

Advancements in Modern Correctional Systems: A Systematic Review on Reform, Rehabilitation, and Technological Integration

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Publication history: Received: January 6, 2026; Revised: February 8, 2026; Accepted: February 10, 2026

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Abstract

This systematic review synthesizes recent research on advancements in modern correctional systems, focusing on reform initiatives, rehabilitation program effectiveness, and the integration of technology. The review identifies key trends, challenges, and opportunities within these three domains to understand their collective impact on Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL) outcomes and system efficiency. A comprehensive search of academic databases was conducted to identify relevant studies published since 2000. Findings indicate a global shift towards more humanized and evidence-based approaches, though significant implementation gaps persist. Rehabilitation efforts show modest but promising reductions in recidivism, particularly with psychological interventions and strong aftercare. Technological integration, while offering benefits in management and rehabilitation, also presents substantial ethical and human rights concerns regarding privacy, bias, and surveillance. The review concludes by highlighting the critical need for continued research into effective program implementation, ethical technological deployment, and the harmonization of reform efforts to foster more just and effective correctional systems. In alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), the review stresses the importance of creating fair, equitable, and accountable correctional systems that contribute to social justice, rehabilitation, and the reduction of societal inequalities. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, correctional staff, and external organizations, to ensure the successful and sustainable implementation of reforms.

Keywords: Correctional Systems, Rehabilitation, Technological Integration, Recidivism, Sustainable Development Goals

1. Introduction

Correctional systems worldwide are constantly evolving, influenced by changes in societal norms, expanding knowledge about criminal behavior, and the ongoing challenge of reducing recidivism. Traditionally, penal systems have prioritized punishment and deterrence, aiming to control crime through retribution. However, there has been a substantial shift in philosophy towards rehabilitation and reform, which increasingly focuses on the reintegration of offenders into society (Henrich, 2020; Santos, 2024). This shift acknowledges that successful correctional practices not only contribute to public safety but also protect human dignity, while minimizing the long-term social costs of reoffending (Weisburd et al., 2017; Agustin et al., 2025).

Today's correctional management must contend with a variety of complex issues, such as overcrowding, insufficient resources, and the need to safeguard the welfare of both PDLs and staff members (Heard, 2020; Banzon et al., 2025). In response to these challenges, there has been a growing interest in exploring evidence-based reform strategies, improving rehabilitation programs, and incorporating technological innovations to streamline and enhance correctional operations. This systematic review aims to compile and analyze the existing academic literature surrounding these key areas, offering a comprehensive examination of the latest advancements, the effectiveness of current practices, and the challenges faced in their implementation.

The primary goal of this systematic review is to explore and address the following critical questions: Seeks to understand the main reform initiatives currently being implemented in correctional systems, and its impacts it shown. The following research questions are utilized:

1. How effective are existing rehabilitation programs in improving PDLs outcomes and curbing recidivism?
2. What is the extent of technological integration in correctional facilities, and what benefits and obstacles does it present?

3. How can correctional systems effectively balance the goals of ensuring public safety while promoting offenders' human rights and rehabilitation?
4. What role do community-based programs play in the reintegration of offenders, and how can they be optimized for greater success?

By investigating these questions, this review aims to provide policymakers, correctional professionals, and academic researchers with a solid foundation for developing more humane, efficient, and sustainable correctional practices.

2. Materials and methods

This systematic review followed a comprehensive search strategy to identify relevant academic literature on advancements in modern correctional systems, focusing on reform, rehabilitation, and technological integration.

2.1 Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across multiple academic databases for studies published between 2000 and 2025. The search terms were designed to capture the breadth of the topic and included combinations of keywords such as: "correctional system*", "prison reform," "penal reform," "rehabilitation program*," "recidivism reduction," "technological integration," "smart prisons," "AI in corrections," "digital justice," "inmate welfare," and "evidence-based corrections." Boolean operators and truncation symbols (*) were used to broaden the search.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

2.2.1 Inclusion Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and comprehensive reports.
- Studies focusing on modern correctional systems in any geographical region.
- Research addressing reform initiatives, rehabilitation programs, or technological integration within correctional contexts.
- Studies published in English.

