

STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL REINTEGRATION OF INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS IN NIGERIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigeria returns thousands of incarcerated individuals to society each year. While this may indicate an end to their detention, it is only the start of their journeys, which are often fraught with several difficulties. The unfortunate hallmark of transitioning into society is the uncertainty that it brings. Several returning citizens are ostracised by their families, stigmatised by employers, crippled by poverty and frustrated by the depleting economic climate. These obstacles are compounded by the current economic climate and by the weak social reintegration structures within the correctional system. To mitigate the weak social reintegration structures in our society, this brief reviews the loopholes in the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 and proposes recommendations like community-led social reintegration, tailored re-entry support systems, the use of detention houses over traditional prisons, harmonised laws and increased data sharing.

INTRODUCTION

Social reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals involves the transition of formerly incarcerated persons back into society after spending time incarcerated. As an action, it is the support given to aid successful re-entry into society, from the point of arrest till after release.

In a bid to reform the Nigerian prison system, the new Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 (the Act) introduced a modern paradigm that focuses on reform, rehabilitation, and reintegration, in line with international best practices. Its core objectives are to provide for human rights compliance, enhance the focus on rehabilitation, reformation and reintegration, implement non-custodial approaches, and reduce the number of individuals awaiting trial. It is structured institutionally into the Custodial Service, which is responsible for social reintegration and the Non-Custodial Service, which gives alternatives to prisons.

Despite these reforms, practical implementation remains inconsistent, and many formerly incarcerated persons continue to face challenges upon release. This policy briefing examines the existing reintegration framework under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 (the Act), explores the gaps between policy intent and practice, and presents recommendations to strengthen reintegration outcomes in Nigeria.

In this brief, social reintegration refers to the broader process of successfully transitioning back into society after incarceration, while re-entry programmes describe the specific interventions and services designed to support that reintegration process.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Social Reintegration is understood in the context of “offenders” only:

The Act, by its language, limits social reintegration to “offenders,” thereby implying that only those formally found to have conflicted with the law should benefit from reintegration efforts. Similarly, several international policies, handbooks, and reports addressing social reintegration within prison contexts also restrict their focus to “offenders.” However, reintegration should not, in policy language or practice, be confined to persons who have been sentenced or declared guilty by a court of competent jurisdiction.

According to the World Prison Brief, 4 as of June 23rd 2025, 66.1% of Nigeria’s incarcerated population are pre-trial detainees and remanded persons. This means approximately 54,000 individuals who remain untried and unconvicted are equally exposed to the adverse effects of imprisonment.

In a society where unlawful and prolonged deprivation of liberty is a systemic issue, framing social reintegration solely around convicted offenders fails to address the reintegration needs of the majority behind bars.



2. There is a disconnect between policy and practice

On paper, the Act is a comprehensive reintegration scheme and is all-encompassing. The Custodial Service must provide education and vocational training to prepare incarcerated persons for release into society. But the promise of this Act is undermined to a large degree by a spectrum of critical loopholes and systemic failures that work to further insulate the correction system from the law as drafted. For instance, Section 19 mandates the Correctional Service to provide some assistance, like transportation and aftercare support, to a returning citizen where it is in their interest or the public’s interest. In practice, however, returning citizens are often left to fend for themselves. As the prison gates shut behind them, it is usually the last interaction they have with the correctional authorities, except in instances of recidivism. NGOs and faith-based organisations often step in to fill this gap by providing housing, feeding and other re-entry interventions without state-sponsored support.

1 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Custodial and Non-Custodial Measures: Social Reintegration (New York: United Nations, 2006) accessed online at https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/cjat_eng/4_Social_Reintegration.pdf

2 Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 (The Act), s. 2(1).

