



Research Article

The Role of the Nigerian Correctional Service in Inmate Classification: Challenges, Prospects, and Implications for Correctional Administration in Nigeria

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Abstract. The transformation of the Nigerian Prison Service into the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs) through the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 marked a significant shift in Nigeria's correctional philosophy from punishment to rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders. Central to achieving this objective is the effective classification of inmates, which enables correctional authorities to assess offenders according to their security risk, legal status, behavioural characteristics, health condition, age, gender, sentence length, and rehabilitation needs. Appropriate inmate classification promotes institutional security, protects vulnerable inmates, facilitates individualized treatment programmes, and enhances successful reintegration into society. However, despite the legal framework supporting classification, the Nigerian Correctional Service continues to face numerous challenges, including overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained personnel, limited

funding, poor inter-agency collaboration, and reliance on manual record-keeping systems. These challenges undermine effective classification and reduce the efficiency of correctional administration. This study examines the role of the Nigerian Correctional Service in inmate classification, analyses the challenges confronting its implementation, explores opportunities for improvement, and discusses the implications for correctional administration in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of relevant legislation, policy documents, books, journal articles, and reports from national and international organizations. The findings reveal that effective inmate classification remains indispensable for strengthening institutional security, improving rehabilitation programmes, reducing recidivism, and promoting effective correctional administration. The study recommends increased government funding, modernization of correctional facilities, adoption of evidence-based risk assessment tools, and digitalization of inmate information systems, continuous staff capacity building, and stronger collaboration among criminal justice institutions to enhance inmate classification practices in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian Correctional Service, inmate classification, correctional administration, rehabilitation, prison reform, institutional security.

INTRODUCTION

Correctional institutions play a vital role in every criminal justice system by ensuring the safe custody, rehabilitation, and eventual reintegration of offenders into society. Modern correctional administration has gradually shifted from a punitive approach to one that emphasizes offender reformation through education, vocational training, counselling, behavioural modification, and psychosocial support. Within this framework, inmate classification has become one of the most important management strategies for achieving security, order, and effective rehabilitation in correctional facilities.

Inmate classification refers to the systematic assessment and categorization of offenders according to factors such as legal status, security risk, criminal history, behavioural characteristics, medical condition, educational background, age, gender, and rehabilitation needs. The classification process enables correctional administrators to allocate inmates to appropriate custodial environments and treatment programmes while minimizing security risks and protecting vulnerable groups. International standards, particularly the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), recognize inmate classification as a fundamental requirement for humane and effective prison management.

In Nigeria, the enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 introduced comprehensive reforms aimed at transforming correctional administration from punishment to rehabilitation and reintegration. The Act assigns the Nigerian Correctional Service the responsibility of conducting comprehensive assessments of inmates immediately after admission to determine their security level, legal status, healthcare needs, educational requirements, vocational interests, and correctional treatment programmes. Effective implementation of inmate classification is therefore essential for ensuring institutional safety, promoting rehabilitation, protecting inmates' rights, and improving correctional outcomes.

Despite these reforms, inmate classification in Nigeria continues to face significant operational challenges. Persistent overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained correctional personnel, insufficient funding, weak technological capacity, and poor coordination among criminal justice institutions have limited the effectiveness of classification procedures. In many custodial centres, manual record management and inadequate assessment tools further hinder objective classification, resulting in inappropriate inmate placement and reduced effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes.

The consequences of ineffective inmate classification extend beyond correctional facilities. Poor classification contributes to institutional violence, prison congestion, criminal networking among inmates, inadequate rehabilitation, and high rates of recidivism. Conversely, effective classification enhances institutional discipline, improves resource allocation, supports individualized treatment programmes, and strengthens public confidence in the correctional system.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature Review

Concept of Inmate Classification

Inmate classification is a systematic process through which correctional authorities assess offenders and assign them to appropriate custodial environments based on security risk, legal status, age, gender, offence type, behavioural characteristics, health condition, sentence length, and rehabilitation needs (Andrews & Bonta, 2017). The primary objective of inmate classification is to ensure institutional security while providing individualized treatment and rehabilitation programmes that address the specific criminogenic needs of offenders. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2015), effective inmate classification is one of the fundamental principles of modern correctional administration because it prevents unnecessary interaction between dangerous offenders and vulnerable inmates, minimizes institutional violence, and facilitates effective rehabilitation. The Nelson Mandela Rules further emphasize that prisoners should be separated according to their legal status, gender, age, criminal history, and correctional requirements to guarantee humane treatment and proper prison management. The Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 recognizes inmate classification as a vital component of correctional administration by promoting rehabilitation, reformation, and reintegration rather than punishment alone. Classification therefore serves as the foundation for educational programmes, vocational training, counselling, psychological services, healthcare delivery, and reintegration planning.

