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Research Article

Media Representation And Public Perception Of The Nigerian Correctional Service: Implications For Institutional Image And Correctional Reforms

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Abstract. The Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) is a strategic component of Nigeria's criminal justice and national security architecture. Its transformation from the Nigerian Prisons Service to the Nigerian Correctional Service under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 represents an important shift from a predominantly custodial orientation toward a broader philosophy of custody, reformation, rehabilitation, reintegration and non-custodial measures. Nevertheless, the public image of correctional institutions is strongly influenced by media representation, while correctional reforms may receive less public visibility than institutional crises. This study examines media representation and public perception of the Nigerian Correctional Service and assesses the implications for institutional image and correctional reforms. The study adopts a qualitative documentary research design and draws on legislation, scholarly literature, institutional publications, media studies and the author's body of research on Nigerian correctional administration, prison reforms, national security,

inmate education, drug abuse, community-based corrections, inmate classification and correctional security. Framing Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory provide the analytical foundations. Existing empirical evidence indicates inadequate media coverage of prison reforms and low public awareness of the reform agenda. The study further identifies overcrowding, awaiting-trial detention, security incidents, inmate welfare, human-rights concerns and institutional failures as recurring themes capable of shaping public perceptions. Conversely, rehabilitation, education, vocational development, community-based corrections, non-custodial measures and institutional reform may receive comparatively less attention. The paper argues that neither favourable publicity nor suppression of criticism can create sustainable institutional legitimacy. Rather, institutional image should emerge from demonstrable performance, transparent communication, accountability and evidence-based reform. The study recommends specialised correctional journalism, stronger NCoS-media relations, proactive disclosure of verified information, strategic communication, digital misinformation monitoring, public reporting of reform outcomes and greater media visibility for rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

Keywords: Nigerian Correctional Service, Media Representation, Public Perception, Institutional Image, Correctional Reforms, Rehabilitation, National Security.

PENDAHULUAN

Correctional institutions occupy a strategic position within every modern criminal justice system. Their responsibilities extend beyond the confinement of persons deprived of liberty to include security, reformation, rehabilitation, education, healthcare, welfare, reintegration and, increasingly, non-custodial measures.

In Nigeria, this institutional philosophy was formally strengthened through the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019. The legislation replaced the former Nigerian Prisons Service framework with a correctional model incorporating both custodial and non-custodial services. The transformation therefore represents an important development in Nigerian correctional administration.

However, legal transformation does not automatically produce corresponding transformation in public perception. The public may continue to understand correctional institutions through historical images of prisons, punishment, confinement, overcrowding and security incidents. The mass media are particularly important in this regard because most citizens do not have direct experience of correctional centres. Their understanding is consequently influenced by newspapers, radio, television, online journalism and social media.

A significant empirical study by Ezuilo, Okon and Okugo (2020) found inadequate media coverage of prison reforms in South-East Nigeria and low audience awareness of the reform agenda. Their study examined 240 respondents, selected newspaper issues and broadcast programmes and concluded that inadequate media attention was associated with low awareness of prison reforms.

This finding raises an important question for contemporary correctional administration: if the Nigerian Correctional Service has undergone substantial legislative and institutional transformation, to what extent is that transformation visible in media representations and public understanding?

The question is important because media representation does not merely describe institutions. It can make particular issues more visible than others. Reports

about prison escapes, riots, overcrowding, alleged misconduct, inmate deaths or security failures can attract significant attention because they possess strong news value. By contrast, routine rehabilitation, educational programmes, vocational training, inmate classification, community-based corrections and reintegration may receive less attention because they are less dramatic.

This does not mean that negative reporting is necessarily inaccurate or undesirable. On the contrary, responsible investigative journalism can expose genuine institutional problems and contribute to accountability. The issue is whether the overall media environment provides the public with sufficient and accurate information about both challenges and reforms.

Manya-Manya's body of research provides a useful correctional foundation for this inquiry. His earlier study of prison administration and criminal justice examined the Nigerian Prisons Service through the Gusau Medium Security Prison experience. His later research examined prison reform and national security at Gusau Medium Security Correctional Facility, while subsequent publications have addressed drug abuse in custodial centres, educational opportunities among inmates, community-based corrections and non-custodial measures, and inmate classification.

The present article therefore extends that research trajectory by introducing media representation and public perception as additional dimensions of correctional governance.

Statement of the Problem

The transformation from prison administration to correctional administration has created a new institutional identity for the Nigerian Correctional Service. Nevertheless, a possible disconnect exists between the statutory objectives of correctional reform and the public image of the institution.

