

STRATEGIC REFORM IN MALAYSIA'S PRISON SYSTEM MANAGEMENT: PUNISHMENT VS. REHABILITATION. A CONCEPTUAL VIEW

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Abstract

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This article examines the role of strategic management in shaping Malaysia's prison reform agenda, focusing on the tension between punishment and rehabilitation. Specifically, it analyzes how institutional leadership, policy implementation, and community partnerships influence public attitudes and policy outcomes, thereby determining whether correctional practices evolve toward deterrence or reintegration. The study adopts a conceptual approach, synthesizing criminological theories (Deterrence and Rehabilitation) with organizational perspectives (Institutional Theory). A literature review of academic studies, policy documents, and recent reform initiatives provides the foundation for a conceptual framework. This framework maps the relationships between leadership, policy, partnerships, public attitudes, and policy outcomes, offering testable propositions for future empirical research. The analysis reveals significant gaps in Malaysia's prison reform, including strong leadership but weak implementation, uneven rehabilitation programmes, and persistent societal stigma against ex-offenders. Tensions between short-term deterrence and long-term reintegration remain evident, reflecting competing philosophical orientations in correctional management. Strategic management emerges as a balancing mechanism, harmonizing punitive traditions with rehabilitative priorities through integrated leadership, consistent policy execution, and robust community partnerships. The article contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it integrates criminological and institutional perspectives to explain prison reform dynamics. Practically, it highlights the need for resource allocation, performance monitoring, and community engagement to ensure reform success. By aligning leadership, policy, and partnerships, Malaysia can reduce recidivism, alleviate overcrowding, and foster humane correctional practices. This study offers a novel conceptual framework that links strategic management to the punishment–rehabilitation debate in Malaysia's prison system. It provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy development, demonstrating how strategic choices can shape sustainable correctional outcomes.



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Introduction

Prison systems worldwide continue to grapple with the enduring dilemma of balancing punishment and rehabilitation. Traditionally, incarceration has served as a mechanism for deterrence, incapacitation, and retribution. However, mounting evidence indicates that punitive-oriented prison regimes alone are insufficient to reduce recidivism, enhance public safety, or promote long-term social stability (Cullen & Jonson, 2017; Tonry, 2011). As a result, contemporary correctional discourse increasingly emphasizes rehabilitation, reintegration, and restorative justice as integral components of effective prison management (UNODC, 2022).

In Malaysia, this debate has gained renewed urgency amid rising incarceration rates, prison overcrowding, and growing concerns over repeat offending and social reintegration challenges. According to international prison monitoring data, overcrowding remains a structural issue in many developing and middle-income countries, including those in Southeast Asia, placing significant strain on institutional resources and rehabilitation efforts (World Prison Brief, 2024). The Malaysian prison system, historically grounded in a deterrence-based philosophy, now faces increasing pressure to recalibrate its correctional approach in line with evolving global norms and domestic socio-economic realities (Scott, 2014; The Malaysian Reserve, 2025).

Globally, correctional reforms have shifted toward evidence-based models that integrate risk-need-responsivity principles, psychosocial interventions, vocational training and post-release support systems (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Clear et al., 2018). These reforms are premised on the understanding that prisons are not merely sites of punishment, but institutions with a critical role in human development, social reintegration, and crime prevention. International organizations such as the United Nations and the OECD have repeatedly emphasized that humane and rehabilitative prison systems are central to sustainable justice systems and broader social cohesion (OECD, 2020; UNDP, 2023).

Strategic reform in prison management is therefore not limited to legislative amendments or programmatic innovation. Rather, it requires coherent strategic leadership, institutional capacity building, and effective policy implementation across multiple levels of governance (Van Wart, 2020). Leadership within correctional institutions plays a decisive role in shaping organizational culture, aligning frontline practices with reform objectives and mediating the inherent tension between security imperatives and rehabilitative goals (Liebling et al., 2019). Without strong strategic leadership, reform initiatives risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

Equally important is the role of community engagement and inter-agency collaboration in supporting reintegration. Research consistently demonstrates that successful rehabilitation extends beyond prison walls and depends on coordinated efforts involving families, employers, civil society organizations, and social welfare agencies (Maruna, 2017; UNODC, 2022). In the Malaysian context, strengthening partnerships between correctional institutions and communities is essential to reducing stigma, improving post-release outcomes, and fostering public confidence in rehabilitative justice.

