

EVALUATION OF THE NIGERIA CORRECTIONAL SERVICE SYSTEM: LESSONS FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM*

Abstract

The Nigerian correctional system remains one of the most challenged institutions within the country's criminal justice architecture. Despite the enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 which replaced the outdated Prisons Act and sought to reorient the system toward rehabilitation and reintegration, custodial centres continue to reflect a congested, punitive, and largely ineffective environment. The primary objective of this study is to assess the effectiveness of the Nigerian Correctional Service in fulfilling its statutory and humanitarian mandates of reformation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The study evaluates legislative and policy foundations, interrogates the roots of persistent inefficiency, and extracts lessons from the more structured, rights-based UK approach. Methodologically, the paper adopts a comparative doctrinal research design, relying on statutory analysis, case law, government reports, and scholarly literature. Primary sources include the 1999 Constitution, Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015, Prisons Act 1952, the UK Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, and international human rights instruments such as the Nelson Mandela Rules and Bangkok Rules. Findings reveal that although Nigeria has made notable legislative strides, the system remains constrained by centralisation, chronic underfunding, and weak accountability mechanisms. Conversely, the UK model demonstrates how autonomy, structured oversight, victim participation, and evidence-based rehabilitation improve outcomes. The study concludes that genuine reform in Nigeria requires a shift toward restorative, transparent, and technology-driven correctional practice anchored on respect for human dignity.

Keywords: Nigerian Correctional Service, Prison Reform, Rehabilitation and Restorative Justice, United Kingdom, Prisoners Act 2024.

1. Introduction

The correctional system plays a central role in the administration of criminal justice by enforcing lawful sentences, detaining offenders, and facilitating their reformation and reintegration into society.¹ In Nigeria, this role is performed by the Nigerian Correctional Service. It is an institution formally established under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 to replace the former Nigerian Prisons Service.² The Act introduced a paradigm shift from a punitive to a rehabilitative model of imprisonment, reflecting a global trend towards humane treatment and restorative justice.³ Despite these legislative advances, the Nigerian correctional system continues to grapple with overcrowding, infrastructural decay, pre-trial congestion, inadequate funding, staff shortages, and recurrent human rights abuses.⁴ In 2024, official statistics revealed that more than 70 per cent of inmates in Nigerian custodial centres were awaiting trial, a figure that underscores systemic inefficiency and the failure of custodial justice.⁵

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¹ Andrew Ashworth and Lucia Zedner, *Preventive Justice* (Oxford University Press 2014) 11.

² Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, s 2.

³ *ibid* s 3; see also UN General Assembly, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)* (A/RES/70/175, 17 December 2015).

⁴ Nigerian National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), *Report on the State of Nigerian Prisons* (Abuja 2022) 4.

⁵ Nigerian Correctional Service, *Annual Statistical Report* (Abuja 2024) <<https://correctionalservice.gov.ng>> accessed 10 October 2025

Scholars have described Nigerian prisons as ‘warehouses of poverty and despair,’ where the constitutional promise of human dignity often collapses under administrative neglect.⁶

In contrast, the United Kingdom has undergone decades of progressive reform aimed at balancing public safety with offender rehabilitation. The introduction of the Offender Management Act 2007 established the integrated Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), while the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 further strengthened victims’ rights and independent scrutiny of parole decisions.⁷ UK correctional policy increasingly emphasises rehabilitation, education, and post-release monitoring. These principles could inform Nigeria’s correctional transformation.⁸ Comparative legal analysis is essential for identifying context-specific reform lessons. As Fombad observes, comparative law provides a platform for nations with shared colonial legal histories to ‘borrow intelligently’ from more developed jurisdictions while respecting domestic realities.⁹ By comparing the Nigerian and UK systems, this paper seeks to determine how legislative design, institutional independence, and rehabilitative programs can be adapted to Nigeria’s socio-legal environment.

2. Statement of Problem

Despite the enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act,¹⁰ which was intended to modernise custodial administration and shift the Nigerian correctional system towards rehabilitation, the realities within custodial centres continue to reflect profound structural and operational failures.¹¹ Chronic overcrowding, poor infrastructural conditions, inadequate funding, and persistent human rights violations remain entrenched, undermining the statutory objectives of reformation, rehabilitation, and reintegration.¹² Although the 1999 Constitution guarantees the dignity of the human person, the conditions within many correctional facilities fall below constitutionally and internationally acceptable standards.¹³ A further problem is the systemic centralisation of correctional administration, which limits institutional autonomy and impedes effective oversight.¹⁴ This contrasts sharply with the more decentralised and rights-focused framework operative in the United Kingdom, particularly following the enactment of the Victims and Prisoners Act, which strengthens accountability mechanisms and promotes evidence-based rehabilitation.¹⁵ Nigeria’s correctional challenges therefore persist not for lack of legislative reform, but due to entrenched institutional weaknesses, poor implementation capacity, and the absence of structured oversight mechanisms comparable to those in jurisdictions such as the UK.¹⁶ As a result, the Nigerian correctional system continues to operate within a punitive paradigm rather than one grounded in restorative justice, transparency, and respect for human dignity. This gap between legislative aspiration and operational reality constitutes a central problem requiring scholarly and policy attention.¹⁷

⁶ Chukwuma Innocent, ‘The Nigerian Prison System: Potentials, Challenges and Opportunities for Reform’ (2021) 9(2) *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 118.

