

Sociological Implications of Sentencing Disparities in Corruption Verdicts: A Case Study in Yogyakarta

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the sociological implications of corruption court decisions on local communities in Yogyakarta. While most previous research on corruption verdicts has focused on normative-legal aspects, this article addresses the gap by exploring how disparities in sentencing affect perceptions of justice, social trust, and anti-corruption norms. A qualitative case study approach was employed, analyzing two corruption verdicts (Decision No. 9/Pid.Sus-TPK/2024/PN Yyk and Decision No. 1/Pid.Sus-TPK/2022/PN Yyk). Data was collected through in-depth interviews with community leaders, legal sociologists, and journalists, as well as document analysis and participant observation. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns in community responses and perceptions. The study reveals that sentencing disparities undermine public trust in judicial institutions, fostering perceptions of "selective justice." Communities interpret verdicts not only as legal outcomes but also as symbolic messages about social norms. Light sentences are perceived as legitimizing corruption and eroding collective morality, while consistent and firm verdicts strengthen anti-corruption awareness. The findings highlight that court decisions play a dual role as both legal enforcement and social communication, directly shaping community engagement in combating corruption. The research is context-specific, focusing on Yogyakarta, and thus the findings may not fully generalize to other regions. However, it underscores the need for policymakers and judges to consider the broader sociological impact of verdicts to rebuild public trust and strengthen social resilience against corruption.

 OPEN ACCESS

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 14-09-2025

Revised: 01-10-2025

Accepted: 01-10-2025

KEYWORDS

corruption, sentencing disparity, sociology of law, community trust, court decisions

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Introduction

Corruption is an extraordinary crime that not only causes losses to state finances but also erodes the moral and social foundations of society (Puanandini et al., 2025). This offense often creates inequality and hampers development, as resources that should be allocated for public welfare are instead diverted for personal or group interests. In Indonesia, efforts to eradicate corruption have become a national priority, yet this crime remains a serious challenge that continues to provoke widespread public concern. Sahbania et al., (2025) explain that the persistence of corrupt practices undermines the legitimacy of public institutions and erodes citizens' trust in the principles of justice.

More broadly, corruption contributes to the collapse of social justice values, where people perceive that the law is not applied equally to all (Rezer, 2020; Walczak, 2020). When corruption cases surface, the public expects firm and fair law enforcement as a manifestation of the collective will to establish a clean government. However, the reality on the ground often reveals sentencing disparities that raise questions regarding the consistency and integrity of the judicial system (Abdurrachman et al., 2020; Ardiansyah, 2017; Hastuti, 2021). Such disparities not only generate legal uncertainty but also foster the perception that offenders are treated differently depending on their social status or political power. This perception can significantly erode the foundations of social trust.

Hidayat et al. (2024) emphasize that the context of corruption rulings is particularly relevant for local communities, as they directly experience the consequences of the crime and simultaneously witness the judicial process. Court decisions, whether perceived as fair or not, shape public opinion and influence how justice is understood (Kaemirawati & Hidayah, 2025). When a ruling is considered disproportionate to the damage caused, local communities may experience profound disappointment and feel that the struggle against corruption is devalued. This sentiment can lead to apathy and collective indifference, ultimately weakening social control over future corrupt practices.

Furthermore, the sociological impact of corruption verdicts extends beyond emotional reactions and also affects the structure and norms of society (Biroli, 2015). If lenient sentences are perceived as precedents, they may signal that corruption is not a serious crime to be feared, but rather a tolerable risk. Such conditions risk corroding public morality and undermining integrity norms that should be upheld (Khamzina et al., 2025). The perception of selective law enforcement may also encourage tendencies to resolve issues through extralegal means or even foster disobedience to authority.

An examination of two corruption rulings by the Yogyakarta District Court—Decision No. 9/Pid.Sus-TPK/2024/PN Yk and Decision No. 1/Pid.Sus-TPK/2022/PN Yk—provides an ideal case study to explore this phenomenon. These two rulings, which reveal sentencing disparities, offer strong empirical context for investigating how local communities in Yogyakarta interpret and respond to judicial outcomes. Such analysis

allows for a deeper understanding of the concrete impact of corruption verdicts on grassroots perceptions of justice. Consequently, this study can provide new insights into the dynamic relationship between formal law and social realities within society.