3 The Act, s. 10 (f).

World Prison Brief, accessed online at <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/nigeria>

3. Reintegration must include custodial rehabilitation

The criminal justice cycle is incomplete if institutional rehabilitative processes are left out. Evidence suggests that reintegration is more effective when it begins within correctional facilities themselves. Programmes such as vocational training, education, psychosocial support, and substance use counselling delivered in custody can better prepare justice-impacted persons for a successful return to society. Embedding such rehabilitation measures within custodial settings helps bridge the gap between custody and community, laying the groundwork for successful re-entry.

4. Non-custodial and alternative sentencing measures promote social reintegration

Empirical studies and international experience demonstrate that non-custodial measures such as probation, parole, and community service are associated with lower recidivism rates and better social reintegration outcomes than imprisonment. For example, data from studies in the European Union show that countries with higher use of non-custodial measures tend to report lower average rates of repeat offending.⁶ These alternatives enable justice-impacted persons to remain embedded in their communities, maintain family ties, and continue employment or education; all factors known to facilitate successful reintegration. In the Nigerian context, effectively operationalising the existing legal framework for non-custodial sentencing could produce similar benefits by reducing prison overcrowding and most importantly, improving post-sentence outcomes.

CENTRE FOR LEGAL SUPPORT AND INMATE REHABILITATION

5. Conflicting laws hinder non-custodial practices

A clear institutional conflict exists between the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 and the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 regarding the administration of non-custodial measures. Under section 457(2), the Chief Judge is empowered to appoint and regulate probation officers. In contrast, section 37(1) and (2)(a) of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 vests the Service with overarching responsibility for administering all non-custodial sanctions, including community service and the appointment of probation officers. This overlap in legal mandates has created administrative ambiguity, affecting effective coordination and implementation of non-custodial sentences.

UNODC, Introductory Handbook on the Prevention of Recidivism and the Social Reintegration of Offenders (New York: United Nations, 2012) accessed online at https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prisonreform/crimeprevention/Introductory_Handbook_on_the_Prevention_of_Recidivism_and_the_Social_Reintegration_of_Offenders.pdf

Anabela Miranda Rodrigues et al., "Non-Custodial Sanctions and Measures in the Member States of the European Union: Comparative Report" (Penal Reform International, the Institute for Legal Research of the University of Coimbra (Portugal) and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2022).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Community approach to reintegration

While the social reintegration process should ideally begin at the point of detention, research suggests that re-entry interventions are often most effective when delivered in community-based settings outside the institutional environment of prisons.

Re-integration is a collective effort, where the government, the Nigerian Correctional Service, institutions, CSOs and the society come together to design, implement and promote social re-integration programmes. Therefore, while it must begin from the institution, in readiness for release, it must also extend to compulsory aftercare and transitional services.

CELSIR's work with the justice-impacted community shows that having post-release support from a community of other justice-impacted persons hastens the successful social reintegration process. Our network of formerly incarcerated individuals who make up the Global Freedom Scholars Network in Nigeria, has recorded increased post-release healing and social reintegration, mainly due to peer interactions, volunteering, and giving back to society through school and community outreaches.

CENTRE FOR LEGAL SUPPORT AND INMATE REHABILITATION

2. Tailored re-entry support

The reality of the criminal justice system is such that both adults and juveniles are incarcerated, and not everyone in incarceration will be convicted. Therefore, the peculiarities of such situations should be considered when designing re-integration programmes.

For instance, an alternative to detention, education-based sentences should be explored for juveniles and minor offences, both for pre-trial and post-trial detention. Research shows that juveniles at risk of offending are more likely to change behaviourally with the right interventions rather than through the deprivation of their liberty.⁸ In 2024, the Centre for Legal Support and Inmate Reintegration (CELSIR) launched a juvenile education programme at the Juvenile Home for Boys, Oregun, Lagos. This initiative provided access to preparatory classes for residents eligible to sit the Basic Education Certification Examination (BECE); the first of its kind in the history of the home.⁹ Evidence shows that such educational interventions can serve as powerful drivers of behavioural change and social reintegration for children in conflict with the law.

