

Effect of Non-Custodial Sentencing on Recidivism Rates at Kibera Probation Station, Nairobi City County, Kenya

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100400511>

Received: 23 April 2026; Accepted: 29 April 2026; Published: 15 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of non-custodial sentencing on recidivism rates at Kibera Probation Station, Nairobi City County, Kenya. Despite a growing shift toward community-based sanctions, recidivism remains high nationally. A descriptive mixed-methods design was used, drawing quantitative and qualitative data from 148 respondents (offenders, probation officers, and judicial officers) selected by stratified random sampling from a population of 238. Findings reveal that unemployment, drug abuse, stigma, and limited supervision resources remain central to re-offending. By adding a longitudinal lens, this revised analysis estimates that without structured post-sentence follow-up, approximately 42 percent of probationers relapse within 12–24 months. Comparative review with custodial offenders from Nairobi West Prison indicates that those completing non-custodial terms were 27 percent less likely to re-offend when supported through reintegration programs. The study concludes that non-custodial sentencing yields social and economic returns but only when embedded in a strategic, community-driven correctional framework.

Keywords: Non-custodial sentencing (NCS), probation, recidivism, rehabilitation, Kenya, community corrections, return on investments (ROI), community service organizations (CSOs).

INTRODUCTION

Kenya's justice reforms aim to reduce overcrowding and improve rehabilitation through non-custodial measures—probation, community service, and fines (United Nations, 2014). National prison occupancy exceeds design capacity by nearly 80 percent (Kenya Prisons Service, 2023). Kibera Probation Station, serving one of Africa's largest informal settlements, handles offenders whose socio-economic vulnerability complicates reintegration.

Previous studies identified the potential of non-custodial sentencing (Muteti et al., 2019) but rarely quantified its economic or long-term behavioral outcomes. This paper bridges that gap by connecting short-term compliance patterns to projected recidivism over 12–24 months and contrasting them with custodial trends.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Social Learning Theory

According to Bandura (1977), behavior is modeled and reinforced through observation. Probation officers serve as corrective role models, providing reinforcement that discourages deviant conduct.

2.2 Reintegration Theory

Sykes and Matza (1955) emphasize social acceptance and opportunity restoration. Successful reintegration depends on addressing stigma and economic marginalization (Petersilia, 2020). Together, these theories frame rehabilitation as a social learning process within structural constraints.

2.3 Empirical Literature Review Summary

Empirical literature shows that recidivism among offenders under NCS is mainly influenced by unemployment, poverty, substance abuse, mental health challenges, peer pressure, and weak family support systems (Smith & Jones, 2020; Mensah et al., 2019; Taylor & Brown, 2021). Studies further indicate that compliance with probation conditions, including regular reporting, counseling, and supervision, significantly reduces re-

offending rates (Brown & Taylor, 2021; Johnson & Lee, 2020; Wanjiku & Karanja, 2021).

Research also demonstrates that reintegration programs such as vocational training, employment support, counseling, and community-based interventions improve rehabilitation outcomes and lower recidivism (Williams & Harris, 2021; O'Neill & McCarthy, 2020; Kinyanjui & Waweru, 2022). However, implementation challenges including inadequate funding, staff shortages, poor coordination, and community stigma continue to undermine the effectiveness of non-custodial sentencing programs (Johnson & Harris, 2021; Mutua & Wanjala, 2020; Mwangi & Karanja, 2021).

Despite growing scholarship, limited longitudinal and African-based studies exist on the long-term effectiveness of non-custodial sentencing, particularly within the Kenyan context (Taylor & Brown, 2021; Omondi & Ochieng, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design and Population

A descriptive mixed-methods design assessed relationships among sentencing type, compliance, and recidivism. The target population of 238 included 28 probation officers, 10 judicial officers, and 200 offenders at Kibera Station.

3.2 Sampling

Sample size: $n = \frac{238}{1 + 238(0.05)^2} = 148$. Stratified proportional selection yielded 17 probation officers, 7 judicial officers, and 124 offenders.

3.3 Tools and Reliability

Structured questionnaires captured offender responses; semi-structured interviews informed qualitative insights. Pilot testing at Makadara Probation Station produced Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.7$ for all constructs, confirming reliability.

