

Carrying Water in a Basket: The Symbolic Politics of Rehabilitation Programs in Nigerian Correctional Facilities, a Critical Interpretive Synthesis

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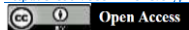
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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian correctional system has officially moved from a punishment to rehabilitation system, especially after the enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019. But there is some evidence that there has been little progress in meeting rehabilitative policy commitments in correctional facilities. This important interpretive synthesis explores this disjuncture metaphorically, using the example of “carrying water in a basket”, an idea that represents institutional or formal activity that results in compliance but not in long-term rehabilitative effects. The synthesis draws on the multidisciplinary literature in criminology, sociology, correctional studies, human rights, mental health, and education, with the aim of identifying shared themes of policy-practice decoupling, overcrowding and underfunding, gaps in professional services and mental-health services, and the exclusion of women, futurelessness, futility, and stigma associated with community reintegration. The analysis is based on a combination of the institutional theory, General Systems Theory, Social Learning Theory, Labeling Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, aiming at explaining the mechanisms and conditions that enable symbolic rehabilitation. The synthesis indicates that symbolic rehabilitation can not just be a failure of implementation, it can also be an organisational response to other competing demands for penal control, human rights compliance and institutional legitimacy. To achieve meaningful reform, non-custodial measures must be enhanced, correctional services must become more professional, gender and mental health considerations in corrections need to be addressed, educational facilities must be improved, post-release support must be structured, and the accountability system must be based on outcomes. The ultimate measure of rehabilitation should be reintegration rather than the existence of a programme.

Introduction

The term "carrying water in a basket" comes from the 2026 qualitative study by Uche, Uche and Nzewuji published in *The Prison Journal*. They surveyed these systemic barriers in offenders' rehabilitation, interviewing eight inmates and four correctional staff at a maximum security prison in Southeast Nigeria. The study found that "although policy promises reintegration, programs are often symbolic, akin to 'carrying water in a basket'" (Uche et al., 2026a, p. 1). The metaphor exemplifies a specific institutional reality: activity without retention, effort without accumulation, form without function. Essentially it is a description of decoupling, the separation of formal organizational structures from the practices to which they are supposed to give life (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The approach taken here is a critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) method that combines quantitative and qualitative results and enables new hypotheses and models to be posited (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). CIS is especially appropriate to this aspect as literature on prison rehabilitation is spread out in various areas of criminology, sociology, public policy and human rights studies and the central issue, the

discrepancy between the rhetoric of prison rehabilitation and the reality of prison life, calls for a synthesis that is more interpretive than aggregative. The review is formulated around three questions: How is symbolism of rehabilitation expressed in Nigeria's correctional homes? What structural, professional, and ideological factors help maintain a policy/practice disconnect? What theoretical resources can help to account for the continuation of symbolic rehabilitation, even after decades of reform?

The Nigerian correctional system is at a paradoxical juncture. The Nigeria Correctional Service Act of 2019 succeeded the colonial era Prisons Act of 1972, and the Nigerian Prisons Service is now the Nigerian Correctional Service, with the state now committed to rehabilitation, reintegration and non-custodial measures (Albishir et al., 2025; Thanni et al., 2026). However, the empirical literature is overwhelmingly supportive of the existence of such a disparity between the statutory obligations and the reality of incarceration. Nigeria has 240 correctional facilities that hold more than 80,000 inmates as compared to the designed capacity of about 50,000 inmates and pre-trial detainees account for nearly 66 per cent of inmates in the correctional facilities (Ogunwale et al., 2026; Eluchie-Chike & Nkeiruka, 2026; ECOWAS Court, 2024). The United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture described the situation of detention centres in Nigeria as "abysmal" owing to poor food, health and sanitation conditions (Punch, 2025). At heart, the system is failing this review asks, why? and on its own. At the root of it, the system is failing and this review asks, why, despite decades of reform rhetoric?

