RISK-NEEDS-RESPONSIVITY IN NIGERIA: HOW MODERN REHABILITATION THEORY CAN WORK IN THE NIGERIAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM*

Abstract

Nigeria's correctional system is characterized by significant institutional contradictions. The Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 (NCSA), repealed the Colonial Act and officially changed the name of the Nigerian Prisons Service to the Nigerian Correctional Services. The Act shifted the institutional mandate from purely punitive enforcement to comprehensive offender reformation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. However, Since the enactment of the Act, Nigeria continues to record different challenges such as persistent increase in recidivism between 52% to 75%, correctional facilities stretched to about 124% from the original capacity designed for them, severe deficit in the professional workforce, and the absence of risk assessment instruments. These challenges undermine the main objectives of establishing correctional services in Nigeria. It might be argued that cultural resistance or limited resources in Nigeria present insurmountable obstacles to the adaptation of modern rehabilitation models. While these concerns are important, the evidence suggests that institutional and structural barriers, rather than deep-seated cultural obstacles, remain the primary impediments to reform. The article contends that the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model is adaptable to Nigeria's unique socio-legal, cultural, and institutional context. Section 10(1)(e) of the NCSA 2019, which mandates risk and needs assessment, provides the statutory basis for such adaptation. This issue holds immediate constitutional and legislative significance: the NCSA 2019 imposes enforceable rehabilitation obligations, and non-implementation constitutes an ongoing statutory failure. The article is based on three theoretical frameworks, namely - The General Personality and Cognitive Social Learning (GPCSL) framework, which is used to identify the Central Eight criminogenic needs as the primary targets of correctional interventions. The family and community networks can be used as post-release reintegration supports, and the perspective to engage them is provided by desistance theory, which is associated with Laub and Sampson, and Maruna's narrative reconstruction approach. The responsivity principle in Nigeria is developed through the reintegrative shaming theory that is rooted in the African community-based justice system traditions as presented by Braithwaite, which also aligns with the communal system in Africa. Key drivers of recidivism in Nigeria, such as substance abuse, antisocial peer networks, unemployment, and educational deficits, align with the RNR model's central eight criminogenic needs. Comparative evidence from Singapore, South Africa, and Kenya demonstrates that this meaningful RNR adaptation is achievable within a decade in similar jurisdictions, even under resource constraints. The article proposes a phased implementation framework based on five legislative reforms, formal inter-agency collaboration, a dedicated Correctional Trust Fund, and a university-led National Correctional Research Unit.

Keywords: Risk-Needs-Responsivity Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019, Offender Rehabilitation, Recidivism and Penological Reform, Cultural Adaptation and Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy

1. Introduction

The Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model is recognized as the most empirically robust framework for offender assessment and rehabilitation in contemporary correctional science. Formulated by Canadian researchers Don Andrews, James Bonta, and Robert Hoge in 1990[1], the model is based on three core principles: the risk principle, the need principle, and the responsivity principle. Collectively, these principles prescribe that correctional interventions should be calibrated to the offender's assessed likelihood of reoffending, targeted at dynamic criminogenic factors, and delivered through cognitive-behavioural methods tailored to individual characteristics.[2] Despite its demonstrated effectiveness in multiple jurisdictions, the RNR model is largely absent from Nigeria's criminal justice system. Current Nigerian correctional practices rely on generic vocational training, undifferentiated religious instruction, and reactive custody management, none of which are aligned with individual risk levels, empirically validated criminogenic needs, or structured cognitive-behavioural modalities identified as effective in the literature. Addressing this gap is the central focus of this article.

The study of offender rehabilitation underwent its most decisive transformation in 1990, when Andrews, Bonta and Hoge demonstrated that structured cognitive-behavioural treatment, when provided to the right offenders, targeting

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[1] D. A. Andrews, J. Bonta, & R. D. Hoge, 'Classification for effective rehabilitation: Rediscovering psychology' (1990). 17 (1) *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 19–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854890017001004

[2] D A Andrews, J Bonta and R D Hoge, 'Classification for Effective Rehabilitation: Rediscovering Psychology' (1990) 17(1) *Criminal Justice and Behavior,* 19 –52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854890017001004

the right criminogenic needs, and delivered in the right way, produces clinically significant and replicable reductions in recidivism.[3] The landmark meta-analysis by Andrew, Zinger and colleagues, published in the same year, confirmed an average effect size of phi = .30 for RNR-adherent programs compared to phi = -.06 for non-adherent interventions, a clinically and practically meaningful distinction that has since been replicated across hundreds of independent studies worldwide.[4] The RNR model emerged from the aftermath of the 'nothing works' doctrine propagated by Robert Martinson's controversial 1974 article, which had devastated rehabilitative optimism in Western criminal justice policy for nearly two decades.[5]

To appreciate how completely Martinson's article reshaped Western correctional philosophy, it is necessary to understand what came before it. From the 1930s through the early 1970s, Western criminal justice systems, particularly in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, operated under what scholars call the 'rehabilitative ideal': the dominant assumption that offenders could be treated like patients, that their criminal behaviour had identifiable psychological, social, and economic causes, and that correctional programmes could address those causes and reduce reoffending. Sentencing was deliberately indeterminate, with parole boards empowered to release offenders when they were deemed rehabilitated rather than after a fixed term. The entire institutional architecture of corrections which includes staffing, programme design, sentence structure, and funding was organised around the premise that rehabilitation was both possible and the primary purpose of imprisonment.[6]

Robert Martinson's 1974 article, 'What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform', published in the policy journal *The Public Interest*, summarised a survey of 231 studies of correctional treatment programmes conducted between 1945 and 1967. His conclusion was blunt: 'with few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism.' Public and political discourse swiftly condensed this into the phrase 'nothing works', a phrase Martinson never used verbatim but that captured precisely how his findings were received.[7]

The impact was rapid and structural for three interconnected reasons. First, Martinson's article appeared to confirm suspicions held by critics across the political spectrum: conservative politicians viewed rehabilitation as lenient and fiscally irresponsible, while liberal critics were concerned that indeterminate sentencing granted parole boards excessive discretionary power, often exercised with racial and economic bias. For Nigeria, this example underscores the need to anchor rehabilitation reforms in clear statutory duties and assessment tools. Second, the article's publication coincided with rising crime rates, heightened public anxiety about order, and widespread scepticism toward social programs in Western democracies. Policymakers, already seeking justification to abandon what they perceived as costly and ineffective liberal social engineering, found support in Martinson's findings. Third, media coverage amplified the 'nothing works' message, overshadowing the original research's methodological caveats and exceptional cases, and reducing complex evidence to a simplistic, politically expedient narrative.[8] This historical episode illustrates the risks of reducing empirical evidence to slogans rather than using it to inform reform.

