0 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design to examine the effect of reintegration approaches on reintegration outcomes among children transitioning from institutional care to community life in Meru County, Kenya. The design enabled the collection of quantitative and qualitative data at a single point in time, allowing for the examination of measurable reintegration outcomes alongside participants' lived experiences.

Data were collected from 96 respondents drawn from Meru Children's Home and the surrounding community. The respondents comprised reintegrated children, children preparing for reintegration

Stratified random sampling was used to select child participants based on age, gender, and reintegration status. The sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for estimating sample size in survey research:

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2} \quad (1)$$

where n is the required sample size, Z is the standard normal value at the 95% confidence level (1.96), $p = 0.50$ is the estimated population proportion where the true proportion is unknown, $q = 1 - p$, and $e = 0.10$ is the acceptable margin of error for a pilot study. The calculated minimum sample size was approximately 96 respondents.

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{(0.1)^2} = 96.04$$

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews. Before the main survey, the research instruments were pilot-tested at Murang'a Children's Rescue Centre in Kahuro Sub-county using approximately 10% of the study sample. Feedback from the pilot study was used to improve the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the instruments.

3.1 Analytical Framework

The study employed descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the study variables. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to examine the effect of institutional support, legal and policy frameworks, and post-reintegration services on reintegration outcomes, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to complement the quantitative findings.

4.0 Results and Discussions.

4.1.1. Demographic characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Most respondents were male (67.7%), while 32.3% were female. The highest proportion of children were reintegrated in 2022 (22.9%) and 2023 (21.9%). Most respondents were living with their parents (63.5%), followed by relatives (18.8%) and grandparents (13.5%). In addition, 84.4% were enrolled in school or vocational training, indicating positive educational continuity following reintegration. These findings suggest that family-based reintegration supports children's social stability and educational participation, consistent with studies by Neville et al. (2025) and Abu et al. (2024), which found that reintegration into supportive family environments promotes better psychosocial adjustment, educational continuity, and overall well-being.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency (n=96)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Boy	65	67.7
	Girl	31	32.3
Year of Reintegration	2019	7	7.3
	2020	16	16.7
	2021	17	17.7
	2022	22	22.9
	2023	21	21.9
	2024	13	13.5
Current Living Arrangement	Parent	61	63.5
	Grandparent	13	13.5
	Relative	18	18.8
	Guardian	4	4.2
School/Vocational Training Attendance	Yes	81	84.4
	No	15	15.6

4.1.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables: institutional support, legal and policy frameworks, post-reintegration services, and reintegration outcomes. Across all constructs, respondents predominantly selected the neutral response category, indicating moderate perceptions of the reintegration process and the support received. Mean scores ranged from 2.70 to 3.10, suggesting generally moderate levels of agreement with the statements, while standard deviations ranged from 0.69 to 0.96, indicating relatively low to moderate variability in responses. Among the four constructs, reintegration outcomes recorded the highest mean scores (2.91–3.10), reflecting comparatively more positive perceptions of children's adjustment and well-being after reintegration. In contrast, legal and policy frameworks recorded the lowest mean score (2.70), suggesting relatively weaker perceptions of the effectiveness of legal protection, monitoring, and policy implementation. Overall, the findings indicate that institutional support, legal and policy mechanisms, and post-reintegration services were perceived as moderately adequate, with scope for strengthening to enhance successful reintegration outcomes.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	SD
Institutional Support							
Informed about reintegration process	6.25	28.13	39.58	21.88	4.17	2.9	0.96
Discussed future living arrangements	5.21	31.25	39.58	20.83	3.13	2.85	0.92
Participated in reintegration decisions	5.21	28.13	41.67	25	0	2.86	0.85
Received counseling/emotional preparation	5.21	30.21	37.5	25	2.08	2.89	0.92
Family/caregivers involved before return	4.17	22.92	42.71	26.04	4.17	3.03	0.91
Institution prepared child for community life	5.21	28.13	43.75	20.83	2.08	2.86	0.88
Legal and Policy Frameworks							
Informed about rights during reintegration	4.17	27.08	46.88	20.83	1.04	2.88	0.82
Follow-up visits conducted	3.13	29.17	50	15.63	2.08	2.84	0.8
Child protection officers available	10.4	29.17	42.71	15.63	2.08	2.7	0.93
Reintegration process properly monitored	6.25	35.42	39.58	17.71	1.04	2.72	0.87
Knows where to report abuse	3.13	30.21	43.75	18.75	4.17	2.91	0.88
Government/child protection systems supported reintegration	7.29	27.08	45.83	15.63	4.17	2.82	0.93
Policies improved reintegration safety/stability	5.21	22.92	51.04	19.79	1.04	2.89	0.82
Pre-reintegration support helped adjustment	4.17	29.17	45.83	16.67	4.17	2.88	0.89
Post-Reintegration Services							
Received psychosocial/counseling support	6.25	26.04	48.96	17.71	1.04	2.81	0.84
Received educational support	5.21	33.33	46.88	12.5	2.08	2.73	0.83
Received regular follow-up support	1.04	27.08	54.17	15.63	2.08	2.91	0.74
Family/community provides basic needs	3.13	26.04	43.75	23.96	3.13	2.98	0.87
Support services helped adjustment	5.21	28.13	52.08	13.54	1.04	2.77	0.79
Available services meet current needs	4.17	32.29	44.79	18.75	0	2.78	0.8
Continued support improved wellbeing	7.29	26.04	42.71	21.88	2.08	2.85	0.92