⁷ Offender Management Act 2007, s 2; Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, ss 1–3

⁸ HM Inspectorate of Prisons, *Annual Report 2023–2024* (London 2024) 8

⁹ Charles M Fombad, ‘Comparative Law in Africa: Methodological Challenges and Perspectives’ (2017) 65(1) *American Journal of Comparative Law* 3, 10

¹⁰ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*; see also Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015

¹³ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 34

¹⁴ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, ss 2–4

¹⁵ Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 (UK)

¹⁶ United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules: United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (2015)

¹⁷ United Nations, *Bangkok Rules: United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners* (2010).

3. Theoretical Framework

Theories of Punishment and Their Relevance

Penal philosophy has historically oscillated between retributive and rehabilitative theories of punishment.¹⁸ Retributive theories posit that offenders deserve punishment proportionate to their wrongdoing, reflecting moral accountability and public denunciation.¹⁹ Deterrent theories emphasize the preventive function of punishment, individual deterrence discouraging the offender from reoffending and general deterrence discouraging society at large.²⁰ Rehabilitative theories focus on transforming the offender through education, therapy, and social support, thereby addressing the root causes of criminality.²¹ Restorative justice theories promote dialogue between offenders, victims, and communities to restore relationships and achieve holistic justice.²² The Nigerian and UK systems both exhibit a convergence of these theoretical strands, though the United Kingdom has increasingly leaned towards rehabilitation and restorative justice, while Nigeria remains largely entrenched in retribution and deterrence due to institutional and socio-political constraints.²³

The rehabilitative ideal, popularized in the mid-twentieth century, asserts that the purpose of the correctional process is to reform the offender rather than inflict suffering.²⁴ It derives from humanist and utilitarian thought, especially Jeremy Bentham's belief that punishment should only be justified when it produces a net social benefit.²⁵ The rehabilitative model underpins contemporary international standards, including the Nelson Mandela Rules and the Bangkok Rules, which emphasize humane treatment and education of inmates.²⁶ In the Nigerian context, however, the rehabilitative ideal is undermined by structural challenges like overcrowding, underfunding, and inadequate training of correctional officers.²⁷ By contrast, the United Kingdom's correctional policy has evolved towards holistic rehabilitation, combining education, skills acquisition, probation supervision, and parole mechanisms that facilitate reintegration.²⁸ The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 reinforces this trajectory by introducing stronger rehabilitation obligations and oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability.²⁹

Restorative Justice as an Emerging Framework

Restorative justice represents a paradigm shift from punishment to healing. It seeks to repair harm through reconciliation between victims, offenders and communities.³⁰ In the UK, restorative programs such as community payback schemes and victim offender mediation have gained legislative backing and are used as alternatives to custody.³¹ Nigeria has made limited progress in this area, though sections 37–38 of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 provide for non-custodial measures such as probation, community service, and parole.³² Adopting restorative practices in Nigeria could reduce

¹⁸ HLA Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press 2008) 5–10.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797, trans Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press 1996) 105

²⁰ Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764, trans Henry Paolucci, Bobbs-Merrill 1963) 23

²¹ Norval Morris, *The Future of Imprisonment* (University of Chicago Press 1974) 38

²² John Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation* (Oxford University Press 2002) 12

²³ Peter O Oluyede, 'Punishment Theories and Criminal Justice Reform in Nigeria' (2022) 6(1) *Journal of Law and Social Policy in Africa* 25

²⁴ Francis T Cullen and Paul Gendreau, 'Assessing Correctional Rehabilitation: Policy, Practice, and Prospects' (2000) 3 *Criminal Justice* 109, 110

²⁵ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789, Clarendon Press 1907) 170

²⁶ UN General Assembly, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)* (A/RES/70/175, 17 December 2015); UN General Assembly, *United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules)* (A/RES/65/229, 21 December 2010)

²⁷ NHRC, *Report on the State of Nigerian Prisons* (n 4) 8-9

²⁸ HM Inspectorate of Prisons, *Annual Report 2023-2024* (n 8) 13-14

²⁹ Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, s 12

³⁰ Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (rev edn, Good Books 2015) 5

