

Prison Overcrowding and Psychological Trauma among Undertrial Prisoners: A Socio-Legal Study

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Abstract

The crowdedness in prisons has emerged as a serious legal, human rights and social problem for undertrials in various prisons. Any postponement in cases, lack of legal aid and poor conditions inside correctional facilities are significant factors that cause the inmates to be psychologically traumatized, emotionally unstable and socially isolated. This is an investigation into the imbalances encountered by the undertrial prisoners as a result of the problem of overcrowding in prisons from a socio-legal lens. The research examines how dignifying prisoners and promoting their wellbeing can be achieved through constitutional protection, judicial intervention and international standards of human rights, and through the effectiveness of prison management. The excess of undertrial detainees and restriction of access to justice are also stressed as a result of socioeconomic marginalisation. It ends on a note of warning for prison reforms, need for implementation of speedy trial system, needy enhancement in the mental health care services and need for adoption of corrective and rehabilitative policies for implementing “Humane Custodial Justice”.

Keywords: Prison Overcrowding; Undertrial Prisoners; Psychological Trauma; Custodial Justice; Human Rights; Mental Health; Socio-Legal Study.

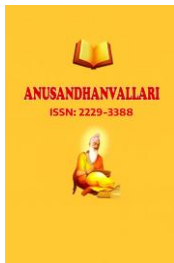
1. Introduction

Overcrowding in prisons poses a significant problem in the contemporary criminal justice system, especially where the undertrial prisoners are detained without conviction for long periods. Psychological trauma, emotional distress and social isolation of inmates can result from overcrowding detention facilities, judicial delays, lack of legal assistance and poor custodial conditions. Extended periods of detention can cause undertrial prisoners to suffer from anxiety, depression and uncertainty about what lies ahead. In this work, a socio-legal approach has been used to study the relationship between overcrowding and psychological trauma in prisons and the efficiency of legal protection, prison reform and rehabilitative measures inside prisons.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Institutional Conditions and Carceral Environment in Detention Facilities

Research has shown that substandard prison conditions and a lack of correction officer personnel also contribute to poor conditions in prison. In addition, limited communications with other family members and society result in emotional distress and diminish the capacity of systems of support. It is also mentioned in the literature that the administration of prisons mostly focuses on security and not rehabilitation and welfare, which means that there are no opportunities for counselling, education, and psychological care within the prisons. The institutional context, this is a factor of psychological trauma, which highlights the need for prison reforms with an emphasis on humane treatment and dignity, as well as on rehabilitative, custodial practices. The environment of the institution under which the children in custody are held has a profound impact on their physical and mental health.



Lack of amenities and space in prisons, poor hygiene, inadequate ventilation, limited medical facilities and access to recreation have a detrimental impact on prisoners' mental health and dignity. Often in developing countries, prisons are operated “over their headcounts,” which strains prison administration and the resources available to them. Legally presumed innocent until proven guilty, undertrial prisoners can face long incarceration periods due to the delays in political trials. Frequent conditions in the carceral environment include aspects such as violence, intimidation, lack of privacy and poor living conditions. These conditions help to foster stress, anxiety, frustration and social isolation for prisoners.¹

2.2 Menta

I Health Vulnerabilities and Emotional Distress in Custodial Spaces

Mental Health Issue	Causes in Custodial Environment	Psychological Impact
Anxiety	Uncertainty regarding trial and detention period	Fear, panic, emotional instability
Depression	Prolonged incarceration and social isolation	Hopelessness, low motivation
Insomnia	Overcrowding and stressful prison conditions	Fatigue, cognitive disturbance
Traumatic Stress	Exposure to violence and custodial abuse	Emotional trauma and fear
Social Withdrawal	Lack of family interaction and support	Loneliness and alienation
Suicidal Tendencies	Mental distress and prolonged uncertainty	Self-harm and severe psychological breakdown

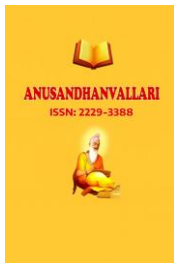
Table 1: Common Mental Health Vulnerabilities among Undertrial Prisoners

The psychopathologies of the undertrial prisoners have turned out to be a serious problem in corrections. Pre-trial detention puts the inmate in emotional distress, fear, depression and anxiety. However, unlike those who are already convicted of a crime, undertrials have to live with psychological stress due to the uncertainty of the length of their trials and verdicts. Restriction of liberty, living without conviction for a long time, leads to helplessness, hopelessness and has a negative impact on emotional and cognitive functions. Custodial environments are often linked to poor conditions in daily life, social stigma and lack of psychological support systems. Excessive overcrowding and poor conditions in institutions can cause prisoners to suffer from feelings of loneliness, humiliation, insomnia and traumatic stress.²

Even prison violence, abuse and custodial neglect, research studies show, further compounds inmates' mental health issues. A lot of the undertrial prisoners are also from the economically and socially backward sections of society and hence are more prone to psychological collapse in prisons. Incarcerated people often overlook mental health due to a lack of resources for mental health and counselling. It has been stressed in the literature that untreated psychological trauma is associated with the presence of mental disorders in the long run, in addition to suicidal tendencies and behavioural disorders. It is therefore important to understand emotional distress in a

¹ Mazher, Sania, and Takashi Arai. "Behind bars: A trauma-informed examination of mental health through importation and deprivation models in prisons." *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 9.1 (2025): 100516.