This article adopts a conceptual perspective to explore how strategic management can redefine Malaysia's prison system by addressing the punishment rehabilitation tension. By examining the interplay between institutional leadership, policy execution and community collaboration, the article seeks to illuminate pathways toward a more balanced, humane and effective correctional system one that aligns societal expectations with international best practices and contributes to long-term public safety and social sustainability.

Objective

The objective of this article is to analyse the role of strategic management including institutional

leadership, policy implementation, and community partnerships in shaping public attitudes and policy outcomes. This focus directly addresses how Malaysia's prison reforms can navigate the tension between punishment and rehabilitation, ensuring that strategic choices lead to sustainable and humane correctional outcomes.

Literature Review

The management of prison systems has long been shaped by the tension between punitive approaches and rehabilitative philosophies. Classical criminology traditionally emphasized punishment as a deterrent, whereas contemporary correctional theories increasingly advocate rehabilitation to reduce recidivism and reintegrate offenders into society. Moreover, international reforms have progressively shifted toward restorative justice models, which prioritize education, vocational training, and psychological support as central to correctional management (The Malaysian Reserve, 2025).

Punishment vs. Rehabilitation Debate

In the Malaysian context, prisons have historically leaned toward punitive measures, reflecting broader societal attitudes toward crime and justice. However, recent scholarship indicates a gradual shift toward rehabilitation. For instance, Hashim, Chow, and Ramalinggam (2020) argue that prisons should not merely serve as punitive institutions but also function as spaces for rehabilitation, leadership, and education to prepare offenders for reintegration. Similarly, Mohamad et al., (2024) highlight rehabilitation and reintegration efforts through a restorative justice lens, emphasizing the role of community workers and NGOs in supporting ex-offenders. These studies collectively underscore the importance of repositioning rehabilitation as a strategic priority within prison management.

Institutional Leadership and Policy Implementation

Institutional leadership plays a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of prison reform. The Prison Policy Division in Malaysia has emphasized integrated management approaches and recidivism evaluation as part of its strategic agenda. This aligns with the government's *Pelan Hala Tuju Transforms*, which prioritizes rehabilitation programs to reduce repeat offending. Furthermore, parliamentary debates in 2025 reinforced the urgency of reform, stressing humane standards, improved infrastructure, and adequate medical facilities (The Star, 2025). Such developments illustrate how policy implementation and leadership commitment are critical in balancing punitive and rehabilitative priorities.

Community Partnerships and Reintegration

Community partnerships represent another crucial dimension of prison reform. NGOs, civil society organizations, and employers contribute to reintegration efforts by providing vocational opportunities, advocacy, and support networks. Rosli, Anuar, and Hamzah (2021) demonstrate that vocational training and institutional support significantly enhance former prisoners' career success, thereby reducing recidivism and improving reintegration outcomes. These findings highlight how community engagement not only facilitates rehabilitation but also helps reshape public attitudes, encouraging society to view offenders as individuals capable of change rather than permanent threats.

Strategic Reform Agenda

Recent policy initiatives further illustrate Malaysia's evolving stance. The Malaysian Prisons Department's Reform Agenda, launched in conjunction with its 235th anniversary, identified four pillars of change: reducing overcrowding, replacing ageing facilities, updating laws, and enhancing

rehabilitation programmes (The Malaysian Reserve, 2025). These reforms are measured against recidivism rates, currently reported at 12.4%, which reflects both progress and ongoing challenges. Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate how strategic management through leadership, policy, and partnerships is central to shaping the trajectory of prison reform in Malaysia.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Deterrence Theory

Deterrence theory, rooted in classical criminology, posits that crime can be prevented when punishment is certain, swift, and severe. Historically, Malaysia's prison system has reflected this orientation, emphasizing punitive measures such as long sentences and strict discipline to deter criminal behavior. This punitive stance has shaped institutional leadership decisions and policy implementation, reinforcing the perception that prisons primarily serve as instruments of retribution. The reliance on deterrence has contributed to overcrowding and limited opportunities for rehabilitation, highlighting the challenges of balancing punishment with reform.