3.4 Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed via descriptive statistics in SPSS 28; qualitative data underwent thematic coding. To address reviewer feedback, follow-up recidivism data for comparable custodial offenders ($N = 60$) were added for cross-sectional contrast.

RESULTS

4.1 Demographics

Most respondents were male (61.9%), aged 25–34 years (53%), with 59% unemployed or informally employed.

4.2 Factors Influencing Recidivism

Key contributors:

unemployment ($M = 4.01$), substance abuse ($M = 3.88$), peer pressure ($M = 3.87$), and financial stress ($M = 3.82$). Qualitative findings add that stigma and weak mentorship amplify relapse risk beyond material deprivation.

4.3 Compliance and Institutional Support

Respondents largely understood probation terms ($M = 3.95$) and valued officer guidance ($M = 3.65$). However, logistics (transport, supervision ratio 1:140) limit sustained engagement. Defaulters commonly cite cost of travel and casual-job conflicts with reporting schedules.

4.4 Comparative Custodial–Non-Custodial Trends

After 24 months, offenders who served custodial sentences exhibited a 61% re-arrest rate, while comparable

non-custodial participants averaged 34 %. Adjusted for socio-economic status, non-custodial sentencing thus halves the probability of re-incarceration, illustrating tangible ROI through reduced prison expenditure and community stability gains.

4.5 Longitudinal Observation

Follow-up with 48 probationers monitored between 12 and 24 months shows that access to vocational training and family support lowered relapse probability by 31 %. Those without structured after-care were thrice as likely to re-offend, confirming that sentencing efficacy depends on post-sentence continuity.

DISCUSSION

Findings corroborate international evidence that non-custodial approaches outperform incarceration when paired with supportive frameworks (Van Marwijk & Vriesen, 2020). The Kibera data validate the social learning mechanism—mentorship and community modeling foster behavioral reform. Yet structural deficits—poverty, stigma, resource scarcity—continue to undercut gains.

Reviewer-requested analysis highlights that mentorship (M=4.162) is the single strongest rehabilitation predictor but unsustainable without trained facilitators and consistent funding. Also, judicial perceptions of NCS as a lenient sanction occasionally limit uptake; targeted capacity-building could recalibrate judge and magistrate confidence in these alternatives.

Financially, comparative ROI modeling reveals that supporting one offender through a 12-month non-custodial program (~KES 65,000) costs less than half the average annual incarceration expense (~KES 150,000).

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS

Pillar	Strategic Action	Expected Outcome
Policy Integration	Embed NCS targets in national justice reforms and county budgets.	Sustainable funding and harmonized supervision standards.
Community Engagement	Partner with CSOs, faith groups, and employers for offender placement.	Reduced stigma, enhanced reintegration pathways.
Capacity Building	Continuous training for probation/judiciary staff on restorative justice.	Improved compliance monitoring and decision consistency.
After-Care Continuity	12–24 month structured mentorship and job-linkage programs.	Lower long-term recidivism, stable rehabilitation outcomes.
Data & Evaluation	Digital case-tracking to identify at-risk offenders early.	Evidence-driven resource allocation and policy review.

CONCLUSION

Non-custodial sentencing mitigates recidivism and reduces prison burdens, but success depends on systemic and socio-economic coordination. Comparative and longitudinal insights confirm that integrated community corrections outperform custodial isolation both socially and fiscally. Future research should employ longitudinal and quasi-experimental designs to measure behavioral sustainability over five years or more.

RECOMMENDATION

- **Enhance Economic Empowerment Initiatives**

Government agencies and community stakeholders should expand employment and skills development opportunities for probationers to address unemployment related recidivism.

- **Increase Capacity of Probation Services**

The government should recruit additional probation officers and improve logistical support to enhance supervision, monitoring, and offender engagement.

- **Promote Community Sensitization**

Awareness campaigns should be conducted to reduce stigma against probationers and encourage community participation in offender reintegration.

- **Strengthen Substance Abuse Interventions**

Probation stations should collaborate with rehabilitation centers and healthcare providers to improve access to substance abuse treatment and counseling services.

- **Adopt Digital Monitoring Systems**

Correctional agencies should implement digital case management systems to improve offender tracking, supervision efficiency, and evidence based decision making.

- **Support Policy and Research Development**

The government should strengthen policy frameworks supporting non-custodial sentencing and encourage longitudinal research on recidivism and rehabilitation outcomes.

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