The policy consequences were immediate and concrete. In the United States, the federal government and numerous states moved rapidly towards determinate sentencing, fixed sentences that eliminated parole discretion with the

[3]D A Andrews, Ivan Zinger and others, 'Does Correctional Treatment Work? A Clinically Relevant and Psychologically Informed Meta-Analysis' (1990) 28(3) *Criminology* 369, 395. See generally on Rehabilitation…B Odesiri Ochei, 'The Effect of Actions of Criminal Justice Agents on Access to Justice and Persons Awaiting Trial' (PhD thesis, University of Ibadan 2019) *available at* https://pgsdspace.ictp.it/xmlui/handle/123456789/850 accessed 26 July 2026.

[4]R Martinson, 'What Works? – Questions and Answers About Prison Reform' (1974) 35(1) *The Public Interest* 22.

[5]F T Cullen and K E Gilbert, *Reaffirming Rehabilitation* (Anderson Publishing 1982) 14–29. For the policy consequences of Martinson's article, see T G Blomberg and K Lucken, *American Penology: A History of Control* (2nd edn, Transaction Publishers 2010) 155–170; and D Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford University Press 2001) 53–73. On the UK trajectory, see M Cavadino and J Dignan, *The Penal System: An Introduction* (5th edn, SAGE 2012) 48–55.

[6]J R P Ogloff and S Davis, 'Advances in Offender Assessment and Rehabilitation: Contributions of the Risk-Needs-Responsivity Approach' (2004) 11(2) *Psychology, Crime & Law* 229; see also B. O. Ochei, 'The Effect of Actions of Criminal Justice Agents on Access to Justice and Persons Awaiting Trial' (PhD thesis, University of Ibadan 2019) available at https://pgsdspace.ictp.it/xmlui/handle/123456789/850 accessed 26 July 2026.

[7]Martinson (n 3) 25. The phrase 'nothing works' was a popular condensation of Martinson's finding; he did not use those exact words. See also T Palmer, 'Martinson Revisited' (1975) 12(2) *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 133, documenting the immediate policy impact of the article.

[8]S Nwakuche (Controller-General of Corrections), Budget Performance Presentation before the House of Representatives Committee on Reformatory Institutions (9 February 2026), reported in *Premium Times* (Abuja, 11 February 2026). As at June 2026: total inmate population 82,195; official system capacity 65,035; awaiting trial persons (ATPs) 51,955 (64%); convicted inmates 24,913 (31%).

Sentencing Reform Act 1984 abolishing federal parole entirely.[9] In the United Kingdom, 'just deserts' sentencing gathered legislative momentum through the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in the Criminal Justice Act 1991. Funding for prison education, therapy, and treatment programmes was cut across Western jurisdictions. For Nigeria, the practical lesson is that policy choices can either support or undermine rehabilitation; without investment in programme design, staffing, and implementation, statutory reform remains symbolic. An intellectual crisis gripped correctional research itself: academics who had devoted careers to designing rehabilitation programmes found their entire professional framework delegitimised almost overnight. The very language of 'treatment' and 'reformation' became politically suspect.

The irony is that Martinson himself ultimately reversed his position. By 1979, having reviewed more methodologically rigorous studies, he published a substantial retraction in the *Hofstra Law Review*, concluding that some programmes did work, particularly those matched to offenders' individual characteristics. For Nigeria, this illustrates the practical value of matching interventions to offender's specific needs rather than relying on generic rehabilitation programmes. However, Martinson's retraction received only a fraction of the public attention by his original article, while the punitive turn in Western criminal justice continued regardless. It was not until Andrews, Zinger and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis in 1990 that helped re-establish the empirical basis for effective rehabilitation. Their findings provided the foundation for the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model, which shifted the focus from whether rehabilitation could work to identifying the conditions under which it was most likely to succeed. In this sense, the RNR model represented not merely a new theoretical framework but an important effort to restore the empirical and institutional credibility of rehabilitation after decades of scepticism and punitive correctional policy.[10]

The RNR model's empirical credentials have been conclusively established across four major Western jurisdictions. In Canada, the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS) demonstrated in a randomised controlled trial that RNR-trained probation officers produced significantly lower recidivism rates than untrained counterparts. In England and Wales, the Offender Assessment System (OASys) has been deployed across all custody and probation settings since 2001, underpinning a national programme accreditation framework administered by the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel. In Australia, the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI) has been validated and adopted as the standard risk assessment tool in New South Wales and Victoria. In the United States, a meta-analysis of 548 studies confirmed that RNR-adherent cognitive-behavioural programmes reduced recidivism by approximately 17% compared to control groups.[11] It is against this backdrop of demonstrated international success that the absence of any RNR-equivalent framework in Nigeria's correctional system becomes most acutely visible and most urgently in need of redress.

Nigeria presents an entirely different correctional landscape. As at June 2026, the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) held a total inmate population of 82,195 against a system capacity of 65,035, an occupancy rate of 124%.[12] Of this population, 51,955 (64%) were awaiting trial persons who had not been convicted of any offence.[13] Recidivism rates, estimated at between 52% and 75% in available systematic reviews, reflect the catastrophic failure of existing correctional programming.[14] These figures represent a continuing and measurable failure of the Nigerian state to fulfil its statutory rehabilitative obligations, which it formally assumed upon the enactment of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 (NCSA).[15]

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[9]Blomberg and Lucken (n 4) 160–165. The Sentencing Reform Act 1984 (United States) abolished federal parole; the Criminal Justice Act 1991 (United Kingdom) entrenched proportionate sentencing; see also Garland (n 4) 62–67.

[10]R Martinson, 'New Findings, New Views: A Note of Caution Regarding Sentencing Reform' (1979) 7(2) *Hofstra Law Review* 243. Martinson concluded that certain treatment types — particularly those matched to individual offender characteristics — did produce measurable reductions in recidivism, substantially reversing his 1974 position. See generally on Criminal Justice Model, Ochei, B. O. (2019). *The Effect of Actions of Criminal Justice Agents on Access to Justice and Persons Awaiting Trial* (Doctoral dissertation). Accessed 26 July 2026.

[11]Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 (No. 9 of 2019), s 2(1).

[12]Nwakuche (n 7).

[13]PR Nigeria, 'NCoS: Awaiting Trial Inmates Form 64% of Prison Population, Lawmakers Seek Reform' (12 February 2026) <https://prnigeria.com/2026/02/12/ncos-awaiting-trial-inmates/> accessed 22 April 2026.

