

Towards Restorative-Based Corrections: An Alternative to Reducing Prison Overcrowding

Egy Aginta Syahputra Surbakti, Frando Natanael Sigalingging, M. Firdaus Azhari Effendi, *Jecki Suganda, I Wayan Budi Pratama Putra, Frando Natanael Sigalingging

Politeknik Pengayoman Indonesia 1, Indonesia

Email Korespondensi: jeckisuganda6@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines the application of restorative justice as an alternative approach to addressing the persistent problem of overcrowding in Indonesian correctional institutions. Overcrowding driven by the dominant use of imprisonment—has undermined the rehabilitative function of prisons, increased health and security risks, and reduced the overall effectiveness of correctional programs. Using a library research method with a descriptive qualitative approach, this study analyzes legal frameworks, policy documents, and empirical research relevant to restorative justice and alternative sentencing. Literature searches were conducted through databases such as Sage, Elsevier, Cochrane Library, SSRN, and Google Scholar. Following a PRISMA-based selection process of 87 initial documents, 13 publications (2013–2025), including academic articles, policy reports, and statutory regulations, met the inclusion criteria. The findings indicate that restorative justice has significant potential to reduce incarceration rates through resolution mechanisms centered on healing, accountability, and social reintegration. However, its implementation in Indonesia remains constrained by limited human resources, a predominantly retributive legal culture, and weak inter-agency coordination. These findings underscore the need for stronger regulatory support, expansion of restorative mechanisms into the correctional stage, and data-driven evaluation to reduce overcrowding and advance a more humane and effective penal system.

Keywords: Restorative Justice, Correctional System, Prison Overcrowding

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INTRODUCTION

The correctional system in Indonesia is fundamentally designed to foster rehabilitation, education, and social reintegration of law offenders so that they may return to society as productive and responsible individuals. This orientation is explicitly reaffirmed in Law Number 22 of 2022 on Corrections, which emphasizes guidance and reintegration as the core objectives of punishment. The concept of corrections itself is not new; since its introduction by Sahardjo in 1963, it has marked a paradigm shift from a punitive prison system toward a more humane and rehabilitative approach. Nevertheless, despite this normative commitment, the practical implementation of the correctional system continues to face persistent structural challenges, most notably prison overcrowding, which significantly undermines the achievement of rehabilitative goals.

At the national level, overcrowding is largely driven by the dominance of a retributive justice paradigm that positions detention and imprisonment as the primary instruments of punishment. Under this paradigm, incarceration is frequently applied not only to serious crimes but also to low-risk offenses, resulting in a consistently high inflow of detainees and prisoners into correctional facilities. This situation is further exacerbated by procedural criminal law provisions, particularly Articles 20 to 31 of the Indonesian Criminal Procedure Code, which regulate detention authority at the stages of investigation, prosecution, and trial. The cumulative duration of detention across these stages contributes significantly to congestion in prisons and detention centers (Manek et al., 2023). As a result, correctional institutions increasingly struggle to accommodate their populations within humane and manageable conditions.

The consequences of overcrowding extend beyond logistical and administrative difficulties. Excessive population density often gives rise to secondary problems such as extortion, conflicts among inmates, violence, and physical abuse. These conditions severely disrupt the correctional environment and impede the implementation of effective rehabilitation programs, thereby contradicting the objectives mandated by law (Putra, 2015). In overcrowded settings, correctional institutions risk devolving into mere holding facilities rather than spaces for guidance, character development, and social reintegration, weakening the legitimacy and effectiveness of the correctional system as a whole.

From a theoretical perspective, retributivism conceptualizes punishment primarily as a form of moral retaliation proportionate to the wrongdoing committed. Its focus lies on imposing suffering on offenders rather than addressing the harm experienced by victims or repairing disrupted social relationships. In contrast, restorative justice offers an alternative framework that views crime as a violation of interpersonal and social relations, not merely as an offense against the state. This approach emphasizes dialogue, participation, accountability, and the restoration of harm through inclusive processes involving offenders, victims, and the broader community (Awaluddin, 2024).

Restorative justice is widely regarded as a more humane and inclusive approach because it prioritizes healing and reconciliation over punishment alone. The restorative penal framework emphasizes restoration rather than retribution, seeking outcomes that repair harm, rebuild trust, and prevent recidivism through social reintegration (Baidi Sulaiman, 2023). In the context of criminal law and corrections, restorative justice refers to mechanisms for resolving criminal cases that focus on repairing relationships and restoring social harmony rather than imposing custodial sanctions as the default response (Pengadilan Negeri Sabang Kelas II, 2021).