³¹ Ministry of Justice (UK), *Restorative Justice Action Plan for the Criminal Justice System* (London 2018)

³² Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, ss 37-38

congestion in custodial centres and enhance public confidence in justice administration.³³ The comparative experience of the United Kingdom demonstrates that restorative justice can coexist with traditional penal measures if supported by legal infrastructure, training, and political will.³⁴

Comparative Penology and the Theory of Legal Transplant

Comparative penology examines how different jurisdictions design, administer, and reform their correctional systems.³⁵ Watson posited that legal systems can adapt successful practices from others provided that such transplants are tailored to the recipient country's socio-cultural context.³⁶ This theoretical approach justifies drawing lessons from the UK system for Nigeria. As Fombad argues, comparative analysis is not mere imitation but an 'intelligent borrowing' guided by local realities and constitutional safeguards.³⁷ Applying this theory, Nigeria's correctional reform can draw from the UK's experience with independent prison inspection, parole boards, and probation services while maintaining alignment with domestic conditions.³⁸ The key lies in institutional adaptation, not wholesale transplantation.³⁹

4. Conceptualizing Corrections and Penal Reform

The concept of corrections transcends the traditional notion of incarceration; it encompasses all measures designed to reform, rehabilitate, and reintegrate offenders into society.⁴⁰ The term is rooted in the idea that punishment should not solely serve retribution or deterrence but also transformation.⁴¹ In modern jurisprudence, correctional service refers to an integrated institutional framework combining custodial and non-custodial measures to achieve the twin objectives of justice and rehabilitation.⁴² In Nigeria, this paradigm shift was formally articulated in the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, which replaced the punitive terminology of 'prisons' with 'correctional service.'⁴³ The Act underscores reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration as the guiding objectives of penal administration.⁴⁴ The same shift is evident in the United Kingdom's adoption of offender management as a central policy framework under the Offender Management Act 2007 and further enhanced by the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, which balances offender rehabilitation with victim participation in justice processes.⁴⁵

5. Historical Evolution of the Nigerian Correctional Service

The evolution of Nigeria's correctional system reflects a gradual transition from colonial subjugation to modern rehabilitation. Under British colonial rule, imprisonment was designed to serve imperial control rather than indigenous notions of restorative justice.⁴⁶ The earliest custodial facility was established in 1872 on Broad Street, Lagos, primarily for holding offenders awaiting trial or

³³ Innocent Chukwuma, 'Reforming Nigeria's Criminal Justice System' (CLEEN Foundation Policy Brief, 2022) 3

³⁴ Joanna Shapland, 'Restorative Justice in Practice: The UK Experience' (2016) 20(2) *European Journal of Criminology* 187

³⁵ Vivien Stern, *A Sin Against the Future: Imprisonment in the World* (2nd edn, Penguin 1998) 15

³⁶ Alan Watson, *Legal Transplants: An Approach to Comparative Law* (2nd edn, University of Georgia Press 1993) 21

³⁷ Charles M Fombad (n 9) 10

³⁸ Prison Reform Trust, *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile* (Autumn 2023) 17

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ Andrew Coyle, *A Human Rights Approach to Prison Management: Handbook for Prison Staff* (4th edn, International Centre for Prison Studies 2018) 7.

⁴¹ Lucia Zedner, *Criminal Justice* (Oxford University Press 2019) 44

⁴² Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, s 2

⁴³ *ibid* s 1.

⁴⁴ *ibid* s 3(a)-(c).

⁴⁵ Offender Management Act 2007, s 2; Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, ss 1-4

⁴⁶ T O Okagbue, 'Law and Practice Relating to Convicted Prisoners in Nigeria' (1996) 10 *Journal of African Law* 19

deportation.⁴⁷ The Prisons Ordinance of 1916 and its later codification in 1934 centralized prison administration under the Governor, entrenching retributive and deterrent principles.⁴⁸ After independence in 1960, the Prisons Act 1972 maintained this colonial legacy, establishing the Nigerian Prisons Service (NPS) under the Ministry of Interior but failing to introduce substantial reform.⁴⁹ The prison system remained overcrowded, punitive, and under-resourced, with widespread human rights violations reported throughout the military era.⁵⁰ Efforts at reform, including the 1989 Civil Liberties Organization Report and the 1998 Presidential Task Force on Prison Reform, identified systemic abuse but achieved limited progress due to bureaucratic and political resistance.⁵¹