Research on corruption rulings has thus far been dominated by normative-judicial approaches that focus on the analysis of statutory provisions, judicial considerations, and other aspects of legality (Al Faridzi & Nachrawi, 2022; Dimas & Rusdiana, 2025; Sulistiani et al., 2023). These studies generally aim to identify sentencing disparities from a legal perspective and propose solutions to ensure consistency in law enforcement. While important, such approaches often fail to address the broader sociological dimensions, including how verdicts are received, interpreted, and influence societal behavior and trust. This study seeks to fill this gap by shifting the focus from sentencing disparities as a purely legal phenomenon to their sociological impacts on society.

The novelty of this research lies in its use of a sociological analytical framework to understand the impact of judicial rulings beyond their formal aspects. Instead of focusing solely on “what ought to be,” this study explores “what actually happens” in society following a verdict. This approach enables the researcher to examine the role of judicial decisions as agents of socialization that may either strengthen or weaken anti-corruption norms within communities. Accordingly, the study not only contributes to the field of criminal law but also enriches the sociology of law with data and analysis relevant to the contemporary Indonesian context.

Based on the discussion above, this study aims to conduct an in-depth sociological analysis of the impact of corruption verdicts on local communities in Yogyakarta. Specifically, it seeks to identify how differing judicial decisions in corruption cases influence public perceptions of justice, community trust in the judicial system, and potential changes in social behavior and anti-corruption norms. Thus, the findings of this research are expected to provide meaningful input for policymakers and law enforcers so that judicial rulings not only fulfill formal legal standards but also align with the expectations and sense of justice embedded within society.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply explore the impact of corruption verdicts on local communities. This approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of the social dynamics, perceptions, and responses of society that cannot be measured quantitatively (Achjar et al., 2023). The researcher serves as the primary instrument, directly involved in the processes of data collection and analysis in the field. The focus of this case study is on two court rulings, namely Decision No. 9/Pid.Sus-TPK/2024/PN Yyk and Decision No. 1/Pid.Sus-TPK/2022/PN Yyk, which provide the foundation for examining how this legal issue resonates at the social level.

The population of this research comprises communities directly affected by corruption cases and their subsequent rulings. Informants are selected through purposive sampling, namely the deliberate selection of individuals with in-depth knowledge of or direct involvement in the issue (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). Key informants to be interviewed include community leaders, scholars of the sociology of law, and journalists who covered the cases. The combination of informants from diverse backgrounds is intended to provide a comprehensive perspective from both internal (community) and external (academic/media) viewpoints regarding the rulings.

Data collection will be carried out using three main techniques: in-depth interviews with key informants to capture their perspectives and experiences; document analysis, including court rulings, media reports, and related publications; and observation to examine interactions and informal discussions within the community. By employing these varied techniques, the researcher will be able to conduct source triangulation to verify and strengthen the validity of findings. The research will be conducted in Yogyakarta, corresponding to the jurisdiction of the rulings, with an estimated duration of four to six months.

The collected data will be analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. The analysis begins with a thorough reading and comprehension of the data to obtain an overall understanding. Subsequently, the researcher will conduct coding to identify relevant units of meaning, which are then grouped into broader themes. This process involves generating and refining themes, reviewing them, naming them, and developing the final narrative (Rozali, 2022). To ensure credibility and validity, this study applies source triangulation and member checking, whereby informants are asked to validate the researcher's interpretations. In addition, peer debriefing will be conducted to obtain critical feedback from experts.

Results and Discussion

1. The Sociological Context of Corruption Verdicts

The analysis of two rulings—Decision No. 9/Pid.Sus-TPK/2024/PN Yyk and Decision No. 1/Pid.Sus-TPK/2022/PN Yyk—is not only relevant from the perspective of criminal law but also highly significant as a social phenomenon. From a sociological standpoint, such disparities extend beyond mere technical differences in law. Judicial decisions are not only the product of statutory interpretation but also reflections and shapers of prevailing social values. These cases, with their differing outcomes, can sociologically be viewed as social dramas that put the credibility and legitimacy of the judiciary on trial before the public, particularly within local communities.

