

Prison Decongestion and The Role of Social Work in Nigeria's Criminal Justice Reform

DR. EMEJURU¹, DR. AARON ANYANABIA²

¹Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Science, University of Port Harcourt

²Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt

Abstract- Prison congestion has emerged as one of the most persistent challenges undermining Nigeria's criminal justice system, with correctional facilities operating far beyond their intended capacity. The majority of inmates are awaiting-trial detainees, a situation caused by systemic inefficiencies, judicial delays, and over-reliance on custodial sentencing. These conditions not only violate human rights but also compromise the rehabilitative mandate of prisons, thereby fueling cycles of recidivism and insecurity. This study examined prison decongestion in Nigeria and the critical role of social work in advancing criminal justice reform. Anchored on the Human Rights Theory, the study highlighted how social workers contribute to reducing congestion through advocacy for non-custodial sentencing, provision of psychosocial support, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs. It also explored the intersection of social work and human rights in aligning Nigeria's correctional practices with international standards such as the Nelson Mandela Rules. The study revealed that prison decongestion cannot be achieved through infrastructural expansion alone but requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates judicial efficiency, social work interventions, and adherence to human rights principles. The study concludes that incorporating social workers into all stages of the criminal justice process is essential for building a humane, rehabilitative, and effective correctional system in Nigeria. The study recommended that social workers should be fully integrated into Nigeria's criminal justice system as probation officers, counselors, and reintegration specialists. This will ensure that rehabilitation, advocacy, and community reintegration are prioritized alongside legal processes.

Keywords: prison decongestion, social work, criminal justice reform and human rights

I. INTRODUCTION

Prison decongestion remains a pressing challenge in Nigeria's criminal justice system, as correctional facilities across the country continue to operate under severe overcrowding. Most prisons in Nigeria were

built decades ago and designed to house far fewer inmates than they currently accommodate. For example, facilities built to contain a few hundred inmates now hold thousands, resulting in inhumane conditions that threaten the health, safety, and dignity of inmates (Akinwale & Oluwole, 2021). Overcrowding in Nigerian prisons is largely fueled by the high number of awaiting-trial inmates, who account for more than 70% of the prison population, indicating systemic inefficiencies in law enforcement, prosecution, and the judiciary (Okoye, 2020). These conditions highlight deep structural problems within Nigeria's criminal justice system, including inadequate access to justice, prolonged pretrial detention, and the absence of effective non-custodial sentencing options. Prison congestion is not just a legal or administrative problem but also a significant social issue. The environment within many correctional centers undermines rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, often exposing inmates to violence, infectious diseases, and psychological trauma (Eze & Igbo, 2023). Instead of serving as centers for correction, many prisons in Nigeria perpetuate cycles of recidivism, with ex-offenders struggling to reintegrate into society and often reoffending due to stigmatization, unemployment, and lack of psychosocial support. This reality calls for urgent reforms that go beyond punitive measures to embrace holistic and human-centered approaches.

Social work has increasingly been recognized as a critical component of prison decongestion and broader criminal justice reform in Nigeria. As a profession concerned with human welfare, social justice, and rehabilitation, social workers play vital roles in addressing the psychosocial needs of inmates, advocating for human rights, and facilitating restorative justice practices (Aghedo, 2022). Through counseling, rehabilitation programs, and family reintegration efforts, social workers reduce the

likelihood of recidivism while fostering social reintegration. Moreover, social workers advocate for alternatives to incarceration—such as probation, community service, mediation, and restorative justice mechanisms—that reduce prison populations and provide more constructive forms of accountability for offenders. Social workers bridge the gap between correctional institutions and communities. Their work ensures that released inmates are not only prepared to re-enter society but also supported in securing employment, housing, and social acceptance. This role is especially important in Nigeria, where stigma against ex-prisoners is widespread and often limits their chances of rebuilding their lives (Eze & Igbo, 2023). By promoting rehabilitation over punishment, social workers contribute to reshaping the criminal justice system into one that is more humane, equitable, and effective. Thus, prison decongestion and the involvement of social work professionals are inseparable in the quest for criminal justice reform in Nigeria. Addressing overcrowding in prisons requires not only infrastructural improvements and judicial reforms but also the integration of social work interventions that prioritize rehabilitation, reintegration, and restorative justice. The active engagement of social workers, alongside legal and judicial reforms, offers a pathway to building a criminal justice system that reduces prison congestion, upholds human dignity, and promotes sustainable peace and social development.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's correctional system is plagued by persistent overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and systemic inefficiencies that undermine its constitutional mandate of rehabilitation and reintegration. Despite various reform efforts, prison congestion continues to escalate, with many facilities holding inmates far beyond their official capacity. Reports indicate that a large proportion of Nigeria's prison population—over 70 percent—consists of awaiting-trial inmates, some of whom remain incarcerated for years without conviction due to delays in investigation, prosecution, and adjudication (Okoye, 2020). This situation not only violates the principle of fair trial but also raises significant human rights concerns. The consequences of prison congestion are multifaceted. Overcrowded and dilapidated facilities expose inmates to poor hygiene, communicable diseases, violence, and