[14]See C A Abrifor, A A Atere and C O Muoghalu, 'Gender Differences, Trend and Pattern of Recidivism among Inmates in Correctional Centres in South-West Nigeria' (2012) 3(5) Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies 661. For systematic reviews placing the upper bound at 75%, see International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS), 'Investigation of Sustainability and Profitability of Correctional Centers in Nigeria' (February 2026) IJRISS <rsisinternational.org> accessed 5 March 2026.

[15]Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 (No. 9 of 2019), s 2(1).

The NCSA 2019 is a remarkable piece of legislative reform. It repealed the colonial-era Prisons Act 2004 and redesignated the Nigerian Prisons Service as the Nigerian Correctional Service, mandating a fundamental reorientation of Nigeria's penal philosophy from punitive custodialism to rehabilitative correction. Section 2(1) establishes compliance with international human rights standards, implementation of non-custodial measures, and the promotion of reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration as the Service's core statutory objectives.[16] Critically, section 10(1)(e) imposes on the Custodial Service an express duty to 'conduct risk and needs assessment aimed at developing appropriate correctional treatment methods for reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration.'[17] This provision, which has received little attention in most Nigerian legal scholarship, constitutes the statutory mandate for the very enterprise that the RNR model was designed to operationalise. Five years after enactment, it remains entirely unimplemented.

In terms of enforceability, section 10(1)(e) can form the basis for judicial review or administrative action where the statutory duty is neglected. Litigants could seek a mandamus order compelling the Custodial Service to fulfill its assessment obligations, or invoke the provision in public interest litigation to demand compliance with mandated rehabilitation standards. Administratively, oversight bodies such as the National Human Rights Commission or the Public Complaints Commission could investigate implementation failures. These legal and administrative mechanisms, while rarely invoked in the correctional context, provide practical avenues for holding officials accountable and ensuring that statutory rehabilitation duties are not merely aspirational but legally enforceable.

The central question addressed in this article is not whether the RNR model, originally developed and validated in Anglo-Canadian correctional contexts, can be transplanted directly to Nigeria. It cannot, and the core analytical contribution of this article is to explain why direct transplantation is unfeasible and to delineate the requirements for principled adaptation. The relevant inquiry is whether the model's core architecture, risk-calibrated intervention intensity, criminogenic need targeting, and cognitive-behavioural delivery tailored to the individual can be adapted to Nigeria's institutional, cultural, and resource constraints in a manner that is both empirically sound and practically achievable. This article contends that such adaptation is possible and that the NCSA 2019 provides the necessary legal foundation. The article is a review of the RNR model and its cross-cultural applicability, an analysis of Nigeria's correctional system and its principal structural deficits, a comparative examination of RNR adaptation in non-Western and African jurisdictions, a framework for operationalising the three principles in Nigeria, specific policy recommendations, and a conclusion.

2. The RNR Model and its Cross-Cultural Applicability

The Three Core Principles

The RNR model organises correctional assessment and treatment around three principles of remarkable analytical elegance. The *risk principle* holds that the intensity of correctional intervention must be adjusted to the offender's assessed likelihood of recidivism. Higher-risk offenders receive more intensive services; lower-risk offenders receive minimal or no intervention. This principle carries significant counter-intuitive implications for resource allocation: intensive programming delivered to low-risk offenders has been empirically demonstrated to be not merely ineffective but actively harmful, disrupting pro-social routines and exposing low-risk individuals to higher-risk peers in ways that elevate rather than reduce recidivism.[18]

The *need principle* maintains that correctional programming should target dynamic criminogenic needs factors empirically correlated with criminal behaviour that, when reduced, produce a corresponding reduction in recidivism. Andrews and Bonta's formulation of the 'Central Eight' framework pinpoints eight key criminogenic needs as focal points for rehabilitation: a history of antisocial behaviour; antisocial personality traits; antisocial cognition (attitudes, values, and beliefs supportive of crime); antisocial associates; problematic family or marital circumstances; poor school or work performance; problematic leisure and recreational patterns; and substance abuse.[19] The need principle explicitly distinguishes these from non-criminogenic needs like self-esteem, anxiety, vague personal problems which show near-zero relationship with recidivism and whose targeting consistently produces negligible effects on reoffending.[20]

[16]NCSA 2019, s 2(1): see (n 15).
[17]NCSA 2019, s 10(1) (e).
[18]Andrews, Zinger and others (n 2) 379. See also C T Lowenkamp, E J Latessa and P Smith, 'Does Correctional Program Quality Really Matter? The Impact of Adhering to the Principles of Effective Intervention' (2006) 32(4) *Criminology & Public Policy* 201.
[19]D A Andrews and J Bonta, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct* (6th edn, Routledge 2017) 63–68.
[20]Andrews and Bonta (n 19) 64.

The *responsivity principle* prescribes both the modality and the style of correctional treatment. The general responsivity component mandates structured cognitive-behavioural and social learning approaches as the primary treatment modalities. The specific responsivity component which the most clinically significant and culturally flexible of the three principles demands further adaptation of treatment delivery to the individual offender's personality, cognitive capacity, motivational state, learning style, and cultural and linguistic background.[21] It is this specific responsivity principle that carries the greatest significance for cross-cultural application: it demands not merely that treatment be evidence-based in design but that it be individually and culturally tailored in delivery.

Criticisms and Their Relevance to the Nigerian Adaptation Project

The RNR model has attracted sustained criticism directly relevant to the Nigerian adaptation project. The first is the theoretical criticism, that the most culturally flexible of the three principles, the responsivity principle, is not a sufficiently well-developed theoretical concept, and that practitioners are not sufficiently informed about how to modify treatment delivery across the wide variety of cultural, religious and linguistic contexts. There is a particular resonance with Nigeria, where more than 250 ethnic groups, two dominant religious traditions, and a variety of indigenous justice systems call out for just such a principled, structured cultural adaptation that the responsivity principle alludes to but does not fully describe. The second is the implementation criticism that even good RNR instruments and programmes fail to work well in under-resourced and poorly supervised correctional settings. This criticism is pertinent to the Nigerian adaptation challenge, as evidenced by the reported inadequacies in funding, professional manpower and institutional supervision of the NCoS.

Ward, Melser and Yates identified the underdevelopment of the responsivity principle which, in their assessment, functions as an insufficiently theorised 'catch-all category' and the model's tendency, in practice, to produce one-size-fits-all programmes that contradict its own specific responsivity prescription.[22] Polaschek identified the implementation fidelity problem: that even well-designed RNR instruments and programmes consistently underperform when deployed in under-resourced or poorly supervised correctional environments.[23] Both criticisms identify not the defects that invalidate the model, but design challenges that any Nigerian adaptation project must directly address: the underdevelopment of responsivity through explicit engagement with Nigeria's cultural resources; and the implementation fidelity problem through sustained training, supervision, and outcome monitoring.