² Shah, Saeedah, Novera Bhatti, and Tanveer Ahmed Daudani. "Prison Overcrowding and its Impact on Rehabilitation Outcomes: A Comparative Policy Analysis." *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 10.1 (2026): 253-266.



custodial care environment to aid in the creation of humane correctional policies and better mental healthcare mechanisms within prisons.

2.3 Socio-Economic Marginalization and Prolonged Pre-Trial Detention

One of the major factors is the socio-economic marginalisation of the undertrial prisoners. Those who are structurally deprived have a barren representation process, often fail to have any meaningful access to finances or social service networks and thus are harsher on standing, sit out of custody on bail and hence incarcerated longer. Several contributing factors, such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and social exclusion, bear a significant weight on the experience of undertrial prisoners in the criminal justice system. Systemic inequalities and discriminatory practices have been shown in many studies to disproportionately affect marginalised communities and put them in prison cells. Undertrial prisoners from other socio-economic statuses are often detained due to the inability to pay a bail bond or obtain legal aid for minor crimes.

They are also particularly vulnerable because of the delays undergone by the investigation and judicial process, and the psychological suffering. The impact of this detention extends beyond just the prisoners themselves, impacting the family, the job market, and the community. Literature also places emphasis on the dependence of overstretched legal aid systems, which can be sub-optimal and inadequate, caused by socio-economic disadvantage. The resulting extended period of detention is an emotional trauma, social alienation and loss of dignity. The researchers suggest that to alleviate the problem of overcrowding in prisons and the protection of rights for the undertrial prisoners, attention must be given towards eliminating socio-economic inequalities and access to justice in the criminal justice system.³

2.4 Human Dignity, Custodial Rights, and Access to Justice

A respect for human dignity is acknowledged to be a key component of the concept of protecting prisoners' rights in democratic societies. The constitutional and human rights of undertrial prisoners, even when they are in custody, include the right to life, dignity, equality and fair treatment, etc. However, literature indicates that overcrowded prisons and inadequate custodial conditions frequently violate these rights, resulting in degrading and inhumane treatment. One of the top issues for undertrial prisoners (UTPs), especially for those belonging to a marginalised class of society, is access to justice. Insufficient legal assistance, lack of awareness of the availability of legal assistance, and delays in legal proceedings are all factors which take their toll on prisoners and result in a failure to achieve fair and prompt justice.

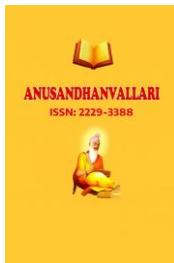
Scholars have stated that the delay of speedy trials and extended incarceration are a violation of the Constitution's commitment to the right of presumption of innocence, and hurt the mental and emotional condition of prisoners. Custodial violence, neglect and lack of access to health care and communication facilities also affect human dignity in prisons. Judicial action and the human rights regime have tried to protect custodial rights; prison re-take and legal protections. However, there are still gaps in the implementation. There is a strong push for rights-based prison administration of undertrial prisoners, the improvement of legal aid services and a rehab approach in prison management to ensure dignity and access to justice and to ensure equality of treatment.⁴

2.5 Contemporary Reform Discourses and Rehabilitation-Oriented Approaches

In modern discourses on prison reform, which no longer have a purely punitive perspective, there is an emphasis on prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates and protection of their human rights, even though abstract concepts are often similar. It is believed by experts and policy makers that correctional institutions should

³ Jena, Bikram Kumar. "A Dilemma of Living in the Society: A Socio-Cultural Insight into Mental Health Challenges of Ex-Prisoner Women in India." *Studies in Indian Anthropology and Sociology* 2.1 (2025): 1-20.

⁴ Kaul, Lepakshi, Swikar Lama, and Priyaranjan Maral. "Reconnoitering the Association Between Childhood Trauma and Perceived Attachment Styles: A Study Conducted in Northern and Western Prisons of India." *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine* (2026): 02537176251406856.



be places of transformation and healing of psychological processes, not of increased trauma and social disconnection. International human rights also require humane treatment, health care facilities, and protection against degrading conditions. Nevertheless, numerous prison systems continue to struggle with overcrowding, lack of infrastructure and little access to qualified individuals. There are also discussions on the reforms in Parliament recently on bail reforms, speedy trial, digital case management and better access to legal assistance for undertrial prisoners. The psychological impact of incarceration is an issue that researchers stress the need for mental health care services and reintegration into society. Overall, the prison reforms are rehab oriented and the aim is to strike a balance between the interest of the society and dignity, mental health and safeguarding of all the constitutional rights of the prisoners.

3. Research Objectives

- To see how overcrowding has affected the psychological health of undertrial prisoners.
- To examine the socio-legal factors that lead to long-term stay of persons as undertrials in a correctional home.
- To assess the effectiveness of constitutional and legal protection of under-trial prisoners.
- To recommend policy changes and rehabilitation-oriented options to better care for prisoners and to enhance mental health care.

4. Research Questions

- How does prison overcrowding affect the mental and emotional health of undertrial prisoners?
- What are the socio-economic and legal issues creating an excess of undertrials?
- What is the realisation of constitutional guarantees and custody rights in prisons?
- What could be done to minimise psychological harm and to make system corrections?