psychological trauma, thereby eroding their chances of rehabilitation (Akinwale & Oluwole, 2021). Furthermore, the existing punitive orientation of the criminal justice system often neglects rehabilitation, resulting in high rates of recidivism and social stigmatization of ex-offenders. Rather than serving as centers of correction, many prisons in Nigeria have become breeding grounds for hardened criminal behavior, exacerbating insecurity and undermining public trust in the justice system (Eze & Igbo, 2023). While government policies and judicial reforms have attempted to address these challenges, limited attention has been given to the role of social work in prison decongestion and reform. Social workers are uniquely positioned to contribute to solutions through advocacy for non-custodial sentencing, provision of psychosocial support, facilitation of restorative justice, and reintegration programs for ex-offenders. However, their involvement in Nigeria's correctional system remains underutilized and poorly institutionalized (Aghedo, 2022).

The neglect of this critical professional contribution has continued to hinder the realization of a truly rehabilitative justice system. Therefore, the central problem lies in the persistent overcrowding of Nigerian prisons, the insufficient integration of social work interventions in criminal justice processes, and the failure of existing reforms to address the human-centered dimensions of incarceration. Unless these gaps are addressed, prison congestion will remain a chronic challenge, with profound implications for justice delivery, human rights, and social stability in Nigeria.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prison Decongestion

Prison decongestion refers to deliberate efforts, policies, and interventions aimed at reducing the excessive population of inmates in correctional facilities in order to ensure humane living conditions, promote effective rehabilitation, and safeguard the rights of prisoners. In most societies, prison congestion results from a combination of factors such as rising crime rates, over-reliance on custodial sentencing, slow judicial processes, and limited use of non-custodial alternatives. In the Nigerian context, prison decongestion has become a recurring issue due

to the overwhelming number of awaiting-trial inmates, many of whom spend years in detention without conviction (Okoye, 2020). The Nigerian Correctional Service has consistently reported that more than two-thirds of the prison population are pre-trial detainees, highlighting systemic inefficiencies within the justice system. The concept of prison decongestion is rooted in the broader goals of criminal justice reform, which prioritize not only public safety but also respect for human rights and rehabilitation of offenders. Overcrowding in Nigerian prisons undermines these goals by creating inhumane conditions such as inadequate sanitation, poor healthcare, malnutrition, and increased exposure to violence and infectious diseases (Akinwale & Oluwole, 2021). These conditions often violate both constitutional provisions and international human rights standards such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), which emphasize dignity and humane treatment (UNODC, 2016).

Efforts at prison decongestion often involve multiple strategies, including judicial reforms, use of non-custodial sentencing, restorative justice practices, and executive pardons for minor offenders or those held unjustly. For instance, the Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 institutionalized non-custodial measures such as probation, parole, community service, and restorative justice mechanisms as alternatives to incarceration. Similarly, interventions by non-governmental organizations, human rights advocates, and social workers have focused on securing legal representation for awaiting-trial inmates, advocating for fair trial, and promoting community-based rehabilitation programs (Aghedo, 2022). In essence, the concept of prison decongestion in Nigeria goes beyond reducing inmate numbers; it embodies a shift towards a more humane, restorative, and rehabilitative model of justice. It recognizes that sustainable reform requires a balance between public safety, offender accountability, and respect for human dignity. The integration of social work, judicial reforms, and community-based alternatives to imprisonment remains critical in addressing the persistent challenge of prison overcrowding in Nigeria.

