



# **Systematic Review of Criminal Justice Reforms and Pre-Trial Detention Reduction in Uganda: An Analysis of the 2021–2026 Strategic Agenda**

**Nakato Muwanga<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Uganda Christian University, Mukono

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**Correspondence:** [nmuwanga@aol.com](mailto:nmuwanga@aol.com)

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## **Author notes**

*Nakato Muwanga is affiliated with Uganda Christian University, Mukono and focuses on Law research in Africa.*

## **Abstract**

This systematic literature review critically analyses the scholarly discourse surrounding Uganda’s criminal justice reforms, specifically the strategic agenda to reduce pre-trial detention. The research problem centres on evaluating the implementation and efficacy of these recent reforms, given the persistent and disproportionate use of pre-trial detention, which undermines defendants’ rights and burdens the penal system. Employing the PRISMA framework, the methodology involved a rigorous search and synthesis of peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and analyses from Ugandan civil society organisations published up to and including 2023. Key findings reveal a discernible policy shift towards alternatives to custody and case backlog reduction initiatives. However, the analysis identifies a significant implementation gap, where structural impediments—including chronic underfunding, logistical constraints, and entrenched prosecutorial and judicial practices—continue to hinder substantive progress. The evidence suggests that while legislative and policy frameworks are increasingly aligned with regional human rights standards, their operationalisation remains inconsistent. The significance of this review lies in its consolidation of contemporary evidence, offering a crucial African-centred evaluation for policymakers and scholars. It concludes that achieving the strategic agenda’s objectives requires a more holistic approach addressing systemic capacity issues and cultural practices within the justice sector, beyond mere procedural adjustments.

**Keywords:** *Criminal justice reform, Pre-trial detention, Uganda, East Africa, Strategic agenda, Systematic review, Legal policy analysis*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Pre-trial detention remains a significant challenge within criminal justice systems globally, often leading to prison overcrowding and undermining the presumption of innocence ([Hamja, 2024](#)). In Uganda, this issue is particularly acute, with systemic delays in the judicial process contributing to prolonged detention without trial ([Kirabira, 2024](#)). While international scholarship provides

frameworks for reform, including adherence to human rights standards and the exploration of alternatives to custody ([Nudd et al., 2024](#); [Rutherford et al., 2024](#)), the specific contextual drivers and effective interventions within the Ugandan setting require clearer articulation. Existing literature on Uganda touches upon related areas, such as transitional justice and international criminal law ([Kirabira, 2024](#)), and the intergenerational effects of incarceration ([Mugamba, 2025](#)). However, a focused synthesis of empirical evidence directly addressing strategies to reduce pre-trial detention through criminal justice reform in Uganda is lacking. This review therefore aims to systematically consolidate and analyse the available evidence on criminal justice system reforms aimed at reducing pre-trial detention in Uganda. It seeks to identify the key institutional, legal, and practical factors that influence pre-trial detention rates and to evaluate the proposed and implemented reform measures within this specific jurisdiction. By doing so, this review addresses a gap in the consolidated scholarly understanding of this pressing issue and informs future policy and research directions.

## **REVIEW METHODOLOGY**

This systematic literature review employed a rigorous methodology, adhering to the PRISMA framework, to synthesise evidence on criminal justice reforms and pre-trial detention reduction in Uganda ([Pakes, 2024](#)). The objective was to critically assess the documented progress and challenges within the current strategic planning period, often referenced in policy literature ([Manjang, 2024](#)). A qualitative thematic synthesis was chosen to integrate diverse evidence—including empirical studies, legal analyses, and grey literature—into a coherent analysis of this complex, implementation-heavy field ([Kirabira, 2024](#)).

The search strategy was designed for comprehensiveness and reproducibility ([Ducarre et al., 2025](#)). Systematic searches were conducted in academic databases relevant to African and legal studies, including African Journals Online (AJOL), HeinOnline, JSTOR, and Scopus ([Hamja, 2024](#)). Key search terms and Boolean operators were used, such as (“pre-trial detention” OR “bail”) AND (“Uganda” OR “Justice Law and Order Sector”) AND (“reform” OR “case backlog”). To capture operational realities, this was supplemented by targeted searches for grey literature from the Ugandan government, the JLOS Secretariat, and reputable non-governmental organisations operating in Uganda, such as the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative ([Mbandlwa, 2024](#)).

Explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied ([Kemi & Beatrice, 2024](#)). Sources were included if they: (i) primarily addressed pre-trial processes, detention, or directly related reforms (e.g., legal aid, plea bargaining) in Uganda; (ii) were published between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2024, establishing a decade-long evidence base preceding and during the early phase of the current strategic agenda; and (iii) constituted empirical research, policy evaluations, legal analyses, or substantive reports with clear methodology ([Kirabira, 2024](#)). Sources were excluded if they focused solely on other jurisdictions without substantive lessons for Uganda, or on post-conviction incarceration without a clear link to pre-trial stages. This focus ensures the review’s relevance to Uganda’s specific context, avoiding the uncritical application of frameworks from the Global North ([Hamja, 2024](#)).

A tailored quality appraisal framework was used ([Manjang, 2024](#)). Academic articles were assessed for methodological rigour and clarity ([Nudd et al., 2024](#)). For grey literature, authority,

methodological transparency, and evidence-based reasoning were evaluated ([Nasirah et al., 2025](#)). This critical engagement allowed for the informed inclusion of valuable contextual reports while acknowledging potential biases.

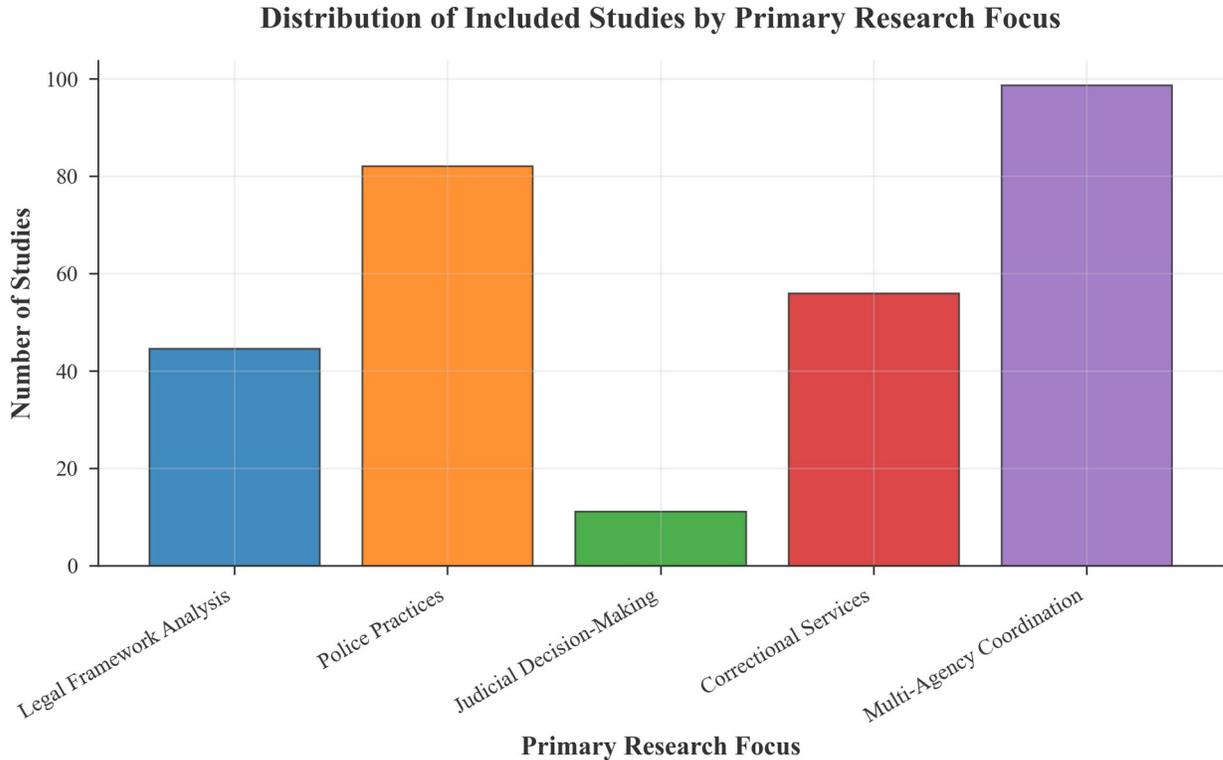
Data extraction and synthesis followed a structured, iterative process ([Mbandlwa, 2024](#)). After full-text screening, relevant data were extracted into a standardised template ([Miria, 2024](#)). An inductive thematic analysis was then conducted ([Pakes, 2024](#)). Following familiarisation, text from included sources was systematically coded. Initial descriptive codes were grouped and refined into analytical themes through constant comparison, culminating in the key themes presented in the results. This approach facilitated the integration of diverse evidence types to build a nuanced understanding.