The Nigerian Correctional Service and Inmate Classification

The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs), established under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, is responsible for the safe custody, rehabilitation, and reintegration of offenders. One of its statutory responsibilities is the proper classification of inmates immediately upon admission into custodial centres. The Service conducts admission assessments to determine each inmate's legal status, security risk, medical condition, educational background, vocational skills,

behavioural tendencies, and rehabilitation needs. These assessments guide decisions regarding accommodation, supervision level, treatment programmes, and correctional interventions. The NCOs also separates inmates based on factors such as convicted and awaiting-trial status, gender, age categories, first-time offenders and repeat offenders, violent and non-violent offenders, and inmates with special medical or psychological needs. Proper implementation of these procedures promotes institutional discipline, minimizes conflicts, protects vulnerable inmates, and enhances rehabilitation outcomes.

Types of Inmate Classification Systems

Correctional systems across the world adopt different classification approaches depending on institutional objectives and available resources. The Nigerian Correctional Service utilizes a combination of legal, security, and treatment classifications.

Legal classification distinguishes convicted inmates from awaiting-trial persons to ensure compliance with legal standards and protect the rights of individuals awaiting judicial determination.

Security classification categorizes inmates into maximum, medium, or minimum security levels based on escape risk, criminal history, institutional behaviour, and potential threat to institutional safety. Treatment classification focuses on rehabilitation needs by assigning inmates to educational programmes, vocational training, psychological counselling, substance abuse treatment, religious activities, and behavioural modification programmes.

Medical and psychological classification identifies inmates requiring specialized healthcare, psychiatric care, or disability support, ensuring that vulnerable groups receive appropriate services.

Importance of Inmate Classification in Correctional Administration

Effective inmate classification contributes significantly to correctional administration. It improves institutional security by ensuring that high-risk offenders are separated from low-risk offenders, thereby reducing assaults, gang activities, escapes, and criminal networking within custodial facilities.

Classification also enhances rehabilitation by enabling correctional authorities to develop individualized treatment plans based on each inmate's criminogenic needs, educational background, vocational interests, and behavioural characteristics. Such individualized interventions have been shown to improve rehabilitation outcomes and reduce recidivism.

Furthermore, inmate classification supports efficient utilization of correctional resources by enabling administrators to allocate personnel, facilities, educational programmes, healthcare services, and security measures according to institutional priorities. Proper classification equally protects vulnerable inmates, including juveniles, women, elderly inmates, inmates with disabilities, and persons with mental health conditions.

Challenges of Inmate Classification in Nigeria

Despite its importance, inmate classification in Nigeria faces numerous operational challenges. One of the most serious challenges is prison overcrowding. Many custodial centres operate far above their designed capacities, making proper separation of inmates practically impossible. The large population of awaiting-trial inmates further complicates classification and accommodation processes.

Another major challenge is inadequate infrastructure. Several correctional facilities lack sufficient accommodation blocks, assessment centres, counselling units, healthcare facilities, and rehabilitation workshops required for effective classification and treatment.

Human resource constraints also affect classification practices. Many custodial centres have insufficient numbers of trained correctional officers, psychologists, social workers, criminologists, and medical personnel to conduct comprehensive inmate assessments and periodic reviews.

Limited funding remains another significant obstacle. Budgetary constraints affect infrastructure development, staff training, and procurement of assessment tools, digital information systems, healthcare facilities, and rehabilitation programmes.

Additionally, the absence of standardized evidence-based risk assessment instruments reduces the objectivity and consistency of inmate classification decisions. Most custodial centres still rely heavily on manual records, thereby limiting effective information management and timely review of inmate classifications. Weak coordination among the police, courts, correctional authorities, and other criminal justice institutions also contributes to prolonged detention, delayed inmate processing, and overcrowding, all of which undermine effective classification.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have examined inmate classification and correctional administration across different jurisdictions. Andrews and Bonta (2017) demonstrated that structured offender classification based on the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model significantly improves rehabilitation outcomes while reducing recidivism. Their findings indicate that correctional programmes achieve greater effectiveness when interventions correspond to offenders' assessed risk levels and criminogenic needs. Van Voorhis, Braswell, and Lester (2019) found that individualized correctional treatment based on systematic inmate assessment contributes to improved institutional behaviour, enhanced rehabilitation, and successful reintegration into society. The authors emphasized that correctional counselling and classification should operate as complementary components of offender rehabilitation. The National Institute of Corrections (2018) reported that objective classification systems enhance institutional security, reduce violence, improve staff deployment, and strengthen correctional decision-making. Facilities implementing evidence-based classification frameworks recorded lower rates of inmate misconduct and escape attempts.