2. The Symbolic Politics Framework: From Institutional Theory to Nigerian Penal Practice

In organisational sociology, symbolic politics is the use of formal structures, policies and programmes that communicate compliance with institutional expectations, but do not actually change practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This phenomenon is closely linked to the phenomenon of "decoupling" that is described by the institutional theorists, namely the decoupling of formal policies from real organisational activities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The change of name from "Nigerian Prison Service" to "Nigerian Correctional Service" in the 2019 Act is an illustration of this in the Nigerian context. The Minister of Interior said that it was not merely a change in name but a change in ideology because a prison is a place of punishment, a correctional centre a place of rehabilitation, transformation and preparation for reintegration (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025). However, the empirical literature indicates that this ideological change has not yet been reflected in the way that operations are transformed.

In 2018, a Commonwealth Law Bulletin article referred to Nigerian penal policy as 'no more than a public disguise for 'modernizing' while in practice nothing has changed since the inherited penal system that was geared towards punishment' (Danjuma & Nordin; 2018, p.90). More recently, studies of sustainability and profitability of correctional centres have found that the 2019 Act "promises a rehabilitative system, but the operational challenges have been characterised as overcrowding and underfunding and as a fundamental disconnect between policy and practice in rehabilitation" (Uche et al, 2026a). The Act has been criticised for the lack of binding implementation guidelines, reporting requirements and institutional accountability that can turn the Act's legal framework into action and effective safeguard (Thanni et al., 2026). The symbolic politics thesis is an empirical observation of this divide.

There are various theoretical resources for analysing this phenomenon. A macro-level lens is provided by General Systems Theory, which the Uche et al. (2026a) study adopted for analyzing structural barriers as interconnected failures in the institutional, professional, and resource areas. The

micro level mechanism that was discussed in the context of the study is also drawn from the Social Learning Theory which was operationalised to link the opportunities available and the functioning of reformation programmes to the opportunities for prosocial modelling and behavioural reinforcement available to inmates of prisons in Kwara State (Bello et al., 2026; Nigeria Society for Criminology, 2025). Labeling Theory and Social Disorganisation Theory provide an explanation of how stigmatisation and community disorganisation negatively impact reintegration outcomes (Uche et al., 2026a; Abrifor et al., 2012; Bello, 2017). An interpretive dimension in the research conducted in Anambra State is provided by Symbolic Interactionism which is used to investigate the meaning inmates and staff create while interacting in correctional programmes. A critical interpretive synthesis can creatively engage these frameworks in a conversation that asks: how would you understand symbolic rehabilitation as a systems failure, a learning deficit, a labelling outcome, or an interactional achievement – or more probably, some mix of all four?

3. Theme 1: Policy-Practice Decoupling and the Architecture of Symbolic Reform

A structured rehabilitation programme, which includes vocational and entrepreneurial training, substance abuse counselling and mental health care, was formally mandated in the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 for 2019 (Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019). The Act also established a National Offender Reintegration Fund to aid in housing and employment placement (National Offender Reintegration Fund Bill, 2025). In the past, other legislative initiatives aimed at the creation of an Inmates Reformation and Rehabilitation Fund (Inmates Reformation and Rehabilitation Fund Bill, 2025) and the Nigeria Correctional Service Trust Fund (Establishment) Bill, 2025 (HB. have been introduced. NALTF (2025) is designed to establish a dedicated funding source that would not be tied to the risks associated with the annual budget allocation process. They are important formal obligations and let international donors, human rights groups and the Nigerian public know that Nigeria is dedicated to healing principles.

The literature on implementation, however, shows there is a pattern of "statutory gatekeeping without gates. Research into Sections 12 and 13 of the Act – which are supposed to govern custodial admissions and ensure that custodial facilities are neither overcrowded nor unnecessarily used – concluded that "the absence of clear operational standards, uncertainty about statutory requirements, few examples of statutory notifiers and weak interagency co-ordination and the apparent inactivity of the admission refusal powers have turned this governance framework into a fiction of statutory gatekeeping" (Thanni et al., 2026). Formal architecture is present but operational mechanisms are not. In the same vein, other provisions in the Act on the delivery of mental health services have also been identified as having significant gaps in assessment at the reception, treatment planning, referral, medication management, and 24-hour delivery of mental health care (Ogunwale et al., 2026).

