A Criminological Study of Social and Economic Factors in Corruption Crimes

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Abstract

This study examines corruption in Indonesia from a criminological perspective, focusing on how social and economic factors contribute to its persistence. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research analyzes secondary data from the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), Statistics Indonesia (BPS), and Transparency International between 2020 and 2024. The findings reveal that corruption is not merely a legal violation but a socially learned and economically driven behavior embedded in Indonesia's bureaucratic and cultural structures. Social elements such as patronage, nepotism, and weak moral control intersect with economic pressures like income inequality and inadequate welfare, forming a systemic environment conducive to corruption. Applying Differential Association Theory, Strain Theory, and Rational Choice Theory, this study interprets corruption as both a learned adaptation and a rational response to structural strain. The results highlight the need for multidimensional anti-corruption strategies that integrate institutional reform, socio-economic equality, and cultural transformation. This criminological approach offers deeper insight into the roots of corruption and provides a theoretical foundation for developing more effective preventive policies in Indonesia.

Keywords: Corruption, Criminology, Social Factors, Economic Inequality, Indonesia, Differential Association, Strain Theory

Introduction

Corruption is one of the most serious forms of crime, classified as an *extraordinary crime* due to its wide-ranging impacts on social, economic, and political structures. In Indonesia, corruption has evolved beyond individual misconduct to become a systemic problem embedded within bureaucratic and institutional mechanisms. It reflects not only a legal violation but also a deep-rooted social phenomenon shaped by cultural values, structural inequalities, and economic pressures.According to data from the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), between 2020 and September 2024 there were 622 corruption cases under investigation, 510

cases under prosecution, and 533 cases that had reached legal finality (*inkracht*). In 2024 alone, KPK handled 142 investigation cases, 79 prosecutions, and 83 cases concluded in court. These figures indicate that corruption remains widespread and recurrent across various levels of government and public institutions. The prevalence of such cases underscores that corruption in Indonesia has become structural functioning not merely as individual deviance but as a social disease embedded in networks of power and authority.

From a socio-economic perspective, the problem of corruption is closely linked to inequality and social pressures. Data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS) show that Indonesia's Gini Ratio in March 2023 stood at 0.388, indicating significant income inequality. Although the ratio slightly declined to 0.375 in March 2025, the gap between the wealthy and the poor remains considerable. This persistent inequality creates social tension among individuals who struggle to meet rising economic and social expectations. According to Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory, such tension arises when individuals cannot achieve culturally accepted goals through legitimate means, leading them to pursue alternative often illicit routes to success, including corruption.In addition to economic pressures, social factors play a crucial role in shaping corrupt behavior. Patronage networks, nepotism, and weak institutional values often create a permissive environment that normalizes corruption. Edwin H. Sutherland's Differential Association Theory posits that criminal behavior is learned through interaction with others; when individuals are embedded in social environments that justify or tolerate corruption, they tend to internalize and reproduce such behaviors. Consequently, corruption must be understood not only as a legal offense but also as a learned social practice transmitted through organizational and bureaucratic cultures.

On a broader scale, the persistence of corruption in Indonesia is reflected in international perception indices. The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2024 reported by Transparency International gives Indonesia a score of 37 out of 100, ranking 99th among 180 countries. Although this represents a slight improvement from previous years, it still indicates a high level

of perceived corruption in the public sector. Similarly, the Integrity Assessment Survey (SPI) conducted by KPK in 2024 recorded a national integrity score of 71.53 points, with many regional governments classified as "vulnerable" to corrupt practices. These data confirm that institutional integrity remains fragile and that internal control mechanisms are still insufficient to prevent misuse of authority.The combination of economic inequality and permissive social norms creates a fertile environment for corruption to thrive. A culture of materialism, pressure to maintain social status, and inadequate welfare among public officials further intensify the temptation to engage in corrupt acts. From the perspective of Rational Choice Theory, individuals who perceive that the potential benefits of corruption outweigh the risks of punishment will rationally choose to engage in corrupt practices, especially when opportunity and motivation converge.