2.2.2 Exclusion Criteria:

- Opinion pieces, commentaries, dissertations, and conference abstracts without full paper availability.
- Studies solely focused on policing or court processes without direct relevance to correctional facilities.
- Studies not published within the specified date range.

2.3 Study Selection Process

Titles and abstracts of all identified articles were independently screened by two reviewers against the eligibility criteria. Full-text articles of potentially relevant studies were then retrieved and assessed for final inclusion. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.

2.4 Data Extraction

For each included study, relevant data were extracted, including authors, publication year, study design, country/context, specific reform initiative or program, type of technology, key findings related to effectiveness, challenges, and limitations.

2.5 Quality Assessment and Data Synthesis

The methodological quality and risk of bias of included studies were not formally assessed in this overview, but would be a critical step in a full systematic review, potentially using tools like the Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Tools. The extracted data were synthesized narratively and thematically, grouping findings according to the key research questions and identifying overarching patterns, discrepancies, and emerging themes across the body of literature.

3. Results and Discussion

The synthesis of the literature reveals significant advancements and ongoing challenges across correctional reform, rehabilitation, and technological integration.

3.1 Correctional Reform Initiatives

Correctional reform efforts are diverse, aiming to address issues from system-wide policy changes to daily operational improvements. A core aspect of reform involves revisiting the purpose of incarceration, with some systems prioritizing deterrence (e.g., in the United States) while others emphasize rehabilitation (e.g., Honduras and Japan) (Henrich, 2020). However, a notable "lack of evidence-based approaches" and an "under-developed link between theory and practice" often hinder these efforts globally (Henrich, 2020).

Key reform initiatives often focus on reducing overcrowding and ensuring human rights. Strategies include expanding access to non-financial bail, periodically reviewing preventive imprisonment, and automating the computation of time

served to safeguard against prolonged detention (Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028, 2023). There is also a push to strengthen and modernize parole and probation administrations, which involves improving human resource allocation to address the disproportionate number of officers relative to applicants (Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028, 2023). Furthermore, the construction and repair of penal facilities are undertaken to adhere to international standards, thereby guaranteeing the dignity and health of detainees and supporting effective rehabilitation and social reintegration (Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted an "unprecedented need for a more health-informed approach to penal reform," leading to measures like reducing prison populations and introducing compensatory measures, such as virtual visitation, to mitigate the adverse effects of isolation (Heard, 2020; MacDonald & Kane, 2021). Historical reforms, such as the Pennsylvania and Auburn systems, and the later emergence of reformatories, show a progression from solitary confinement and strict labor towards more rehabilitative models focusing on education and vocational training (Kalman, 1969). Modern approaches like "open prisons" and "campus-type facilities" are highlighted as humanized models that emphasize responsibility, self-discipline, personal development, and social interaction, which can significantly prepare individuals for reintegration and reduce recidivism (Kalman, 1969).

3.2 Rehabilitation Program Effectiveness

Research on rehabilitation consistently points to the effectiveness of programs that target criminogenic needs using cognitive-behavioral techniques. However, "implementation challenges" often create a gap between research findings and correctional practice.

Specific findings on rehabilitation programs include:

- **Psychological Interventions:** Psychological treatments in prisons aim to reduce recidivism, but systematic reviews and meta-analyses suggest "modest effects" (Beaudry et al., 2021). There is evidence that "publication bias and small-study effects" may have "overestimated the reported modest effects," suggesting a need for larger, more rigorous studies (Beaudry et al., 2021). Future research should prioritize "therapeutic communities and interventions that ensure continuity of care in community settings" (Beaudry et al., 2021).
- **Cognitive-Behavioral and Educational Programs:** Interventions based on cognitive-behavioral therapy and educational programs are found to "have a significant impact on reducing recidivism," equipping individuals with skills for employment and personal development (Akkoyun, 2024). Vocational programs, in particular, have been shown to "improve self-confidence and personal development" (Villeza & Jose, 2025).
- **Aftercare and Community Support:** The "role of aftercare is increasingly recognized as a determinant of long-term success," as continued support post-release can sustain progress made during incarceration and mitigate risks like substance abuse and unemployment (Akkoyun, 2024). Family support, community connection, and spirituality are also crucial resilience factors, especially in Asian contexts (Villeza & Jose, 2025).
- **Psychological Well-being and Resilience:** Studies on Persons Deprived of Liberty reveal varying levels of psychological distress and resilience. Some PDLs demonstrate "normal levels of resilience," attributing this to psychological and rehabilitation programs offered in facilities, including vocational and recreational activities that contribute to physical health and personal growth (Villeza & Jose, 2025). However, stressors like overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and limited access to services can heighten stress and depression (Villeza & Jose, 2025). Positive transformations within prison settings, including self-reflection and personal growth, are also observed, with coping strategies including peer support and solace in faith (Aquino et al., 2025).
- **Importance of Social Climate:** Rehabilitation programs are suggested to be more effective in prisons with a "positive social climate" (Harding, 2014). Interventions that help individuals maintain contact with family and friends, participate in mentoring programs, and engage in educational activities (e.g., literacy, job-hunting, IT skills) are vital for preparing them for life outside prison (Baer & Ravneberg, 2008).