This decoupling is seen in several areas. Sixty-seven (67%) medium-security facilities in Kwara State were not equipped with functional educational programmes but 100% were equipped with functional religious programmes. Vocational training was available in all centres, while only one (33%) (Bello et al., 2026) was fully operational. All facilities studied in Kwara State were found to lack or be non-functional critical digital learning infrastructure such as computers and Internet access (Bello et al., 2026). While a number of programmes were available for inmates at Kuje Correctional Centre, the study revealed that there was "significant room for improvement in terms of participation and effectiveness" due to the lack of resources, the lack of trained personnel, and insufficient post-release support for inmates (Albishir et al., 2025, p. 24).

According to the symbolic politics framework, such programmes have a legitimating effect – they do not merely show that Nigeria is a modern, reform oriented state, but they also do so, and the material conditions under which people are imprisoned are basically punitive (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The Nigeria Correctional Service system was evaluated with lessons learned from United Kingdom in 2025 and concluded that “custodial centres continue to indicate an environment of overcrowding, punishment and in large measure ineffectiveness” and that the system is “limited by a centralised structure, chronic underfunding and poor accountability mechanisms” (Nigerian Journals Online, 2025). The discrepancy between the stated vision and the actual work of the system isn't an issue of implementation – its an expected result of a system in which formal structures have symbolic roles and actual practices do not change.

4. Theme 2: Structural Barriers Overcrowding, Underfunding, and the Criminogenic Environment

More than anything else, the literature shows that overcrowding is the main constraint on rehabilitative programming. The key rehabilitation barriers in the Uche et al. (2026a) study included "persistent overcrowding, gendered exclusions, inconsistent programming, and absence of social workers. In two out of three facilities, Kwara State, the research revealed "significant constrains in programme delivery" (Bello et al., 2026, p.7) due to overcrowding. According to the review on youth offenders by Nigeria Society for Criminology (2025), “All correctional facilities are overcrowded and under-resourced and rehabilitation programmes have a limited scope and quality, and limited access to vocational training, psychological counselling” (Nigeria Society for Criminology, 2025, p. 2).

It's an enormous problem. Nigeria has more than 80,000 prisoners in correctional institutions which are designed to accommodate about 50,000 inmates (Ogunwale et al., 2026; Mbah, 2021). Nearly 66 per cent of the custodial population are pre-trial detainees, which is higher than the South Africa and England and Wales where 35.6 per cent and 18.1 per cent respectively are pre-trial detainees respectively, while 23.3 per cent of the United States is pre-trial detainees (Ogunwale et al., 2026; ECOWAS Court, 2024). According to official statistics published in 2024, the ECOWAS Court revealed that there are 79,237 inmates of prisons of which 26,718 are convicted inmates, and 52,519 inmates are awaiting trial (ECOWAS Court, 2024). Overcrowding, outdated infrastructure, poor conditions of inmates, slow judicial processes and the prevalence of corruption are commonly cited as "systemic issues" (EUAA, 2024). The National Human Rights Commission has commented in 2025 that "thousands of citizens are detained in pre-trial prisons for years because of their poverty and lack of access to justice" (NHRC, 2025).

Overcrowding has been placed in the context of other abuses in the human rights literature. A study in the West African Journal of Industrial and Academic Research in 2026 indicated that "Human Rights abuses continue in Nigerian correctional institutions, highlighting persistent issues such as overcrowding, substandard facilities, and justice access, and recommended prioritizing non-custodial options and judicial reforms to reduce overcrowding" (Eluchie-Chike & Nkeiruka, 2026, p. 10). The Minister of Interior has admitted to the use of "alleged corruption, abuse of power, torture, cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment against the Nigeria Correctional Service" (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025). Since 2021, inmates have complained of meals with poor nutritional value that contain no meat or fish, and numerous correctional centres are plagued with the problem of overcrowding, underfunding, poor sanitation, poor nutrition, and a lack of medical care (NILDS, 2024).