Democratic transition in 1999 renewed attention to correctional reform, as the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guaranteed fundamental rights to dignity, liberty, and fair hearing.⁵² Subsequent collaboration with international bodies such as the UNODC and the European Union introduced the Prison Reform and Decongestion Program, which sought to expand non-custodial measures and reduce congestion.⁵³ These initiatives culminated in the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, which rebranded the NPS as the Nigerian Correctional Service and legally divided it into Custodial and Non-Custodial Services.⁵⁴ The Act's objectives include reformation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of offenders through education, vocational training, and restorative justice mechanisms.⁵⁵ Despite its progressive framework, implementation remains constrained by inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and judicial reluctance to employ non-custodial sanctions.⁵⁶ Comparative insights from the United Kingdom's correctional system, particularly under the Prisons Act 1952, Offender Management Act 2007, and Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 offer practical models for institutional independence, parole reform, and data-driven rehabilitation.⁵⁷

6. Structure and Legal Framework of the Nigerian Correctional Service

The Nigerian Correctional Service derives its legal authority from the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, which repealed the Prisons Act 1972 and redefined correctional administration in Nigeria.⁵⁸ The Act establishes the Service as a department under the Federal Ministry of Interior, with statutory mandates to reform, rehabilitate, and reintegrate offenders, as well as to implement non-custodial measures aimed at decongesting prisons and preventing recidivism.⁵⁹ This framework signifies a philosophical transition from a punitive model to one grounded in restorative and rehabilitative justice, aligning with international human rights standards such as the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.⁶⁰ The Service operates across the federation, managing custodial and non-custodial centres, and is integrated into the broader criminal justice system through collaboration with law enforcement, the judiciary, and parole boards.

⁴⁷ A O Obioha, 'Exploring the Challenges of Nigerian Prison System in the Context of Human Rights' (2011) 3(2) *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 23

⁴⁸ Prisons Ordinance No 41 of 1934

⁴⁹ Prisons Act 1972 (Cap P29, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004)

⁵⁰ Civil Liberties Organisation, *Report on Nigerian Prisons* (CLO 1989)

⁵¹ Presidential Task Force on Prison Reform, *Final Report* (Federal Government of Nigeria 1998)

⁵² Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), ss 34-36

⁵³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Prison Reform and Decongestion Programme Evaluation Report* (UNODC 2007)

⁵⁴ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019

⁵⁵ *ibid* ss 3, 37-38

⁵⁶ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Trapped in the Cycle of Violence: Torture and Human Rights Violations in Custody* (2023)

⁵⁷ Prisons Act 1952 (UK); Offender Management Act 2007 (UK); Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 (UK)

⁵⁸ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019

⁵⁹ *ibid*, s 3

⁶⁰ United Nations, *Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules)*, UNGA Res 70/175 (17 December 2015); African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) OAU Doc CAB/LEG/67/3 Rev.5

Structurally, the Service is headed by the Controller-General of Corrections, appointed by the President on the recommendation of the Minister of Interior.⁶¹ The Service comprises six key directorates: Operations; Training and Staff Development; Non-Custodial Measures; Health and Social Welfare; Inmate Training and Productivity; and Finance and Accounts.⁶² Each state command is overseen by a Controller of Corrections, while individual custodial centres are managed by Superintendents or Deputy Controllers. The 2019 Act divides the Service into Custodial and Non-Custodial components. The Custodial Service ensures the humane detention and welfare of inmates, while the Non-Custodial Service administers probation, parole, community service, and restorative justice program in line with the United Nations Tokyo Rules (1990).⁶³ However, implementation of non-custodial measures remains limited due to infrastructural deficits, inadequate personnel, and judicial conservatism.

In terms of oversight and human rights protection, the Act mandates regular inspection and monitoring by the Controller-General, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and accredited civil society organizations.⁶⁴ It also provides for a Correctional Information Management System (CIMS) to enhance transparency and policy planning, including biometric registration of inmates.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, chronic underfunding, overcrowding, and reports of human rights violations persist, undermining full compliance with domestic and international obligations.⁶⁶ Comparative analysis with the United Kingdom's correctional system where independent oversight bodies such as the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman and Parole Board for England and Wales are statutorily empowered, illustrates the potential for Nigeria to strengthen accountability through institutional autonomy and data-driven correctional management.⁶⁷

7. The United Kingdom Correctional System: Structure, Philosophy, and Reforms

The United Kingdom's correctional system has evolved over more than two centuries from a punitive and deterrent model to one centred on rehabilitation, restorative justice, and public protection. Its origins lie in the Penitentiary Act, which established state-run prisons aimed at labour and moral reform.⁶⁸ Humanitarian reformers such as Howard and Fry later promoted principles of humane treatment and gender-sensitive management.⁶⁹ Modern correctional philosophy is guided by three principles public protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration embodied in legislation such as the Offender Management Act and the Victims and Prisoners Act.⁷⁰ These reforms collectively demonstrate the UK's enduring commitment to balancing justice, human rights, and social reintegration.