5. Hypotheses

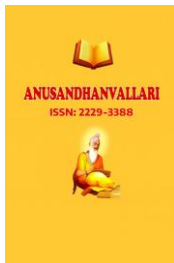
- **H1:** The psychological trauma that is caused to persons who become undertrial prisoners is greatly affected by the phenomenon of overcrowding of prisons.
- **H2:** Long-term pre-trial detention adds to the emotional distress, anxiety and mental instability of inmates.
- **H3:** Marginalisation in socioeconomic terms also impacts unequal access to justice and longer stays in prison for undertrial prisoners.
- **H4:** Psychological trauma and conditions can be minimised through effective prison reforms and mental health support.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Analytical Framework and Study Design

In the present study, it is a general socio-legal approach to look at the interrelationship between prison overcrowding and the psychological trauma of undertrial prisoners. The usage of a socio-legal approach is suitable, as it relates to both the legal aspects, namely constitutional protection and how courts process these cases, and the social aspects, namely mental health, marginalisation and prison conditions.⁵ The study is descriptive-analytical, where insight into the situation of detention centres and the psychological effects of long stay on under-

⁵ Sinha, Dakshayani, and Pallavi Keswani. "Rehabilitation vs Punishment: How prison design system shapes behaviour." *Innovative Multidisciplinary Approaches to Global Challenges: Sustainability, Equity, and Ethics in an Interconnected World (IMASEE 2025)*. Atlantis Press, 2025.



trial prisoners in the detention centre has been sought. This research is mostly carried out through qualitative research methods with the use of secondary quantitative data that are collected from official reports and statistical records. The analytical framework combines the theories on human rights, social exclusion, trauma, and custodial justice when the experiences of the undertrial prisoners in the correctional institutions are considered. It also involves a comparative analysis of the standards in prisons nationally and internationally to consider the national level of legal protections and institutional practices. This study seeks to critically examine prison management, the delay of justice and the rehabilitative process of the criminal justice system.

6.2 Techniques of Evidence Collection and Source Evaluation

The study will be done with primary and secondary sources of information to make the study comprehensive and reliable. Some of the main sources of research include books, journal articles, legal commentaries, government publications, prison manuals, National Crime Records Bureau statistics, International human rights documents, pertinent judicial rulings and the constitutional provisions of prisoners' rights and prison reforms. Interviews and questionnaires as well as dialog with legal experts, prison officers, psychologists and inmates having first-hand knowledge of the situation of the prison and psychological trauma if any will be used to collect the main data.

The use of such techniques in order to gain a greater understanding of the experience of the undertrial prisoners, and of the custodial policies. Source Evaluation is when you have a choice among materials which are legally and/or academically recognized as legitimate sources of information that have undergone some form of peer review and are trusted. Studies and official reports are accorded high priority as this is the only way of ensuring up-to-date analysis and information about the problem overcrowding in prisons and mental health issues. Several sources can be compared to find commonalities, areas of research and differences. In this systematic evidence collection, they have received support with the evidence collection process and it results in the interpretation of the objective of the socio-legal aspects.⁶

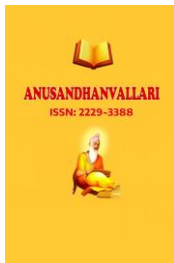
6.3 Interpretation Procedures and Validation of Findings

Research Component	Interpretation Technique	Validation Method
Prison Overcrowding Data	Comparative and descriptive analysis	Cross-checking with NCRB and official reports
Psychological Trauma Findings	Thematic interpretation	Review of academic and psychological studies
Legal and Constitutional Analysis	Doctrinal and socio-legal interpretation	Verification through case laws and statutes
Judicial Pronouncements	Analytical case study method	Comparison with constitutional principles
International Human Rights Standards	Comparative legal analysis	Evaluation with international conventions
Research Findings and Conclusions	Integrated qualitative assessment	Triangulation of multiple secondary sources

Table 2: Interpretation and Validation Techniques Used in the Study

The interpretation of the findings of this study is carried out qualitatively and analytically, namely by relating to legal reality in the prison institution to social reality. The themes that have been identified correspond to data

⁶ Ganesh, Balasubramanian, et al. "HIV Prevalence and Associated Risk Factors among Prisoners in South Indian States: Evidence from HIV Sentinel Surveillance 2019–2020." *Indian Journal of Public Health* 69.Suppl 1 (2025): S32-S38.



collected from the literature and there is clear sorting of data. The research will be descriptive that explains the understanding of the effect of the embedded legal framework and prison conditions on mental and emotional health of the subject matter, which is the undertrial. Thematic interpretation takes place during the course of the study and categorises the information collected into four broad themes: emotional distress, socio-economic marginalisation, prison administration and access to justice. The interpretation of the courts, the constitutional safeguards, as well as the international human rights standards are interpreted with regard to the real situation in detention facilities.