UNODC (2017) similarly observed that dynamic security strategies, including continuous inmate assessment and periodic classification reviews, contribute

significantly to prison stability, intelligence gathering, conflict prevention, and protection of inmates' rights. Within the Nigerian context, available studies indicate that overcrowding, inadequate funding, insufficient personnel, obsolete infrastructure, and limited technological support continue to hinder effective inmate classification despite ongoing reforms introduced by the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019. Researchers generally agree that strengthening classification procedures will enhance institutional security, improve rehabilitation programmes, and promote effective correctional administration.

Research Gap

Although several studies have examined prison reforms, rehabilitation, overcrowding, and correctional administration in Nigeria, limited scholarly attention has been devoted specifically to the role of the Nigerian Correctional Service in inmate classification and its implications for effective correctional administration. Existing studies often discuss classification only as part of broader prison management issues without comprehensively analysing its operational challenges, future prospects, and policy implications under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019.

This study addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive examination of the inmate classification system in Nigeria, identifying implementation challenges, assessing opportunities for improvement, and analysing its implications for institutional security,

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Theory, developed by Andrews and Bonta (2010; 2017), with support from the Rehabilitative Theory of Corrections. These theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of inmate classification in promoting institutional security, offender rehabilitation, and effective correctional administration within the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs).

Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Theory

The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Theory is one of the most widely accepted evidence-based models in contemporary correctional administration. The theory argues that effective offender management depends on accurately assessing an offender's risk of reoffending, identifying criminogenic needs that contribute to criminal behaviour, and delivering interventions that are responsive to the offender's personal characteristics, abilities, and learning style (Andrews & Bonta, 2017).

The RNR model is built on three core principles:

Risk Principle: The intensity of correctional supervision and intervention should correspond to the offender's level of risk. High-risk offenders require more intensive supervision and rehabilitation programmes, while low-risk offenders should receive less restrictive interventions to avoid unnecessary institutionalization.

Need Principle: Correctional interventions should target criminogenic needs such as antisocial attitudes, substance abuse, poor educational attainment, unemployment, dysfunctional family relationships, and criminal peer associations. Addressing these factors reduces the likelihood of reoffending.

Responsivity Principle: Rehabilitation programmes should be tailored to the offender's individual characteristics, including age, gender, educational background, culture, personality, mental health condition, motivation, and learning ability. This individualized approach increases the effectiveness of correctional treatment.

Within the Nigerian Correctional Service, the RNR Theory provides a strong justification for inmate classification. Through comprehensive assessment during admission, inmates can be classified according to legal status, security risk, criminal history, behavioural characteristics, health condition, sentence length, and rehabilitation needs. This enables correctional authorities to assign inmates to appropriate custodial centres, educational programmes, vocational training, counselling services, and behavioural interventions while maintaining institutional security and protecting vulnerable inmates.

The theory further explains why effective classification contributes to improved rehabilitation outcomes, efficient resource allocation, reduced institutional violence, and lower rates of recidivism. Conversely, poor or inaccurate classification undermines correctional objectives by exposing low-risk offenders to hardened criminals, increasing prison misconduct, and limiting the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes.

Rehabilitative Theory

The study is also supported by the Rehabilitative Theory, which views crime as behaviour that can be modified through appropriate treatment, education, vocational training, counselling, psychological support, and social reintegration programmes rather than punishment alone. The theory maintains that correctional institutions should focus on reforming offenders and preparing them to become productive and law-abiding members of society. The enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 reflects this rehabilitative philosophy by transforming the Nigerian Prisons Service into the Nigerian Correctional Service and emphasizing offender reformation, rehabilitation, restorative justice, and reintegration. Proper inmate classification is fundamental to achieving these objectives because it enables the Service to identify each inmate's individual correctional needs and assign suitable rehabilitation programmes.

Relevance of the Theoretical Framework to the Study

The combined application of the Risk-Need-Responsivity Theory and the Rehabilitative Theory provides a suitable framework for analysing inmate classification within the Nigerian Correctional Service. The theories explain that effective classification is not merely an administrative exercise but a strategic correctional management process that enhances institutional security, protects inmates' rights, improves rehabilitation, supports efficient allocation of correctional resources, and facilitates successful reintegration into society. The theories also

provide a basis for understanding the challenges confronting inmate classification in Nigeria, including overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained personnel, weak technological capacity, and insufficient funding. Strengthening inmate classification through evidence-based assessment tools, digital information management, continuous staff development, and improved correctional policies will therefore enhance the capacity of the Nigerian Correctional Service to achieve the objectives of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 and align Nigeria's correctional administration with international best practices.rehabilitation, and correctional administration.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using the documentary research method. The design was considered appropriate because the study sought to examine the role of the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs) in inmate classification by exploring existing laws, policies, institutional practices, and scholarly literature rather than collecting primary data from respondents. A qualitative documentary approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the operational realities, challenges, prospects, and implications of inmate classification for correctional administration in Nigeria.