Three complementary theoretical frameworks supplement the RNR model for the Nigerian adaptation project. First, *desistance theory*, associated with Laub and Sampson and with Maruna's narrative reconstruction approach, highlights how social connections, identity transitions, and community reintegration efforts enable individuals to permanently leave criminal lifestyles behind.[24] This perspective offers a useful structure for leveraging Nigeria's strong family and community ties to aid reintegration after release. Second, *restorative justice frameworks*, particularly Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming theory and African community justice rooted in Ubuntu philosophy, naturally align with Nigeria's collectivist social structures and complement the responsivity principle's emphasis on community-based, desistance-oriented corrections for post-release programmes.[25] Third, *African criminological scholarship*, spanning from Igbinovia's foundational critique of uncritically adopting Western criminological models to Dissel's findings on rehabilitation gaps across African prison systems, consistently stresses that locally adapted approaches, rather than direct replication of foreign models, represent the sole intellectually sound approach.[26]

[21] Andrews and Bonta (n 19) 66–67.

[22] T Ward, J Melser and M Yates, 'Reconstructing the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model: A Theoretical Elaboration and Evaluation' (2007) 34(2) *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 208, 208–210.

[23] D L L Polaschek, 'An Appraisal of the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model of Offender Rehabilitation and Its Application in Correctional Treatment' (2012) 17(1) *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 1, 3–4.

[24] J H Laub and R J Sampson, *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70* (Harvard University Press 2003); S Maruna, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* (American Psychological Association 2001).

[25] J Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (Cambridge University Press 1989) 55–60; M Schoeman, 'The African Concept of Ubuntu and Restorative Justice' in D Vanfraechem, A Pemberton and F Ndahinda (eds), *Justice for Victims: Perspectives on Rights, Transition and Reconciliation* (Routledge 2016) 162, 168–170.

[26] I A Igbinovia, 'Criminology in Africa' (1989) 33(2) *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* v–xiii; A Dissel, 'Rehabilitation and Reintegration in African Prisons' in J Sarkin (ed), *Human Rights in African Prisons* (HSRC Press 2008) 89.

3. The Nigerian Correctional System: Structural Deficits and Their RNR Implications

Colonial Inheritance and the 2019 Legislative Break

The Nigerian correctional system inherited its punitive architecture from British colonial rule.[27] The Prisons Ordinance of 1872, the Prisons Decree of 1972, and the Prisons Act 2004 entrenched a custodial-punitive ethos in which rehabilitation was, at best, an aspirational afterthought.[28] The colonial prison was designed primarily for containment, deterrence, and the extraction of labour but not for the reformation of the offender.[29] This colonial inheritance shaped correctional officers' culture, facility design, and public attitudes toward imprisonment in ways that still persist today. The NCSA 2019 constitutes the most decisive statutory break with the past legacy. It repealed the Prisons Act 2004 and redesignated the Nigerian Prisons Service as the Nigerian Correctional Service. Section 2(1) establishes four core objectives; section 10(1) (e) mandates risk and needs assessment; and Part II (sections 37 – 47) formally establishes a Non-Custodial Service encompassing probation, parole, community service, and restorative justice measures.[30] The Act also introduces a tiered classification of custodial facilities, including Borstal institutions, open centres, and designated female facilities with specific healthcare provisions.[31] This innovation introduced by the Act shifts national penal policy away from purely punitive incarceration toward reformative justice, aiming to reduce severe congestion in custodial centers. If the new innovations contained in the Act are applied, they modernise Nigerian penology to reflect international human rights and rehabilitation frameworks thereby aligning with global standards. They also emphasize repairing the harm caused by crime through community-based correction rather than isolating minor offenders.

Operational Deficits: Overcrowding, Underfunding, and Mental Health

The legislative architecture of NCSA 2019 has been recognised by commentators as sophisticated and, in its aspirations, internationally compliant.[32] What it has not generated is implementation. The gap between the Act's rehabilitative mandate and the operational reality is not merely a policy failure; it is, on the Act's own terms, a continuing statutory failure. Multiple barriers have contributed to the stagnation of its implementation. Politically, rehabilitation has not been prioritised within government agendas, and leadership turnover in the Federal Ministry of Interior has led to inconsistent policy commitment. Financial barriers are significant, with allocations for capital and operational expenditure routinely falling short of budgeted levels, and rehabilitation programs competing with basic security needs for scarce resources. Bureaucratically, entrenched correctional cultures and rigid administrative hierarchies have slowed innovation, while inter-agency coordination remains weak, particularly among the NCoS, the judiciary, and the social service sectors. There has been limited follow-through in developing implementation guidelines or deploying staff for rehabilitation functions, and systemic inertia is compounded by chronic staff shortages and a lack of training in evidence-based correctional practices. The Service's legislatively mandated duty to conduct risk and needs assessment has not been operationalised in any custodial centre. No Nigerian risk assessment instrument exists; no trained cadre of rehabilitation practitioners has been developed; and no national recidivism monitoring system exists to evaluate programme outcomes.

The NCoS's operational deficits are severe and well-documented. As of June 2026, a total inmate population of 82,195 occupied facilities with an official capacity of 65,035, a system-wide occupancy rate of 124%, with individual facilities, including Lagos State's custodial centres, operating at more than 220% of design capacity.[33] The overcrowding crisis is principally driven by the awaiting-trial persons (ATP) problem: 51,955 inmates (64%) had not been convicted of any offence.[34] This ATP crisis has multiple intersecting causes: chronic judicial delay, underfunded prosecution services, inadequate implementation of non-custodial sentencing, and Logistics issues often prevent the Nigerian Correctional Service from bringing inmates to court for their hearings.[35]

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[27] See generally on the colonial justice system in Nigeria, Ochei, B O., & Dawodu-Sipe, O. A. (2025). The Colonial and Neocolonial Traits in the Nigeria Criminal Justice System. *International Journal of Private and Property Law*, *4*(1).

[28] A M Babalola, 'The Evolution of the Nigerian Prisons Service: From Colonialism to Post-Independence' (2014) 5(1) *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 1.

[29] Babalola (n 27) 4–6.

[30] NCSA 2019, ss 2(1), 10(1)(e), 37–47.

[31] NCSA 2019, ss 12–15.

[32] See eg I Obi, 'A Review of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019: Prospects and Challenges' (2021) 7(1) *ABUAD Journal of Public and International Law* 1, 5–7.

[33] Nwakuche (n 7); Punch Nigeria, 'Awaiting Trial Inmates Make Up 64% of Prison Population' (11 February 2026) <https://punchng.com/awaiting-trial-inmates-make-up-64-of-prison-population-ncos/> accessed 22 April 2026.