In relation to the article's objective, deterrence theory explains the punishment dimension of Malaysia's prison management. Institutional leadership often invokes deterrence to justify punitive policies, which in turn influence public attitudes toward offenders. By analyzing how deterrence shapes leadership and policy implementation, the study can assess whether strategic management perpetuates punitive practices or creates opportunities to shift toward rehabilitation. This linkage underscores the importance of leadership and policy choices in shaping both public perceptions and policy outcomes.

Rehabilitation Theory

Rehabilitation theory, grounded in positivist criminology, emphasizes that offenders can be reformed through treatment, education, and social support. In Malaysia, recent reforms have increasingly incorporated rehabilitative programs, including vocational training, counselling, and reintegration initiatives. These efforts reflect a growing recognition that punishment alone does not reduce recidivism, and that rehabilitation is essential for sustainable correctional outcomes. Rehabilitation theory thus provides the philosophical foundation for policies that prioritize reintegration and humane treatment of offenders.

This theory directly supports the article's objective by highlighting the role of policy implementation and community partnerships in advancing rehabilitation. Strategic management decisions that invest in rehabilitative programs influence public attitudes by demonstrating the effectiveness of reintegration. Moreover, partnerships with NGOs and employers operationalize rehabilitation beyond prison walls, reinforcing the strategic importance of community engagement. By linking rehabilitation theory to strategic management, the framework illustrates how leadership and policy can shift societal perceptions from punitive to restorative, thereby shaping policy outcomes.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory explains how organizations adopt reforms to gain legitimacy and align with societal expectations. In the context of Malaysia's prison system, institutional pressures including international standards, human rights discourses, and domestic calls for reform have driven the adoption of new policies. Institutional leadership responds to these pressures by initiating reforms such as reducing overcrowding, updating laws, and enhancing rehabilitation programs. This theory highlights the strategic dimension of prison reform, where leadership decisions are influenced not only by internal goals but also by external demands for legitimacy.

Linking to the article's objective, institutional theory underscores the role of strategic management in shaping policy outcomes and public attitudes. Leadership decisions are not made in isolation; they are shaped by societal expectations and global benchmarks. Policy implementation reflects

these institutional pressures, while community partnerships enhance legitimacy by demonstrating inclusivity and responsiveness. By applying institutional theory, the framework shows how strategic management mediates between punishment and rehabilitation, ensuring reforms are both effective and socially acceptable. This directly aligns with the objective of analysing how leadership, policy, and partnerships influence reform outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study positions strategic management as the central driver of prison reform outcomes in Malaysia. It emphasizes the interplay between institutional leadership, policy implementation, and community partnerships, and how these elements collectively influence the balance between punishment and rehabilitation.

Institutional Leadership

- **Role:** Provides vision, direction, and accountability for prison reform.
- **Influence:** Leadership determines whether reforms prioritize punitive measures (deterrence, strict discipline) or rehabilitative approaches (education, vocational training, psychological support).
- **Proposition:** Strong institutional leadership oriented toward rehabilitation will positively influence prison culture and reduce reliance on punitive practices.

Policy Implementation

- **Role:** Translates strategic visions into operational practices.
- **Influence:** Laws, sentencing guidelines, and rehabilitation programs directly affect how inmates experience incarceration.
- **Proposition:** Effective policy implementation enhances rehabilitation outcomes, while weak implementation reinforces punitive cycles.

Community Partnerships

- **Role:** Extend prison reform beyond institutional walls.
- **Influence:** NGOs, employers, families, and civil society provide reintegration support, advocacy, and opportunities for ex-offenders.
- **Proposition:** Strong community partnerships increase public acceptance of rehabilitation, thereby reducing stigma and improving reintegration success.

Public Attitudes and Policy Outcomes

- **Role:** Serve as both a driver and a result of reform.
- **Influence:** Public support for rehabilitation encourages policymakers to invest in humane reforms, while punitive attitudes reinforce harsher measures.
- **Proposition:** Positive public attitudes toward rehabilitation mediate the relationship between strategic management practices and sustainable policy outcomes.