Similarities and differences are also analysed comparatively between current prison policies and reform strategies that have been implemented in other jurisdictions. Findings are validated by cross verifying data from diverse and quality sources like academic literature, official reports and empirical observations. Throughout the process, there is a relationship between theory and evidence to be collected to remove any bias and achieve a more accurate process. The sources of law and statistics used are real, so that the conclusions are more reliable. That is a systematic interpretation, so that it can be concluded and recommended to improve prison administration and the prevention of prisoners' mental health and human dignity.⁷

7. Legal and Constitutional Framework

7.1 Jurisprudential Foundations of Prisoners' Rights

The concept of prisoners' rights has jurisprudential bases that stem from the fact that the custody does not take away from the person the aspects of human and constitutional rights. Modern jurisprudences have established that prisoners maintain dignity, equality and protection from inhuman and degrading treatment. Varying interpretations of the constitution, the human rights theories and judicial activism stressing a greater level of humane treatment for inmates in correctional facilities have contributed to the evolution of the concept of prisoners' rights. Every human being, including the undertrial prisoner, in a democratic society has a right to life and personal liberty. Non-juristic law experts contend that fundamental non-legal rights should not be abridged, and its only physical freedom that's permitted to be curtailed by incarceration.

As far as the undertrial prisoners are concerned, the example of natural justice and presumption of innocence is highly relevant. Thus, it is morally and legally obligated to give fair treatment and decent living conditions in prisons. Through judicial interpretation, the scope of the prisoners' rights has been extended, and access to legal assistance, health care services, speedy trial, and protection from custodial violence have been seen as the constitutional guarantees of such rights. Jurisprudence also emphasises the rehabilitative aspect and the reformatory justice rather than merely punishment. The preceding legal principles emphasise the respect for human dignity, mental health and access to justice of people held in prison and the balancing of the security of prisons with these goals.⁸

7.2 Procedural Safeguards in Pre-Trial Detention Mechanisms

The significance of procedural safeguards in pre-trial detention mechanisms cannot be overemphasised, as it works towards safeguarding the rights and liberties of the undertrial prisoners in the criminal justice process. These protections are intended to ensure, among other things, that no one is arbitrarily detained, that there is fair process in the law, and that in the Constitution, the presumption of innocence is upheld. Important legal issues, including arrest, bail, legal counsel and complex general due processes are significant when it comes to protecting people from unjustified and extended detention. Some of the most critical forms of protection are the person's right to be told why they are being arrested and to have counsel. It is especially significant to allow the provision

⁷ Kaur, Richa. "Prisoners' Rights in India: A Human Rights Perspective." *Christ ULJ* 14 (2025): 105.

⁸ Naz, Naseem Akhtar. "Beyond Containment: Restoring Constitutional Dignity in Punjab Prisons." *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)* 9.1 (2026): 6-29.

of legal assistance to economically weaker prisoners who may be able to come out only by getting legal representation.

The requirement of bail provisions is also a protective measure to reduce unnecessary time to be spent before the conviction hearing. However, the procedures are frequently inadequate, either because of delays or the lack of available space in courts, or administrative inefficiencies. Judicial oversight is an important aspect of a mechanism to hold people accountable. The courts make frequent interventions on the use of law on issues of illegal detention, custodial abuse and violation of rights. Even though there are constitutional and statutory safeguards, prolonged detention of many undertrial prisoners is possible via systemic failures. Increasing procedural safeguards with the help of efficient law enforcement assistance, electronic case management and rapid trial will play a key role in attaining fairness, minimising overcrowding in prisons and safeguarding the dignity of human beings.⁹

7.3 International Norms Governing Custodial Welfare and Human Dignity

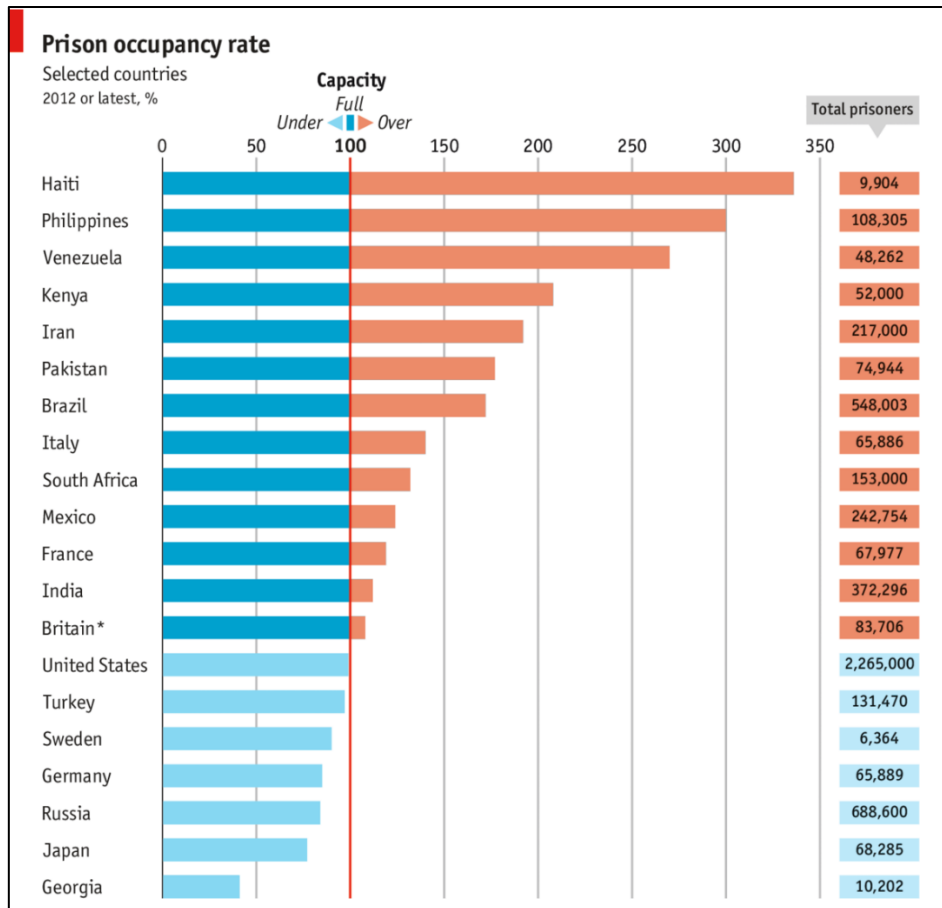
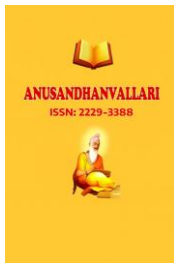