[34] PR Nigeria (n 12).

[35] United States Department of State, *Nigeria 2024 Human Rights Report* (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2024) 7–10.

Structural underfunding compounds the operational services. Of the ₦14.50bn appropriated for capital expenditure in the 2025 fiscal year, only ₦3.22bn (22.2%) was released and utilised.[36] The infrastructure of rehabilitation, such as therapeutic spaces, vocational workshops, information technology systems is chronically under-resourced.[37] The mental health deficit is the most acute dimension of the professional workforce crisis. As at August 2025, 8,246 inmates across 241 custodial centres suffered from documented mental illness, yet the Psychological Services Unit operated through visiting consultants at only 12 designated facilities.[38] Nigeria has fewer than 300 psychiatrists for a population exceeding 200 million.[39] This deficit constitutes a categorical bar to responsivity-calibrated rehabilitation for the significant proportion of the inmate population with co-occurring mental disorders. Although, the Nigerian Correctional Service has been removed from the exclusive legislative list through the 5th Constitutional Amendment which allows State Government the power, authority and, right to establish their own prisons or correctional centers. The amendment remains a paper work, because no state government in Nigeria has established Correctional Centres and the implications of these are lack of adequate funding, severe overcrowding, slow response to local need and high cost for the central government which continues to maintain and fund all the existing correctional centers in Nigeria.

Recidivism and the Failure of Existing Programming

Official Federal Government data indicate a substantial decline in the number of reported repeat offenders in Nigeria, from 11,616 in 2023 to 1,382 in 2025. However, independent civil society groups and academic studies estimate the actual broader historical and long-term reoffending rate is significantly higher, ranging between 50% and 65%. For citation on civil society report, see Punch Newspapers of 17 August, 2025, captioned Over 60% of inmates reoffend, says Prison Fellowship.[40] They are the predictable and well-understood consequence of correctional practice that systematically violates all three RNR principles: programme intensity is not calibrated to risk level; programming targets non-criminogenic needs (religious instruction, generic vocational training) rather than empirically documented criminogenic factors; and delivery is generic and undifferentiated rather than individually responsive. The existing Nigerian evidence demonstrating the preliminary effectiveness of CBT in custodial settings including Nwokeoma et al's controlled trial (2019), Eseadi et al's group CBT study (2020), and Abunike et al.'s feasibility study (2025) confirms both the receptiveness of Nigerian inmates to structured cognitive-behavioural intervention and the existence of a sufficient local evidence base to justify a structured, scaled adaptation.[41]

Human Rights and Constitutional Dimensions

The NCSA 2019's alignment with international human rights standards under section 2(1), which sets out the four core objectives of the Nigerian Correctional Service: to ensure compliance with international human rights standards and good correctional practices; to provide an enabling platform for the implementation of non-custodial measures; to enhance the focus on corrections and the promotion of reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders; and to establish institutional, systematic and sustainable mechanisms to address the high rate of awaiting trial persons. It is the first and third of these objectives that bring the NCSA 2019 into direct alignment with the international human rights framework, since they expressly commit the Service to human rights compliance and to the rehabilitative purpose that international instruments treat as inseparable from lawful imprisonment.

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules, revised 2015) mandate that the purpose of imprisonment is to protect society against crime and to reduce recidivism by ensuring

[36]National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), *Nigeria Prison Statistics Report 2017–2025* (NBS 2026), reported in Nairametrics, 'NBS: Nigeria Prisons Add 11,764 Inmates Between 2017 and 2025' (14 January 2026) <nairametrics.com> accessed 15 January 2026. Capital expenditure release rate: of ₦14.50bn appropriated for capital projects in 2025, only ₦3.22bn (22.2%) was released and utilised.

[37]Vanguard Nigeria, '64% of Inmates Awaiting Trial as Correctional Service Seeks ₦198.85bn for 2026' (11 February 2026) <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2026/02/64-of-inmates-awaiting-trial-as-correctional-service-seeks-n198-85bn-for-2026/> accessed 22 April 2026.

[38]The Punch, 'NCoS Laments Doctors' Shortage to Treat 8,244 Mentally Ill Inmates' (13 August 2025) <punchng.com> accessed 14 August 2025. As at August 2025, 8,246 inmates suffered from documented mental illness across 241 custodial centres, yet the Psychological Services Unit operated through visiting consultants at only 12 designated facilities.

[39]World Health Organization, *Mental Health Atlas 2020: Nigeria Country Profile* (WHO 2021). Nigeria has fewer than 300 psychiatrists for a population exceeding 200 million, one of the lowest psychiatrist-to-population ratios globally.

[40]https://punchng.com. See also, criminal recidivism tendencies and effectiveness, Academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu. See again, International Journal of Intellectual Discourse: https://ijidjournal.org.

[41]D B Nwokeoma and others, 'Efficacy of Prison-Based Cognitive Behavioural Rehabilitation Intervention on Violent Sexual Behaviors among Sex Offenders in Nigerian Prisons' (2019) 98(30) *Medicine* e16526; C Eseadi and others, 'Effects of Group Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy on Psychological Distress of Awaiting-Trial Prison Inmates' (2020) 99(15) *Medicine* e19508; E Abunike and others, 'Evaluating the Effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in Reducing Recidivism among Inmates in Nigerian Prisons' (2025) 8(1) *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies* 1.

the reintegration of prisoners into society upon release.[42] Rule 4 explicitly requires that prison regimes be designed to facilitate rehabilitation. The Bangkok Rules (UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders, 2010) further require gender-responsive assessment and programming.[43]

At the regional level, Article 5 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights guarantees the right to dignity and prohibits cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, a provision that the African Commission has interpreted as requiring states to provide rehabilitative conditions for detention.[44] Under Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended), section 34 guarantees the right to dignity of the human person, while section 17(3) (c) imposes a directive principle of state policy requiring the government to ensure suitable and adequate shelter, food, a national minimum living wage, and the welfare of the disabled.[45] Although directive principles are not directly enforceable, they inform the interpretation of fundamental rights and establish the constitutional policy framework within which the NCSA 2019 must be understood. The non-implementation of section 10(1) (e) therefore engages not only statutory but constitutional concerns.