In recent years, the Indonesian government has demonstrated increasing commitment to the implementation of restorative justice mechanisms, particularly during the law enforcement process prior to adjudication. The growing number of cases resolved through restorative justice by the Attorney General's Office reflects a notable shift in prosecutorial orientation. This trend indicates broader institutional acceptance of restorative justice as a viable alternative to formal prosecution and imprisonment. According to official reports from the Attorney General's Office and Republika, the number of restorative justice cases approved annually has increased substantially, especially following the issuance of Prosecutorial Regulation Number 15 of 2020 (Kejaksaan Agung & Republika, 2024). These developments suggest that restorative justice has proven effective in resolving certain categories of criminal cases outside custodial settings.

However, the expansion of restorative justice at the pre-adjudication stage has not automatically translated into meaningful improvements within correctional institutions. The primary reason lies in the limited integration of restorative principles into the correctional system itself. While restorative justice is increasingly applied during investigation and prosecution, correctional policy and practice remain largely rooted in conventional custodial and rehabilitative models, leaving the potential of restorative corrections underexplored.

Existing academic studies on corrections in Indonesia tend to focus predominantly on normative legal analysis, operational management, or the implementation of punishment within retributive and rehabilitative frameworks. Research that specifically examines restorative-based correctional models remains relatively scarce. Most restorative justice scholarship concentrates on its application during police investigation or court proceedings, particularly in cases involving juveniles in conflict with the law. Consequently, there is limited empirical and conceptual discussion on how restorative justice principles could be systematically incorporated into correctional institutions as a strategy to reduce prison overcrowding and enhance rehabilitation outcomes.

This gap in the literature is particularly significant given the potential of restorative correctional models to address multiple systemic challenges simultaneously. The implementation of restorative principles within corrections is believed to offer more balanced forms of punishment, reduce recidivism, and strengthen social reintegration by fostering accountability and community involvement (Sahputra, 2022; Yogie & Akuntari, 2025). Moreover, a shift toward restorative corrections aligns closely with broader criminal law reforms reflected in the new Criminal Code and various policy initiatives of the Ministry of

Law and Human Rights, which increasingly promote non-custodial sanctions and alternative sentencing mechanisms (Dila et al., 2024).

The relevance of this research gap is further underscored by the direct impact of overcrowding on rehabilitation quality, fulfillment of inmates' basic rights, institutional security, and the overall success of correctional programs. Overcapacity undermines the effectiveness of guidance activities, increases the risk of human rights violations, and weakens the capacity of correctional officers to deliver individualized interventions. In this context, restorative-based corrections emerge as a more adaptive approach to modern penal objectives, as they emphasize recovery, dialogue, responsibility, and reintegration as foundational principles.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to analyze the potential and application of a restorative-based correctional system as a strategic alternative for reducing prison overcrowding in Indonesia. Specifically, the research examines the conceptual foundations, relevance, and opportunities for integrating restorative justice principles into the correctional framework, while also assessing their contribution to improving rehabilitation effectiveness, alleviating population pressure, and strengthening social reintegration processes. Through this analysis, the study seeks to fill an important gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive and evidence-based examination of restorative correctional models, thereby providing an academic foundation for the development of future criminal justice reform policies in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study employs a library research (literature review) method using a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on the systematic identification, selection, and analysis of literature related to restorative justice-based correctional systems as an alternative strategy for addressing overcrowding in correctional institutions. The data sources consist of primary sources, including statutory and regulatory instruments such as Law Number 22 of 2022 on Corrections, the Indonesian Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP), and Prosecutorial Regulation Number 15 of 2020; secondary sources, comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and official reports issued by national and international institutions; and tertiary sources, such as legal dictionaries and other supporting publications.

The process of literature identification and selection was conducted through comprehensive searches of major academic databases, including SAGE, Elsevier, Cochrane Library, SSRN, Google Scholar, and national journal portals. The inclusion criteria emphasized: (1) thematic relevance to restorative justice, alternative sentencing, community-based corrections, prison overcrowding, and correctional systems; (2) publication types in the form of journal articles, systematic reviews, academic books, or policy reports; (3) a publication period between 2013 and 2025 to capture contemporary developments; (4) full-text accessibility; and (5) the academic credibility and reliability of the sources. Exclusion criteria were applied to opinion-based articles lacking scientific grounding, irrelevant publications, duplicate records, and documents without clearly defined methodologies. Through this process, 13 eligible sources were identified, consisting of international systematic reviews and meta-analyses, highly indexed economic and social science articles, national legal journal articles, policy reports, and publications addressing rehabilitation and prison overcrowding.