Figure 1: International Comparison of Prison Occupancy Levels and Total Prison Population

(Source: PRC, 2025)

International standards on custodial welfare and human dignity set minimum standards for an inmate's treatment and the importance of safeguarding fundamental human rights in prison. Under international human rights treaties,

⁹ Choudhury, Kaustav. "Algorithmic Anklets: A Case for Electronically Monitored Bail (EMB) in India." *Multidisciplinary Research Journal* (2025): 101-109.



no one loses his or her right to be treated with humanity, dignity and respect simply because he or she is missing in court. The standards aim to stop torture, degrading treatment that might happen in detention centres, custodial violence and neglect. Depending on the country, these international standards (the Nelson Mandela Rules) give detailed instructions on the housing, medical care, hygiene, discipline and rehabilitation of the inmates. Further, rights to a fair trial, the prohibition of arbitrary arrest and humane treatment in custody are also highlighted under various international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These international standards promote rehabilitation approaches for prisons instead of punitive approaches. Custodial welfare is recognised as essential, and includes access to vulnerable groups, mental healthcare, communication with family members, protection of vulnerable groups, and access to legal assistance. Many countries, however, still have problems with overcrowding, poor infrastructure and the implementation of these standards. It is emphasised in the literature that the domestic legislation needs to be made more in line with international human rights principles, which will allow dignity, equality and psychological well-being to the undertrial prisoners as well.¹⁰

7.4 Role of Judicial Interpretation in Advancing Prison Justice

Judicial interpretation has had an immense role in the development of prison justice and the protection of the rights of the undertrial prisoners. Judges have laid new standards for highly personalised constitutional rights, and proclaimed that it is not the seller's duty to define the limits of respect for human dignity and the right to Basic Legal Safeguards while a person is a prisoner. The judiciary has, through progressive judgments influenced things like custodial violence, delay in trials, overcrowding, as well as inhumane conditions in prisons, making prison reform a push. Right to life and personal liberty has been defined as the "right to humane treatment, health care and speedy justice of prisoners.

Extended periods of detention without trial are contrary to the principles of the Constitution and have been detrimental to both mental and emotional health. There is also a heightened focus on legal assistance, fair processes and accountability of prison officials for the sake of custodial justice as a result of judicial interventions. Public Interest Litigations and Human Rights Petitions have raised a voice by courts in systemic failures of the prison administration and suggested changes. Through judicial interpretation, the use of rehabilitation-oriented approaches has been promoted, and greater responsibility has been placed on the state authorities to prevent prisoners from being subjected to degrading treatment. Nevertheless, such progress has still been hindered by faults in the system related to the poor infrastructure as well as administrative inefficiencies. Still, however, judicial activism has been one of the key tools that can help in prison reform, for the protection of human dignity and for facilitating access to justice for untried prisoners.

8. Prison Overcrowding and Its Causes

8.1 Structural Deficiencies and Administrative Constraints within Correctional Institutions

Over the last decade, inadequate facilities and restrictions on paperwork have become significant obstacles to solving overcrowding and declining custodial conditions. Many prisons are being overcrowded with inadequate accommodation, poor sanitation and insufficient healthcare facilities, and are lacking necessities. The lack of prison staff and correctional officers also impacts effective prison management outcomes, and hence, the pressure on the already failing prison administration. Such institutional shortcomings have a detrimental impact on security and the welfare of the prisoners. Most of the prisons lack facilities to offer rehabilitation, counselling, education

¹⁰ Raj, Prithivi. "Ensuring Mental Health as a Human Right for Prisoners: Legal Barriers, Policy Gaps, and Advocacy for Reform." *International Journal of Law, Management and Humanities* 8.2 (2025): 3891-3910.

and recreational activities in high-density prisons. Due to a lack of separate facilities, undertrial prisoners are often co-mingled with convicted prisoners, and exposed to violence, intimidation and psychological stress.¹¹ Additionally, administrative shortcomings, including record keeping, delayed prisoner transfers and coordination between judicial and prisoners' officers, also cause delays in detention and hardship. Literature highlights how many jurisdictions in the world still view security and incarceration as important factors in prison administration rather than rehabilitative and mental health. Limited investments and a lack of governmental interest are also associated with a delay in infrastructure development and modernisation of prisons. This makes it difficult for correctional facilities to provide their inmates with decent living conditions and a suitable method of rehabilitation. Removing these structural and administrative shortcomings is critical to de-stress overcrowding in prisons, safeguard prisoners' rights, and make prison operations more effective.