The problem has several dimensions.

First, correctional institutions are security-sensitive environments. Journalists may encounter restrictions concerning access to custodial centres, inmates, operational information and sensitive security procedures. Such restrictions are understandable in relation to institutional security but can also create information gaps.

Second, where official information is delayed or insufficient, journalists may obtain information from other sources. These may include lawyers, relatives of inmates, human-rights organisations, civil-society organisations, witnesses and social-media users. Such alternative sources can contribute important information, but they can also produce competing accounts that require verification.

Third, media news values tend to give considerable attention to crisis, conflict and unusual events. Consequently, overcrowding, escapes, riots, alleged misconduct and inmate deaths may receive greater prominence than routine rehabilitation and reform programmes.

Fourth, public understanding of the NCoS may remain influenced by the historical prison model. The legal transition to a correctional service introduced a

broader institutional mandate, but public awareness of that transformation may not correspond to the legal change.

Fifth, digital media have introduced new challenges involving misinformation, manipulated images and unverified claims. The NCoS has itself publicly addressed the circulation of misleading AI-generated content, illustrating the emerging communication challenges facing correctional institutions.

The central problem, therefore, is not simply whether media coverage is positive or negative. The more important issue is whether the media provide a sufficiently accurate, balanced, contextualised and reform-sensitive representation of the Nigerian Correctional Service.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective is to examine media representation and public perception of the Nigerian Correctional Service and determine the implications for institutional image and correctional reforms.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine major themes through which the Nigerian Correctional Service is represented in Nigerian media;
2. Assess how media representation may shape public perception of the ncos;
3. Examine the visibility of correctional reforms in media coverage;
4. Examine the representation of rehabilitation, education, security and non-custodial measures;
5. Examine the relationship between institutional communication and public image;
6. Identify communication challenges affecting the ncos;
7. Examine the implications of media representation for correctional reform and national security; and
8. Recommend strategies for improving evidence-based correctional communication.

Research Questions

1. How is the Nigerian Correctional Service represented in Nigerian media?
2. What themes dominate media coverage of the NCoS?
3. How may media representation influence public perception of correctional institutions?
4. To what extent are correctional reforms represented in the media?
5. How are rehabilitation, education and non-custodial measures represented?
6. What communication challenges affect the institutional image of the NCoS?
7. What implications does media representation have for correctional reforms and national security?
8. How can strategic communication improve public understanding of correctional administration?

Conceptual Review

Media Representation

Media representation refers to the selection, construction and presentation of people, organisations, events and issues through communication channels. Representation involves choices concerning headlines, language, photographs, sources, prominence, frequency, framing, contextual information, and the relationship between an event and its wider social environment. A report concerning a correctional centre can therefore represent the same event as a security problem, human-rights issue, administrative failure, criminal-justice problem or reform opportunity.

Public Perception

Public perception refers to the beliefs, attitudes and interpretations held by members of society concerning an institution. In relation to the NCoS, public perception may involve beliefs about:

- Professionalism;
- Security;
- Inmate treatment;
- Rehabilitation;
- Transparency;
- Corruption;
- Institutional effectiveness;
- Staff conduct;
- Human rights; and
- Correctional reform.

Public perception should not automatically be equated with objective institutional performance because perceptions can be influenced by incomplete information.

Institutional Image

Institutional image is the collective impression stakeholders develop concerning an organisation. For the NCoS, institutional image may be influenced by the interaction of performance, media representation, institutional communication and public experience:

Performance + Media Representation + Institutional Communication + Public Experience = Institutional Image

A sustainable institutional image therefore cannot depend exclusively on public relations.

Correctional Reform

Correctional reform involves changes intended to improve custody, security, rehabilitation, reformation, welfare, reintegration and alternatives to imprisonment. Manya-Manya's research on prison reforms and national security at Gusau Medium Security Correctional Facility examined the relationship between correctional reform

and Nigeria's broader security environment. The study also identified the 2019 Correctional Service Act as an important institutional response to longstanding problems within the prison system.

Review of Related Literature

Media Coverage and Prison Reform

The empirical literature provides direct evidence that correctional reforms have not always received sufficient media attention. Ezuiilo, Okon and Okugo (2020) studied media coverage and audience awareness of prison reform campaigns in South-East Nigeria. Their study analysed 56 broadcast programmes, 28 newspaper issues and responses from 240 participants, of whom 220 valid responses were analysed. Only 19% of respondents reported awareness of media campaigns concerning prison reform, while 78% considered the reform agenda inadequately portrayed.