The literature selection process followed a simplified PRISMA framework. Initially, 87 documents were identified through database searches. A preliminary screening eliminated 42 documents due to duplication or lack of relevance. Subsequently, 32 documents underwent eligibility assessment, resulting in the exclusion of 19 sources that did not meet methodological standards. The final stage yielded 13 selected studies for in-depth analysis. A PRISMA flow diagram is presented to illustrate and clarify each stage of the literature selection process.

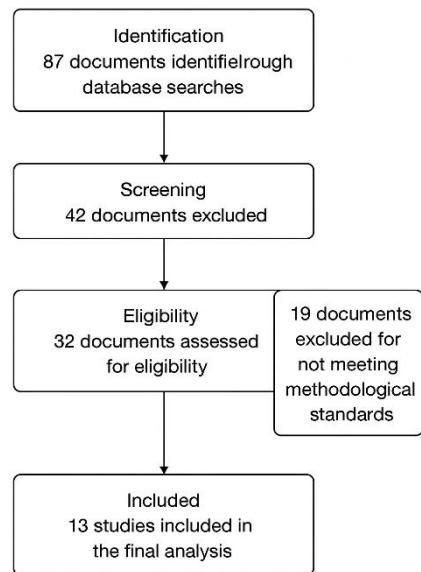


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, a method selected for its capacity to systematically organize, code, and synthesize key concepts drawn from diverse legal sources, policy documents, and empirical studies. Through content analysis, the study identifies recurring patterns, research gaps, and prevailing trends in restorative correctional practices at both international and Indonesian levels.

The analytical process involved several stages: data reduction through the coding of core concepts such as restorative justice, overcrowding, alternative sanctions, and social reintegration; data display through the thematic organization of findings into core analytical categories; and conclusion drawing through the interpretation of theoretical and policy implications. This approach provides a comprehensive analytical foundation for examining the potential integration of restorative justice principles into Indonesia's sentencing and correctional policies, as well as their relevance in addressing the persistent problem of prison overcrowding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In conducting a literature-based analysis, it is essential to organize findings into coherent thematic categories in order to ensure a systematic and focused discussion. Thematic grouping allows the analysis to highlight recurring patterns, identify research gaps, and synthesize insights drawn from diverse empirical and normative studies. Based on an extensive review of international and national literature, several dominant themes emerge in relation to recidivism, prison overcrowding, the effectiveness of restorative justice (RJ), implementation weaknesses in existing policies, and the growing relevance of humane, recovery-oriented sentencing alternatives. These themes collectively frame the discussion on the potential transformation of Indonesia's correctional system toward a restorative paradigm.

1. Recidivism and the Effectiveness of Offender Rehabilitation

International scholarship consistently indicates that restorative justice has a measurable impact on reducing recidivism, although its effectiveness is highly contingent upon the quality, consistency, and contextual appropriateness of program implementation. A notable empirical study by Shem-Tov et al. (2024), examining the *Make-it-Right* program in San Francisco, reported a reduction in re-arrest rates of up to 44 percent. This finding underscores the premise that when offenders are actively engaged in dialogue, encouraged to acknowledge responsibility, and involved in repairing the harm they have

caused, the likelihood of reoffending decreases substantially. Such outcomes highlight the rehabilitative potential of restorative justice when it moves beyond symbolic reconciliation and is operationalized through structured, well-facilitated interventions.

These findings are reinforced by the meta-analysis conducted by Fulham et al. (2025), which demonstrates that restorative justice mechanisms contribute to the internalization of accountability and the development of pro-social behavior among offenders. The study emphasizes that RJ processes foster moral reflection and empathy, two factors widely recognized as protective against repeated criminal behavior. From this perspective, restorative justice does not merely serve as an alternative procedural pathway but operates as a substantive rehabilitative tool that reshapes offender cognition and behavior.

Nevertheless, international evidence is not entirely uniform. Lingstone (2013) reports mixed or statistically insignificant outcomes in certain restorative justice programs, suggesting that RJ is not inherently effective in all contexts. Variations in program design, facilitator competence, victim participation, and institutional support significantly influence outcomes. These findings are particularly relevant when considering the Indonesian context, where restorative justice initiatives are still developing and often lack standardized operational frameworks. National studies indicate that while restorative justice holds promise in reducing recidivism, its practical effectiveness is constrained by limited human resources, insufficient training, and the absence of robust implementation guidelines (Su et al., 2025).