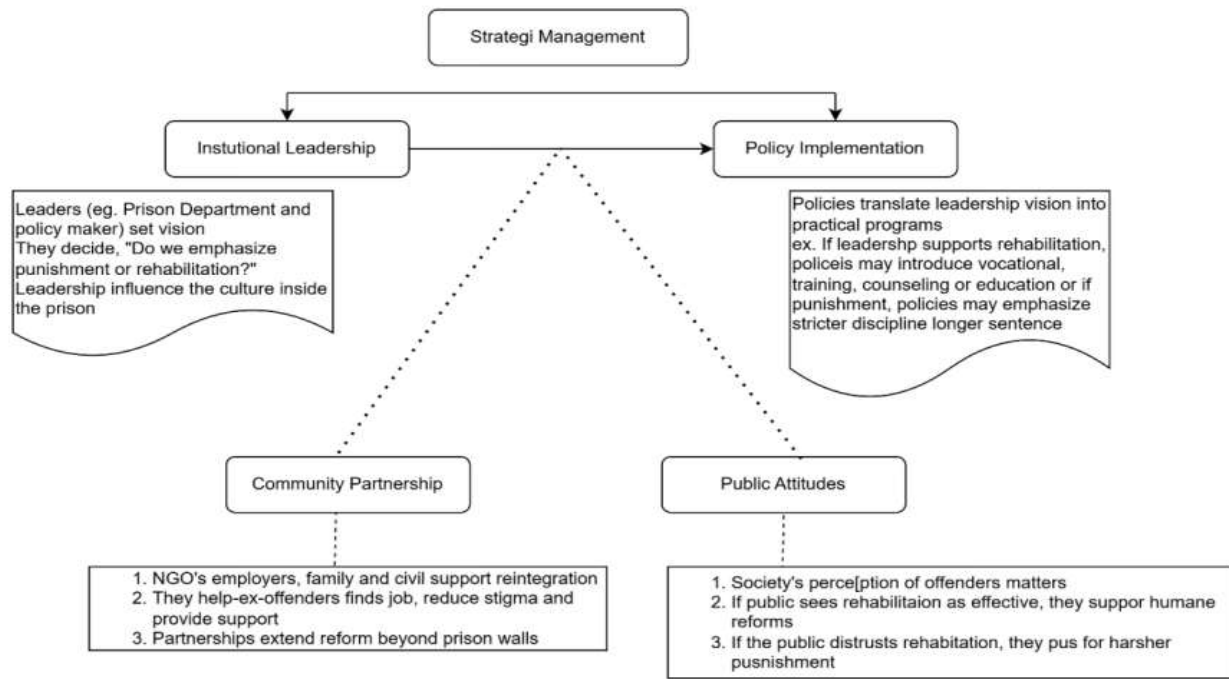


Figure 1. Conceptual Model (Variables & Relationships)

The figure 1 titled “Strategic Management” presents a conceptual framework illustrating how prison reform in Malaysia is shaped by four interrelated components: institutional leadership, policy implementation, community partnership, and public attitudes. Institutional leadership, such as the Prison Department and policymakers, sets the overarching vision whether to emphasize punishment or rehabilitation which directly influences the internal culture of correctional facilities. This vision is operationalized through policy implementation, where decisions translate into specific measures such as vocational training or stricter sentencing, depending on the leadership’s orientation (Prison Policy Division, 2025; Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Community partnerships, including NGOs, employers, and families, play a vital role in supporting reintegration by reducing stigma and extending reform efforts beyond prison walls. Public attitudes act as a mediating force; societal perceptions of offenders and rehabilitation influence whether reforms are embraced or resisted. Together, these components demonstrate how strategic management functions as a balancing mechanism between punitive traditions and rehabilitative priorities, ultimately shaping the trajectory and legitimacy of prison reform (Prison Policy Division, 2025).