Finally, the symbolism of these findings is that the problem of overcrowding is more than one of resource allocation, it is a structural one, and that by design, substantive rehabilitation is impossible. To sum up, participation in the Uche et al. (2026b) study revealed that when 30 inmates work with 2 sewing machines, the pedagogical logic of vocational training takes a turn for the worse, becoming observation without practice. Inmates "get stuck once you pass the beginner level" (Uche et al., 2026b, p. 12) when educational programmes are only basic literacy and there is no availability of advanced materials or qualified teachers. The basket is not designed to hold water, thus it does not hold water. The structural conditions of incarceration, overcrowding, underfunding, the criminogenic environment they enable are not a by-product of symbolic rehabilitation, but rather conditions of its enablement.

5. Theme 3: Professional Gaps and the Absent Social Worker

Other emergent themes from the Uche et al. (2026a) study were "professional gaps" including the lack of social workers, which is a specific issue. This is supported by previous studies which recommended "social worker specialization" as a solution to the failure of rehabilitation service in Nigerian prisons (Uche et al., 2023). In the same vein, the Kuje study found that lack of trained personnel was one of the key challenges to programme effectiveness (Albishir et al., 2025). Earlier studies of the training of correctional officers in Nigeria, conducted in Lagos State, revealed that less than 35% of correctional officers had been adequately trained in rehabilitation-related skills (Adesanya et al, 2023, cited in IJCSS, 2025). Taxman (2020) has shown that evidence-based correctional practices produce better rehabilitation outcomes, which is also the case in Nigeria, as the professional skills of correctional officers significantly and positively predict rehabilitation effectiveness (IJCSS, 2025).

This professional void is not only a staffing problem, it's an ideology problem about the purpose of incarceration. Even if the policies and statements of correctional institutions stress the rehabilitative role of a social worker, psychologist, and educator, if they are not the ones to work with inmates on a day-to-day basis and are instead occupied with keeping people in line and in check, the institutional logic of punishment is repeated in the organization's day-to-day practices. The 'carrying water in a basket' metaphor is an apt one here: the staff are industrious, the inmates are eager but the tools and the training are not suited to the job. This has been identified by the Nigerian Correctional Service, which has made deliberate efforts to go beyond containment of offenders to structured rehabilitation, which includes psychologists, counsellors, religious tutors and welfare officers (NCTC, 2026). The Service has also introduced training initiatives like the Advanced Command Course, and has collaborated with the Prisoners' Rehabilitation and Welfare Action (PRAWA) to educate officers on non-custodial measures (NCoS, 2025; NAN, 2025). However, they are still small-scale efforts and not a fundamental change. Until there's more custodial officers than social workers, psychologists and educators, the organisation's day-to-day activities will focus on securing and controlling rather than rehabilitating.

The mental health aspect of the professional gap is of special concern. Although Nigeria has a clear responsibility by law to provide physical and mental health care, "correctional mental health services are virtually non-existent" (Ogunwale et al., 2026). Few psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses and mental health practitioners relevant to correctional services exist in the country and specifically in correctional services (Ogunwale et al., 2026; Ogunwale et al., 2020). Depression has been estimated at 30.5% among Nigerian prison inmates which is higher rate of mental illness than the general population (Coping Strategies and Depression, 2024). Suicidal ideation among incarcerated individuals in Southwest Nigeria has been identified as a major concern, and the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCS) has emphasized the need for more practitioners to engage and conduct empirical studies on the issue

(Bioku et al., 2025). Somatic symptoms of inmates have been associated with emotion regulation problems, low dispositional mindfulness, and length of stay, with younger inmates being especially susceptible to these symptoms (Somatic Symptoms, 2024). Prior to admission, screening for mental health is recommended, and sufficient mental care is provided (Zenodo, 2024). There is no oversight of mental health services in correctional facilities, it's not an oversight, it's a result of a system where custody comes first, care comes second.