3.3 Technological Integration in Correctional Systems

Technological integration is transforming correctional systems, aiming to enhance operational efficiency, safety, and rehabilitation efforts. The concept of "Smart Prisons" or "technocorrections" leverages information and communication technologies and Artificial Intelligence to streamline management and improve various services (Imandeka et al., 2024; Ishiy & Ramos, 2023).

3.3.1 Key aspects of technological integration include:

- **Offender Management and Decision Support:** AI and digital technologies are used for "offender management purposes," assisting staff with routine tasks, supporting decision-making throughout the offender management cycle (assessment, classification, planning, execution, evaluation), and determining security levels, parole eligibility, and community supervision conditions (Rodrigues & Fidalgo, 2024). Predictive analytics, natural language processing, and machine learning algorithms are leveraged in community corrections to "enhance decision-making" and "improve offender management" ("Evaluating The Role Of Artificial Intelligence In Community Corrections: Implications For Social Work," 2024).

- **Security and Surveillance:** Digital changes include developing data collection and processing systems, with AI for secure decision-making, "video content analysis to forecast the behavior of convicts and penal system staff," and "facial recognition systems" at checkpoints (Tereschenko et al., 2024). Smart security and surveillance technologies are increasingly adopted for monitoring and control (Imandeka et al., 2024). Digital twin technology is emerging to monitor prisoners' behavioral and health data, predict behavior trends, and detect security risks (Amjad et al., 2025).
- **Rehabilitation and Communication:** Technology can "promote closer contact between inmates and their families," improve access to health, education, and justice, and enhance digital literacy among inmates (Ishiy & Ramos, 2023). Digital self-service systems are being introduced to provide greater autonomy and access to education and information for prisoners (Hofinger & Pflegerl, 2024; Imandeka et al., 2024).
- **Challenges and Ethical Concerns:** While offering benefits, technological integration in prisons raises significant "human rights concerns" (Canlı, 2022). Critics highlight that AI-driven technologies can "amplify carceral surveillance, invade privacy and perpetuate biased profiling," potentially "exacerbating the psychological, mental and physical conditions of both prisoners and their communities" (Canlı, 2022). There are also concerns regarding data security, equitable access, and the potential for increased dehumanization. Ethical and normative regulation of AI is crucial to protect the rights, liberties, and legitimate interests of individuals, as uncontrolled use could lead to "disclosure of personal data, discrimination and more severe implications" (Tereschenko et al., 2024). Infrastructure for online learning and varying levels of digital proficiency among staff and inmates also present implementation challenges (Strengthening Workforce Skills and Capacity through Cyber-Based Training in BJMP Regional Office Calabarzon, 2024).

The findings of this systematic review reveal a complex and evolving landscape within modern correctional systems. A clear trend towards reform is evident, moving away from purely punitive models towards those that integrate rehabilitation and advanced management techniques. However, the efficacy of these advancements is often mediated by the challenges of implementation and ethical considerations.