8.2 Socio-Economic and Procedural Factors Contributing to Excessive Undertrial Detention

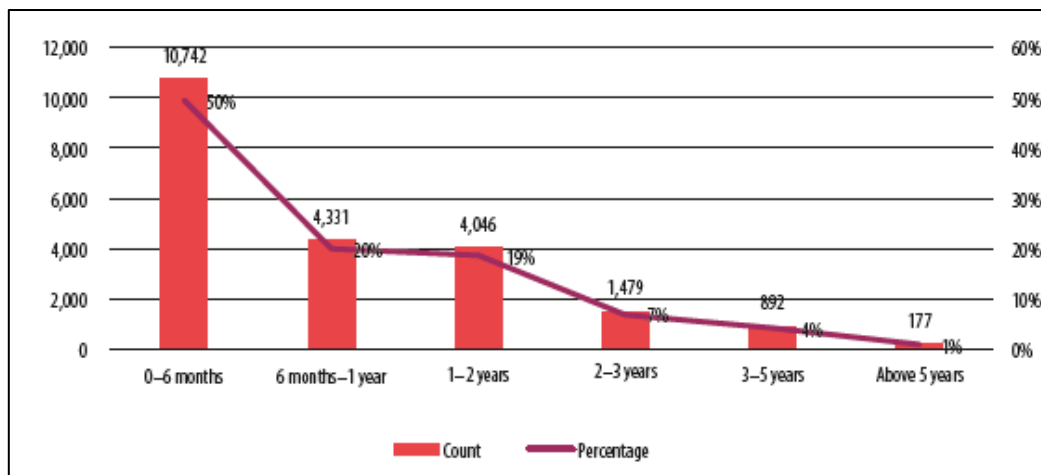


Figure 2: Duration of Undertrial Detention in Indian Prisons

(Source: Daksh, 2025)

Socio-economic and procedural considerations are important factors, likely to contribute to high levels of under-trial detention rates in the criminal justice system. Persons from economically downtrodden, socially marginalised groups may be held in custody for a long time, due to their lack of resources to pay bail, advocate and other procedural costs. A lack of financial resources, lack of literacy, lack of jobs and social exclusion contribute to situations of vulnerability that can lead to higher risks of spending more time in detention, and unfair treatment in legal processes. Another major reason for high rates of under-trial detention would be due to procedural delays. The length of pre-trial incarceration is greatly extended due to delays in the investigation process, delays in judges' appointment, time-consuming courts, adjournment of cases and delays in filing charge sheets.¹²

Many of those who are accused of minor offences are locked up in prison for many years, without any trial. These delays aim not only at the increase of the prison population, but also bring about serious psychological trauma, emotional distress and disintegrating social existence. A lack of awareness of their legal rights, compounded with

¹¹ Jain, Akshat D. "Criminal Justice and Human Rights: A Discussion of Custodial Violence, Pretrial Detention and Capital punishment." *Journal of Legal Research and Polity* 2.2 (2025): 15-30.

¹² Attri, Vinay, and Manish Yadav. "The Constitutional Promise and the Prison Reality: A Critical Appraisal of Human Rights Protection in Indian Prisons." *Cadernos de Pós-Graduação em Direito Político e Econômico* 26.1 (2026): 863-869.

a lack of access to effective legal assistance, heightens the plight of marginalised prisoners. There are further procedural inefficiencies in the ineptitude of coordination among the police authorities, courts and prison administration. According to research studies, disadvantaged groups in a society face the brunt of systemic inequalities and institutional delays. Thus, reforms aimed at faster courts, free legal representation, ease of bail and efficiency of the courts are crucial for decreasing the fundamental issue of excessiveness of the undertrial population and the level of access to justice.

9. Psychological Trauma Among Undertrial Prisoners

9.1 Emotional Instability and Cognitive Disturbances during Prolonged Incarceration

Undertrial prisoners suffer from serious and widespread internal disturbances in their emotional and cognitive activities as a result of prolonged detention. Longer periods of time in detention without conviction can give rise to a sense of uncertainty, fear, frustration and hopelessness, which can cause a serious emotional imbalance. The uncertainty of the legal process and the deplorable conditions in correction houses often result in cases of anxiety, depression, anger and emotional weariness among the undertrial prisoners. Limitations of regular contact with family members and society are also major psychological distress and sensations. Confusion or memory problems also occur among those prisoners who have been held in jail for many years. Prison environment lacking sufficient space and being under constant stress can lead to a struggle to focus, poor judgment, memory problems and emotional numbness.