6. Theme 4: Gendered Exclusions and the Limits of "Inmates" as a Category

The Uche et al. (2026a) study showed that "gendered exclusions" restricted outcomes of rehabilitation. However, the study findings on female ex-convicts in Enugu State paint a more nuanced picture; although there are vocational and educational programs for female inmates, implementation is flawed, and psychosocial interventions are limited, meaning there remain significant challenges for reintegration for female ex-convicts (Igweidinmah & Adegoke, 2026, p. 2). It recommends a range of gender-specific interventions, community-based support structures and post-release mentorship (Igweidinmah & Adegoke, 2026, p. 3).

The symbolic politics lens shows this to be particularly troubling. Female prisoners received symbolic rehabilitation programmes identical with those of male prisoners, but centred on norms about work, family and reintegration that are characteristic of the male norm. This leads to a double marginalisation: participation in a rehabilitative system of processes not designed for women, and failure to meet their particular needs, such as psychosocial support, a lack of understanding of the stigma of female criminality and a failure to tackle the gendered labour market. The basket is not only leaky, it's the wrong shape

The Nigerian Correctional Service has started to recognize this deficiency. The NCoS Gender Unit has collaborated with the Legend Golden Care Foundation for gender-specific interventions, such as free legal and psychosocial support for female inmates (NCoS, 2026). UNODC has helped to develop a gender-sensitive rehabilitation assessment tool that identifies the needs of female prisoners and develops rehabilitation programmes accordingly (2025). VCare Foundation's Reform360 Programme at Lagos female custodial facility provides mental health care, education and livelihood skills to assist women in reconstructing their lives and readiness for successful reintegration (Vanguard, 2025). These still don't constitute a systemic part of the correctional system, however. Four coping strategies have been identified in studies of incarcerated women in Nigerian correctional institutions and include emotional and psychological regulation, spiritual engagement, peer support and future-oriented routines, none of which are adequately supported in those institutions (Life Behind Bars, 2026). Women's access to conjugal visits is also unstructured, which exacerbates the gendered nature of being incarcerated, as women are not offered a similar structure for intimate family contact that is common in many other jurisdictions (Adenuga, 2024). Rehabilitation of women convicts, therefore, is not just inadequate, it is exclusionary too, reinforcing gender hierarchy within the prison environment.

7. Theme 5: Lived Experience and the Phenomenology of Futility

One of the unique features of qualitative research in this area is its ability to capture the experience of symbolic rehabilitation. One key theme uncovered by the study by Uche et al. (2026a) was 'experiences of futility and aspiration'. This futility is well illustrated from rich narrative evidence in the Uche et al. (2026b) study:

The tailoring class is useful but it is overcrowded; sometimes more than 30 people are using two machines and then learners end up watching rather than doing, which makes learning very slow and

some learners give up because they feel they are not learning anything. (Male 37) (Uche et al., 2026b, p. 15).

It is not as though you aren't learning something useful, like carpentry, but we need help too. If nobody helps you after you're released, what you learned here just might be for nothing. People outside still think of you as a prisoner, and it's tough to get back on your feet without the tools or the funds. (Male, 36) (Uche et al., 2026b, p. 16)

The stories show that there is no such thing as a victim of symbolic rehabilitation, but a sharp critic of its shortcomings. They appreciate that there is a disparity between skills promise and barriers in the post-release environment. They also see that while education may not be enough, "structural support and social acceptance are also required for effective reintegration" (Uche et al. 2026b, p. 18). The symbolic politics of rehabilitation is thus not experienced as a good albeit flawed rehabilitation but as institutional hypocrisy on top of the stigma of incarceration.

However, the same stories contain the essence of aspiration. One participant explained that literacy helped him reclaim his role as a father: "Before prison, I couldn't read, but now I can write letters to my children. That's important to me" (Uche et al., 2026b, p. 19). This sense of futility and hope, of failure and promise, is at the affective heart of the symbolic rehabilitation experience – and a critical interpretive synthesis should embrace both. The inmates who testified about the overcrowded tailoring class, and the uncertain future of the inmates after they were released, also testified about the transformative power of even partial education. It's not only a tale of failure but one of promise made and promise deferred.