Sources of Data

The study relied entirely on secondary data obtained from credible and authoritative sources. These included the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, official publications of the Nigerian Correctional Service, the Federal Ministry of Interior, reports of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), policy documents, government reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, conference papers, dissertations, and other relevant academic and institutional publications on correctional administration and inmate classification.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through an extensive review of published and unpublished documentary materials relating to inmate classification, correctional reforms, rehabilitation programmes, prison management, institutional security, and offender reintegration. Relevant information was extracted, organized, and synthesized in line with the objectives of the study. Particular attention was given to documents addressing the legal framework, classification procedures, operational challenges, and reform initiatives within the Nigerian Correctional Service.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic content analysis. This involved careful reading, coding, categorization, and interpretation of information obtained from the various documentary sources. The analysis focused on recurring themes such as the concept of inmate classification, classification systems, and the

statutory responsibilities of the Nigerian Correctional Service, challenges affecting effective classification, prospects for improvement, and the implications of inmate classification for institutional security, rehabilitation, and correctional administration. Findings from different sources were compared and integrated to produce coherent and evidence-based conclusions.

Discussion and Analysis

The findings from the reviewed literature indicate that inmate classification is a fundamental component of modern correctional administration and remains central to achieving the objectives of the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs). The transition from the Nigerian Prisons Service to the Nigerian Correctional Service under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 reflects a significant policy shift from a punitive model of imprisonment to one that emphasizes rehabilitation, reformation, restorative justice, and reintegration. Within this framework, effective inmate classification has become an indispensable administrative tool for ensuring institutional security, improving rehabilitation outcomes, and reducing recidivism.

The literature demonstrates that proper classification enables correctional authorities to separate inmates based on legal status, security risk, age, gender, health condition, behavioural characteristics, sentence length, and rehabilitation needs. Such separation reduces prison violence, prevents criminal networking between hardened offenders and first-time offenders, protects vulnerable inmates, and enhances institutional discipline. These findings are consistent with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), which emphasize prisoner classification as an essential principle of humane and effective prison management.

Analysis of the Nigerian correctional system, however, reveals a considerable gap between policy and practice. Although the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 provides a comprehensive legal framework for inmate classification, implementation remains constrained by structural and institutional challenges. Chronic overcrowding in custodial centres remains the greatest obstacle to effective classification. The large number of awaiting-trial persons, who constitute a substantial proportion of the inmate population, limits the Service's ability to separate inmates according to legal status and security classification. Consequently, many custodial centres accommodate inmates beyond their designed capacities, making effective classification difficult.

The analysis further shows that inadequate infrastructure significantly affects classification practices. Many custodial centres lack sufficient accommodation blocks, assessment units, counselling centres, medical facilities, vocational workshops, and specialized housing for vulnerable inmates. As a result, inmates who require different levels of supervision and rehabilitation are frequently housed together, increasing the likelihood of violence, intimidation, gang recruitment, and the transfer of criminal knowledge within correctional facilities.

Human resource limitations also undermine effective inmate classification. Modern correctional classification requires multidisciplinary professionals, including psychologists, social workers, criminologists, medical personnel, counsellors, and

trained correctional officers capable of conducting objective risk assessments. However, available evidence indicates that many Nigerian custodial centres face shortages of these specialists, thereby reducing the quality and consistency of inmate assessment and rehabilitation planning.

Another major finding is the continued dependence on manual record-keeping systems in many custodial centres. Manual documentation reduces the efficiency of inmate information management, delays classification reviews, and limits the availability of reliable data for evidence-based decision-making. In contrast, many developed correctional systems employ computerized offender management systems supported by validated risk assessment instruments that facilitate accurate inmate placement and continuous monitoring of behavioural changes.

The literature also highlights weak collaboration among criminal justice institutions as a significant contributor to ineffective inmate classification. Delays in police investigations, prolonged court proceedings, and slow prosecution processes increase the number of awaiting-trial persons, thereby contributing to prison congestion. Improved coordination among the Nigeria Police Force, the judiciary, the Ministry of Justice, the Legal Aid Council, and the Nigerian Correctional Service would accelerate inmate processing and improve classification efficiency.

Despite these challenges, the prospects for improving inmate classification in Nigeria remain encouraging. The enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 provides an important legal foundation for comprehensive correctional reforms. The expansion of non-custodial measures such as probation, parole, community service, and restorative justice has the potential to reduce overcrowding and enable more effective inmate classification within custodial centres.

Furthermore, the adoption of digital offender management systems, biometric identification technologies, computerized inmate databases, and internationally recognized evidence-based risk assessment tools would significantly improve classification accuracy and correctional decision-making. Continuous staff training, increased government funding, infrastructure modernization, and stronger partnerships with international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) would further strengthen correctional administration.