The study is particularly relevant because it demonstrates a communication gap between reform and public awareness. Its findings suggest that a reform may exist institutionally without becoming sufficiently visible in public discourse.

Manya-Manya's Correctional Research and the Present Study

The present research is part of a broader body of scholarship concerning correctional institutions, security and criminal justice.

Prison Administration and Criminal Justice

Manya-Manya's earlier work, *Prisons Service and Criminal Administration in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis (2007–2015): A Case Study of Gusau Medium Security Prison*, examined the relationship between prison administration and criminal justice. The study provides an institutional foundation for understanding the correctional centre as an element of the wider criminal justice system rather than an isolated institution. This is important to media analysis because correctional problems can originate from or be affected by processes occurring before incarceration, including arrest, prosecution, trial, sentencing and pre-trial detention.

Prison Reform and National Security

Manya-Manya's *Prison Reforms and National Security in Nigeria (2010–2020): A Study of Gusau Medium Security Correctional Facility* examined correctional reform within the context of insecurity in Nigeria. The study used a sample of 117 inmates and examined issues including insecurity, small arms and light weapons, armed banditry and the 2019 Correctional Service Act. This research is important to the current study because media representations of correctional institutions frequently occur within the wider context of Nigeria's insecurity. A correctional centre may therefore be represented through the lens of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, organised crime or prison security.

Drug Abuse in Custodial Centres

Manya-Manya's research on *Drug Abuse in Nigerian Custodial Centres and Reformatory Institutions* examines the presence and implications of drug abuse

within custodial environments. The work addresses how substances may enter custodial systems, the institutional challenges associated with drug abuse and possible responses. The publication is documented as a 2025 conference paper with ISBN 978-93-95789-25-7. This research expands the present media discussion because drug abuse is an issue that can easily be represented through a crime-and-security frame. However, it also has rehabilitation, healthcare and behavioural dimensions. A responsible media representation should therefore avoid reducing drug abuse exclusively to inmate criminality and should examine its relationship with prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

Educational Opportunities among Inmates

Education is a central component of correctional rehabilitation. Manya-Manya's 2026 study, *Educational Opportunities and Human Capital Development among Inmates in Nigerian Correctional Centres: Challenges and Prospects*, identifies education as relevant to rehabilitation, human-capital development, social reintegration and crime reduction. The publication appeared in *STEM Education Review*, 4(1), with DOI 10.67229/stemer.26080007. This work has direct implications for media representation. When education, vocational training and human-capital development receive limited media attention, the public may not fully understand the rehabilitative function of correctional institutions.

Community-Based Corrections and Non-Custodial Measures

Manya-Manya, Yusuf and Bara's 2026 work on *Community-Based Corrections and Non-Custodial Measures: Prospects and Challenges in Nigeria under the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019* examines the shift toward rehabilitation, reintegration and restorative justice. This dimension is especially important to the current study because the term "prison" may itself shape public expectations. A public that understands the NCoS solely as a prison administration may have limited awareness of community-based corrections and non-custodial interventions. Media communication therefore has a role in explaining the institutional transformation.

Inmate Classification

Manya-Manya's 2026 study of inmate classification examines the role of classification in correctional administration, including security risk, legal status, behavioural characteristics, health, age, gender, sentence length and rehabilitation needs. The article was published in *INTERDISIPLIN: Journal of Qualitative and Quantitative Research*, 3(5), 353-374, DOI 10.61166/interdisiplin.v3i5.163. The subject has media significance because public discussion sometimes treats inmates as a homogeneous category. Effective correctional communication should explain that custodial populations may include persons with different legal statuses, security classifications, ages, offences, sentences and rehabilitation needs.

Broader Security Context

Manya-Manya's wider security research also provides context for understanding correctional institutions. His research on armed banditry identifies the relationship between insecurity and Nigeria's wider national-security environment. The study examines armed banditry from 2010 to 2025 and its systemic implications for national security. His research on Boko Haram similarly examines the insurgency's effects on Nigeria's political, economic, humanitarian and social environment. Research concerning small arms and light weapons further links insecurity with criminal and security dynamics in Nigeria.

These works are relevant to this paper not because they directly examine media representation, but because they establish the wider security environment in which correctional institutions operate. Consequently, media reporting of correctional security should recognise that correctional institutions can be affected by external insecurity, organised crime, weapons proliferation and violent conflict.