This nearly constant fear of violence, humiliation, and social stigma can make a person mentally weaker and wobble one's behavioural responses. Mental strain from periods of imprisonment often leads many prisoners to suffer from insomnia, lack of motivation and suicidal thoughts. The psychological counselling and mental health care facilities are not available in the prison, which aggravates emotional and cognitive disorders, according to a research study. In prisons, undertrial prisoners frequently go untreated as the main focus is security and discipline and not mental health. Thus, it is crucial to make extensive changes in prisons, to speed up legal processes and to have efficient psychological support.¹³

9.2 Effects of Custodial Isolation on Behavioural and Social Well-Being

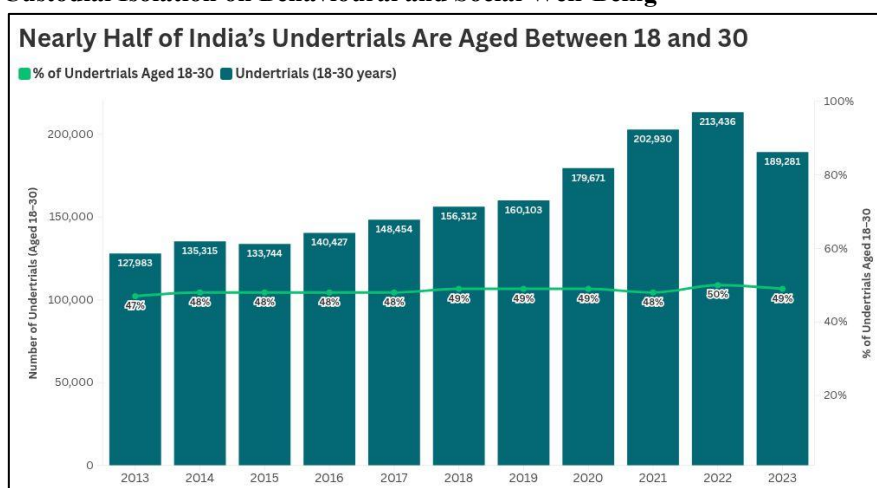
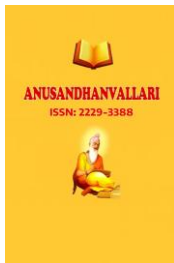


Figure 3: Age-Wise Distribution of Undertrial Prisoners in India

(Source: Moneylife, 2025)

¹³ Goswami, Parineeta. "Assessing the Human Rights and Rehabilitation Efforts in Dehradun Jail: An Analysis of Prison Conditions." *Available at SSRN 5224668* (2025).



The separation of undertrial prisoners has a serious impact on the behavioural and social health of the prisoners. Being away from family, friends, and community networks results in loneliness, abandonment and emotional disconnection. Extended prison stays are generally detrimental to prisoners' behaviour and can lead to violence, withdrawal, temper tantrums and decreased socialisation. Inside the prison, there are fewer opportunities to have meaningful communication with other people, and social participation can be less, both of which have a negative impact on interpersonal relations and emotional stability. Being removed from familiar environments, such as isolation in custodial environments, also contributes to a person's loss of self-identity and self-esteem. Undertrial prisoners can be humiliated, suffer from social stigma and fear reintegration into society.¹⁴

Stress and psychological trauma are caused by a lack of emotional support and uncertainties regarding legal issues. Words of fear, mistrust and hostile prison environments hover over people in overcrowded prisons, even though they are physically locked up with others. Custodial isolation can result in such behavioural effects as depression, anxiety disorders, emotional numbness and self-destructive tendencies. Many prisoners have difficulty adjusting to the lifestyle of prison, while others can become more socially disconnected and psychologically weak. Studies indicate that family life is compounded by a lack of counselling and recreation facilities, as well as rehabilitation opportunities. Thus, necessary steps need to be taken to foster social engagement, communication within the family, and provide psychological and mental health assistance to preserve the well-being of undertrial prisoners' behaviour and emotions.

The separation of undertrial prisoners has a serious impact on the behavioural and social health of the prisoners. Being away from family, friends, and community networks results in loneliness, abandonment and emotional disconnection. Extended prison stays are generally detrimental to prisoners' behaviour and can lead to violence, withdrawal, temper tantrums and decreased socialisation. Inside the prison, there are fewer opportunities to have meaningful communication with other people, and social participation can be less, both of which have a negative impact on interpersonal relations and emotional stability. Being removed from familiar environments, such as isolation in custodial environments, also contributes to a person's loss of self-identity and self-esteem. Undertrial prisoners can be humiliated, suffer from social stigma and fear reintegration into society.

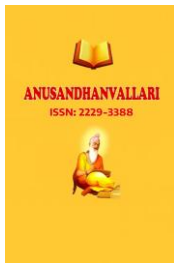
Stress and psychological trauma are caused by a lack of emotional support and uncertainties regarding legal issues. Words of fear, mistrust and hostile prison environments hover over people in overcrowded prisons, even though they are physically locked up with others. Custodial isolation can result in such behavioural effects as depression, anxiety disorders, emotional numbness and self-destructive tendencies. Many prisoners have difficulty adjusting to the lifestyle of prison, while others can become more socially disconnected and psychologically weak. Studies indicate that family life is compounded by a lack of counselling and recreation facilities, as well as rehabilitation opportunities. Thus, necessary steps need to be taken to foster social engagement, communication within the family, and provide psychological and mental health assistance to preserve the well-being of undertrial prisoners' behaviour and emotions.¹⁵

9.3 Coping Mechanisms, Resilience, and Access to Psychological Support Systems

Also, psychological stress related to the correctional environment, coping and resilience are important, reducing the psychological stress amongst the undertrial prisoners. Prisoners can deal with the unpleasantness of prison living in a multitude of ways. Others use other outlets like religion, meditation, schooling or fellow inmates to

¹⁴ Haider, Saqlain, et al. "Colonial Shadows and Modern Authorities: An In-Depth Analysis of Female Prisoners in Pakistan with Cross-Jurisdictional Insights and Primary Interviews from District Jail Kasur." *ASSAJ* 3.02 (2025): 770-791.