Causes of Prison Congestion in Nigeria

Prison congestion, or overcrowding, is one of the most persistent challenges confronting the Nigerian correctional system. It refers to a situation where the population of inmates exceeds the official carrying capacity of correctional facilities, resulting in inhumane conditions and ineffective rehabilitation. The causes of prison congestion in Nigeria are multifaceted, reflecting the inefficiencies of the criminal justice system, social inequalities, and institutional shortcomings. One of the most significant contributors to congestion is the high number of awaiting-trial inmates. Reports from the Nigerian Correctional Service consistently show that over 70% of inmates are on remand, some of whom spend years in detention without conviction (Okoye, 2020). This is largely due to delays in judicial processes, including slow investigation, adjournments, shortage of judges, and bureaucratic bottlenecks within the courts (Akinwale & Oluwole, 2021). The inability to provide timely trials not only denies inmates their right to justice but also bloats the prison population with individuals who may eventually be acquitted.

Another major factor is the over-reliance on custodial sentencing. The Nigerian justice system has historically emphasized imprisonment over non-custodial measures such as community service, probation, parole, and restorative justice. This punitive approach often results in incarceration for minor offences, which could have been resolved through alternatives (Aghedo, 2022). Despite the Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 introducing non-custodial sentencing, implementation has remained limited due to lack of awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and resistance from some stakeholders in the judiciary and law enforcement. Socioeconomic factors also play a role in prison congestion. Many offenders come from impoverished backgrounds and cannot afford legal representation, bail conditions, or fines, leading to prolonged incarceration (Eze & Igbo, 2023). Poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion also increase the likelihood of minor crimes, further straining correctional facilities. In addition, institutional corruption and inefficiency exacerbate congestion. Instances of arbitrary arrests, prolonged police detentions, and lack of accountability in the judicial process contribute to the growing number of inmates (Dambazau, 2020). In many cases, inmates

are remanded for trivial offences or detained illegally without proper charges. Finally, inadequate prison infrastructure compounds the problem. Most correctional facilities in Nigeria were built decades ago, with little or no expansion to match the country's growing population and rising crime rates. For instance, facilities built to accommodate a few hundred inmates now house thousands, stretching resources such as healthcare, food, and sanitation beyond their limits (Akinwale & Oluwole, 2021). Addressing these root causes requires comprehensive reforms, including judicial efficiency, expansion of non-custodial measures, improved prison infrastructure, and stronger social welfare systems.

Beyond addressing human rights violations, prison congestion also has broader social and security implications. Overcrowded prisons often fail to rehabilitate offenders, instead becoming breeding grounds for criminal networks and recidivism. When released, ex-inmates who lack support systems or vocational skills often return to crime, further burdening the justice system (Eze & Igbo, 2023). By contrast, decongested and well-managed correctional facilities can better fulfill their rehabilitative mandate, enabling inmates to acquire education, vocational training, and psychosocial support necessary for reintegration into society.

The Criminal Justice System in Nigeria

The criminal justice system in Nigeria is the institutional framework through which the state enforces laws, maintains order, and administers justice. It is composed of three primary components: law enforcement agencies (such as the Nigeria Police Force), the judiciary, and the correctional institutions under the Nigerian Correctional Service. Together, these agencies are responsible for crime prevention, investigation, prosecution, adjudication, sentencing, and the rehabilitation of offenders. Ideally, the system is designed not only to punish offenders but also to protect the rights of citizens, rehabilitate inmates, and promote social justice (Alemika, 2020). Despite its constitutional and statutory mandates, Nigeria's criminal justice system faces numerous challenges that undermine its effectiveness. One of the most pressing problems is delayed justice and prolonged pre-trial detention. A large percentage of inmates in Nigerian prisons are awaiting trial, some for many years, due to

inadequate investigative capacity, judicial inefficiency, and systemic corruption (Okoye, 2020). This has contributed to overcrowded correctional facilities and widespread violations of the right to a fair and speedy trial. Another challenge is the over-reliance on custodial sentencing. While the Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 introduced non-custodial measures such as probation, community service, and parole, their implementation remains weak due to lack of awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient personnel to supervise offenders outside prison walls (Oluwole & Akinwale, 2021). As a result, custodial sentences remain the default option, further straining correctional institutions.