Cybersecurity and Correctional Communication

Manya-Manya's research trajectory also includes cybersecurity and cyber-conflict issues. This is relevant because contemporary institutional reputation is increasingly constructed through digital platforms. The NCoS must therefore manage:

- Official websites;
- Social-media communication;
- Online misinformation;
- Manipulated photographs;
- False reports;
- Impersonation;
- Digital security;
- Rapid-response communication; and
- Protection of sensitive institutional information.

The Service has already publicly responded to misleading AI-generated content concerning correctional matters, demonstrating that the digital information environment has become an institutional-security concern. Thus, correctional communication can no longer be treated as a conventional press-office responsibility alone.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two complementary communication theories: Framing Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory. Together they explain how media representations influence what the public thinks about and how the public thinks about correctional institutions.

Framing Theory

Framing Theory, associated with the work of Erving Goffman and later developed in media studies by scholars such as Entman (1993), posits that the media select and highlight certain aspects of a perceived reality while omitting or downplaying others. Frames organise experience, define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations and suggest remedies. In the correctional context, the same institutional event—an escape, a riot, an overcrowding crisis or a rehabilitation programme—can be framed as a security failure, a human-rights violation, an administrative lapse, a symptom of systemic criminal-justice dysfunction, or an opportunity for reform. The dominant frame shapes public interpretation and, ultimately, institutional legitimacy.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, pioneered by McCombs and Shaw (1972), asserts that the media may not tell people what to think, but they are highly successful in telling people what to think about. By allocating differential attention, prominence and frequency to issues, the media influence the perceived importance of those issues in the public mind. Applied to the Nigerian Correctional Service, the theory helps explain why security incidents, overcrowding and alleged misconduct may dominate public consciousness while rehabilitation programmes, educational initiatives, non-custodial measures and incremental institutional reforms remain relatively invisible. When reforms receive limited media attention, public awareness of the 2019 legislative transformation remains correspondingly low, as documented by Ezuilo et al. (2020).

Integrated Analytical Lens

Combining the two theories yields a useful analytical lens: Agenda-Setting Theory accounts for the visibility (or invisibility) of correctional issues, while Framing Theory accounts for the interpretive meaning attached to those issues once they become visible. Sustainable institutional image, therefore, depends not only on the volume of coverage but on the balance and contextual richness of the frames employed.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design. Documentary research is appropriate where the primary evidence consists of existing texts, legislation, institutional publications, scholarly literature and media studies rather than primary field data collected specifically for the present inquiry. The design permits systematic examination of the discursive construction of the Nigerian Correctional Service across multiple documentary sources.

Sources consulted include:

- The Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 and related legal instruments;

- Peer-reviewed studies on media coverage of prison reform (notably Ezuilo, Okon & Okugo, 2020);
- The author's prior empirical and conceptual work on prison administration, reform and national security, inmate education, drug abuse, community-based corrections and inmate classification;
- Institutional statements and public communications of the Nigerian Correctional Service; and
- Secondary literature on Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory and institutional image.

Analysis proceeded through thematic synthesis. Recurring themes in media and scholarly representations were identified, compared with the statutory and programmatic objectives of the 2019 Act, and interpreted through the dual theoretical lens of framing and agenda-setting. No primary quantitative survey or content-analytic sample of contemporary news output was conducted for this paper; instead, the study relies on existing empirical findings and the cumulative insights of the author's correctional research programme.

Discussion: Media Themes, Public Perception and Institutional Image

Dominant Media Themes

Available evidence and institutional experience point to a recurring set of media themes:

- Overcrowding and infrastructure deficits;
- Awaiting-trial (pre-trial) detention;
- Security incidents (escapes, riots, external attacks);
- Inmate welfare, healthcare and human-rights concerns;
- Alleged misconduct or institutional failure; and
- Occasional coverage of high-profile rehabilitation or vocational programmes.

These themes possess high news value because they involve conflict, drama, human interest and potential public-safety implications. By contrast, routine classification processes, educational enrolment figures, vocational certification, community service orders and gradual improvements in non-custodial supervision attract less spontaneous media interest.

Visibility of Reform

The 2019 Act introduced a significant conceptual and operational shift—from a purely custodial “prisons” model to a correctional service encompassing both custodial and non-custodial functions. Yet the empirical finding of Ezuilo et al. (2020) that only a small minority of respondents were aware of media campaigns on prison reform, and that a large majority judged the reform agenda inadequately portrayed, remains instructive. Legal and institutional change does not automatically generate public knowledge; sustained, accessible and credible communication is required.