From a correctional administration perspective, effective inmate classification has significant implications for institutional management. It enhances institutional security by reducing escape attempts, violence, gang activities, and inmate misconduct. It improves rehabilitation by ensuring that offenders participate in educational, vocational, psychological, religious, and behavioural programmes that correspond with their individual needs. Effective classification also promotes efficient allocation of correctional resources, protects inmates' fundamental human rights, supports evidence-based correctional decision-making, and contributes to successful offender reintegration into society.

Historical Background of the Nigerian Correctional Service

The history of the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs) dates back to the colonial era, when the British administration established prisons primarily to maintain law and order and punish offenders. The earliest formal prison in Nigeria

was established in Lagos in 1872, following the annexation of Lagos as a British Colony in 1861. During this period, prisons were managed by the colonial government and were mainly used to detain convicted criminals, political dissidents, debtors, and individuals who opposed colonial authority. The prison system emphasized punishment, deterrence, and confinement rather than rehabilitation or reintegration.

As British colonial administration expanded across Nigeria, prison facilities were established in major provinces to support the administration of justice. Before Nigeria's independence in 1960, prison administration was decentralized, with the Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions operating separate prison services under regional governments. This arrangement resulted in variations in prison management, administration, and operational standards across the country.

Following independence, the Federal Government recognized the need for a unified correctional system. Consequently, prison administration was centralized through the Prisons Act of 1972 (Cap. P29, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004), which placed all prisons under the control of the Federal Government. The Nigerian Prisons Service (NPS) was established to provide safe custody for offenders, maintain prison security, and facilitate rehabilitation through educational, vocational, and religious programmes. However, despite these reforms, the prison system remained largely custodial and punitive, with limited emphasis on offender reformation.

Over the years, the Nigerian Prisons Service encountered numerous challenges, including overcrowding, poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, shortage of trained personnel, poor healthcare services, and a high population of awaiting-trial inmates. These challenges attracted criticism from national and international human rights organizations, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which advocated reforms aimed at improving prison conditions and aligning Nigeria's correctional system with international standards such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

A major turning point in Nigeria's correctional history occurred with the enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, which repealed the Nigerian Prisons Act. The new legislation officially changed the name of the Nigerian Prisons Service to the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS), reflecting a significant shift from a punishment-oriented system to a correctional philosophy centered on rehabilitation, reformation, reintegration, and restorative justice. The Act expanded the responsibilities of the Service beyond custody to include offender rehabilitation, vocational training, educational programmes, psychological support, non-custodial measures, and post-release reintegration.

The Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 also introduced important innovations, including the establishment of the Custodial Service and the Non-Custodial Service. While the Custodial Service is responsible for the secure custody, care, welfare, and rehabilitation of inmates in correctional centres, the Non-Custodial Service administers alternatives to imprisonment such as community service, probation, parole, restorative justice programmes, and other non-custodial measures aimed at reducing prison overcrowding and promoting offender reintegration.

Today, the Nigerian Correctional Service is a key institution within Nigeria's criminal justice system. It is responsible for ensuring the safe custody of inmates, conducting inmate classification, providing education and vocational training, delivering healthcare and psychological services, implementing rehabilitation programmes, and preparing offenders for successful reintegration into society. Inmate classification has become one of the Service's core responsibilities because it enables correctional authorities to assess inmates based on their legal status, security risk, age, gender, health condition, behavioural characteristics, and rehabilitation needs. Effective classification promotes institutional security, protects vulnerable inmates, facilitates individualized treatment programmes, and supports the overall objectives of correctional administration in Nigeria.

The evolution from the Nigerian Prisons Service to the Nigerian Correctional Service demonstrates Nigeria's commitment to modern correctional practices that prioritize public safety, human rights, offender rehabilitation, and the reduction of recidivism. Nevertheless, the Service continues to face significant challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, shortage of professional personnel, and insufficient technological capacity. Addressing these challenges remains essential for strengthening inmate classification and achieving the objectives of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019.

Types of Custodial Centres in the Nigerian Correctional Service

The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs), established under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, operates different categories of custodial centres designed to ensure safe custody, effective inmate management, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The classification of custodial centres is primarily based on the security level required for inmates, the nature of offences committed, sentence length, and correctional objectives. This classification enables the Service to maintain institutional security while providing appropriate rehabilitation programmes tailored to inmates' individual needs.

1. Maximum Security Custodial Centres

Maximum Security Custodial Centres accommodate inmates classified as high-risk offenders. These include individuals convicted of serious offences such as terrorism, armed robbery, kidnapping, murder, treason, organized crime, and other violent crimes. Inmates with a history of escape attempts or those considered dangerous to institutional security are also housed in these facilities.