Taken together, the literature suggests that restorative justice has demonstrated global efficacy in reducing recidivism, but its success in Indonesia remains largely prospective. Realizing its full potential requires sustained policy commitment, institutional capacity building, and the professionalization of restorative justice facilitators.

2. Prison Overcrowding as a Structural Challenge in Corrections

Prison overcrowding emerges as a central and persistent issue within the Indonesian correctional system. National studies by Hamja (2022) and Tua (2019) consistently reveal that correctional facilities in Indonesia operate at occupancy rates two to three times their intended capacity. This structural imbalance has profound implications for inmate welfare, institutional safety, and the overall effectiveness of correctional programming. Overcrowded conditions are associated with deteriorating physical and mental health among inmates, increased incidents of violence, and the erosion of meaningful rehabilitation opportunities.

Such conditions fundamentally undermine the implementation of rehabilitative and restorative approaches. When institutional resources are overwhelmingly directed toward managing population density and maintaining security, little capacity remains for individualized treatment, counseling, or restorative dialogue. As a result, the correctional system risks functioning primarily as a containment mechanism rather than as a rehabilitative institution.

In contrast, international literature highlights alternative policy trajectories adopted by countries such as Canada, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. These jurisdictions have successfully reduced prison populations through diversion programs, non-custodial sanctions, and community-based correctional models. The policy report *Reducing Prison Overcrowding through Non-Custodial Measures* by Widodo and Kasih (2025) emphasizes that these successes are not solely attributable to legal reforms but also to a paradigmatic shift that redefines imprisonment as a measure of last resort.

The comparative analysis reveals a significant gap between Indonesia's incarceration-centered approach and the preventive, diversion-oriented strategies adopted internationally. While restorative justice has the potential to reduce prison admissions, its effectiveness remains limited unless accompanied by broader systemic reforms that recalibrate sentencing practices and institutional priorities.

3. Effectiveness of Restorative Justice within Judicial and Correctional Systems

The effectiveness of restorative justice cannot be assessed solely through recidivism metrics. Broader indicators include victim satisfaction, judicial efficiency, and the restoration of social relationships. Fulham et al. (2025) demonstrate that restorative justice processes consistently yield higher levels of victim satisfaction compared to conventional criminal proceedings. Victims report feeling heard, respected, and emotionally validated outcomes that are often absent in adversarial court systems. Moreover, restorative justice contributes to reducing court caseloads and expediting case resolution, thereby enhancing overall system efficiency.

In Indonesia, the enactment of Prosecutorial Regulation No. 15 of 2020 on the Termination of Prosecution Based on Restorative Justice represents a significant normative step toward integrating restorative principles into the criminal justice process. This regulation has enabled prosecutors to resolve eligible cases outside formal court proceedings, thereby reducing institutional burdens at the investigative and prosecutorial stages. Official data from the Attorney General's Office indicate a steady increase in the number of cases resolved through restorative justice mechanisms.

However, national legal studies suggest that the effectiveness of this regulation remains uneven. Implementation often depends on prosecutorial discretion, the availability of trained RJ facilitators, and varying levels of community acceptance. Furthermore, despite increasing case numbers, there is a notable absence of long-term evaluative mechanisms to assess the impact of restorative justice on recidivism and social reintegration. Consequently, restorative justice in Indonesia remains at an intermediate stage of institutionalization, requiring standardized operating procedures, mediator training, and systematic monitoring frameworks.

4. Implementation Weaknesses of Restorative Justice and Rehabilitation in Indonesia

A recurring theme in national literature is the identification of structural and operational weaknesses that limit the effectiveness of restorative justice and rehabilitation initiatives. Overcrowding is consistently cited as the most significant obstacle, as correctional officers are compelled to prioritize security over rehabilitative engagement (Aprillia et al., 2025). This security-centric orientation diminishes opportunities for restorative programming and individualized intervention.

Additionally, the shortage of professional personnel—including counselors, psychologists, and trained RJ facilitators—significantly constrains program quality. Solihan et al. (2023), through an architectural and spatial analysis of correctional facilities, highlight that many prisons lack adequate infrastructure for counseling sessions, restorative meetings, and vocational training. Physical space limitations further exacerbate the challenges posed by overcrowding.

Another critical weakness lies in the lack of institutional integration across the criminal justice system. The absence of seamless coordination among police, prosecutors, courts, and correctional institutions results in fragmented implementation of restorative justice. Initiatives undertaken at one stage of the justice process are not consistently reinforced at subsequent stages, undermining continuity and long-term impact. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive reform that extends beyond regulatory amendments to encompass inter-agency coordination and governance reform.