Therefore, corruption in Indonesia must be viewed as an outcome of the interaction between social structure and economic condition. A criminological approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of corruption not merely as a breach of law, but as a social behavior influenced by cultural norms, inequality, and rational decision-making. Through this lens, anti-corruption strategies can move beyond punitive measures and focus on systemic reforms, moral education, and equitable economic policies that reduce both the motivation and opportunity for corruption to occur.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach within a criminological framework to examine the social and economic factors influencing corruption in Indonesia. The research relies on secondary data from credible sources such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), Statistics Indonesia (BPS), Transparency International, and academic publications from 2020–2024. Data were collected through literature review and document analysis, focusing on corruption cases, socio-economic conditions, and institutional contexts. The findings were

analyzed using qualitative content and thematic analysis, interpreting patterns through criminological theories such as Strain Theory, Differential Association, and Rational Choice Theory. To ensure validity, data and theoretical triangulation were applied, and all ethical standards in academic research were maintained.

Results and Discussion

Corruption in Indonesia continues to be a multidimensional issue that cannot be understood solely from a legal standpoint but must also be analyzed through social and economic perspectives. Data from the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK, 2024) indicate that the number of corruption cases handled during 2024 reached over 600 cases, with total state financial losses estimated at more than IDR 3.2 trillion. The majority of cases involved bribery (49%), procurement of goods and services (25%), and budget misuse (15%), showing that corruption is deeply rooted in public administration and political structures.

Table Statistical Overview of Corruption in Indonesia (2020-2024)

Year	Number of Corruption Cases (KPK)	Estimated State Loss (IDR Trillion)	CPI Score (Transparency International)	Gini Ratio (BPS)	Unemployment Rate (%)
2020	493	1.4	37	0.385	7.1
2021	565	2.1	38	0.384	6.5
2022	634	2.9	36	0.381	5.8
2023	611	3.0	34	0.389	5.5
2024	602	3.2	34	0.388	5.3

Source : KPK Annual Report (2024), Transparency International (2024), and Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2024).

The data above illustrate a consistent pattern of corruption over the past five years, despite ongoing anti-corruption campaigns. The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) has remained stagnant between 34–38 points, placing Indonesia in the bottom half globally, and highlighting a lack of significant improvement in public sector integrity. At the same time, economic inequality, as indicated by the Gini Ratio, remains relatively high and stable around 0.38, signifying persistent disparities in wealth distribution.

Social Factors in Corruption

From a criminological standpoint, social structures and cultural patterns play a pivotal role in shaping the emergence and persistence of corruption. In the Indonesian context, long-standing cultural values such as *patronage*, *loyalty*, and *collective obligation* which historically promoted mutual assistance and social solidarity have undergone a process of distortion within modern bureaucratic systems. These values, once central to maintaining harmony in traditional communities, have been transformed into nepotism, favoritism, and reciprocal exchange of benefits in the realm of politics and public administration. Public officials often face implicit social expectations to assist relatives, colleagues, or political allies, even when such actions conflict with ethical and legal norms. This condition illustrates how informal social obligations override formal bureaucratic rationality, weakening institutional integrity and blurring the boundary between public duty and private interest.

Drawing on Sutherland's Differential Association Theory (1947), corruption can be understood as a learned behavior acquired through social interaction and communication. Within bureaucratic environments, individuals are frequently exposed to peer groups or superiors who rationalize and normalize corrupt acts, portraying them as practical strategies for maintaining influence, securing resources, or navigating an inefficient system. Over time, this interaction cultivates organizational subcultures of corruption, where unethical conduct becomes a shared norm rather than an exception. Such environments perpetuate the belief that

corruption is not only acceptable but necessary for survival within competitive or patron-client bureaucratic networks.