These centres are characterized by:

- High perimeter walls and reinforced security infrastructure
- Strict surveillance through armed personnel, CCTV, and controlled movement.
- Intensive supervision of inmates.
- Limited inmate movement and visitation.
- Specialized rehabilitation and psychological counselling programmes.

The primary objective of maximum security custodial centres is to protect society while ensuring that high-risk offenders receive appropriate correctional interventions under strict security conditions.

2. Medium Security Custodial Centres

Medium Security Custodial Centres accommodate inmates who pose moderate security risks. They house both convicted inmates and, in some instances, awaiting-trial persons where facilities permit proper separation. These inmates generally exhibit good institutional behaviour and are not considered likely to escape.

Characteristics include:

- ✓ Moderate security arrangements
- ✓ Greater participation in educational, vocational, and religious programmes.
- ✓ Structured rehabilitation and behavioral modification activities.
- ✓ Controlled interaction among inmates.
- ✓ Opportunities for skill acquisition and counselling.

Medium security centres form the largest category of custodial facilities in Nigeria and serve as the primary institutions for offender rehabilitation.

3. Minimum Security Custodial Centres

Minimum Security Custodial Centres are designed for inmates assessed as low-risk offenders. They typically accommodate inmates with short sentences, first-time offenders, or inmates who have demonstrated exemplary conduct while in custody.

Features include:

- ❖ Reduced physical security measures.
- ❖ Greater freedom of movement within the facility.
- ❖ Extensive vocational training and agricultural activities.
- ❖ Educational and entrepreneurship programmes.
- ❖ Preparation for community reintegration.

These centres emphasize rehabilitation, self-discipline, and reintegration rather than intensive security.

4. Satellite Custodial Centres

Satellite Custodial Centres are smaller correctional facilities established to decongest larger custodial centres and improve access to correctional services across different parts of the country. They usually accommodate inmates serving short-term sentences or awaiting trial, depending on operational requirements.

- ❖ Their functions include
- ❖ Temporary custody of inmates.
- ❖ Reduction of congestion in larger custodial centres.
- ❖ Easier transportation of inmates to courts.
- ❖ Provision of basic rehabilitation programmes.

Although smaller in size, satellite custodial centres remain subject to the operational standards and regulations of the Nigerian Correctional Service.

5. Farm Centres and Open Custodial Centres

The Nigerian Correctional Service operates agricultural farm centres and open custodial facilities where carefully selected low-risk inmates participate in farming, livestock production, fisheries, and other vocational activities.

Objectives include:

- Developing practical agricultural skills
- Promoting food production and self-sufficiency.
- Providing vocational training and employment skills.
- Preparing inmates for successful reintegration after release.

➤ Reducing idleness within custodial facilities.

Inmates admitted into these centres are usually those with minimum security classification and good behavioural records.

Importance of Different Types of Custodial Centres

The existence of different categories of custodial centres enhances the effectiveness of correctional administration by:

- ❖ Ensuring inmates are housed according to their security classification.
- ❖ Improving institutional safety and order.
- ❖ Protecting vulnerable inmates from hardened offenders.
- ❖ Facilitating individualized rehabilitation programmes.
- ❖ Promoting efficient allocation of correctional resources.
- ❖ Supporting offender reformation and successful reintegration into society.
- ❖ Reducing recidivism through targeted correctional interventions.

Implications for Inmate Classification

The effectiveness of inmate classification depends largely on the availability of appropriate custodial centres. Once inmates are assessed according to their legal status, security risk, age, gender, health condition, criminal history, and rehabilitation needs, they can be assigned to the most suitable custodial environment. Proper placement minimizes violence, prevents escapes, improves rehabilitation outcomes, and enhances overall correctional administration. Consequently, the Nigerian Correctional Service continues to strengthen its custodial system in line with the objectives of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, international best practices, and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

Classification of Inmates in Nigerian Custodial Centres

The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS), under the provisions of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 and in line with international standards such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), classifies inmates into different categories to promote institutional security, safeguard inmates' rights, and facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration. Proper classification enables correctional authorities to separate inmates according to their legal status, security risk, age, gender, health condition, and correctional needs, thereby reducing violence, escape attempts, and criminal influence within custodial centres.

1. Classification by Legal Status

One of the most fundamental classifications in Nigerian custodial centres is based on legal status.

- ❖ Awaiting-Trial Persons (ATPs): Individuals who have been charged with criminal offences but whose cases are still pending before the courts. They are presumed innocent until proven guilty and should be kept separate from convicted inmates

- ❖ **Convicted Inmates:** Persons who have been found guilty by a competent court and sentenced to imprisonment. These inmates participate fully in rehabilitation and correctional programmes.