Administratively, the system is managed by the Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice responsible for prisons, probation services, and youth offender institutions.⁷¹ The legal framework is primarily governed by the Prisons Act 1952, the Human Rights Act 1998, and the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which together establish humane treatment standards, sentencing structures, and parole mechanisms.⁷² The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 introduced major innovations, including the codification of the Victims' Code, enhanced transparency in parole decisions, and individualized rehabilitation plans with annual progress reporting.⁷³ Oversight

⁶¹ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, s 8

⁶² *ibid*, s 9

⁶³ United Nations, *Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (Tokyo Rules)*, UNGA Res 45/110 (14 December 1990)

⁶⁴ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, s 11

⁶⁵ *ibid*, s 12

⁶⁶ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Trapped in the Cycle of Violence: Torture and Human Rights Violations in Custody* (2023)

⁶⁷ Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 (UK); see also HM Inspectorate of Prisons, *Annual Report 2023-24* (TSO 2024)

⁶⁸ Penitentiary Act 1779 (UK)

⁶⁹ John Howard, *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* (W Eyres 1777); Elizabeth Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence and Government of Female Prisoners* (1817)

⁷⁰ Offender Management Act 2007 (UK); Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 (UK)

⁷¹ Ministry of Justice, 'Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service Framework Document' (MoJ 2017)

⁷² Prisons Act 1952 (UK); Human Rights Act 1998 (UK); Criminal Justice Act 2003 (UK)

⁷³ Ministry of Justice, *Victims and Prisoners Act 2024: Policy Overview* (MoJ 2024)

by bodies such as the HM Inspectorate of Prisons, the Independent Monitoring Boards, and the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman ensures compliance with the Nelson Mandela Rules and the European Prison Rules.⁷⁴

Rehabilitation and resettlement are legally embedded within the UK's correctional strategy, featuring programs in education, vocational training, substance-abuse treatment, and psychological counselling. Empirical evidence shows that prisoners engaged in educational programs are 13 per cent less likely to reoffend within a year of release.⁷⁵ Independent inspection and public reporting mechanisms reinforce transparency and accountability across the system. For Nigeria, the UK model offers valuable insights, particularly regarding the statutory embedding of rehabilitation, victim participation in justice processes, transparent parole procedures, and data-driven management demonstrating a philosophy that treats imprisonment as a process of reformation rather than retribution.

8. Current Challenges within the Nigerian Correctional System

Despite the enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act and Nigeria's ratification of key international human rights instruments, the correctional system continues to suffer from structural, administrative, and human rights deficiencies.⁷⁶ These persistent issues undermine the statutory goals of reformation, rehabilitation, and reintegration, leaving the Service largely custodial rather than correctional in practice.⁷⁷ Reports by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and Amnesty International reveal endemic overcrowding, prolonged pre-trial detention, poor funding, infrastructural decay, and ongoing human rights abuses.⁷⁸

Overcrowding and Pre-Trial Detention: Overcrowding remains the most critical problem confronting Nigeria's custodial institutions. The Nigerian Correctional Service Annual Statistical Report (2024) records 81,774 inmates across 244 centres, exceeding official capacity by nearly 150 per cent, with more than 70 per cent awaiting trial.⁷⁹ This condition violates section 36(5) of the 1999 Constitution, which presumes innocence until proven guilty, and breaches Rule 11(b) of the Nelson Mandela Rules, which prohibits indefinite remand detention.⁸⁰ Contributing factors include sluggish judicial processes, police overreliance on pre-trial detention, and underutilization of non-custodial measures provided under the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 (ACJA).⁸¹ In contrast, the United Kingdom has reduced pre-trial congestion through bail reforms, electronic monitoring, and community supervision orders.⁸²

Funding and Infrastructure Constraints: Nigeria's correctional system is constrained by chronic underfunding and decaying infrastructure. Federal allocations to the Service account for less than 0.3 per cent of the national budget, insufficient to maintain facilities or implement rehabilitation programs.⁸³ The Ikoyi Medium Security Custodial Centre, built for 800 inmates, currently holds over 2,000, while the Kano Central Custodial Centre, designed for 400, accommodates more than 1,200.⁸⁴ Such overcrowded conditions degrade human dignity and heighten risks of violence, disease, and recidivism. The UK's Prison Infrastructure Program (2021–2025) demonstrates a contrasting model of continuous

⁷⁴ HM Inspectorate of Prisons, Annual Report 2023-24 (TSO 2024)

⁷⁵ Ministry of Justice, Education and Employment Strategy for Offenders (MoJ 2018)

⁷⁶ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019

⁷⁷ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Prison Reform and Decongestion Programme Report* (UNODC 2023)

⁷⁸ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Trapped in the Cycle of Violence* (2023)

⁷⁹ Nigerian Correctional Service, *Annual Statistical Report* (2024)