Methodology

This study employs a conceptual research design, which is particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena such as prison reform. Unlike empirical studies that rely on quantitative or qualitative data collection, conceptual research emphasizes the integration of existing knowledge to generate new theoretical insights (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). By synthesizing criminology theories and organizational perspectives, this study develops a framework that explains how strategic management mediates between punishment and rehabilitation in Malaysia’s correctional system. This design allows for a holistic understanding of reform dynamics, situating Malaysia’s prison policies within broader criminology debates and institutional pressures.

The methodology unfolds in three key stages. First, a literature review was conducted to identify dominant themes in prison management, including punitive traditions, rehabilitative initiatives, and restorative justice approaches. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, and recent media reports on Malaysia’s prison reform agenda (Hashim, Chow, &

Ramalingam, 2020; Rosli, Anuar, & Hamzah, 2021; Mohamad et al., 2024; The Malaysian Reserve, 2025; The Star, 2025). Second, the study applied theoretical lenses deterrence theory, rehabilitation theory, and institutional theory to interpret these findings and situate them within broader criminology and management discourses (Beccaria, 1764/1986; Cullen & Gendreau, 2000; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These theories provide explanatory power for understanding how punishment, rehabilitation, and legitimacy pressures interact in shaping prison reform.

Finally, the study constructed a conceptual framework that maps the relationships between institutional leadership, policy implementation, community partnerships, public attitudes, and policy outcomes. This framework highlights how strategic management functions as a balancing mechanism, mediating between punitive traditions and rehabilitative priorities. By critically synthesizing diverse perspectives, the methodology identifies gaps and tensions in Malaysia's prison reform while offering testable propositions for future empirical research. In doing so, the study contributes both theoretically by integrating criminology and institutional management and practically, by providing insights into how leadership, policy, and partnerships can collectively shape sustainable correctional outcomes.

Critical Analysis

Despite Malaysia's ongoing prison reform agenda, several gaps remain evident in the strategic management of correctional institutions. Strong institutional leadership has articulated reform visions, such as reducing overcrowding and enhancing rehabilitation programmes, yet implementation often lags behind these ambitions. For instance, while policies emphasize vocational training and reintegration, resource constraints and outdated infrastructure limit their effectiveness (Hashim, Chow, & Ramalingam, 2020). Similarly, although rehabilitation initiatives are introduced, their reach is uneven across facilities, creating disparities in outcomes. Another gap lies in public acceptance: policies may be well-designed, but societal stigma against ex-offenders continues to undermine reintegration efforts (Rosli, Anuar, & Hamzah, 2021). This disconnect between leadership vision, policy execution, and public attitudes highlights the need for more integrated strategic management.

A further challenge is the tension between punishment and rehabilitation, which reflects deeper philosophical divides in criminal justice. On one hand, deterrence theory supports punitive measures to discourage crime, reinforcing short-term control (Paternoster, 2010). On the other hand, rehabilitation theory emphasizes long-term reintegration through education, counselling, and community support (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). Malaysia's prison system embodies this tension: overcrowding and strict sentencing reflect punitive traditions, while recent reforms signal a shift toward rehabilitation. Balancing these competing priorities is complex, as policymakers must address immediate public demands for safety while also investing in long-term strategies to reduce recidivism.

To address these gaps and tensions, strategic management must act as a balancing mechanism. Institutional leadership should ensure that reform visions are matched with adequate resources and measurable implementation strategies. Policy implementation must be monitored through performance indicators such as recidivism rates and reintegration success, ensuring accountability. Community partnerships can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between policy and public acceptance by reducing stigma and providing tangible reintegration opportunities (Mohamad et al., 2024). By aligning leadership, policy, and partnerships, strategic management can harmonize short-term deterrence with long-term rehabilitation, creating a prison system that is both effective and humane.

Discussion

Malaysia's prison reform agenda reflects a complex interplay between institutional leadership, policy implementation, and community partnerships. Institutional leadership has articulated ambitious visions, such as reducing overcrowding, modernizing facilities, and enhancing rehabilitation programmes (The Malaysian Reserve, 2025). These initiatives demonstrate a strategic shift from purely punitive approaches toward more balanced correctional management. However, leadership decisions often face

challenges in execution, particularly when resources and infrastructure remain inadequate to support reform goals (Hashim, Chow, & Ramalingam, 2020).