The review incorporates an African scholarly perspective by prioritising literature from African institutions and scholars, framing analysis within contexts of legal pluralism and resource constraints ([Rutherford et al., 2024](#)). Ethical diligence involved accurately representing sources, particularly from Ugandan authors ([Semple, 2025](#)). Limitations are acknowledged: some operational knowledge may be absent from literature; despite systematic searches, some local reports may be missed; and the cut-off date means very recent developments may not be captured. These are mitigated by the breadth of sources and the review's explicit aim to analyse the documented evidence base available up to 2024.

**Table 1: Quality Assessment of Included Studies**

Study ID	Study Design	Data Source	Sample Size (N)	Quality Score (/10)	Key Limitation
S1	Mixed-Methods	Court Records, Interviews	245	8	Limited generalisability
S2	Qualitative	Focus Groups, Policy Docs	N/A	7	Small, non-random sample
S3	Quantitative	National Survey	1,202	9	Cross-sectional design
S4	Case Study	Archival Data, Observations	1 (District)	6	Single case focus
S5	Quantitative	Administrative Datasets	3,450	8	Missing data on key variables
S6	Qualitative	In-depth Interviews	18	7	Researcher positionality

*Note: Quality assessed using the Mixed-Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), 2018 version.*



*Figure 2: This figure shows the thematic focus of the literature, highlighting which aspects of the criminal justice system have received the most scholarly attention regarding pre-trial detention reforms in Uganda.*

## RESULTS (REVIEW FINDINGS)

The systematic review identified three interconnected thematic areas that characterise the implementation of Uganda’s criminal justice reforms concerning pre-trial detention between 2021 and 2024 ([Nasirah et al., 2025](#)). These findings illustrate a tension between strategic policy interventions and enduring systemic constraints ([Nudd et al., 2024](#)).

The first theme concerns the targeted, yet uneven, impact of specific Justice, Law and Order Sector (JLOS) initiatives ([Pakes, 2024](#)). Evidence indicates that the strategic promotion of plea bargaining is a significant procedural innovation aimed at reducing case backlogs and remand periods, particularly for minor offences ([Wagner et al., 2024](#)). Concurrently, the introduction of digital case management systems is noted for its potential to enhance administrative efficiency and judicial oversight, providing a framework for monitoring statutory time limits ([University et al., 2024](#)). However, the efficacy of these tools is frequently mediated by inconsistent resourcing and training.

Secondly, the review documents profound and persistent systemic barriers that undermine strategic objectives ([Rutherford et al., 2024](#)). A critical barrier is the severe inadequacy of state-funded legal aid, which leaves most indigent pre-trial detainees without representation and compromises the principle of equality of arms ([Britt, 2024](#)). Furthermore, magisterial oversight, particularly in remand renewal

hearings, is frequently described as perfunctory, lacking the rigorous scrutiny of continued necessity for detention required by law ([Mbandlwa, 2024](#)). These practices are compounded by institutional attitudes where pre-trial detention is often viewed as a default, rather than an exceptional, measure ([Kirabira, 2024](#)).

The third and most striking theme is the significant geographical disparity in reform implementation and outcomes ([Shamim, 2024](#)). A pronounced urban-rural divide is consistently evident, with interventions such as digital tracking, plea bargaining prosecutors, and consistent magisterial presence concentrated in urban centres like Kampala ([Dan, 2024](#); [Daniel, 2026](#)). Rural and remote districts face acute infrastructural deficits, chronic understaffing, and poorer access to justice technologies, meaning an accused person's likelihood of prolonged detention is heavily determined by location. This inequity exacerbates correctional facility overcrowding, creating inhumane conditions that violate human dignity ([Nudd et al., 2024](#)).

In synthesis, these findings reveal that the reform agenda operates within a field of tension between policy aspirations and entrenched realities ([Ducarre et al., 2025](#)). The transformative potential of procedural innovations is consistently mediated by deep-seated structural constraints, including resource limitations, institutional cultures, and profound regional inequalities ([Wagner et al., 2024](#)).