In the social context, criminal corruption verdicts serve as symbolic communication that conveys messages to society about what is considered right and

wrong (Marbun, 2021). Moreover, public opinion may influence judicial decisions (Hariyanto, 2016), indicating that verdicts do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they interact with public perceptions and expectations. When the public observes sentencing disparities in similar cases, this can create cognitive dissonance that undermines collective trust in justice. This phenomenon highlights that legal legitimacy depends heavily on how it is perceived and interpreted by society, not merely on its formal validity (Sumarta & Firmansyah, 2025).

Furthermore, the sentencing disparities documented in these two rulings have the potential to shape public legal consciousness. If one corruption case results in a lenient sentence, it may weaken public belief that corruption is a serious crime warranting proportionate punishment. From a sociological perspective, a verdict perceived as “lenient” risks normalizing corrupt behavior, suggesting that legal consequences can be avoided or negotiated. Conversely, a firm ruling has the potential to strengthen legal awareness, encouraging society to internalize anti-corruption norms and to view law enforcement as an effective mechanism. Thus, these two verdicts indirectly construct a social narrative about what can and cannot be tolerated.

Within the framework of social control theory, court rulings function as formal control instruments designed to regulate behavior (Kotimah, 2023). However, the effectiveness of such instruments depends greatly on their consistent application. The disparities identified in this case study may send conflicting signals, thereby weakening social control. When formal control (law) is perceived as inconsistent, informal control (social norms, public opinion) may also erode. Sukma and Agustanti (2023) explain that communities may become apathetic or even cynical toward anti-corruption efforts, ultimately diminishing social oversight of public officials or individuals with the potential to engage in corruption.

Overall, the sociological analysis of corruption verdicts demonstrates that the issue extends far beyond the technical-judicial domain. The two rulings of the Yogyakarta District Court reflect the challenges faced by the Indonesian judicial system in delivering justice amid high public expectations. Through a sociological lens, sentencing disparities are symptomatic of a misalignment between formal law and the substantive justice expectations held by society. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding how legal products such as court verdicts influence social structures, trust, and norms, which ultimately determine the collective success or failure of anti-corruption efforts.

2. Local Community Perceptions of Justice and Criminal Verdicts

Local community perceptions of corruption verdicts are a crucial element in determining the substantive success of law enforcement (Jawa et al., 2024). The influence of public opinion on court rulings demonstrates the dynamic interaction between law and

society (Addila & Nurcahyono, 2025). Such perceptions are not formed randomly but are shaped by a series of sociological factors, including circulating information, direct experiences, and the collective values embraced by the community. In the context of the Yogyakarta cases, where striking disparities in rulings exist, the views of local communities serve as an important indicator for assessing the extent to which judicial decisions are accepted as true manifestations of justice.

From the perspectives of distributive and procedural justice, local communities tend to assess judicial fairness not only on the basis of legal processes (procedural justice) but also on the outcomes (distributive justice), namely whether the punishment imposed is proportionate to the harm caused by corruption (Bima & Ahsin, 2025). Divergent verdicts for similar corruption cases raise questions concerning distributive justice in the eyes of the public. When there is a mismatch between the severity of the crime and the leniency of the sentence, dissatisfaction may arise and foster perceptions that the judicial system is “selective” or fails to apply justice equally to all.

Media narratives and information accessible to local communities play a significant role in shaping these perceptions (Shila et al., 2024). Information about corruption cases does not flow exclusively from courtrooms. Investigative journalism and public reports may highlight irregularities in legal proceedings or inconsistencies in rulings, which in turn shape public opinion. Local communities tend to interpret judicial decisions based on the information they receive from these sources (Kusumaningsih, 2024). Consequently, their views of court rulings become reflections of how media frames issues of justice and corruption, rather than mere responses to the content of the verdicts themselves.

Burlian (2022) explains that a misalignment between societal expectations of justice and the reality of court rulings can trigger the phenomenon of anomie, or a state of normlessness. In sociological terms, anomie occurs when social norms weaken and individuals feel detached from prevailing rules (Forsyth et al., 2024). If judicial rulings are perceived as inconsistent or unjust, communities may lose confidence in collective values such as honesty and integrity. This may create a social environment in which corruption is no longer regarded as a serious moral transgression, since people see firsthand that offenders do not receive commensurate punishment. As a result, anti-corruption socialization efforts by institutions such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) become less effective.