Reintegration Outcomes							
Feel accepted in family/community	3.13	25	51.04	19.79	1.04	2.91	0.78
Feel safe where currently living	1.04	26.04	46.88	22.92	3.13	3.01	0.81
Adjusted well to community life	4.17	20.83	56.25	17.71	1.04	2.91	0.77
Emotionally stable since return	1.04	32.29	43.75	20.83	2.08	2.91	0.81
Participate comfortably in activities	0	22.92	56.25	19.79	1.04	2.99	0.69
Positive relationships with family/community	3.13	19.79	52.08	22.92	2.08	3.01	0.8
Reintegration improved wellbeing	3.13	21.88	51.04	21.88	2.08	2.98	0.81
Hopeful about the future	0	22.92	44.79	31.25	1.04	3.1	0.76

4.2 Regression Analysis

The regression results in Table 3 indicate that the combined effect of institutional support, legal and policy frameworks, and post-reintegration services explained 56.1% of the variation in reintegration outcomes ($R^2 = 0.561$). The adjusted R^2 of 0.519 suggests that, after adjusting for the number of predictors, approximately 51.9% of the variation in reintegration outcomes remains explained by the independent variables. The overall regression model was statistically significant ($F = 13.24$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the predictors jointly influenced reintegration outcomes among reintegrated children and adolescents.

Table 3: Model Summary

Statistic	Value
R	0.749
R^2	0.561
Adjusted R^2	0.519
Root MSE	0.441
F-statistic	13.24
Prob > F	0.000

The regression results in Table 4 indicate that all three predictor variables had a positive and statistically significant effect on reintegration outcomes. Institutional support had the strongest influence ($\beta = 0.410$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that adequate preparation, counselling, caregiver involvement, and reintegration planning enhance children's adjustment to family and community life. Legal and policy frameworks also had a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.258$, $p = 0.004$), highlighting the importance of effective child protection systems, policy implementation, and monitoring mechanisms in safeguarding children's rights during reintegration. Similarly, post-reintegration services significantly improved reintegration outcomes ($\beta = 0.390$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating the value of continued psychosocial support, educational assistance, follow-up services, and provision of basic needs after placement. Overall, the findings suggest that successful

reintegration is a continuous process requiring coordinated support before, during, and after transition from institutional care. These findings are consistent with Kalra and Modi (2025), Grover et al. (2026), and Wilke et al. (2020), who emphasize that effective reintegration depends on comprehensive preparation, supportive policy frameworks, family engagement, and sustained post-reintegration support.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	0.537	0.392	—	1.37	0.175
Institutional Support	0.299	0.065	0.41	4.57	0.000
Legal & Policy Frameworks	0.206	0.07	0.258	2.94	0.004
Post-Reintegration Services	0.35	0.08	0.39	4.38	0.000

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that reintegration outcomes among children transitioning from institutional care to community life are significantly influenced by the quality and continuity of support provided before, during, and after reintegration. The findings demonstrate that institutional support, legal and policy frameworks, and post-reintegration services collectively contribute to improved reintegration outcomes, accounting for a substantial proportion of variation in children’s adjustment to family and community environments.

Institutional support emerged as the most influential determinant of successful reintegration, emphasizing the critical role of structured preparation processes, including psychosocial counselling, child participation, caregiver engagement, and transition planning. This highlights that reintegration effectiveness depends not only on the physical movement of children from institutions to families but also on their emotional readiness, relational stability, and ability to adapt to new environments.

The study further concludes that legal and policy frameworks provide an essential foundation for sustainable reintegration by establishing standards for child protection, accountability, monitoring, and coordination among stakeholders. However, the existence of policies alone is insufficient unless accompanied by effective implementation mechanisms, adequate resources, and consistent monitoring at community and institutional levels.

Additionally, post-reintegration services were found to significantly enhance reintegration outcomes, demonstrating that support should continue beyond placement. Continuous psychosocial assistance, educational support, family strengthening, and follow-up mechanisms are

essential for maintaining children's wellbeing, resilience, and social inclusion. Therefore, reintegration should be conceptualized as a long-term developmental process requiring coordinated interventions across institutional, family, community, and policy systems.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing evidence that successful deinstitutionalization requires a comprehensive, child-centred, and systems-based approach. Sustainable reintegration is achieved when children are supported within enabling family and community environments that address their protection, emotional, educational, and social needs.

Recommendations

Child care institutions should institutionalize comprehensive pre-reintegration preparation programmes that incorporate psychosocial counselling, emotional readiness support, child participation in decision-making, caregiver engagement, and family strengthening to enhance children's successful adjustment after transition to community-based care.

Government agencies and child protection stakeholders should strengthen the implementation, coordination, and monitoring of child protection policies and reintegration guidelines to ensure effective safeguarding, accountability, and continuity of support for children transitioning from institutional care.

Organizations implementing reintegration programmes should establish sustainable post-reintegration support mechanisms that provide ongoing psychosocial services, educational assistance, family support, and follow-up monitoring to promote children's long-term wellbeing, resilience, and reduce the risk of re-institutionalization.

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Appendix A: Demographic Characteristics

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Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	0.537	0.392	—	1.37	0.175
Institutional Support	0.299	0.065	0.41	4.57	0.000
Legal & Policy Frameworks	0.206	0.07	0.258	2.94	0.004
Post-Reintegration Services	0.35	0.08	0.39	4.38	0.000