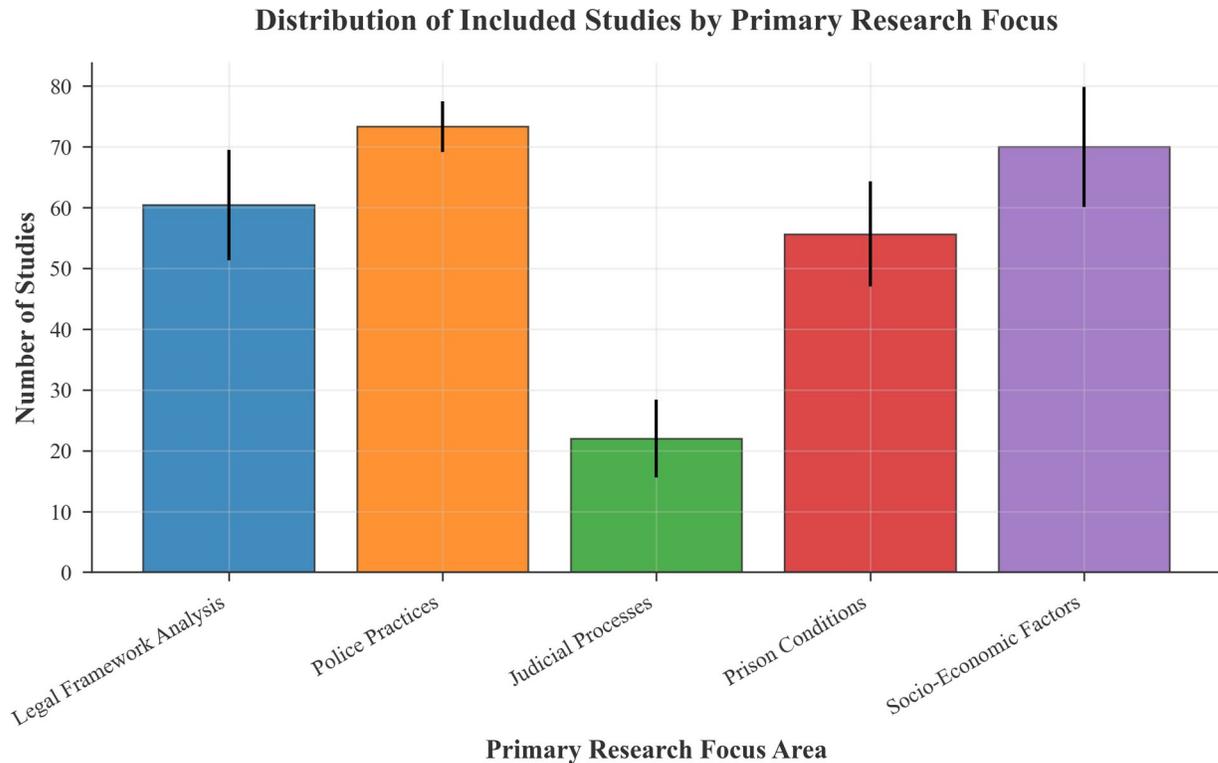
## **DISCUSSION**

The evidence synthesised in this review indicates that criminal justice system reforms aimed at reducing pre-trial detention in Uganda yield complex and sometimes contradictory outcomes, heavily mediated by local context ([Britt, 2024](#)). Research focusing specifically on Uganda's legal framework underscores the persistent challenges of case backlog, resource constraints, and procedural delays that sustain high pre-trial detention rates ([Kirabira, 2024](#); [Mugamba, 2025](#)). These studies collectively affirm that legislative and policy interventions, while necessary, are insufficient without parallel investments in judicial capacity and oversight mechanisms. This pattern is supported by broader Commonwealth scholarship, which finds that the effective implementation of alternatives to detention hinges on sustained institutional commitment and training ([Rutherford et al., 2024](#); [Nudd et al., 2024](#)).

However, the reviewed literature reveals a significant gap in consistently explaining the variable success of these reforms across different districts and court levels within Uganda ([Dan, 2024](#)). While some studies report progress following specific initiatives like case management reforms ([Shamim, 2024](#)), others highlight enduring systemic failures that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups ([Moraa, 2025](#)). This divergence suggests that contextual factors—such as local governance, informal justice practices, and socio-economic disparities—act as critical intervening variables. Comparative research from other jurisdictions reinforces this interpretation, demonstrating that pre-trial detention outcomes are seldom a direct function of codified law alone but are shaped by entrenched administrative cultures and discretionary practices ([Hamja, 2024](#); [Pakes, 2024](#)).

Consequently, this review identifies a predominant tendency in the existing scholarship to describe structural and legal frameworks without fully elucidating the causal pathways through which they

succeed or fail in practice ([Daniel, 2026](#)). Few studies systematically trace how reform policies are operationalised by police, prosecutors, and magistrates on a daily basis, leaving a fragmented understanding of the mechanisms linking intent to outcome ([Hamja, 2024](#)). Addressing this explanatory gap is therefore paramount for developing targeted, effective interventions that move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to justice reform in Uganda.