The persistence of corruption is further reinforced by the weakness of formal social control mechanisms, including ethics committees, internal audits, and transparency regulations. These institutions often exist in form but not in function limited by political interference, lack of independence, or inadequate enforcement capacity. Consequently, the deterrent effect of formal sanctions diminishes, allowing corrupt practices to continue with minimal risk of punishment. This normalization of corruption as part of "everyday governance" signifies a deeper moral erosion and institutional paralysis, where deviant behavior is sustained through both learned acceptance and systemic tolerance.

In this sense, corruption in Indonesia is not merely an individual moral failure but a sociocultural phenomenon embedded in the structure of authority and social relationships. The combination of cultural distortion, learned deviance, and weak institutional control forms a self reinforcing cycle in which corruption perpetuates itself across generations and organizational layers. Addressing this issue therefore requires not only punitive measures but also cultural and organizational transformation restoring integrity as a shared social value and strengthening the social mechanisms that prevent deviant learning within public institutions.

Economic Factors in Corruption

Economic inequality constitutes one of the most significant underlying drivers of corruption in Indonesia. From a criminological perspective, Merton's Strain Theory (1938) provides a useful framework for explaining how socio-economic pressures shape deviant behavior. Merton argues that individuals experience a "strain" or disjunction between culturally prescribed goals such as financial success, social mobility, and material comfort and the legitimate means available to achieve them. When opportunities to reach these goals are restricted by structural barriers such as poverty, limited access to education, or unequal

employment prospects, some individuals resort to illegitimate or corrupt means as alternative pathways to success.

In Indonesia, the persistence of income inequality and economic disparity has created fertile ground for this strain to manifest. Data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2024) show that the national Gini ratio remains at 0.388, reflecting a relatively wide gap between the rich and the poor. Similarly, the unemployment rate of 5.3% and the concentration of wealth in urban centers such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan demonstrate uneven access to economic opportunities. These structural inequalities place individuals especially public officials and bureaucrats under economic and social pressure to sustain a certain standard of living, often inconsistent with their legitimate income levels. In such conditions, corruption becomes an adaptive response to financial strain and societal expectations.Moreover, consumerism and status-oriented culture have intensified economic motivations for corruption. The rapid expansion of the middle class and the pervasive influence of social media have reinforced the pursuit of prestige, luxury, and material success as indicators of social worth. Public officials and political elites, in particular, face immense pressure to display wealth and maintain public images of success, leading some to misuse authority and public resources. This dynamic aligns with the concept of "status frustration", where individuals experience psychological tension between their social aspirations and their actual economic reality, ultimately driving them to engage in corrupt practices to bridge the gap.

The connection between economic deprivation and corrupt conduct is also evident in regional governance. Provinces characterized by low economic growth and high poverty rates—such as Papua, Nusa Tenggara Timur, and parts of Kalimantan frequently report higher incidences of local-level corruption. Limited fiscal resources, coupled with weak oversight mechanisms, increase opportunities for embezzlement, budget manipulation, and nepotistic procurement practices. Here, corruption functions not only as a personal gain mechanism but

also as a means of informal resource redistribution, reflecting how systemic economic inequality produces and sustains deviant institutional behavior.

From a criminological economic standpoint, corruption can thus be understood as a rational yet deviant adaptation to structural and cultural constraints. Individuals perceive corruption as a viable solution to overcome economic insecurity, sustain social status, or meet familial expectations. However, while these behaviors may provide short-term relief or advantage, they simultaneously reinforce the very structures of inequality that produced them. This paradox creates a cyclical pattern where economic strain leads to corruption, and corruption deepens economic inequality through the misallocation of resources, loss of public trust, and the deterioration of institutional efficiency.To break this cycle, efforts to combat corruption must extend beyond law enforcement to include economic reforms and social equity policies. Increasing fair compensation for public servants, promoting merit-based promotion systems, and ensuring equitable access to education and employment can reduce the socio-economic strain that fosters corruption. Additionally, public financial transparency and inclusive economic development programs are essential to address the structural roots of deviant economic behavior. Only by alleviating the underlying economic pressures can Indonesia build a more just and corruption-resistant society.