⁸⁰ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 36(5); UN General Assembly, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules)*, A/RES/70/175 (17 December 2015), r 11(b)

⁸¹ Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015

⁸² Ministry of Justice (UK), *Bail and Remand Reform Policy Paper* (2020)

⁸³ Budget Office of the Federation, *Federal Budget Analysis Report* (2024)

⁸⁴ National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), *Report on Conditions in Nigerian Custodial Centres* (2023)

investment in prison estate modernization, an approach Nigeria could replicate through strategic public-private partnerships and international development funding.⁸⁵

Staff Welfare, Training, and Corruption: The effectiveness of correctional administration is directly linked to staff welfare and professional capacity. Nigerian correctional officers often work under poor conditions, with low remuneration, minimal training, and limited safety protections.⁸⁶ These factors contribute to corruption, bribery, and abuse of power, undermining institutional integrity and prisoner welfare. By comparison, the UK's HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) provides structured training and career development through the Prison Officer Entry Level Training (POELT) scheme and continuous professional development.⁸⁷

Weak Rehabilitation and Reintegration Mechanisms: Although rehabilitation is a core goal of the Correctional Service Act, implementation remains minimal. Many custodial centres lack vocational, educational, or psychosocial programs, and post-release monitoring is inadequate.⁸⁸ Conversely, the UK's Victims and Prisoners Act mandates individual sentence plans and sustained post-release support, embodying the 'through-the-gate' model where reintegration begins at the point of incarceration.⁸⁹

Neglect of Gender and Vulnerable Groups: Nigeria's correctional facilities often fail to meet the specific needs of women, juveniles, and persons with disabilities. Although section 14 of the Correctional Service Act 2019 and section 209 of the Child's Rights Act 2003 mandate separate facilities and gender-sensitive management, female and juvenile inmates are frequently held in overcrowded and unsuitable conditions.⁹⁰ The UK's Women's Custodial Strategy 2018 and its dedicated Young Offender Institutions demonstrate best practices in gender-responsive and trauma-informed correctional care.⁹¹

Weak Policy Implementation and Accountability: A persistent challenge is the gap between legislative ambition and practical enforcement. The Correctional Service Act 2019 and ACJA 2015 both encourage non-custodial measures, yet courts rarely implement them consistently.⁹² Unlike the UK's data-driven approach under the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, Nigeria lacks transparent monitoring, evaluation, and annual reporting mechanisms to ensure compliance and accountability.⁹³

Persistent Human Rights Violations: Despite legal safeguards, widespread human rights violations continue in Nigerian correctional centres. Inmates report torture, malnutrition, overcrowding, and inadequate medical care, all contrary to Article 5 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.⁹⁴ Establishing an independent Correctional Inspectorate, similar to the UK's HM Inspectorate of Prisons, would enhance oversight, ensure compliance with human rights standards, and strengthen public confidence.⁹⁵

⁸⁵ UK Ministry of Justice, *Prison Infrastructure Programme 2021-2025* (2021)

⁸⁶ AO Obioha, 'Exploring the Challenges of Nigerian Prison System in the Context of Human Rights' (2011) 3(2) *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 23

⁸⁷ HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), *Prison Officer Entry Level Training (POELT) Curriculum* (2022)

⁸⁸ Nigerian Correctional Service (n 68)

⁸⁹ Victims and Prisoners Act 2024

⁹⁰ Child's Rights Act 2003 (Nigeria), s 209; *Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019*, s 14)

⁹¹ Ministry of Justice (UK), *Women's Custodial Strategy* (2018)

⁹² Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 (Nigeria)

⁹³ Victims and Prisoners Act 2024

⁹⁴ African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (adopted 27 June 1981, entered into force 21 October 1986) 21 ILM 58, art 5

⁹⁵ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (UK), *Annual Report 2023-2024* (2024)

9. Comparative Analysis: Lessons for Nigeria from the United Kingdom's Correctional Framework

A comparative review of Nigeria's correctional system and that of the United Kingdom reveals crucial differences in governance, rights enforcement, rehabilitation, and oversight. The UK model, anchored in accountability and human rights, offers valuable lessons for Nigeria's ongoing penal reform.⁹⁶

Institutional Governance and Autonomy: The UK's Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) operates with administrative autonomy under the Ministry of Justice, ensuring professional management and minimal political interference.⁹⁷ In contrast, the Nigerian Correctional Service functions as a department within the Ministry of Interior, limiting efficiency and operational independence.⁹⁸

Policy Continuity and Legal Enforcement: UK correctional policy benefits from continuity, parliamentary oversight, and evidence-based reform exemplified by the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.⁹⁹ Nigerian policies, however, suffer from weak implementation and inconsistent monitoring.¹⁰⁰

