



P.L.RAJ IAS & IPS ACADEMY

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1. Prison Statistics 2024- Overcrowding, Undertrials, And Reform Imperatives – Polity/Governance

The National Crime Records Bureau's latest Prison Statistics report reveals that India's jail occupancy rate fell to a decade-low of 112.7% in 2024, yet overcrowding remains a persistent challenge driven largely by a disproportionately high share of undertrial prisoners. India had 1,333 jails with capacity of 4.53 lakh inmates but housed over 5.11 lakh prisoners at end of 2024. Undertrials accounted for approximately 73% of total inmate population with Delhi (194% occupancy, 87% undertrials) and Bihar recording highest shares. The crisis reflects structural failures across judicial, legal aid, infrastructure, and bail systems.

1. Major Highlights

Overcrowding in Jail

- 1,333 jails with sanctioned capacity of 4.53 lakh inmates
- Actual inmate population- 5.11 lakh (overcrowded by 58,000+ prisoners)
- Occupancy rate- 112.7% (decade-low but still overcrowded)
- More than half of states had occupancy rate over 100%
- Delhi**- Highest occupancy rate at 194% (2024)

High Number of Undertrials

- Undertrials- ~73% of total inmate population (2024)
- Delhi and Bihar**- Over 87% inmates being undertrials
- Prisoners awaiting trial spending months/years in jail without conviction
- Violates fundamental right to personal liberty (Article 21)

2. Reasons Behind Rising Prison Overcrowding

Judicial Delays

- Large pendency of criminal cases (5+ crore cases pending in Indian courts)
- Results in prolonged incarceration of undertrial prisoners
- Insufficient judges, courts relative to caseload

Overcriminalization

- Excessive use of imprisonment for minor offences contributing to congestion
- Petty crimes, traffic violations, minor disputes leading to imprisonment
- Alternatives to imprisonment underutilized

Bail-Related Challenges

- Economically weaker sections failing to secure bail due to financial constraints
- Lack of awareness about legal rights
- Inadequate legal assistance prolonging detention
- Stringent bail conditions for certain offences (UAPA, NDPS, PMLA)

Inadequate Prison Infrastructure

- Prison infrastructure expansion not keeping pace with growing inmate population
- Understaffing in prisons (guards, medical staff, counsellors)
- Aging facilities requiring modernization

3. Concerns

1. **Basic needs failure**– Overcrowding undermining healthcare, food, accommodation provision
2. **Rights violation**– Endangers right to adequate living standards, physical-mental health (Article 21)
3. **Security hazards**– Creates security problems, health hazards, disrupts rehabilitation programs
4. **Administration challenge**– Segregation of hardened criminals from mild offenders becomes impossible
5. **International standards violation**– Conditions unacceptable to UN Standard Minimum Rules for treatment of offenders (India is signatory)

4. Committees on Prison Reforms

1. **Justice A.N. Mulla Committee (1980–83)**– Separation of undertrials from convicts; improvement of prison conditions, nutrition, sanitation
2. **Justice Amitava Roy Committee**– Decongestion of prisons, speedy trials, legal aid reforms, technology for prison management
3. **Krishna Iyer Committee**– Separate jail facilities for women preventing exploitation

5. Judicial Interventions

1. **Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar**– SC held right to speedy trial is fundamental right under Article 21
2. **State of Rajasthan vs. Balchand**– SC established "bail is rule and jail is exception" reinforcing Article 21 personal liberty

6. Government Initiatives

1. **Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023**– Provisions for reformation, rehabilitation, social integration; Welfare Programs for Prisoners; After-Care and Rehabilitation Services
2. **Undertrial Review Committees (UTRCs)**– Established in every district; periodically reviews cases of undertrial prisoners eligible for bail/personal bonds
3. **e-Prisons Project**– Mission Mode Project under National e-Governance Plan; digitizes prison records; integrates prisons with courts, police, legal services; facilitates faster bail-parole-release processing
4. **Open Prisons/Open Correctional Institutions**– Eligible prisoners serving sentences in less restrictive environments; reduces pressure on conventional prisons; promotes rehabilitation
5. **Legal Aid and Bail Reforms**– NALSA and SLSAs providing free legal aid to indigent prisoners; "Support to Poor Prisoners Scheme" assisting those unable to afford bail bonds

7. Way Forward

1. **Technology integration**– Digital prison management, video conferencing for court hearings reducing delays
2. **Social reintegration**– Vocational training, skill development enhancing post-release employability
3. **Strengthening legal aid**– Timely, effective representation for undertrials and economically weaker sections
4. **Alternatives to imprisonment**– Community service, probation, non-custodial punishments for minor offences
5. **Expand open prison models**– Reduce congestion, support rehabilitation across states

Conclusion

NCRB Prison Statistics 2024 revealing decade-low 112.7% occupancy rate despite housing 5.11 lakh prisoners against 4.53 lakh capacity underscores systemic crisis rooted in 73% undertrial proportion, judicial delays, bail inaccessibility for poor, and inadequate infrastructure. Delhi's 194% occupancy rate

and 87% undertrial share exemplify urban prison crisis. Multiple committee recommendations (Mulla, Amitava Roy, Krishna Iyer), judicial mandates (Hussainara Khatoon, Balchand) and government initiatives (Model Act 2023, UTRCs, e-Prisons, Open Prisons, NALSA legal aid) provide comprehensive reform framework. Structural solutions require fast-track courts reducing pendency, bail reforms ensuring personal liberty for economically weaker sections, expanded alternatives to imprisonment, technology integration, vocational rehabilitation, and open prison scaling ensuring India's prison system transforms from custodial warehousing to genuine correctional, rehabilitative institution upholding constitutional dignity of every prisoner.

Source- <https://www.thehindu.com/data/prisons-in-india-continue-to-be-overcrowded-by-undertrials-data/article71048620.ece>