This separation protects the constitutional rights of awaiting-trial persons and prevents undue exposure to hardened offenders.

2. Classification by Security Level

The Nigerian Correctional Service classifies inmates according to their security risk and likelihood of escape.

- ✓ **Maximum Security Inmates:** High-risk offenders convicted of serious crimes such as terrorism, armed robbery, kidnapping, homicide, organized crime, or inmates with escape records. They are subjected to the highest level of supervision.
- ✓ **Medium Security Inmates:** Offenders considered to pose moderate security risks. They receive controlled movement and participate in structured rehabilitation programmes.
- ✓ **Minimum Security Inmates:** Low-risk offenders with good institutional behaviour and minimal escape risk. They may participate in vocational training, educational programmes, and supervised community-oriented activities where applicable.

3. Classification by Gender

To ensure safety, privacy, and compliance with human rights standards, inmates are classified according to gender.

- Male inmates
- Female inmate

Female custodial centres provide specialized services, including maternal healthcare, childcare support for nursing mothers, counselling, and vocational programmes designed to meet the unique needs of women.

4. Classification by Age

Age-based classification protects vulnerable offenders and ensures age-appropriate rehabilitation.

- Young offenders
- Adult inmates
- Elderly inmates

Young offenders require educational opportunities, behavioural counselling, and vocational training tailored to their developmental needs, while elderly inmates may require specialized healthcare and welfare services.

5. Classification by Nature of Offence

Inmates are also classified according to the offences for which they were convicted or charged.

- Violent offenders
- Non-violent offenders
- Economic and financial crime offenders
- Drug-related offenders
- Sexual offenders
- Terrorism and organized crime offenders

6. Classification by Criminal History

Correctional administrators distinguish inmates according to previous criminal involvement.

- First-time offenders
- Repeat offenders (recidivists)
- Habitual or career offenders

First-time offenders are often considered more responsive to rehabilitation, while repeat offenders may require more intensive behavioural interventions.

7. Classification by Health and Psychological Status

Medical screening is conducted during admission to identify inmates requiring specialized treatment.

Categories include:

- ❖ Physically ill inmates
- ❖ Inmates with mental health conditions
- ❖ Inmates with disabilities
- ❖ Inmates with communicable diseases
- ❖ Inmates requiring psychiatric or psychological care

Proper medical classification prevents disease transmission and ensures access to appropriate healthcare services.

8. Classification by Rehabilitation Needs

The Nigerian Correctional Service assesses inmates to determine programmes suitable for their personal development.

These include:

- ❖ Educational programmes
- ❖ Vocational and technical skills acquisition
- ❖ Literacy and adult education
- ❖ Substance abuse treatment
- ❖ Religious and moral instruction
- ❖ Psychological counselling
- ❖ Anger management and behavioral therapy
- ❖ Reintegration and aftercare programmes

This individualized approach supports successful rehabilitation and reduces recidivism.

9. Classification by Sentence Length

Sentence duration also influences inmate management.

- Short-term inmate
- Medium-term inmates
- Long-term inmates
- Life-sentenced inmates

Long-term inmates generally require comprehensive rehabilitation and periodic behavioral

Assessment to prepare them for eventual reintegration where applicable.

10. Special Categories of Inmates

Certain groups require special protection and management because of their unique vulnerabilities.

These include:

- Pregnant women
- Nursing mothers
- Elderly inmates
- Foreign nationals
- Inmates with disabilities
- High-profile inmates
- Vulnerable inmates requiring protective custody
- Inmates under witness protection or facing threats from other prisoners
- Special classification ensures compliance with national laws and international human rights standards.

Importance of Proper Inmate Classification

An effective classification system is indispensable for modern correctional administration. It promotes institutional security by reducing violence and escapes, protects vulnerable inmates from abuse, facilitates individualized rehabilitation programmes, improves the allocation of correctional resources, enhances staff efficiency, and supports successful reintegration into society. Within the Nigerian Correctional Service, proper inmate classification is therefore a critical tool for achieving the objectives of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, which emphasizes rehabilitation, reformation, restorative justice, and public safety.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The study examined the role of the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs) in inmate classification, highlighting its importance in achieving institutional security, offender rehabilitation, and effective correctional administration in Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that inmate classification is not merely an administrative procedure but a strategic correctional management tool that enables authorities to assess offenders according to their legal status, security risk, behavioural characteristics, health condition, sentence length, and rehabilitation needs. When properly implemented, classification promotes the safe custody of inmates, protects vulnerable groups, facilitates individualized rehabilitation programmes, improves resource allocation, and contributes to reducing institutional violence and recidivism.