The collateral consequences of incarceration for families further exacerbates this sense of hopelessness. Studies on non-incarcerated partners of prisoners have revealed that imprisonment can lead to a sense of social shame among partners and children, reduce family assets, and result in emotional and psychological harm (Adenuga, 2024). In Nigeria, prisoners are allowed visits from their families, but limitations exist on distance, cost, and administrative challenges (PRAWA, 2023). PRAWA has been running a Family Link Program since 2004, highlighting the significance of social connections in preventing re-offending and rehabilitation (Ashoka, 2024). Recorded messages and supervised visits are part of special visits on days such as Children's Day and Father's Day, which allows for emotional reconnection (Prime Progress NG, 2025). Still, these are exceptional and not routine, and female inmates not being able to see their families at home, which would be called their conjugal visits, is a type of gender deprivation (Adenuga, 2024). Rehabilitation is not only a symbolic politics within the prison walls, but also in the lives of the families who are sentenced to prison.

8. Theme 6: Stigma, Public Attitudes, and the Structural Limits of Community Reintegration

Rehabilitation is not a symbolic process just inside the walls of the prison. It's reflected in the attitudes and practices of communities that are supposed to receive ex-offenders. In a mixed-method study, 1,187 respondents were sampled from the main geopolitical zone of Nigeria and a correlation coefficient of $r = .025$ was established to indicate a negative association between the level of education and the acceptance of ex-offenders into the society (Public Perceptions, 2025). This result defies common perceptions of what education fosters: tolerance. The qualitative findings also indicated "a lack of confidence in ex-offenders' real reintegration and perceived role of community trauma that is combined, and that contributes to the negative social identity against the ex-offenders" (Public Perceptions, 2025, p. 18). Nigeria's recidivism rate has increased considerably from 37.3% in 2005 to 52.4% and public stigmatisation attributed to this is significant (Abrifor et al., 2012; Soyombo, 2009).

The Nigerian Correctional Service has come out to state that stigmatisation is a red flag to former convicts into committing crimes. The NCoS Katsina Command has held sensitisation meetings with community/community groups and youth groups to highlight the need for community-based support for ex-offenders through employment, counselling, mentorship and other support systems (NCoS, 2026). Communities are warned to avoid stigmatisation because reformed ex-offenders are "truly reformed and ready for reintegration" (NCoS, 2026), the FCT Corrections Command has said. But these calls to good will of the community are not matched by structural measures that would make reintegration in a material sense possible. For many Nigerians who have spent time in prison, the society's silent sentence is actually a tougher punishment, as said by one Punch investigation: "For countless Nigerians who have spent time in prison, a harsh sentence is silently handed down by society, for they are denied jobs while neighbours whisper their past as a curse" (Punch, 2025). The symbolic politics of rehabilitation is therefore a two-sided coin: the state acts as a doer of rehabilitation in symbolic programmes, the community as a doer of punishment in symbolic exclusion. Both fail to address structural factors contributing to recidivism, such as poverty, unemployment, housing insecurity.

9. Theme 7: Pathways to Sustainability—What Would Substantive Reform Require?

The fourth theme identified in the Uche et al. (2026a) study was "pathways to sustainability". There are a number of directions suggested in the wider literature. It is recommended that the use of non-custodial measures and judicial reform are imperative to achieve a reduction in the population of prisons and to establish conditions that allow for rehabilitation (Eluchie-Chike & Nkeiruka, 2026; Thanni et al., 2026). The Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 introduced community service, probation/parole, restorative justice and other court-ordered non-custodial measures as a way to alleviate overcrowding in the prison system and to facilitate rehabilitation (NCoS, 2026; An Overview of Non-Custodial Penal Measures, 2026). The Kano Command recorded 151 non-custodial sentences in the first quarter of 2026 while the Lagos State Parole Board has strongly emphasized on the realisation of enhancement in non-custodial measures (NCoS, 2026; Lagos State MOJ, 2025). However, the operation of these measures has not been uniform and the level of operationalisation of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 (ACJA), which brought many of these measures, is yet to be realised in all states (An Overview of Non-Custodial Penal Measures, 2026).