5. Sentencing Alternatives and Prospects for Systemic Transformation

The final dominant theme emerging from the literature concerns the expansion of sentencing alternatives as a long-term strategy to reduce overcrowding and enhance social reintegration. National studies, particularly by Listiyanto et al. (2025), identify community service sentences as a viable and cost-effective alternative with restorative potential. Such sanctions allow offenders to remain within their communities while contributing positively to society, thereby aligning punishment with restoration.

International research on community-based corrections further supports this approach, demonstrating high effectiveness in reducing recidivism and alleviating prison populations. At the same time, Piskur (2014) documents emerging models of neuro-rehabilitation in advanced jurisdictions, targeting criminal behavior linked to biological and psychosocial factors. While such approaches raise ethical considerations, they highlight the evolving landscape of rehabilitative interventions.

The synthesis of these findings suggests that sentencing alternatives represent a strategic opportunity for Indonesia to transition from incarceration-centered corrections toward a rehabilitative-restorative model. However, successful transformation requires regulatory harmonization, institutional readiness, and a paradigm shift among law enforcement officials and the broader public.

6. Policy Implications and Theoretical Integration

The persistent issue of prison overcrowding in Indonesia indicates that the current penal system has not fully realized its rehabilitative and reintegrative mandate as articulated in correctional law. Heavy reliance on imprisonment has transformed correctional institutions into spaces of containment rather than rehabilitation, resulting in increased conflict, reduced program effectiveness, escalating state costs, and sustained recidivism. Although Indonesia has normatively embraced rehabilitative and restorative principles, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of restorative correctional models remains limited, as reflected in the Attorney General's Annual Report 2024.

From a policy perspective, the implementation of restorative justice by the Prosecutor's Office and the Directorate General of Corrections represents a strategic initiative aligned with public policy theories emphasizing long-term problem-solving. However, sustained success depends on collaborative governance, requiring coordinated engagement among state institutions, civil society organizations, and local communities. Without cross-sectoral coordination, capacity building, and adequate rehabilitative infrastructure, restorative justice initiatives risk stagnation.

Moreover, literature on social participation and rehabilitation underscores the centrality of community involvement in successful reintegration. Debates surrounding rehabilitative interventions, including neurological approaches, highlight the importance of balancing recidivism reduction with human rights protections, particularly psychological autonomy. In this context, restorative justice centered on repairing relationships among offenders, victims, and communities emerges as the most realistic and ethically grounded sentencing alternative for Indonesia. Restorative justice holds promise not only as a mechanism for reducing prison overcrowding through non-custodial resolutions but also as a foundation for a more humane, effective, and sustainable correctional system.

CONCLUSION

The problem of overcrowding in Indonesian correctional institutions indicates that the continued dominance of imprisonment remains a major obstacle to the realization of a humane and effective correctional system, as the increasing number of inmates is not matched by adequate capacity, facilities, or the quality of rehabilitative programs. Under these conditions, the application of restorative justice offers a strategic alternative for reducing the inflow of prisoners by resolving criminal cases through approaches that emphasize the restoration of relationships among offenders, victims, and the community.

Although its implementation has demonstrated a contribution to reducing cases that result in incarceration, restorative justice still faces significant challenges, including limited human resources, a persistently retributive legal culture, suboptimal inter-institutional coordination, and the absence of full public acceptance. Therefore, stronger regulatory frameworks, enhanced capacity building for implementing actors, and cross-sectoral collaborative models are required to ensure that restorative approaches can be applied more consistently and in a measurable manner. Conceptually, this study strengthens the empirical foundation for the development of a restorative justice based correctional system in Indonesia, while also affirming that a transition toward more humane, recovery-oriented

punishment is an urgent and necessary step to address overcrowding and to improve the effectiveness of inmate rehabilitation and social reintegration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the analysis, it is recommended that the government revise the Correctional Law by explicitly incorporating restorative justice mechanisms through all stages of correctional management, including the rehabilitation phase within correctional institutions. In addition, the implementation of pilot projects on restorative-based corrections in at least three major prisons is recommended as a national testing model to assess feasibility and impact.

The implementation of these policies should be supported by capacity-building programs, particularly training in mediation, counseling, and restorative practices for correctional officers. Furthermore, the optimization of alternative sentencing mechanisms, such as conditional sentences, community service, rehabilitation programs, and diversion, is essential to reduce prison overcrowding. Strengthening inter-agency synergy among law enforcement bodies and social institutions, enhancing public awareness and education regarding restorative values, and conducting data-driven evaluations and empirical research are also necessary to ensure the effectiveness of restorative approaches in reducing recidivism and improving the overall quality of the correctional system.

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