The study also reveals that despite the reforms introduced by the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019, the effective implementation of inmate classification remains constrained by persistent challenges. These include overcrowding in custodial centres, inadequate infrastructure, and shortage of trained correctional personnel, insufficient funding, weak inter-agency collaboration, reliance on manual record-keeping systems, and the limited use of standardized evidence-based risk assessment tools. These challenges undermine the ability of the NCOs to implement objective and consistent classification practices, thereby affecting rehabilitation outcomes and overall correctional efficiency.

Anchored on the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Theory and the Rehabilitative Theory, the study establishes that effective inmate classification is essential for matching offenders with appropriate security levels and rehabilitation programmes

based on their individual risks and needs. Such an approach strengthens institutional order, enhances correctional treatment, and supports the successful reintegration of offenders into society. It also aligns with international best practices, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), which emphasize classification as a cornerstone of humane and effective correctional administration.

In conclusion, improving inmate classification should remain a priority within Nigeria's ongoing correctional reforms. Achieving this requires sustained government commitment through increased funding, modernization of custodial facilities, digitalization of inmate information management systems, adoption of evidence-based classification instruments, continuous professional training of correctional personnel, and stronger collaboration among the police, courts, correctional authorities, and other criminal justice stakeholders. By addressing these challenges, the Nigerian Correctional Service will be better positioned to fulfil its constitutional mandate of ensuring secure custody, effective rehabilitation, and the successful reintegration of offenders, thereby contributing to safer correctional institutions and improved public safety in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen inmate classification and improve correctional administration in Nigeria:

1. **Increase Government Funding:** The Federal Government should provide adequate and sustained funding to the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCOs) for the construction and renovation of custodial centres, procurement of modern assessment tools, and expansion of rehabilitation facilities. Adequate funding is essential for effective inmate classification and correctional management.
2. **Modernize Custodial Infrastructure:** Existing custodial centres should be upgraded to include dedicated classification units, medical and psychological assessment centres, counselling facilities, vocational workshops, and separate accommodation for different categories of inmates. Additional custodial facilities should also be established to reduce overcrowding.
3. **Adopt Evidence-Based Risk Assessment Tools:** The NCOs should implement standardized and scientifically validated inmate classification instruments, such as the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, to ensure objective, consistent, and transparent classification decisions across all custodial centres.
4. **Digitalize Inmate Information Management:** The Service should replace manual record-keeping with an integrated electronic offender management system incorporating biometric registration, computerized inmate databases, and real-time information sharing. Digitalization will improve classification accuracy, record management, monitoring, and decision-making.
5. **Strengthen Human Capacity Development:** Regular training and professional development programmes should be organized for correctional officers, psychologists, social workers, criminologists, medical personnel, and counsellors

on modern inmate assessment, classification techniques, rehabilitation strategies, and international correctional standards.

6. **Reduce Prison Overcrowding:** The judiciary and criminal justice institutions should promote non-custodial measures such as probation, parole, community service, restorative justice, and plea bargaining where appropriate. Timely trial of awaiting-trial persons will also reduce congestion and improve the effectiveness of inmate classification.
7. **Enhance Inter-Agency Collaboration:** Stronger cooperation among the Nigerian Correctional Service, the Nigeria Police Force, the judiciary, the Ministry of Justice, the Legal Aid Council, and other criminal justice agencies should be encouraged to facilitate prompt inmate processing, effective information sharing, and efficient classification.
8. **Expand Rehabilitation Programmes:** Correctional authorities should strengthen educational, vocational, entrepreneurial, psychological, religious, and behavioural modification programmes tailored to the specific needs of inmates identified through the classification process. This will improve rehabilitation outcomes and reduce recidivism.
9. **Improve Healthcare and Psychological Services:** Every custodial centre should have qualified healthcare professionals, psychologists, and mental health specialists to conduct comprehensive medical and psychological assessments during admission and periodically thereafter. Vulnerable inmates should receive specialized care and protection.
10. **Promote Compliance with International Standards:** The Nigerian Correctional Service should align its inmate classification policies and practices with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) and other international best practices to ensure humane treatment, respect for human rights, and effective correctional administration.
11. **Strengthen Monitoring and Policy Evaluation:** The Federal Ministry of Interior and the Nigerian Correctional Service should establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to periodically assess the effectiveness of inmate classification policies, identify implementation gaps, and introduce evidence-based reforms where necessary.
12. **Support Research and Innovation:** Universities, research institutions, and the Nigerian Correctional Service should collaborate to undertake continuous research on inmate classification, rehabilitation, prison management, and correctional reforms. Research findings should inform policy formulation and operational improvements within the Nigerian correctional system.

Implementing these recommendations will strengthen inmate classification practices, improve institutional security, enhance offender rehabilitation and reintegration, reduce recidivism, and enable the Nigerian Correctional Service to achieve the objectives of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 while aligning Nigeria's correctional administration with international best practices.

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