Human Rights Protection and Oversight: The UK embeds human rights within its correctional framework through the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, allowing inmates to seek redress.¹⁰¹ Nigeria's Constitution guarantees dignity (section 34(1)) but offers limited enforcement mechanisms within prisons.¹⁰²

Rehabilitation and Reintegration: Rehabilitation is central to the UK model, which mandates education, employment training, and structured resettlement through the Through-the-Gate Program¹⁰³ Nigerian rehabilitation efforts remain fragmented, lacking systematic post-release support.¹⁰⁴

Restorative Justice and Victim Participation: The UK's Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 incorporates victims in parole reviews and rehabilitation processes, advancing restorative justice.¹⁰⁵ Nigeria's system largely excludes victims' post-conviction.¹⁰⁶

Staff Professionalization and Welfare: UK prison officers receive structured training through the Prison Officer Entry Level Training (POELT) and ongoing professional development.¹⁰⁷ Nigerian officers, by contrast, face poor welfare and minimal training, contributing to corruption and inefficiency.¹⁰⁸

Oversight, Data, and Technological Integration: The UK ensures transparency through independent bodies such as HM Inspectorate of Prisons and the Independent Monitoring Boards, both of which publish annual reports.¹⁰⁹ In Nigeria, oversight remains largely internal, and data management is paper-based and unreliable.¹¹⁰

Gender and Vulnerable Groups: UK correctional policies prioritize gender sensitivity and youth rehabilitation under the Women's Custodial Strategy 2018 and the Youth Custody Framework.¹¹¹

⁹⁶ Victims and Prisoners Act 2024

⁹⁷ HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), *Annual Report 2023-24* (UK Ministry of Justice 2024)

⁹⁸ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019

⁹⁹ Ministry of Justice (UK), *White Paper on Prison Reform* (2022)

¹⁰⁰ National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), *Nigeria Prisons Assessment Report* (2023)

¹⁰¹ Human Rights Act 1998 (UK); Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO), *Investigation Standards* (2023)

¹⁰² Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 34(1)

¹⁰³ UK Ministry of Justice, *Through-the-Gate Resettlement Policy* (2020)

¹⁰⁴ Nigerian Correctional Service, *Rehabilitation Report* (2023)

¹⁰⁵ Victims and Prisoners Act 2024

¹⁰⁶ Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), *Justice and Victims in Nigeria* (2022)

¹⁰⁷ HMPPS, *POELT Training Curriculum* (2022)

¹⁰⁸ NHRC (n 93)

¹⁰⁹ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (UK), *Annual Report 2023-24* (2024)

¹¹⁰ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Assessment of Prison Data Systems in Nigeria* (2023)

¹¹¹ Ministry of Justice (UK), *Women's Custodial Strategy* (2018)

Nigeria, however, continues to house women and juveniles in inadequate facilities despite statutory safeguards.¹¹²

10. Recidivism in the Nigerian Correctional Service

Recidivism which is the tendency of released offenders to reoffend remains one of the most persistent challenges facing Nigeria's correctional system. Despite the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, which rebranded the former Prisons Service to emphasise rehabilitation and reintegration, Nigeria's reoffending rate remains alarmingly high, estimated at between 52 and 68 per cent.¹¹³ This indicates that the system remains largely custodial rather than correctional in practice. Several factors drive this trend: overcrowded prisons, poor rehabilitation infrastructure, and the lack of post-release support.¹¹⁴ Many inmates leave custody without employable skills or community reintegration assistance, leading to social rejection and a return to crime.¹¹⁵ In contrast, the United Kingdom's correctional model under the Offender Management Act 2007 and Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 has institutionalised rehabilitation through structured parole, probation, and 'Through-the-Gate' resettlement programmes.¹¹⁶ These initiatives ensure that offenders receive education, counselling, and supervision both during and after incarceration, contributing to the UK's significantly lower recidivism rate of around 25 per cent.¹¹⁷ Nigeria can learn from the UK's emphasis on evidence-based corrections and independent oversight. Establishing a National Reintegration and Probation Service, supported by digital inmate tracking and community partnerships, would strengthen post-release monitoring and reduce repeat offending.¹¹⁸ True correctional reform in Nigeria requires a shift from punitive detention to restorative rehabilitation one that measures success not by the number of prisoners held, but by the number of lives transformed.¹¹⁹