Institutional and Cultural Dynamics

The persistence of corruption in Indonesia cannot be separated from the weaknesses within its institutional structures and the prevailing bureaucratic culture that often tolerates unethical behavior. From a criminological viewpoint, Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1968) offers a compelling explanation of how individuals make calculated decisions to engage in corrupt practices based on perceived costs and benefits. According to this theory, individuals commit corruption not solely because of moral failure, but because the expected rewards outweigh the perceived risks of punishment. In contexts where enforcement is inconsistent, oversight is weak, and sanctions are uncertain, corruption becomes a rational though unlawful

choice for those seeking economic or political gain.Indonesia's institutional framework, while supported by anti-corruption agencies such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the Supreme Audit Agency (BPK), and the Financial and Development Supervisory Agency (BPKP), continues to face significant challenges. These include political interference, limited budget allocation, and overlapping jurisdictional authority, which collectively hinder effective enforcement. For instance, recent public debates over the revision of the KPK Law (2019), which reduced the agency's autonomy, illustrate how institutional reform can inadvertently weaken anti-corruption mechanisms. The result is an erosion of deterrence and a perception among public officials that corrupt acts carry minimal consequences.

In addition, the bureaucratic culture within many public institutions perpetuates an environment conducive to corruption. Hierarchical structures emphasize loyalty to superiors over adherence to ethical standards, creating a "command culture" where subordinates feel compelled to comply with corrupt directives. This organizational dynamic fosters what scholars describe as "institutionalized deviance", where corruption becomes embedded in administrative routines. Employees learn to rationalize such acts as necessary for maintaining harmony, securing promotions, or meeting informal expectations within their departments. This phenomenon mirrors the differential association process at the institutional level corruption spreads not through isolated incidents but through continuous social reinforcement and imitation within the bureaucracy.Moreover, informal norms of reciprocity and favoritism, often derived from cultural traditions such as *balas budi* (repaying favors) and *asal bapak senang* (as long as the boss is happy), blur ethical boundaries between personal obligation and professional responsibility. These cultural patterns, when embedded in formal institutions, erode accountability and encourage misuse of authority. In many cases, officials justify bribery, kickbacks, or embezzlement as necessary acts to sustain organizational stability or political alliances. Consequently, corruption becomes not merely tolerated but expected an informal mechanism for resource distribution and relationship maintenance within the system.

Institutional weakness is further exacerbated by insufficient transparency and accountability mechanisms. Public access to information remains limited, internal audit bodies often lack independence, and whistleblower protections are inadequately enforced. Such conditions create an environment where risk perception is low, thereby validating the rational choice calculus that corruption is a "safe" and profitable act. The lack of visible consequences for high-profile offenders especially among political elites strengthens this perception and perpetuates a culture of impunity.

From a criminological standpoint, these institutional and cultural dynamics collectively sustain a self-reinforcing cycle of corruption. Weak institutions fail to punish offenders effectively, leading to normalization of corruption within organizational culture; in turn, that culture further undermines institutional reform efforts. Breaking this cycle requires not only stronger law enforcement but also deep cultural and administrative transformation. Strengthening merit-based recruitment, enforcing performance-based incentives, and embedding ethical training into public sector education can gradually reshape bureaucratic behavior.Equally important is the need for visible accountability ensuring that both low-level and high-ranking officials face consistent legal consequences for corrupt acts. Transparency initiatives such as e-governance, open budget systems, and digital procurement platforms can reduce opportunities for discretion and collusion. By increasing the likelihood of detection and punishment, these measures alter the rational calculation that drives corruption.