⁷ UNODC, *supra*. Nations, 2012) ⁸ Oluwatobi Adetona, "Rehabilitation Over Incarceration: A Critical Evaluation of Juvenile Policies in Nigeria" (2024) 7:4 AJLEE 136. ⁹ CELSIR, "CELSIR Launches Juvenile Education Programme in Nigeria (CELSIR Blog, 17 October 2024) accessed online at <https://celsir.org/celsir-launches-juvenile-education-program-in-nigeria/> ¹⁰ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Small-scale Detention: Focusing on Social Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Society*, 10105/24 (adopted in Brussels on 14 June 2024).

3. Detention houses over traditional prisons

Detention houses are a small-scale detention model adopted in parts of the European Union ¹⁰ as an emerging alternative to traditional incarceration. These facilities prioritise social reintegration by focusing on inclusive education, rehabilitation, and maintaining community ties.

In the Nigerian context, detention houses could bridge the gap between society and justice-impacted individuals, offering a more humane and effective response to overcrowding while supporting reintegration outcomes. Although Section 12(8) of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 empowers State Controllers of Corrections to refuse new admissions when facilities are overcrowded, this provision is rarely enforced in practice, contributing to persistent congestion. To address this, the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS), in collaboration with state governments, should establish community-based detention houses as an alternative for managing eligible detainees. These smaller, decentralised facilities would not only ease pressure on overcrowded correctional centres but also enable more individualised support and rehabilitation, thereby improving prospects for successful reintegration.



4. Enforce non-custodial measures

Important legal frameworks, including the Nigeria Correctional Service Act 2019 and the ACJA provide for alternative sentencing measures such as community service, probation, and parole. While the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) inaugurated the National Parole Board in 2022 pursuant to the Act, there is currently little evidence of parole or probation sentences being actively applied in practice across Nigeria.

To strengthen the implementation of alternative sentencing measures, the Court and the Nigerian Correctional Service should operationalise the provisions of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019 and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, 2015 by actively applying parole and probation in sentencing. This should include clear guidelines for eligibility, training for judicial and correctional officers, and nationwide awareness campaigns to build confidence in non-custodial sentences. By doing so, returning citizens will benefit from structured supervision and tailored support, significantly reducing the likelihood of reoffending and enhancing their prospects for successful social reintegration.



⁸ Oluwatobi Adetona, “Rehabilitation Over Incarceration: A Critical Evaluation of Juvenile Policies in Nigeria” (2024)7:4 AJLEE 136. ⁹ CELSIR, “CELSIR Launches Juvenile Education Programme in Nigeria (CELSIR Blog, 17 October 2024) accessed online at <https://celsir.org/celsir-launches-juvenile-education-program-in-nigeria/> ¹⁰ Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on Small-scale Detention: Focusing on Social Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Society, 10105/24 (adopted in Brussels on 14 June 2024).

5. Harmonise non-custodial systems

The varying provisions and structures governing different non-custodial measures currently appear fragmented and cumbersome, which may undermine the overall effectiveness of the non-custodial system. To enhance coordination and efficiency, the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS), in collaboration with the judiciary, should harmonise these systems. This could involve establishing a unified administrative body structured into specialised divisions responsible for measures such as community service, parole, and probation, to oversee policy implementation and operational management. In the same vein, while the Judiciary should be restricted to giving non-custodial and alternative sentences, NCoS vide its non-custodial service, should be responsible for the full implementation and administration of all non-custodial sentences.



CONCLUSION

Social reintegration is not merely a concept but a necessary practice that offers justice-impacted individuals the opportunity to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society. However, achieving meaningful reintegration requires more than personal effort: it depends on strong institutions, well-designed structures, and genuine community support. By strengthening the implementation of existing policies, investing in targeted re-entry programmes, and fostering public acceptance, Nigeria can create an environment where second chances become a practical reality, not just an ideal.