The judiciary, as a central arm of the system, struggles with inefficiencies such as case backlogs, inadequate technology adoption, and insufficient funding. These issues slow down the dispensation of justice and perpetuate public mistrust in legal processes (Okoye, 2020). Similarly, the police force, which is the first point of contact in the criminal justice process, is often criticized for corruption, human rights abuses, and inadequate training in modern policing techniques (Alemika, 2020). The correctional system is equally troubled. Nigerian prisons, many of which were built during the colonial era, are dilapidated and overcrowded, with poor sanitation, inadequate healthcare, and limited rehabilitation programs. These conditions undermine the rehabilitative mandate of correctional institutions and often contribute to recidivism, as ex-inmates face stigmatization and lack of support upon release (Eze & Igbo, 2023). Nonetheless, there have been reform initiatives aimed at addressing these challenges. The Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA) of 2015 sought to harmonize criminal procedures across Nigeria, reduce trial delays, and promote efficiency in justice delivery. Similarly, the Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 rebranded the Nigerian Prisons Service and introduced restorative justice and non-custodial sentencing as alternatives to incarceration (Aghedo, 2022). These reforms reflect a shift from punitive justice towards rehabilitation and restorative practices, though their impact is still limited due to weak implementation and institutional resistance.

Social Work and Criminal Justice

The intersection between social work and criminal justice reflects a shared commitment to addressing crime, justice, and rehabilitation through approaches that uphold human dignity and promote social well-being. While the criminal justice system traditionally emphasizes law enforcement, punishment, and deterrence, social work provides a complementary human-centered perspective that focuses on prevention, rehabilitation, reintegration, and restorative justice (Aghedo, 2022). The integration of social work into criminal justice practices ensures that responses to crime go beyond punitive measures and address the social, psychological, and economic factors that contribute to criminal behavior.

Social work within the criminal justice context is grounded in principles of social justice, human rights, and advocacy. Social workers operate at multiple levels of the system, including policing, courts, correctional services, and post-incarceration reintegration. At the level of corrections, they provide counseling, psychosocial support, and rehabilitation programs that help offenders modify behavior and acquire skills needed for reintegration into society (Eze & Igbo, 2023). In court systems, social workers often function as mediators or probation officers, recommending alternatives to incarceration such as community service, parole, or restorative justice interventions. This approach helps to decongest prisons while also ensuring that offenders remain accountable. Another critical contribution of social work to criminal justice is advocacy for vulnerable populations. In Nigeria, marginalized groups—including women, juveniles, the poor, and awaiting-trial inmates—are disproportionately affected by systemic inefficiencies and discrimination within the justice system (Akinwale & Oluwole, 2021). Social workers intervene by advocating for fair treatment, facilitating access to legal representation, and promoting the adoption of non-custodial measures introduced by the Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019. This advocacy strengthens fairness and equity in the justice system while promoting compliance with international human rights standards. In addition, social work contributes to crime prevention and community safety. Through community-based interventions, social workers address the root causes of crime such as poverty, unemployment, family

instability, and substance abuse (Okoye, 2020). By engaging with communities, educating the public, and building support systems, they foster social cohesion and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. This preventive function is particularly vital in Nigeria, where socio-economic disparities and weak institutions often drive criminal activities. The concept of social work and criminal justice embodies a partnership between legal systems and social welfare approaches. Whereas criminal justice seeks to uphold law and order, social work ensures that responses are rehabilitative, restorative, and human-centered. Within Nigeria's context of prison overcrowding, delayed justice, and weak rehabilitation systems, social work offers pathways to reform that emphasize dignity, fairness, and reintegration. Its integration into criminal justice practice is indispensable for achieving a system that balances accountability with social development.

Human Rights and Prison Reform

The concept of human rights and prison reform is rooted in the recognition that even individuals who have been deprived of their liberty retain their inherent dignity and fundamental rights. While imprisonment restricts freedom of movement, it does not negate other rights such as the right to life, health, dignity, and access to justice. Prison reform therefore refers to deliberate efforts to improve prison conditions, safeguard human rights, and align correctional systems with international standards of humane treatment. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, prison reform has become an urgent concern due to the prevalence of overcrowding, poor sanitation, lack of healthcare, and widespread violations of inmates' rights (Akinwale & Oluwole, 2021).