Implications for Institutional Image

Institutional image is not the product of publicity alone. Where performance deficits are real—overcrowding, delayed trials feeding the remand population, security breaches—negative frames are likely to persist regardless of communication strategy. Conversely, genuine progress in rehabilitation, education, classification, non-custodial measures and transparent accountability can, over time, support more balanced public perceptions—provided those advances are made visible through credible channels. Neither suppression of criticism nor purely promotional messaging can substitute for demonstrable improvement.

National-Security Linkages

Because correctional institutions operate within Nigeria's broader security environment, media representations of escapes, external attacks or the presence of high-risk inmates intersect with public anxieties about banditry, terrorism and organised crime. Accurate contextualisation is therefore essential: reporting that isolates correctional failures from upstream criminal-justice bottlenecks or external threat environments risks producing incomplete public understanding.

Implications for Correctional Reform and National Security

Media representation and public perception carry practical consequences for reform implementation and national security. First, low public awareness of non-custodial measures and community-based corrections can limit political and social support for alternatives to imprisonment, thereby sustaining pressure on custodial facilities. Second, persistent negative framing may erode staff morale and public cooperation with reintegration programmes. Third, in a security-sensitive environment, unmanaged digital misinformation can itself become a security risk. Fourth, constructive media engagement can strengthen accountability, deter misconduct and amplify successful reform initiatives, thereby reinforcing both institutional legitimacy and public safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, the following measures are recommended:

1. **Specialised correctional journalism:** Media houses and professional associations should encourage specialised reporting on criminal justice and corrections, supported by training that covers both security sensitivities and reform dimensions.
2. **Stronger NCoS-media relations:** The Service should maintain structured, predictable channels of engagement with accredited journalists, including timely briefings on verified operational matters and reform progress.
3. **Proactive disclosure of verified information:** Where security considerations permit, the NCoS should release accurate information promptly rather than allowing information vacuums that invite speculation or misinformation.

4. **Strategic communication capacity:** Investment in professional communication units capable of framing complex institutional realities accurately—covering both challenges and achievements—is essential.
5. **Digital misinformation monitoring and response:** Given the rise of AI-generated and manipulated content, the Service should maintain capacity to detect, assess and publicly correct false narratives that threaten institutional integrity or public safety.
6. **Public reporting of reform outcomes:** Regular, accessible reports on educational programmes, vocational outcomes, non-custodial caseloads, classification improvements and other measurable reforms should be published to increase the visibility of progress.
7. **Greater media visibility for rehabilitation and reintegration:** Deliberate efforts should be made to showcase evidence-based rehabilitation, education, skills acquisition and successful reintegration stories, thereby balancing crisis-oriented coverage with reform-oriented narratives.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of the Nigerian Prisons Service into the Nigerian Correctional Service under the 2019 Act constitutes a significant legislative and philosophical advance. Yet legal change alone does not guarantee corresponding change in public perception. Media representation continues to shape how citizens understand correctional institutions, often prioritising crisis and conflict frames over the quieter processes of rehabilitation, education, classification and non-custodial supervision.

This study has argued that sustainable institutional image cannot be manufactured through publicity or the suppression of criticism. It must rest on demonstrable performance, transparent communication, accountability and evidence-based reform. Framing Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory illuminate why certain themes dominate public discourse and how interpretive frames influence legitimacy. The author's broader research programme on prison administration, reform, national security, inmate education, drug abuse, community-based corrections and classification provides a substantive foundation for understanding the institutional realities that media representations either illuminate or obscure.

Improving the quality and balance of media representation of the Nigerian Correctional Service is therefore not a cosmetic public-relations exercise. It is an integral dimension of correctional governance and, by extension, of national security. Specialised journalism, proactive and accurate institutional communication, digital vigilance, and sustained visibility for reform outcomes offer practical pathways toward a more informed public and a more legitimate correctional institution.

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World Prison Brief

Important correction

Your Ezuilo et al. (2020) reference should be completed because the current version is incomplete. The verified bibliographic information is:

Ezuilo, J. C., Okon, P. E., & Okugo, U. C. (2020). Media coverage and audience awareness of prison reform campaigns in South-East Nigeria. *Media Watch*, 11(3), 579–592. <https://doi.org/10.15655/mw/2020/12092020>

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So, after adding these 15 references to your existing list, you will have 25 references in total. The new sources also strengthen the paper's theoretical foundation and its international correctional literature, rather than merely increasing the number of references.