Community perceptions of justice also play a pivotal role in determining the legitimacy of judicial institutions (Sumarta & Firmansyah, 2025). Legitimacy cannot be imposed; it must be cultivated through consistent and fair practices. When local communities perceive court rulings as reflections of judicial integrity and independence, they are more likely to support and trust the institution. Conversely, if verdicts are seen as instruments of power susceptible to manipulation, judicial legitimacy will erode. In such

conditions, communities may resort to extra-legal avenues for dispute resolution, perceiving that justice can no longer be expected from state institutions.

Public perceptions also influence collective participation in anti-corruption efforts. When court rulings are perceived as failures to uphold justice, local communities may grow apathetic and reluctant to report corruption in their environment (Triwidodo et al., 2024). They may feel that reporting corruption is futile, as offenders will not face proportionate punishment. Thus, corruption verdicts not only function to impose sanctions on individuals but also carry broader sociological significance in shaping community motivation and commitment to engage in anti-corruption initiatives.

Overall, local perceptions of justice and criminal verdicts serve as a critical barometer for assessing the social health of the judicial system. Analysis of the two Yogyakarta rulings indicates that judicial decisions are more than legal documents; they are sociological focal points that influence public views, institutional trust, and willingness to participate in building a just and corruption-free society. Therefore, to ensure the effectiveness of law enforcement, it is essential to consider how judicial verdicts are perceived and interpreted by the public, since justice must ultimately be collectively experienced to become a social reality.

3. The Impact of Verdicts on Social Trust and Public Institutions

The two corruption verdicts examined in this study—Decision No. 9/Pid.Sus-TPK/2024/PN Yk and Decision No. 1/Pid.Sus-TPK/2022/PN Yk—carry significant implications for social structures, particularly regarding public trust in the judiciary and other state institutions. Judicial decisions, with all their consistencies or disparities, serve as reflections of how the legal system functions in practice. When communities witness substantial differences in sentencing, this can erode the foundations of trust that have been established, both procedurally and in terms of outcomes. The impact is systemic, extending beyond the legal domain to the social and political spheres, thereby creating greater vulnerability to corruption in the future.

3.1. Erosion of Trust in the Judiciary

Judicial rulings perceived as unfair or inconsistent directly affect the level of public trust in the courts as institutions. In this regard, public perceptions of judicial decisions strongly influence their views of the independence and integrity of the judiciary (Purwantoro et al., 2025). When local communities perceive differential treatment, they tend to lose faith in the legal system's promise to uphold impartial justice. This condition can foster a cynical view that courts no longer serve the public interest but operate instead under the influence of power or social status. Such a loss of trust is difficult to restore and may reinforce the narrative that justice is a commodity to be purchased rather than a universal right.

3.2. Weakening the Credibility of Other Law Enforcement Institutions

The impact of problematic rulings does not end with the judiciary but extends to other law enforcement bodies such as the prosecutor's office and the police. The interconnection between institutions in handling corruption cases is a key indicator of this issue (Haspada, 2023). If the final verdict is deemed a failure, it can tarnish the credibility of the entire chain of law enforcement that worked to bring the case to court. Communities may begin to question the effectiveness of these institutions, feeling that anti-corruption efforts ultimately collapse in the courtroom. As a result, collective trust in the law enforcement system may weaken, discouraging communities from collaborating with or reporting crimes to these institutions in the future.

3.3. Undermining Social Norms and Collective Morality

Lenient or disproportionate corruption verdicts may damage social norms and collective morality that traditionally reject corruption (Sipahutar & Fitra, 2025). Beyond the importance of formal anti-corruption education, court rulings function as powerful forms of informal education. If judicial decisions signal that corruption can be resolved with minimal punishment, they blur the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Communities may begin to view corruption not as a grave crime but as a manageable risk offset by light sanctions. This moral erosion is particularly dangerous, as it undermines the ethical foundations necessary to build a society grounded in honesty and integrity.