International human rights frameworks provide the foundation for prison reform initiatives. Key among these is the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), which set out global principles for ensuring humane treatment of inmates, including access to healthcare, adequate accommodation, protection from torture or degrading treatment, and opportunities for rehabilitation (UNODC, 2016). Similarly, regional instruments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) emphasize the dignity of

individuals and the prohibition of inhumane or degrading punishment. Nigeria, as a signatory to these instruments, bears the obligation to integrate these standards into its criminal justice and correctional practices. However, the reality of Nigerian prisons shows a wide gap between these standards and actual practices. Overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and insufficient resources lead to conditions that contravene basic human rights. Inmates often lack access to proper medical care, legal representation, and decent living conditions, while awaiting-trial detainees are kept in custody for prolonged periods without conviction (Okoye, 2020). Such conditions not only violate constitutional rights guaranteed under Chapter IV of the Nigerian Constitution but also undermine the rehabilitative function of correctional facilities.

Prison reform initiatives in Nigeria have increasingly focused on integrating human rights principles into correctional management. The Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 represents a significant milestone, replacing the outdated Prison Act and introducing provisions for non-custodial sentencing, rehabilitation, and reintegration of offenders. The Act emphasizes respect for the dignity of inmates, improved healthcare, vocational training, and the adoption of restorative justice practices (Aghedo, 2022). These reforms align with global trends that seek to shift correctional systems from punitive approaches to rehabilitative and restorative models. A key aspect of human rights within prison reform is the protection of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and individuals with mental health challenges. Social workers play a crucial role in this regard by advocating for inmates' rights, providing psychosocial support, and ensuring reintegration programs that reduce recidivism. By addressing not only the physical conditions of prisons but also the systemic issues of access to justice and rehabilitation, prison reform becomes an essential element of broader human rights protection in Nigeria (Eze & Igbo, 2023). The concept of human rights and prison reform highlights the need to balance security concerns with respect for human dignity. Prison reform is not merely about improving infrastructure; it is about creating a correctional system that aligns with constitutional and international obligations, ensures humane treatment, and promotes rehabilitation and reintegration. In the Nigerian

context, sustained reform requires strong political will, adequate funding, judicial efficiency, and the active involvement of social workers, civil society, and international organizations.

Human Rights Implications of Prison Overcrowding in Nigeria

Prison overcrowding in Nigeria has profound human rights implications. Facilities designed to house a limited number of inmates now contain populations several times their intended capacity, leading to unsanitary conditions, spread of communicable diseases, and inadequate access to healthcare services (Eze & Igbo, 2023). Overcrowding also compromises prisoners' right to dignity and humane treatment, as inmates are often forced to share small cells, sometimes without bedding or adequate ventilation. Moreover, the high number of awaiting-trial inmates violates the right to a fair and speedy trial as guaranteed by both Nigeria's Constitution and international legal frameworks (Okoye, 2020). These conditions effectively transform prisons from centers of correction into environments that perpetuate suffering, stigmatization, and criminalization, undermining both human rights and public trust in the justice system.

The Role of Social Work in Nigeria's Criminal Justice Reform

Social work plays a critical role in the transformation of Nigeria's criminal justice system, particularly in addressing prison congestion, promoting rehabilitation, and advancing restorative justice. As a profession grounded in human rights, social justice, and holistic care, social work goes beyond punitive approaches to crime and emphasizes rehabilitation, reintegration, and community safety. Within Nigeria's context, where the criminal justice system is plagued by overcrowded prisons, delayed trials, and inadequate reintegration programs, the interventions of social workers are both urgent and essential.

One of the primary contributions of social work is in rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders. Social workers provide counseling, psychosocial support, and skills acquisition programs that help inmates address behavioral issues and prepare for life after incarceration (Eze & Igbo, 2023). By supporting inmates in developing coping strategies, acquiring

vocational skills, and reconnecting with their families, social workers reduce the likelihood of recidivism. This approach transforms correctional facilities into spaces of reform rather than punishment.

Another important role is advocacy for non-custodial measures and restorative justice. The Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019 introduced non-custodial sentencing such as probation, community service, and parole as alternatives to imprisonment. Social workers are key actors in implementing and supervising these alternatives, ensuring that offenders are held accountable while avoiding the damaging effects of incarceration (Aghedo, 2022). Restorative justice models, facilitated by social workers, also prioritize dialogue between offenders, victims, and communities, fostering healing and reconciliation.