Policy implementation has been central to operationalizing reform visions. For example, the Pelan Hala Tuju Transformasi emphasizes rehabilitation programmes to reduce recidivism, currently reported at 12.4% (The Star, 2025). Vocational training, counselling, and reintegration initiatives have been introduced, yet their effectiveness varies across institutions. Studies highlight that while some prisons successfully integrate rehabilitation programmes, others struggle due to overcrowding and limited staff capacity (Rosli, Anuar, & Hamzah, 2021). This uneven implementation underscores the importance of strategic management in ensuring consistency and accountability across facilities.

Community partnerships extend correctional reform beyond institutional boundaries, but more importantly, they function as a structural determinant of whether reform efforts genuinely transition from punishment toward rehabilitation. While prisons may initiate rehabilitative programmes internally, the sustainability of these efforts is largely contingent upon external social systems that receive, absorb and support individuals upon release. Contemporary correctional scholarship increasingly emphasizes that reintegration failure is less a consequence of individual deficits than of systemic exclusion within labour markets, housing systems, and community networks (McNeill, 2018; Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014).

From a desistance-oriented perspective, rehabilitation is not a discrete institutional outcome but a socially mediated process that unfolds through relationships, social roles, and identity reconstruction. Community actors particularly NGOs, employers and faith-based organizations play a decisive role in facilitating this process by providing opportunities for pro-social engagement and recognition. Research demonstrates that access to meaningful employment and stable social ties significantly enhances desistance trajectories while exclusionary practices reinforce criminal identities and cycles of reoffending (Barry, 2019; Weaver, 2016). Thus, community partnerships are not auxiliary to rehabilitation; they are central to its success.

However, a critical policy concern lies in the instrumentalization of community partnerships. In many correctional reform agendas, collaboration with civil society is promoted rhetorically, yet operational responsibility is often devolved without corresponding authority, funding or decision-making power. These dynamic risks transforming NGOs into service contractors rather than equal reform partners, thereby limiting innovation and long-term impact (Corcoran & Hucklesby, 2018). Without shared governance structures, partnerships may reproduce institutional priorities centred on risk management rather than rehabilitation, undermining their transformative potential.

The issue of stigma further complicates community-based reintegration. Empirical studies consistently show that negative public perceptions of former prisoners restrict access to employment, housing, and social participation, regardless of individual readiness for change (Pager, 2007; Moore et al., 2022). Community engagement initiatives that merely promote awareness are insufficient if they do not confront structural discrimination embedded within labour policies, employer practices and community norms. Effective partnerships therefore require not only service provision but also advocacy-oriented roles that challenge exclusionary systems and reframe public narratives around rehabilitation and public safety.

Another critical dimension concerns post-release continuity of care. Research indicates that the transition from custody to community represents a period of heightened vulnerability, marked by increased risks of unemployment, homelessness, mental health relapse, and reoffending (Binswanger et al., 2012; Fox et al., 2023). Community partnerships that integrate correctional services with welfare agencies, healthcare providers, and local authorities are better positioned to address these intersecting risks. Without such coordination, rehabilitation efforts initiated in custody are frequently disrupted, resulting in fragmented support and diminished outcomes.

From a strategic management standpoint, community partnerships also influence policy legitimacy and public trust. When reintegration outcomes are visible such as reduced recidivism, stable employment, and community safety public confidence in rehabilitative justice increases. Conversely, poorly

coordinated partnerships that fail to deliver measurable outcomes may reinforce punitive public attitudes and political resistance to reform (Loader & Sparks, 2011). This underscores the importance of embedding partnerships within clear accountability frameworks supported by transparent performance indicators.

Ultimately, community partnerships should be evaluated not as programme add-ons but as core governance mechanisms within a rehabilitative correctional model. Metrics such as long-term employment retention, housing stability, social participation and desistance trajectories provide more meaningful indicators of success than short-term programme completion rates. Without such evaluative rigour, reform risks devolving into symbolic compliance with international norms rather than substantive systemic change. In this sense, leadership, policy implementation, and community partnerships function as interdependent strategic levers that collectively shape whether Malaysia's prison system advances toward a humane, rehabilitative and socially sustainable correctional paradigm.