4. RNR Adaptation in Nigeria: Framework and Pathways

The Design Principle: Strategic Cultural Adaptation

The case for introducing the RNR framework into the Nigerian criminal justice system rests on two foundations: empirical necessity and statutory obligation. The empirical case is made by Nigeria's documented recidivism crisis, with rates of between 52% and 75% that are directly attributable to the absence of risk-calibrated, needs-targeted, and responsivity-adapted correctional programming. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations in the current Nigerian empirical evidence based. The published research on structured cognitive-behavioural therapy and RNR application in Nigeria, while promising, remains sparse and largely limited to small-scale studies in select custodial centres. There is a lack of large-scale, longitudinal data on programme effectiveness, as well as gaps in systematic evaluation of outcomes across diverse regions and populations. Further research is needed to validate locally developed risk assessment tools, evaluate implementation fidelity, and assess long-term recidivism outcomes of adapted interventions. The statutory basis for reform is provided by the NCSA 2019 itself in: section 10(1) (e) which obliges the NCoS to conduct a risk and needs assessment, and the Federal Ministry of Interior, as the supervisory ministry, bears the constitutional responsibility for ensuring its implementation. The Nigerian RNR adaptation project would therefore be led by the NCoS, in partnership with Nigerian universities, civil society organisations, and international development partners, within the statutory framework set out in the NCSA 2019.

The conceptual foundation of the adaptation is Castro, Barrera and Martinez's principle of 'strategic cultural adaptation', an approach that preserves the essential therapeutic elements of an evidence-based intervention while adjusting its external features, including language, metaphors, who delivers the programme, and cultural framing, to ensure cultural relevance and acceptability within the local context.[46] When applied to the RNR model, this principle involves keeping three core components intact: intensity matched to risk level, targeting criminogenic need, and cognitive-behavioural methods, these elements are supported by research and not to be altered.[47] However, the model allows for cultural customisation in other areas: risk assessment instruments can become norms to Nigerian populations; CBT programme content can be expressed through Nigerian cultural idioms; and responsivity planning can draw on Nigeria's religious traditions and community resources. The NCSA 2019's section 10(1) (e) mandate is the statutory framework within which this adaptation must be conducted.

Comparative Lessons from Non-Western and African Jurisdictions

Three jurisdictions provide directly applicable lessons for a Nigerian adaptation. *Singapore* is described in the literature as 'probably one of the first non-Western countries' to achieve comprehensive, cross-agency RNR implementation demonstrating that the model's core principles can be operationalised outside their Western

[42]United Nations, Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules), UN Doc A/RES/70/175 (17 December 2015), Rule 4.
[43]United Nations, Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), UN Doc A/RES/65/229 (21 December 2010), Rules 41–44.
[44]African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Fair Trial and Legal Assistance in Africa (2003), Principle M (1).
[45]Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), ss 34, 17(3)(c).
[46]F G Castro, M Barrera Jr and L A Martinez, 'The Cultural Adaptation of Prevention Interventions: Resolving Tensions Between Fidelity and Fit' (2004) 33(2) *Prevention Science* 41.
[47]Castro, Barrera and Martinez (n 44) 44.

correctional origins.[48] The Singapore experience establishes three transferable lessons: first, that an existing instrument (the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory, YLS/CMI) can be deployed after local normative data is collected; second, that cross-agency implementation spanning custody, probation, and social services is achievable through a unified framework; and third, that sustained training, supervision, and fidelity monitoring are the critical implementation variables.

South Africa's cautionary experience is equally instructive: despite two decades of statutory commitment to a needs-based rehabilitative model under the White Paper on Corrections (2005), South Africa's recidivism rate of approximately 74% remains among the highest in Africa.[49] The South African Department of Correctional Services has identified three structural barriers: needs assessment tools not applied consistently; a shortage of trained rehabilitation staff; and the absence of integrated data systems[50] that represent precisely the gaps any Nigerian adaptation framework must prioritise.

Kenya's indigenous instrument development, the Change Intervention Programme for Probation (CHIPP) and the Probation Kenya-Risk Assessment of Violent Extremist Tool (PK-RAVET) demonstrates that an African correctional system operating with limited resources can develop its own culturally validated assessment and treatment tools.[51]

5. Operationalising the Three Principles in Nigeria

The Risk Principle and Assessment Instrument Development

Operationalising the *risk principle* requires developing a fourth-generation Nigerian risk assessment instrument modelled on the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI) architecture. The adaptation process must address the 'norming problem': the empirically documented tendency of instruments normed on Western populations to artificially inflate risk scores for structurally disadvantaged populations whose static risk factors such as low education, prior criminal justice contact, and unemployment reflect structural inequality rather than individual criminogenic propensity.[52] The instrument must therefore be: translated into Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Pidgin English; normed on a representative sample drawn from Nigerian custodial centres across all six geopolitical zones; validated through a concurrent validity study linking instrument scores to documented recidivism outcomes; and subjected to inter-rater reliability testing.

The Need Principle and Criminogenic Targeting

Operationalising the *need principle* requires identifying the Central Eight criminogenic needs as they manifest in the specifically Nigerian offender population. Substance abuse is the most prevalent and tractable: a pooled prevalence of 14.4% among the population aged 15–64, driven by youth unemployment of 33% and multidimensional poverty exceeding 50%, identifies it as a primary target for structured, risk-tiered intervention.[53] Antisocial peer association, consistently the strongest dynamic recidivism predictor, is documented in the Nigerian literature through criminal gang networks, intra-custodial criminal subcultures, and post-release criminal peer recontact.[54] Employment and educational deficits must be addressed as genuine criminogenic needs within a structured assessment framework rather than as generic programme offerings applied irrespective of individual need.

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[48]J R Chua and others, 'Implementation of the Risk-Need-Responsivity Framework across the Juvenile Justice Agencies in Singapore' (2014) 21(6) *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 877, 878–882. Singapore is described therein as 'probably one of the first non-Western countries' to achieve comprehensive, cross-agency RNR implementation.

[49]P B B Murhula and A D Tolla, 'A Qualitative Inquiry: Management of Recidivism in South Africa' (2024) *Crime, Law and Social Change* DOI: 10.1007/s10611-024-10141-1. South Africa's recidivism rate of approximately 74% — the highest in Africa — is attributable to three structural causes: inconsistent implementation of the Correctional Sentence Plan; insufficient professional rehabilitation personnel; and absent integrated data systems.

[50]Murhula and Tolla (n 47).

[51]Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Interior and National Administration, *State Department for Correctional Services Strategic Plan 2023–2027* (Ministry of Interior 2024) 18–22. The CHIPP (Change Intervention Programme for Probation) is an indigenously designed evidence-based offender rehabilitation programme; PK-RAVET (Probation Kenya-Risk Assessment of Violent Extremist Tool) is an indigenously developed risk assessment instrument.

[52]J Monahan and J L Skeem, 'Risk Assessment in Criminal Sentencing' (2016) 69(3) *Washington and Lee Law Review* 693. On the COMPAS controversy and the risk of racially skewed risk scores, see J Angwin and others, 'Machine Bias' *ProPublica* (23 May 2016) <https://www.propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing> accessed 22 April 2026.