Another pathway that is crucial is investment in educational infrastructure and digital learning. The National Open University of Nigeria has now increased its correctional education programme in 22 study centres in Correctional Facilities across Nigeria (NOUN, 2026). About 150 inmates are enrolled in the various NOUN programmes, with four inmates pursuing master's degrees and one inmate studying for a PhD at Kuje; 27 inmates have graduated, three of whom have master's degrees (NOUN, 2025). The inmates at the Agodi facility in Oyo state have been able to get five credits including Mathematics and English with 85% success rate since 2018 (NCoS, 2025). The Customs Service has ordered a new classroom complex in Kirikiri Apapa, with four fully air-conditioned classrooms and a fully-equipped library (NCoS, 2026). These are real accomplishments. However, they are the oases of brilliance in a desert of poverty. The lack of access to computers and internet in Kwara State facilities and the limited scope of education programmes that only comprise basic literacy in many of the centres indicates that the NOUN model is the exception. (Bello et al., 2026; Uche et al., 2026b)

A third pathway in the profession of correctional workers is professionalisation. To make rehabilitation happen, the recruitment and training of social workers, psychologists and educators should be prioritised (Uche et al., 2023; Adesanya et al., 2023, cited in IJCSS, 2025). The NCoS Academy has

produced cadets from the Advanced Command Course and NOUN has called for correction officers to be trained through open and distance learning (ODL) (NCoS, 2025; NAN, 2025). However, the current level of professional preparedness (less than 35% of officers who participated in structured rehabilitation programs) indicates that training programs need to be more comprehensive rather than being measured just through incremental steps (Adesanya et al., 2023, cited in IJCSS, 2025). A paradigm shift is needed in the correctional workforce, from custody to care.

There is a fourth pathway involving structured post-release support. Vocational training that leaves participants without job opportunities, mentorship, and/or post-release supports is "carrying water in a basket" (Uche et al, 2026a; Leadership, 2026). Kaduna State Government has been releasing N970, 000 to 97 freed inmates while the FCT has been giving starter packs which include fish tanks and cash support to 16 ex-inmates (Leadership, 2026; Punch, 2026). The NCoS has also introduced a parole system with the first batch of parolees in Abia State being released with empowerment and reintegration packages (Independent, 2026). While positive steps, these are still pilot schemes and not real rights. What changes would be needed for substantive reform? It would need a radical shift in resources from custody to community, from punishment to prevention, and from symbolic action to investment. It would need a political economy of rehabilitation that tackles the structural causes of crime, not just its symptoms, as poverty and unemployment are to blame.

10. Theoretical Synthesis: Toward an Explanation of Symbolic Rehabilitation

The threads are brought together and a critical interpretive synthesis can offer a coherent and integrated theoretical explanation for symbolic rehabilitation in Nigeria. Based on literature, five propositions are formulated.

Proposition 1: Symbolic rehabilitation is a response to institutional pressure, not a failure of will. Symbolic rehabilitation is not the result of a lack of will. Nigerian correctional authorities are confronted with competing priorities: international human rights principles which call for rehabilitative programming, while political pressures call for punitive punishments for the crime, and budget pressures which make substantive reform very costly. Formal rehabilitative structures that are separated from practice meet all three constituencies at the same time (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For instance, the provisions of the 2019 Act for mental health care are "largely driven by a paradigm shift from a punitive to a rehabilitative approach", but important gaps in the statute mean that it is largely symbolic (Ogunwale et al., 2026). Symbolic rehabilitation does not fail because it is not implemented; it fails because it is a rational organisational strategy in a space where institutional logics conflict.

Proposition 2: Overcrowding is not an accidental by-product of symbolic rehabilitation but a structural condition that makes it inevitable. Overcrowding is another unfortunate consequence of the symbolic rehabilitation, inevitable because it is a structural problem. With the facilities operating at 200-300 % capacity, the level of pre-trial detainees (65-70% of the population) and the lack of non-custodial measures, the material conditions for rehabilitation simply do not exist (Ogunwale et al., 2026; ECOWAS Court, 2024; Eluchie-Chike & Nkeiruka, 2026). Under these circumstances only Symbolic programmes are possible. There is no "illusion of statutory gatekeeping" it's actually a feature of a system that wasn't intended to contain anything. (Thanni et al., 2026).