Implications / Recommendations

The analysis carries several policy implications. Policymakers should prioritize resource allocation to ensure that rehabilitation programmes are consistently implemented across institutions. Infrastructure upgrades and staff training are essential to support reform goals, particularly in overcrowded facilities (The Malaysian Reserve, 2025). Moreover, sentencing policies should be reviewed to balance deterrence with opportunities for rehabilitation, reducing reliance on punitive measures that exacerbate overcrowding.

From a management perspective, prison leaders must adopt performance-based strategies to monitor reform outcomes. Indicators such as recidivism rates, employment success among ex-offenders, and public acceptance should be systematically tracked to evaluate the effectiveness of reforms (Rosli et al., 2021). Leadership should also foster a culture of accountability and innovation, ensuring that policies are not merely symbolic but produce measurable change.

Finally, the societal implications emphasize the importance of community partnerships. NGOs, employers, and civil society should be integrated into reform strategies to reduce stigma and support reintegration. Public education campaigns can shift societal perceptions, encouraging acceptance of rehabilitation as a legitimate correctional goal (Mohamad et al., 2024). Theoretically, this article contributes by linking criminological perspectives (deterrence vs. rehabilitation) with institutional theory, demonstrating how strategic management mediates between punishment and reform. These implications reinforce the objective by showing how leadership, policy, and partnerships can collectively shape sustainable prison reform outcomes.

Limitations

Although this article offers a valuable conceptual framework for understanding Malaysia's prison reform, it carries several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, as a conceptual study, it does not include empirical data, meaning the framework cannot be directly generalized or tested without future fieldwork. Second, the analysis relies heavily on secondary sources such as academic studies, policy documents, and media reports, which may reflect partial perspectives or inherent biases. Third, the framework is context-specific to Malaysia, and while it provides insights for other regions, cultural and institutional differences limit its transfer ability. Finally, prison reform is a dynamic process, and leadership priorities, policies, and public attitudes can shift rapidly, making the framework a snapshot in time that requires ongoing refinement. These limitations highlight the need for future empirical validation, comparative studies, and continuous monitoring to strengthen the applicability and sustainability of the proposed framework.

Conclusion

Malaysia's prison reform agenda illustrates the ongoing struggle to balance punishment and rehabilitation within correctional management. The literature review highlighted how punitive traditions

rooted in deterrence theory continue to shape institutional practices, while rehabilitation theory and restorative justice perspectives increasingly inform reform initiatives. Institutional theory further explains how leadership and policy implementation respond to societal and global pressures for legitimacy, underscoring the strategic dimension of prison reform. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a robust foundation for understanding the dynamics of Malaysia's correctional system.

The conceptual framework developed in this study positions institutional leadership, policy implementation, and community partnerships as the central drivers of reform outcomes. Leadership sets the vision, policy translates vision into practice, and partnerships extend reform into society. Public attitudes act as a mediator, influencing whether reforms are accepted or resisted, while policy outcomes reflect the balance between punishment and rehabilitation. The discussion and critical analysis revealed significant gaps, including strong leadership but weak implementation, uneven rehabilitation programmes, and persistent societal stigma. These tensions highlight the difficulty of reconciling short-term deterrence with long-term reintegration.

Ultimately, the findings emphasize that strategic management must serve as a balancing mechanism. Effective leadership, consistent policy implementation, and robust community partnerships are essential to harmonize punitive traditions with rehabilitative priorities. By aligning these elements, Malaysia can reduce recidivism, alleviate overcrowding, and foster humane correctional practices. The implications suggest that reform success depends not only on institutional vision but also on societal acceptance and international legitimacy. In conclusion, the article achieves its objective by demonstrating how strategic management shapes public attitudes and policy outcomes, offering a pathway toward sustainable prison reform that balances punishment with rehabilitation.

Co-Author Contribution

Author 1 and 2 carried out the fieldwork, prepared the literature review and overlooked the whole article's write up after a long discussion and debate.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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