[53]National Bureau of Statistics, *National Drug Use Survey 2018* (Abuja, NBS 2019); National Bureau of Statistics, *Nigeria Living Standards Survey 2018–2019* (Abuja, NBS 2020).

[54]I O Albert, 'Urban Violence and Criminal Gangs in Nigeria' in W A Adebanwi and E Obadare (eds), *Encountering the Nigerian State* (Palgrave Macmillan 2010) 167.

The Responsivity Principle and Cultural Resources

To put the *responsivity principle* into practice, Nigeria's unique cultural resources should be formally integrated as targeted adaptations that enhance the programme not as replacements for it. Nigeria's approximately even division between Christianity and Islam, constitutionally protected under section 38 of the Constitution, offers an exceptionally broad resource for responsiveness.[55] Religious identity and community ties should serve as motivational support for CBT-based cognitive restructuring, for example, through faith-based motivational interviewing that aligns cognitive restructuring with the offender's existing spiritual framework, rather than standing in for it.[56]

Nigeria's indigenous community justice traditions including Yoruba *Ilé-Àjọ* tribunals, Igbo community arbitration, and Islamic *Sulhu* conciliation align with Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming theory and Ubuntu-rooted restorative justice.[57] These function as specific responsivity resources for community-based corrections after release. The emerging Nigerian CBT research, with three controlled studies demonstrating both feasibility and early signs of effectiveness, provides the empirical foundation needed for expanding a culturally adapted programme.[58]

Gender-Responsive and ATP-Specific Considerations

Gender-responsive adaptation is essential for prisons because men, women and gender diverse people have very different needs (what men need is different from women's need), but standard correctional rules often ignore this difference. Tailoring systems to gender improves safety, healthcare and rehabilitation success for every inmate. Female inmates constitute approximately 2.5% of the Nigerian custodial population but face distinct criminogenic needs: trauma from domestic and sexual violence, childcare responsibilities, and stigma upon release that is qualitatively more severe than for male offenders.[59] The Bangkok Rules require gender-specific risk assessment and programming.[60] Any Nigerian RNR instrument must include validated dynamic risk factors for women and ensure that programme delivery addresses trauma, parenting skills, and post-release housing and employment support.

Awaiting-trial persons (ATPs) present a distinct challenge. RNR was designed primarily for sentenced offenders, and applying risk assessment to pre-trial detainees raises due process and presumption of innocence concerns. However, the NCSA 2019 applies to all persons in custody, and ATPs constitute 64% of the inmate population. There should be a different approach for ATPs because, there are constitutional provisions in their favour, for example, presumption of innocence (if they end up not being convicted, the stigma cannot be erased, who then compensate them for the period of incarceration). Thus, this paper is canvasing for a different approach suitable for an Awaiting trial persons, such as risk-needs assessment for ATPs should be limited to identifying immediate custodial risks (violence, self-harm, escape) and rehabilitation needs (such as substance withdrawal, mental health, and educational deficits) that affect conditions of detention, and not used for sentencing or bail determination. This approach aligns with core constitutional guarantees under the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, particularly the rights to personal liberty (section 35), the dignity of the human person (section 34), and the presumption of innocence (section 36(5)). By strictly limiting the use of risk-needs assessments for ATPs to the management of safety and welfare within custodial settings, and not in any way for pre-judging guilt or influencing judicial decisions, the approach upholds due process requirements and safeguards fundamental rights while also addressing urgent rehabilitation needs.

6. Policy Recommendations

Legislative and Regulatory Reforms

Five legislative and regulatory reforms are prioritised. First, the Attorney-General of the Federation should issue, under the authority of the NCSA 2019, a Statutory Instrument prescribing risk and needs assessment as a mandatory

[55]Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 38.

[56]W R Miller and S Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (3rd edn, Guilford Press 2013) 143–145.

[57]Braithwaite (n 24) 8–12. On Ubuntu-rooted restorative justice, see Schoeman (n 24) 168–170. On *Ilé-Àjọ*, see O O Elechi, 'The Igbo Indigenous Justice System' in V Saleh-Hanna (ed), *Colonial Systems of Control: Criminal Justice in Nigeria* (University of Ottawa Press 2008) 398–9. On *Sulhu*, see M K Masud, 'The Concept of Sulh in Islamic Law' (1989) 4(1) *Islamic Studies* 111.

[58]Nwokeoma and others (n 39); Eseadi and others (n 39); Abunike and others (n 39).

[59]NBS (n 7); Nigerian Correctional Service, *Strategic Plan 2021–2025* (Abuja, NCoS 2021) 18. Female inmates constitute approximately 2.5% of the total NCoS custodial population. On gender-specific criminogenic needs including domestic violence, childcare and post-release stigma, see P Van Voorhis and others, 'Women's Risk Factors and Their Contributions to Existing Risk/Needs Assessment: The Current Status of a Gender-Responsive Supplement' (2010) 23(3) *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 261.

[60]United Nations, *Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders* (the Bangkok Rules), UN General Assembly Resolution 65/229, UN Doc A/RES/65/229 (21 December 2010), Rules 41–44.https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Bangkok_Rules_ENG_22032015.pdf accessed 25 May 2026

admission procedure for all newly received inmates, specifying the instrument to be used, the training requirements for administering officers, and the case management obligations arising from assessment results. Second, the National Assembly should enact implementing legislation to operationalise the non-custodial sentencing provisions of both the NCSA 2019 and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 (ACJA), thereby creating a nationally coordinated non-custodial corrections framework under the supervision of NCoS. Third, the Correctional Service Trust Fund (Establishment) Bill, 2025 (HB 686) currently awaiting Presidential assent should be promptly enacted to provide the dedicated, ring-fenced funding stream that the RNR implementation infrastructure requires. Fourth, the Federal Ministry of Interior should issue a Ministerial Policy Directive establishing a National Correctional Research Unit within the NCoS Directorate of Research, Statistics, and Information Management, with a mandate to commission, coordinate and publish outcome research on programme effectiveness, recidivism trends, and risk assessment validation, operating under a formal partnership framework with at least four designated Nigerian universities. Fifth, the National Assembly should amend the NCSA 2019 to mandate the periodic publication of a National Correctional Services Annual Report including national recidivism statistics, programme completion rates, and outcome evaluation findings, creating the public accountability infrastructure that effective correctional reform requires.