Additionally, social workers contribute to protecting human rights in correctional facilities. Overcrowding, poor healthcare, and inhumane treatment remain persistent challenges in Nigerian prisons. Social workers advocate for improved living conditions, access to medical care, and adherence to international human rights standards such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) (Akinwale & Oluwale, 2021). By championing the dignity of inmates, they ensure that correctional institutions align with principles of justice and humanity.

Furthermore, social work facilitates community reintegration and crime prevention. Stigma against ex-offenders remains a barrier to successful reintegration in Nigeria. Social workers help bridge this gap by engaging communities, educating the public on reintegration, and creating support systems that reduce discrimination. They also participate in crime prevention initiatives through community development programs that address poverty, unemployment, and family instability—factors that often contribute to criminal behavior (Okoye, 2020).

The role of social work in Nigeria's criminal justice reform is multifaceted—ranging from rehabilitation, advocacy, and human rights protection to community reintegration and restorative justice. By addressing both systemic and individual-level challenges, social workers contribute to decongesting prisons, reducing

recidivism, and building a criminal justice system that is more humane, effective, and socially inclusive. Their involvement is indispensable for achieving sustainable reform and aligning Nigeria's correctional practices with global standards.

The Role of Social Workers in Protecting Inmates' Rights

Social workers play a pivotal role in advancing prison reform by advocating for and protecting the rights of inmates. As professionals committed to social justice and human dignity, social workers intervene in prisons by monitoring conditions, providing psychosocial support, and raising awareness about human rights violations (Aghedo, 2022). They also serve as mediators between inmates, correctional officers, and policymakers, ensuring that prisoners' voices are heard in decision-making processes. Furthermore, social workers help facilitate access to legal representation for awaiting-trial inmates, thereby promoting the right to fair trial. By advocating for alternatives to incarceration—such as probation, community service, and restorative justice practices—social workers contribute to decongesting prisons and reducing the violation of rights associated with overcrowding. Their presence within Nigeria's criminal justice system strengthens accountability and pushes for reforms that align with international standards like the Mandela Rules.

In essence, prison reform in Nigeria must be grounded in respect for human rights, and social workers are indispensable in this process. By aligning correctional practices with international standards, addressing the human rights consequences of overcrowding, and championing the rights of inmates, social workers ensure that prisons serve not only as places of correction but also as institutions that uphold justice, dignity, and rehabilitation.

III. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Human Rights Theory

Human Rights Theory is grounded in the principle that every individual, regardless of status, retains inherent dignity and fundamental rights that must be respected, protected, and fulfilled. These rights are considered universal, inalienable, and indivisible, meaning they cannot be taken away or compromised even when an

individual is convicted of a crime. The theory emphasizes that the deprivation of liberty through imprisonment does not equate to the deprivation of other basic rights, such as access to healthcare, fair trial, humane treatment, education, and dignity (Donnelly, 2013). The theory draws heavily from international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). These frameworks establish the responsibility of states to ensure that correctional systems uphold the dignity of inmates and create conditions conducive to rehabilitation rather than perpetuating suffering (UNODC, 2016). Within the African context, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) further reinforces the principle that incarceration must never result in cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment.

The relevance of Human Rights Theory becomes evident when examining the state of the country's correctional facilities. Nigerian prisons are notorious for overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate medical care, and the unlawful detention of thousands of awaiting-trial inmates (Akinwale & Oluwole, 2021). Such conditions not only violate the rights of prisoners but also undermine the constitutional provisions enshrined in Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which guarantees fundamental rights. Human Rights Theory therefore serves as a critical lens for advocating prison reform and decongestion, ensuring that the correctional system aligns with both national and international obligations. This theory is particularly relevant to social work practice in the criminal justice system. Social workers, as advocates for human dignity and social justice, play a vital role in ensuring that inmates' rights are upheld. They provide psychosocial support, advocate for access to legal aid, and push for alternatives to incarceration such as probation, parole, and restorative justice. By addressing systemic rights violations, social workers contribute directly to prison decongestion and the promotion of humane conditions in correctional facilities (Eze & Igbo, 2023). Thus, the Human Rights Theory underpins the argument that prison decongestion is not merely a matter of logistics or infrastructure but a fundamental issue of justice and

human dignity. It highlights the moral and legal obligation of the Nigerian state to reform its correctional system and provides a theoretical foundation for social work interventions that prioritize rehabilitation, reintegration, and respect for the rights of all individuals in custody.