11. Lessons for Nigeria

While both Nigeria and the UK share similar correctional goals like rehabilitation, reintegration, and societal protection, the UK demonstrates stronger institutional coherence, oversight, and evidence-based management. By adopting reforms centred on autonomy, accountability, technology, and restorative justice, Nigeria can transform its correctional system from a punitive model to a rehabilitative and human rights-compliant institution.¹²⁰ Nigeria has the following lessons to be drawn from the United Kingdom model. Nigeria should amend the Correctional Service Act 2019 to grant the Service semi-autonomous status or establish an independent Correctional Commission to enhance accountability and decision-making.¹²¹ Nigeria should create a statutory National Correctional Policy Review Board to evaluate institutional performance and policy impact periodically.¹²² Nigeria could establish an Independent Correctional Ombudsman, empowered to investigate complaints and issue binding recommendations to promote institutional transparency.¹²³ Nigeria should operationalize Individual Sentence Plans under section 14 of the Correctional Service Act 2019 and collaborate with private and civil organizations to support reintegration.¹²⁴ Nigeria should establish Victim Liaison Services to facilitate communication between victims and the correctional system, promoting reconciliation and community trust.¹²⁵ Nigeria should establish a National Correctional Academy to

¹¹² Child's Rights Act 2003

¹¹³ *ibid*

¹¹⁴ National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), *Report on the State of Nigerian Prisons* (2023)

¹¹⁵ O Adebayo, 'Post-Release Challenges and Recidivism among Ex-Inmates in Nigeria' (2021) *Journal of Social Policy Studies* 45

¹¹⁶ Offender Management Act 2007 (UK); Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 (UK)

¹¹⁷ Ministry of Justice (UK), *Proven Reoffending Statistics Quarterly Bulletin* (2024)

¹¹⁸ NHRC (n 93)

¹¹⁹ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 (Nigeria), s 3

¹²⁰ Obioha (n 97)

¹²¹ *ibid* s 3

¹²² *ibid*

¹²³ A Obioha, 'Prison Oversight and Accountability in Nigeria' (2021) *Nigerian Journal of Human Rights Law* 45

¹²⁴ Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, s 14

¹²⁵ *ibid*

standardize training, ethics, and human rights education for correctional personnel.¹²⁶ Nigeria should establish specialized correctional units for women, juveniles, and persons with disabilities, guided by the Bangkok Rules and Beijing Rules.¹²⁷ Nigeria should implement an Integrated Digital Correctional Management System (IDCMS) for inmate records, parole tracking, and data-driven oversight.¹²⁸

12. Conclusion and Recommendations

Reforming Nigeria's correctional system requires a comprehensive, rights-based strategy that integrates local realities with international standards. Drawing inspiration from the United Kingdom's human rights-oriented and victim-inclusive model particularly the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, Nigeria has the opportunity to shift from punitive incarceration to genuine rehabilitation and reintegration. A truly modern correctional service should be evaluated not by the number of inmates detained but by the extent to which it restores dignity, reforms behaviour, and facilitates successful reintegration into society. The state of a nation's correctional system reflects the moral and ethical strength of its justice framework. If Nigeria adopts autonomy, transparency, and rehabilitation as its guiding principles, the correctional service can evolve from an institution of deprivation into one of transformation. Lasting reform will depend not only on improved infrastructure and policy but on a sustained national commitment to restorative justice, compassion, and the belief in human redemption.

Despite the progressive reforms introduced under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, the Nigerian correctional system continues to face challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate rehabilitation structures, limited use of non-custodial measures, and weak institutional accountability. Drawing lessons from the United Kingdom's modern correctional framework particularly its emphasis on rehabilitation, data-driven management, and independent oversight, the following recommendations propose strategic reforms to strengthen Nigeria's correctional administration, enhance human rights compliance, and promote effective reintegration of offenders into society. This paper recommends the following measures:

Establish an Independent Correctional Commission: Create a Nigerian Correctional Service Commission (NCSC) to oversee recruitment, training, and discipline independently from the Ministry of Interior. This would promote professionalism, reduce political interference, and ensure merit-based administration.

Decentralize Correctional Administration: Empower state governments to manage custodial and non-custodial centres under federal guidelines. Decentralization would decongest federal facilities, improve responsiveness, and enhance local accountability in corrections management.

Implement Individual Sentence and Rehabilitation Plans: Ensure that every inmate has a tailored sentence plan with measurable educational, vocational, and psychological goals. Regular monitoring of these plans would promote data-driven rehabilitation and reduce reoffending.

Develop Post-Release Reintegration Programs: Establish structured resettlement and support units to assist ex-offenders with employment, housing, and counselling. Effective post-release support is essential to reduce recidivism and foster community reintegration.

Enhance Staff Training and Welfare: Establish a National Correctional Academy to provide continuous professional training and enforce high ethical standards. Improved staff welfare through mental health support and incentives would strengthen institutional integrity.

Adopt an Integrated Digital Management System: Introduce a centralized digital platform linking prisons, courts, and law enforcement agencies. This would improve record-keeping, transparency, and evidence-based policy planning across the correctional system.

¹²⁶ *ibid*

¹²⁷ United Nations, Bangkok Rules (2010); Beijing Rules (1985)

¹²⁸ *ibid*