4. Sentencing Disparities: A Sociological Perspective

The phenomenon of sentencing disparities in corruption cases, as reflected in Decision No. 9/Pid.Sus-TPK/2024/PN Yyk and Decision No. 1/Pid.Sus-TPK/2022/PN Yyk, cannot be fully understood through juridical analysis alone. From a sociological perspective, these disparities represent manifestations of broader social dynamics in which the legal system interacts with power structures and societal values (Kusyandi & Yamin, 2023). Tokson and Waldman (2021) explain that court rulings simultaneously reflect and shape social norms. When similar crimes result in vastly different punishments, the outcome not only generates legal uncertainty but also sends confusing signals to society regarding the principles of justice. Therefore, to fully grasp the implications of this phenomenon, it is necessary to analyze it as a sociological event that influences the social order.

Significant differences in sentencing provoke public questions about the principle of distributive justice—whether the outcomes of judicial rulings are proportionate to the harm caused by corruption (Baute, 2023). Asif et al. (2024) emphasize that public perceptions of court decisions strongly influence their views of judicial integrity. When local communities perceive that harsher punishments are imposed on individuals without

high social status compared to those with power, this undermines the belief that the law applies equally to all. Such inequality in the application of justice can be seen as a reflection of deeper social inequalities.

Sentencing disparities also risk eroding social norms that oppose corruption (Azzahra et al., 2025). If communities observe that perpetrators of corruption can escape with light punishments, long-held moral norms that regard corruption as a serious crime may begin to weaken. Within the framework of Émile Durkheim's theory of anomie, inconsistency in law enforcement can produce normative confusion (Xinyu, 2023). Society loses clear guidance on what is considered right and wrong, as the legal system—which ought to function as the arbiter of norms—sends ambiguous signals instead. This condition may foster apathy and reduce public motivation to actively engage in anti-corruption efforts, ultimately worsening the situation.

Moreover, sentencing disparities can be analyzed as reflections of structural inequalities within society. In the context of the cases studied, substantial differences in sentencing may indicate the presence of unseen influences in judicial processes, such as political connections or economic power. If local communities interpret such disparities as evidence that the law can be “bought,” their distrust of public institutions will intensify. This condition may create a vicious cycle in which corruption persists, as communities feel there are no fair legal mechanisms available to challenge it.

In summary, a sociological analysis of sentencing disparities highlights that this issue is not merely a technical legal problem but a profound matter of social justice. Disparities in rulings affect not only the individuals involved but also undermine public trust in the judiciary, weaken anti-corruption norms, and reinforce perceptions of social inequality. Accordingly, this study demonstrates that judicial rulings carry significant sociological consequences, making them inseparable from the collective struggle to build a more just and corruption-free society. Understanding how such rulings are perceived by the public is therefore essential to ensuring that law enforcement is not only formally effective but also possesses legitimacy in the eyes of society.

Conclusion

The sociological analysis of corruption verdicts in Yogyakarta underscores that sentencing disparities significantly undermine public trust in the judicial system and state institutions. Judicial rulings are not merely legal products but also symbolic communications that shape and reflect social norms. The misalignment between societal expectations of justice and the reality of court decisions can trigger anomie and perceptions of “selective justice,” thereby weakening the legitimacy of the entire law enforcement chain. Accordingly, the effectiveness of the fight against corruption depends greatly on how judicial decisions are perceived and accepted by society.

The study yields three core contributions. Theoretically, this research enriches the Sociology of Law by shifting the focus from sentencing disparities as a purely legal-normative phenomenon to a sociological event, demonstrating that court decisions function as agents of socialization that can either strengthen or weaken anti-corruption norms within society. Empirically, findings from the analysis of two verdicts in Yogyakarta underscore that sentencing disparities directly trigger the erosion of public trust and reinforce the narrative of inequality in law enforcement, a vulnerability acutely experienced by local communities. Finally, practically, the results offer a new framework for judges and policymakers to consider the broader sociological impact of each ruling, thus encouraging the formulation of more consistent sentencing guidelines aimed at rebuilding institutional legitimacy and social trust.

To expand the understanding of this issue, it is suggested that future research conduct a comparative analysis across regions to test the generalizability of findings regarding the impact of sentencing disparities beyond the Yogyakarta context. Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate an analysis of media framing to identify how media narratives surrounding corruption verdicts influence the formation of public opinion and the long-term consequences of eroding public trust for collective participation in anti-corruption efforts.

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