IV. EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Henry, (2025) examined alternative sentencing, prison reform, and rehabilitation programmes: A panacea for decongesting Nigerian correctional facilities. The study explores the potential of alternative sentencing, correctional facilities reform, and rehabilitation programmes to address this pressing issue. It highlights the factors contributing to overcrowding, including the over-reliance on custodial sentencing for minor offences and delays in the judicial process. It proposes alternative sentencing strategies such as community service, probation, house arrest, educational or vocational training, suspended sentences, and restorative justice as more effective and efficient methods of handling non-violent offenders. Rehabilitation programmes aimed at skill development, education, and mental health support are presented as tools for reducing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration into society. By analyzing international best practices and their applicability within the Nigerian context, this paper argues that a comprehensive approach incorporating these reforms will serve as a panacea for decongesting the Nigerian correctional centers, ultimately fostering a more humane and effective criminal justice system. It finally recommends, among other things, that the Nigerian National Assembly enact laws incorporating more alternative sentencing in the Nigerian Criminal Justice System and expand the scope of judicial powers to allow for discretionary sentencing in non-violent and simple offences.

Ukwayi & Okpa, (2017) assessed the Nigeria criminal justice system and the problem of awaiting trial in Port Harcourt Maximum Prison, Rivers State. Three research questions were raised to guide the study. The study adopted the survey research design. An 18-item questionnaire captioned "Questionnaire on Nigeria criminal justice system and awaiting trial problem" (QNCJSWTP) was designed by the researchers and used in gathering data for the study. Data were

gathered from one hundred and eighty seven (187) respondents consisting of inmates and warders. The respondents were purposively selected from Port Harcourt Maximum prison, Rivers State. The generated data were presented using charts and simple percentage. Findings indicated that, rigidity of the penal law, holding charges, and delay in the disposal of cases by the agencies of NCJS has contributed to the problem of awaiting trial in Port Harcourt Maximum Prison, Rivers State, Nigeria. The study recommended that, there should be more professional commitment, on the part of stakeholders, in order to check the rise in awaiting trial problem in Port Harcourt maximum Prison.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that prison congestion in Nigeria poses a serious threat to the effectiveness of the criminal justice system and the protection of human rights. Correctional facilities across the country continue to operate under severe strain, largely due to the overwhelming number of awaiting-trial inmates, delays in judicial processes, and the persistent reliance on custodial sentencing for offences that could be addressed through alternative measures. These conditions not only compromise inmates' welfare and dignity but also undermine the rehabilitative mandate of correctional institutions, thereby contributing to high rates of recidivism and insecurity in society.

The study equally emphasizes that meaningful prison decongestion cannot be achieved through infrastructural expansion alone but requires the integration of social work into Nigeria's criminal justice system. Social workers play a transformative role by advocating for non-custodial sentencing, providing psychosocial support, protecting inmates' rights, and facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Their interventions align with international human rights standards and ensure that the justice system becomes more humane, rehabilitative, and socially inclusive.

The study concluded that decongesting Nigerian prisons demands a comprehensive approach that combines legal reforms, judicial efficiency, infrastructural improvement, and active social work involvement. Only through such an integrated strategy

can Nigeria move towards a criminal justice system that promotes justice, respects human dignity, and supports sustainable social development.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Nigerian government should fully implement the provisions of the *Nigerian Correctional Service Act of 2019*, particularly non-custodial options such as community service, parole, probation, and restorative justice. This will reduce the over-reliance on imprisonment for minor offences.
2. The judiciary should prioritize the speedy trial of cases through better case management, recruitment of more judges, adoption of digital court systems, and elimination of unnecessary adjournments to reduce the number of awaiting-trial inmates.
3. Social workers should be fully integrated into Nigeria's criminal justice system as probation officers, counselors, and reintegration specialists. This will ensure that rehabilitation, advocacy, and community reintegration are prioritized alongside legal processes.
4. The government should invest in the expansion and modernization of correctional facilities to meet international human rights standards. Inmates should have access to proper healthcare, sanitation, education, and vocational training.
5. Stronger accountability mechanisms should be enforced within law enforcement, the judiciary, and correctional services to curb corruption, arbitrary arrests, and unlawful detentions that contribute to prison congestion.
6. Correctional practices in Nigeria should align with international standards such as the *Nelson Mandela Rules*. Regular monitoring and evaluation of prison conditions should be conducted by independent bodies to ensure compliance with human rights norms.

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