Inter-Agency Collaboration

A National Correctional Reform Steering Committee, chaired by the Minister of Interior and comprising the Controller-General of Corrections, the Attorney-General of the Federation, the Chief Judge of the Federal High Court, the Inspector-General of Police, the Director-General of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), and the Ministers of Health and Education, should meet quarterly to coordinate implementation and review outcome data. At the operational level: a Memorandum of Understanding between the NCoS and the NDLEA should establish a joint substance abuse screening and treatment protocol; a Sentencing Information Protocol should require probation officers to submit risk-informed pre-sentence social inquiry reports to sentencing courts; and a Correctional Mental Health Partnership Agreement between the NCoS and the Ministry of Health should provide scheduled psychiatric and clinical psychology services to all 241 custodial centres.

A Phased Implementation Framework

A three-phase framework is proposed:

Phase One (Years 1–3): Foundation Building

1. Pilot validation of the Nigerian risk assessment instrument at six custodial centres (two per geopolitical zone);
2. Training of approximately 200 specialist rehabilitation officers in RNR principles and CBT techniques;
3. Establishment of the National Correctional Research Unit; and
4. Launch of pilot CBT programmes.

Phase Two (Years 4–7): Validation and Expansion

1. Validate the risk assessment instrument nationally;
2. Expand the trained officer cadre to all 241 centres;
3. Evaluate Phase One outcomes; and
4. Introduce non-custodial RNR-based supervision for medium-risk parolees and probationers.

Phase Three (Years 8–12): Institutionalisation

1. Deploy the programme nationwide;
2. Create an accreditation system for programme quality;
3. Publish national recidivism outcome reports; and
4. Engage the African correctional reform community to share the Nigerian adaptation experience as a continental model.

This phased framework embodies the principle of principled incrementalism: it begins with elements that require minimal institutional infrastructure, systematically advances towards comprehensive implementation, and generates the indigenous evidence base needed to sustain and refine adaptation. The South African experience shows that a needs-based framework, even when legislatively mandated, will not reduce recidivism without implementation fidelity and professional capacity. The experiences of Singapore and Kenya further illustrate that these conditions are achievable within a decade, provided there is sufficient political will and institutional coordination.

The Role of State Governments in Correctional Reform

A major aspect of the Nigerian correctional reform project that is, largely ignored is the role of state governments. Criminal cases in Nigeria are, overwhelmingly, prosecuted under state criminal laws, criminal codes in southern states and penal codes in northern states, before state magistrates and high courts. In Nigeria, the offenders that fill the cells of prisons, are is overwhelmingly, state offenders incarcerated in the federal prisons because the constitutional

architecture historically left states with no power to establish their own. This fundamental mismatch between the level at which crime occurs and the level at which correctional responsibility is borne is one of the structural drivers of Nigeria's chronic overcrowding crisis.

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Fifth Alteration) (No 15) Act 2023 makes a fundamental shift in this constitutional landscape. By deleting Item 48 ('Prisons') from the Exclusive Legislative List and redesignating it as 'Correctional Services' in the Concurrent Legislative List and inserting an additional paragraph 10A (Correctional Services) into the Concurrent Legislative list to Part II of the Second Schedule. The Act for the first time empowers State Houses of Assembly to enact laws establishing correctional services and custodial facilities within their respective states. This constitutional amendment was motivated in part by the recognition, expressed during National Assembly debates, that most prison inmates are state offenders, that overcrowding constitutes an obstacle to Nigeria's implementation of the UN Mandela Rules, and that the states must share the responsibility of relieving the federal correctional system's structural burdens.

This article recommends that state governments now act on this constitutional mandate without delay. Each of Nigeria's 36 states should, as a matter of urgency, enact a State Correctional Services Law under its newly conferred concurrent legislative power, establishing at least one state custodial facility, a state probation and non-custodial corrections authority, and a state correctional rehabilitation fund. State-level correctional facilities would produce three immediate and concrete benefits for the RNR implementation project. First, they would directly address the overcrowding of federal custodial centres, which was 124% of system capacity as at February 2026, constitutes a structural barrier to the individualised risk assessment and targeted programming that the RNR model requires. Second, state facilities would be geographically close to the communities, families, and prosocial networks of the offenders they incarcerate, a structural benefit to the community reintegration programming and post-release support that desistance theory and the RNR responsivity principle both identify as essential to sustainable rehabilitation. Third, smaller-scale state facilities would be more manageable environments for piloting culturally adapted RNR instruments and CBT programmes, with the flexibility to adapt delivery to the specific ethnic, linguistic, and religious context of each state.

Finally, it is important to stress that state participation should not add to or detract from the evidence-based core of the RNR framework. The principle of strategic cultural adaptation requires that the three core components, risk-calibrated intervention intensity, criminogenic need targeting, and cognitive-behavioural delivery, be maintained across all facilities, federal and state alike, and that cultural adaptation operates only at the level of delivery vehicles. The National Correctional Reform Steering Committee recommended in Section B above should therefore include the thirty-six State Commissioners for Interior (or their equivalent) as members, ensuring that state correctional facilities operate within a nationally consistent RNR fidelity framework rather than developing ad hoc, unevidenced approaches that reproduces at the state level the same programmatic failures that this article seeks to remedy at the federal level.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model, when subjected to principled cultural adaptation, holds transformative potential for Nigerian correctional reform. The statutory foundation for this project already exists in section 10(1)(e) of the NCSA 2019,an express legislative mandate for risk and needs assessment that, five years after enactment, remains entirely unimplemented. The obstacles to its implementation are not theoretical but institutional: the absence of validated assessment instruments, the absence of a trained rehabilitation workforce, the absence of integrated data systems, and the dominance of a custodial culture shaped by colonial inheritance rather than evidence-based practice. None of these obstacles is immovable. The emerging Nigerian CBT evidence base, thin but significant, establishes that structured cognitive-behavioural intervention is both acceptable and effective for Nigerian custodial populations. The comparative experiences of Singapore and Kenya demonstrate that non-Western correctional systems with resource constraints comparable to Nigeria's can achieve meaningful RNR implementation within a decade. And the specific responsivity principle of the RNR model was designed precisely for contexts like Nigeria to enable the 'what works' evidence base to be deployed in settings for which it was not originally developed, by attending rigorously and sensitively to the individual and contextual variables that shape how treatment is received. Nigeria's rich religious traditions, its strong family and community bonds, and its indigenous justice systems are not obstacles to this project: they are its primary adaptive resources.

The recidivism crisis in Nigerian custodial centres, with 52% to 75% of released offenders reoffending, constitutes a significant loss of human potential and an ongoing constitutional failure. Nevertheless, this is a solvable problem. When properly adapted, the RNR model offers the most rigorously evidence-based framework for addressing it. The five legislative reforms, inter-agency collaboration architecture, phased implementation framework, and university research partnership programme proposed in this article collectively provide a viable and actionable pathway from statutory aspiration to correctional reality. The critical issue is no longer whether Nigeria's correctional system can be rehabilitated, but whether the necessary political will exists to initiate the process.