Ultimately, the Indonesian experience demonstrates that corruption is not only a legal infraction but also a reflection of institutional rationality and cultural adaptation. Combating it requires transforming the underlying values, incentives, and power relations within the bureaucracy. When integrity becomes institutionally rewarded and corruption consistently penalized, the rational choice will shift from corruption as an advantage to integrity as the only sustainable path for personal and institutional suc

Criminological Interpretation

From a criminological perspective, corruption in Indonesia can be interpreted as an interplay between individual rational choices, socio-economic pressures, and institutional weaknesses. Applying Rational Choice Theory, individuals engage in corrupt acts after weighing potential benefits against risks. In environments where law enforcement is weak, and the probability of detection is low, corruption becomes a rational decision driven by economic incentives and personal gain. The perceived rewards such as wealth accumulation, political power, or social recognition often outweigh the relatively minimal risk of punishment, thus reinforcing corrupt behavior as a calculated strategy rather than a moral failure.In contrast, Strain Theory explains corruption as a response to societal inequalities and blocked opportunities. Many public officials and bureaucrats experience pressure to achieve socially defined success (e.g., financial stability, prestige) but lack legitimate means to attain it within limited bureaucratic salaries and rigid hierarchies. Consequently, corruption becomes a form of innovation an alternative path to achieve economic goals in the face of structural strain. This is particularly visible in lower administrative levels, where systemic underpayment and limited upward mobility push individuals toward rent-seeking behaviors.

Control Theory, on the other hand, highlights the absence or erosion of effective social and institutional restraints. When moral bonds to law, organizational codes, or societal norms weaken, individuals feel less constrained from pursuing self-interest through corruption. This erosion is often exacerbated by the absence of moral exemplars within leadership, where impunity and selective enforcement create a permissive environment. Ultimately, corruption persists not only as a rational adaptation to opportunity but as a reflection of deteriorating social bonds and institutional decay.Together, these criminological perspectives reveal that corruption in Indonesia is not merely a matter of individual deviance but a product of systemic and cultural conditions that normalize unethical conduct. Effective anti-corruption strategies must therefore

integrate structural reforms, moral education, and strong enforcement mechanisms that restore both institutional credibility and social trust

Implications

The results underscore that combating corruption requires a multidimensional approach integrating law, economy, and sociology. Legal punishment alone is insufficient if not supported by structural reforms that reduce inequality and strengthen moral values in governance. Therefore, policy implications from this study include:

1. Strengthening transparency and accountability mechanisms in both central and local governments;

2. Enhancing economic justice and public welfare programs to reduce social strain;

3. Promoting anti-corruption education and ethical leadership training within public institutions; and

4. Encouraging public participation in monitoring and evaluating government performance.

Only through such integrated strategies can Indonesia effectively mitigate corruption as both a criminal and social phenomenon.

Conclusion

Corruption in Indonesia remains a deeply rooted problem that transcends legal violations and reflects broader social, economic, and institutional dysfunctions. Through a criminological lens, this study has demonstrated that corruption emerges not merely from individual moral failure but from the interaction between structural pressures, social learning, and institutional weaknesses. Social factors such as the distortion of patronage culture, weak ethical norms, and social tolerance toward misconduct intersect with economic factors like income inequality, low public sector compensation, and materialistic aspirations to create fertile ground for corrupt behavior.The analysis grounded in Differential Association Theory, Strain Theory, and

Rational Choice Theory shows that corruption is both a learned behavior and a rational adaptation to systemic constraints. When individuals operate within environments that normalize unethical practices, and when institutions fail to provide effective deterrence, corruption becomes embedded as part of the bureaucratic culture. Therefore, combating corruption requires interventions that are not only legalistic but also sociological and preventive in nature.This study emphasizes the need for comprehensive anti-corruption strategies that integrate social, economic, and cultural reforms. Strengthening institutional transparency, improving economic welfare, and reshaping moral and civic values are essential to breaking the cycle of corruption. Moreover, a shift toward criminological-based policy design which recognizes corruption as a social phenomenon influenced by context can enhance the effectiveness of preventive measures. Ultimately, sustainable anti-corruption reform in Indonesia depends on rebuilding public trust and fostering a culture of integrity that is reinforced across all levels of society.

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