Proposition 3: The professional composition of the correctional workforce reproduces the punitive logic of the institution. Professional staffing of corrections perpetuates the punitive nature of the institution. The focus of the organisation on security and control over rehabilitation will remain even

if they are supposed to be rehabilitative in their daily operations as long as their security personnel outnumber their social workers, psychologists, and educators; and as long as less than 35% of the security personnel are equipped with structured rehabilitation training (Adesanya et al., 2023 cited in IJCSS, 2025; Uche et al., 2023). Social workers are not lacking, they are chosen not to be there.

Proposition 4: Inmates' experiences of futility are not evidence of programme failure but of programme success at a different function. Futility of inmates is not proof of programme failure, but rather of the success of programme in a different function. Symbolic rehabilitation is able to effectively convey to the external audience that Nigeria is a modern state that is on a path of reform. It provides structure to prison life and does a good job of managing the prison population. It does not, however, prepare inmates for reintegration. But that may not be its primary function (Uche et al., 2026a; Bello et al., 2026). The inmates who complain about the too-crowded tailoring class and its uncertain post-release future are not complaining that the system is broken—as in, "I'm not happy with it," they're complaining that it works perfectly, for someone else.

Proposition 5: The gap between policy and practice is sustained by the absence of accountability mechanisms that measure rehabilitation outcomes rather than programme existence. If the criteria for success is the number of programmes that are established and not actually the number of inmates that successfully reintegrate, then symbolic rehabilitation will remain the rational organisational strategy as discussed before (Bello et al., 2026; Thanni et al., 2026). The most serious indictment of this accountability failure (Abrifor et al., 2012) is the recidivism rate: 52.4% and climbing. Recent government assertions that recidivism has declined from 11,616 in 2023 to 1,382 in 2025 are commendable but should be critically verified before being taken to be as the government says it is (Radio Nigeria, 2026; Ripples Nigeria, 2026; Independent, 2026).

Conclusion: From Metaphor to Analytical Framework

A basket to carry water is a very powerful metaphor. It is an analytical approach which focuses on the interaction between form and function, between policy and practice, between symbolic and substantive. This framework could serve as a critical interpretive synthesis of rehabilitation in Nigerian correctional facilities, beyond a mere description of programme inadequacy to provide a theoretically informed explanation for the longstanding existence of such inadequacy.

The basis for such a synthesis is provided by the literature assembled here. The study of Uche et al. (2026a) provides the source metaphor and a systems theoretical approach. The research done by Bello et al. (2026) offers quantitative evidence of gaps in functionality. The Albishir et al. (2025) study is a report on a gap between the availability of programme and its effectiveness. The study by Igwedimamah and Adegoke (2026) uncovers the gendered aspect of exclusion. The study presented by Uche et al. (2026b) contributes the phenomenology of futility and aspiration. The findings are located in the context of the human rights and policy literature on decongestion, non-custodial approaches, and the boundaries of statutory reform (Danjuma & Nordin, 2018; Eluchie-Chike & Nkeiruka, 2026; Thanni et al., 2026; Ogunwale et al., 2026). The external dimension of symbolic politics is the communities from which exoffenders are expected to come, and which are themselves the subject of symbolic punishment (Public Perceptions, 2025; Abrifor et al., 2012).

What will be left is to make these sources part of a coherent critical narrative, an explanation, a telling of the symbolic politics of rehabilitation in Nigeria. Theories that inform the theoretical resources are available: concepts of decoupling and myth-and-ceremony of institutional theory, interconnected barriers of general systems theory, prosocial modelling of social learning theory and the account of

stigma and exclusion of labeling theory. Interpretive synthesis, a critical interpretive approach, can produce new understandings of symbolic rehabilitation and the conditions for substantive reform by engaging these frameworks in conversation in relation to the empirical literature.

The basket is broken so the water is not being carried. It is being carried as a display it was intended as, not to carry. So long as the politics of rehabilitation is symbolic, instead of substantive, Nigerian prisons will keep churning out not reformed citizens, but recycled offenders and the basket will keep leaking.

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