The varied understandings of correctional purpose across different countries (Henrich, 2020) underscore the need for a global dialogue on shared objectives, while simultaneously acknowledging diverse cultural and political contexts. The emphasis on evidence-based practices is strong in principle, yet the persistent "under-developed link between theory and practice" (Henrich, 2020) remains a critical barrier to optimizing outcomes. Initiatives to reduce overcrowding through non-financial bail and improved judicial review (Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028, 2023) are positive steps toward more humane systems, complementing structural reforms like open prisons and campus-type facilities that focus on human dignity and reintegration (Kalman, 1969). The lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the value of health-informed approaches and digital connections (Heard, 2020; MacDonald & Kane, 2021), offer a blueprint for future resilience and improved inmate well-being.

Rehabilitation programs demonstrate potential, especially those rooted in psychological interventions and cognitive-behavioral therapies. The call for prioritizing "therapeutic communities and interventions that ensure continuity of care in community settings" (Beaudry et al., 2021) is crucial, as aftercare significantly impacts long-term success and recidivism reduction (Akkoyun, 2024). The findings related to psychological distress and resilience among PDLs (Villeza & Jose, 2025) highlight the importance of addressing mental health needs and leveraging programs that foster self-confidence and personal growth, including vocational training and spiritual support (Villeza & Jose, 2025). The effectiveness of rehabilitation is also intrinsically linked to the social climate within prisons (Harding, 2014) and the maintenance of external connections, such as family and community ties (Baer & Ravneberg, 2008).

Technological integration presents a dual-edged sword. While "smart prisons" and AI applications offer undeniable benefits in operational efficiency, offender management, and enhancing communication and educational opportunities (Ishiy & Ramos, 2023; Rodrigues & Fidalgo, 2024), they simultaneously introduce significant "human rights concerns" (Canlı, 2022). Issues of privacy invasion, biased profiling, and amplified surveillance are not merely theoretical but have tangible impacts on the psychological and physical well-being of incarcerated individuals (Canlı, 2022; Tereschenko et al., 2024). The need for "ethical and normative regulation of AI" is paramount to prevent misuse and ensure that technology serves as an instrument of justice rather than a tool for discrimination or dehumanization (Tereschenko et al., 2024). Furthermore, practical challenges such as inadequate digital infrastructure and varying levels of digital literacy need to be addressed for effective implementation (Strengthening Workforce Skills and Capacity through Cyber-Based Training in BJMP Regional Office Calabarzon, 2024).

3.4 Limitations of the Review

This review is limited by its broad scope, which prevented in-depth critical appraisal of individual studies and a detailed meta-analysis. The search was confined to English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant research from other linguistic contexts. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of technology means that some cutting-edge developments might not yet be fully reflected in peer-reviewed academic literature.

3.5 Future Research

Future research should focus on:

- Rigorous evaluations of correctional reform initiatives to establish clear causality and long-term impacts, particularly regarding recidivism and social reintegration.
- Developing and testing rehabilitation programs that are culturally sensitive and adaptable to diverse correctional contexts, with an emphasis on integrated aftercare models.
- Longitudinal studies on the ethical implications and human rights impacts of AI and surveillance technologies in correctional settings, alongside the development of robust regulatory frameworks.
- Investigating strategies to bridge the gap between research and practice in correctional settings, facilitating the effective implementation of evidence-based interventions.

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that adjunct-built-in clinical instructors are perceived by nursing students as highly effective in Advancements in modern correctional systems represent a continuous pursuit of more effective, humane, and just practices. Reforms are pushing towards humanized environments and structured reintegration pathways, while rehabilitation programs, particularly those grounded in psychological and educational interventions, show potential in reducing recidivism when supported by positive environments and robust aftercare. The integration of technology offers powerful tools for management efficiency and enhanced opportunities for inmates, yet it necessitates careful ethical oversight and regulatory frameworks to mitigate risks associated with privacy, bias, and surveillance. Ultimately, achieving truly "modern" correctional systems requires ongoing, collaborative efforts in policy, practice, and research to ensure that advancements contribute genuinely to societal well-being and individual transformation.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study followed accepted academic and ethical standards for systematic literature reviews. As it relied solely on published sources, no human participants or primary data were involved.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the scholars whose published works informed and supported this review.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no financial or personal conflicts of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required, as the study involved only secondary data from publicly available literature.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was not applicable, as no human participants were involved in the study.

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