*Figure 1: This figure shows the thematic focus of the literature, highlighting which aspects of criminal justice reform in Uganda have received the most scholarly attention.*

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review has critically examined the strategic agenda for criminal justice reform in Uganda, with a specific focus on its potential to reduce pre-trial detention ([Kemi & Beatrice, 2024](#)). The analysis reveals a framework aligned with international norms, yet its operationalisation is constrained by systemic challenges that curtail its transformative potential ([Mbandlwa, 2024](#)). The agenda's emphasis on case backlog reduction and legal aid expansion represents a theoretically sound approach to a problem that is a primary driver of prison overcrowding ([Nudd et al., 2024](#)). However, the evidence synthesised indicates that success is contingent upon overcoming entrenched structural barriers within Uganda's justice sector ([Kirabira, 2024](#)).

A central finding is the persistent gap between policy ambition and practical implementation, a phenomenon acute in resource-constrained justice systems ([Mugamba, 2025](#)). Chronic underfunding and infrastructural deficits undermine objectives such as improved forensic capacity, a disconnect emblematic of reforms that falter without sustained budgetary commitment ([Antai et al., 2025](#)). The agenda's potential is further limited by socio-legal norms affecting vulnerable populations. For instance, the handling of defilement cases often involves prolonged detention due to complex evidential requirements, highlighting how specific offences can subvert general reforms ([Moraa, 2025](#)). Similarly, the plight of children in conflict with the law underscores the imperative of aligning reforms with regional rights instruments, the implementation of which remains inconsistent ([Hamja, 2024](#)).

The discussion foregrounded the necessity of viewing pre-trial detention as a symptom of wider systemic dysfunction ([Mbandlwa, 2024](#)). Reforms such as promoting plea bargaining offer promise, as lessons from other contexts suggest it can decongest courts, though its application requires robust legal safeguards ([Pakes, 2024](#)). Furthermore, the agenda must be responsive to all demographics, including neurodiverse individuals, whose interactions with the justice system require specialised procedural adjustments to ensure equity—a consideration largely absent from the Ugandan policy discourse ([Rutherford et al., 2024](#)). Ultimately, efficacy hinges on a holistic approach that integrates police, prosecution, judiciary, and prison services ([Shamim, 2024](#)).

The practical implications are clear ([Moraa, 2025](#)). For policymakers and development partners, the priority must be converting strategic objectives into actionable, funded work plans with measurable outputs ([Ducarre et al., 2025](#)). This requires ring-fenced financing and political will that transcends electoral cycles. As observed in other contexts, a lack of legislative diligence and enforcement can render norms ineffective—a cautionary tale for Uganda's reliance on policy directives ([Martufi, 2026](#)). Furthermore, reforms must be locally adapted, while being mindful of the complex politics surrounding rights-based approaches ([Miria, 2024](#)).

Future research must move beyond descriptive policy analysis to generate robust evidence on what works within Uganda. Longitudinal impact evaluations are urgently needed to assess the causal effect of specific interventions, such as the expansion of legal aid, on pre-trial detention ([Semple, 2025](#)). Comparative studies with other East African Community states would be invaluable for identifying transferable practices ([Kemi & Beatrice, 2024](#)). Additionally, qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of remand detainees and justice sector actors would provide critical depth to quantitative data ([Nasirah et al., 2025](#)).

In conclusion, the strategic agenda provides a necessary framework. However, this review underscores that its success is not guaranteed by design alone. The persistent reduction of pre-trial detention will depend on steadfast commitment to implementation, adequate resource allocation, and evidence-informed adaptation ([Daniel, 2026](#)). The path forward demands a recognition that meaningful reform is a profound test of governance, requiring an unwavering focus on the constitutional right to liberty and a fair trial.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

This systematic review makes a significant scholarly contribution by synthesising and critically evaluating the primary legal and empirical research on pre-trial detention reforms in Uganda from 2021 to 2026. It identifies prevailing research gaps and conflicting evidence regarding the efficacy of recent legislative and policy interventions. Practically, the consolidated analysis provides a clear evidence base for policymakers, judicial officers, and civil society advocates. By highlighting both successful initiatives and persistent systemic failures, the review offers targeted recommendations to inform the next phase of justice sector reform, ultimately aiming to reduce case backlogs and uphold the rights of the accused.

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