¹⁵ Parihar, Ravina, and Deepashri Choudhari. "Prisoners' Rights and Human Dignity: An International and National Perspective." *National Seminar on Enhancing Privacy Protection in the Digital Age: Legal Challenges & Innovations (NSEPPDA 2025)*. Atlantis Press, 2025.



keep them emotionally level and mentally balanced. Family support and communication are important coping mechanisms, which can help to minimise feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. Resilience is the capacity of prisoners to adjust to stress-inducing situations in the prison setting without losing power and maintaining emotional stability. Resilience, however, is dependent on personal factors, social supports, and prison conditions. A harsh environment and fear of violence can be emotionally overwhelming for prisoners who are placed in this situation for extended periods, particularly in environments where the facility is crowded by inmates and lacks any mental health services. Lack of prison infrastructure, structures and rehabilitation-oriented programmes weakens positive coping strategies. There are still many correctional systems that do not have adequate psychological support. Lack of trained counsellors, psychiatrists and mental healthcare professionals makes emotional disturbances in the inmates unidentified or untreated in time. Studies highlight the need for counselling therapy, rehabilitation and help groups for minimising the psychological trauma. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen the psychological network inside prisons to enhance the mental health of prisoners and help establish their dignity and rehabilitation.¹⁶

10. Case Laws and Judicial Pronouncements

10.1 Evolution of Judicial Thinking on Custodial Rights and Human Dignity

Over the years, the judicial thinking that has undergone a change both with respect to what have been termed as the custodial rights, and in respect of human dignity, has led to a different approach by the Courts towards the prisoners and also the management of Prisons. In the past, the legal systems generally considered prisoners as people in prison who would lose almost all of their rights. It is, however, the latest interpretational approach of the constitutional jurisprudence that by virtue of imprisonment, the fundamental human rights which are not curtailed by lawful detention shall not be extinguished. The importance of dignity, fair and humane treatment, health care rights and freedom from inhuman or degrading punishment has become more prominent in court decision-making over the past few years. The judiciary has been instrumental in broadening the conception of a right to welfare and to be mentally well, as part of the right to life and personal liberty. Over the years, Judges have recognised the weakness of the under-trial prisoner and passed strict verdicts against custodial violence, torture and arbitrary detention practices. The pendulum of the judge's thinking has been moving from punishment to reform, based on rights, with emphasis on reformation and social justice.

10.2 Landmark Verdicts Addressing Delay in Trial and Detention Practices

Significant judgments related to trial and detention delay have helped safeguard the rights of undertrial prisoners and ensured procedural justice in the criminal justice system. Long-term detentions without trials have been duly noted by courts as being contrary to constitutional principles and negatively affecting the right to personal liberty and human dignity. Previous court decisions have pointed out that justice in delay will not only hurt the public's trust in the judiciary but will also inflict great psychological and social damage on inmates. The most important advances in this regard were that the right to speedy trial became a part of the right to life and liberty. The courts have ordered authorities to free individuals who have been imprisoned for too long, after whom legal processes have not been fulfilled.

The courts have also emphasised the need for legal assistance, simplified bail process, efficient judicial administration and the need to ensure easy accessibility to justice for avoiding unnecessary legal detentions. These cases revealed problems like congestion in prisons, scarcity of judges, gaps in investigation and trial procedures and the need for more efficiency in the administration of justice. Judicial rulings facilitated reforms to enhance the reduction of the number of people held under arrest and to ensure constitutional safeguards. The judiciary,

¹⁶ Mazher, Sania, and Takashi Arai. "Behind bars: A trauma-informed examination of mental health through importation and deprivation models in prisons." *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 9.1 (2025): 100516.

through the elimination of the arbitrary and prolonged detention practice, has emphasised the principles of justice, fairness, and timely justice in the administration of criminal justice.

10.3 Judicial Responses to Inhumane Prison Conditions and Mental Suffering

The judicial reaction to the inhuman prison conditions, and to this misery, there remains no remedy, has made a substantial and valuable contribution towards the amelioration of prisons and to the interests of prisoners. International judicial systems have consistently ruled that conditions of overcrowding, uncleanliness, a lack of medical care, beatings and prolonged isolation are all in violation of the human dignity constitutionally guaranteed. One cannot be treated degradingly and cruelly by mere reason of its imprisonment, as has been pointed out by judicial interventions, including the cases of undertrial inmates. The courts have dealt with mental miseries by recognising that prison conditions of overcrowding and hostility have psychological consequences.¹⁷

Adverse discussions on the state's duty to provide proper medical care, mental health services, and humane living conditions in correctional institutions. The judiciary has also noted that extended stay and lack of basic amenities in prisons lead to emotional pain, anxiety, depression and marginalisation of inmates. In some of the public interest cases and constitutional remedies, the judgments of the court have compelled the prison authorities to take steps to improve the sanitation, cut down overcrowding of prisons, maintain separate facilities for vulnerable inmates and enhance re-education measures. Suppression of prison administration has fostered accountability and improved observance of human rights standards, thanks to judicial oversight.¹⁸

11. Findings and Discussion

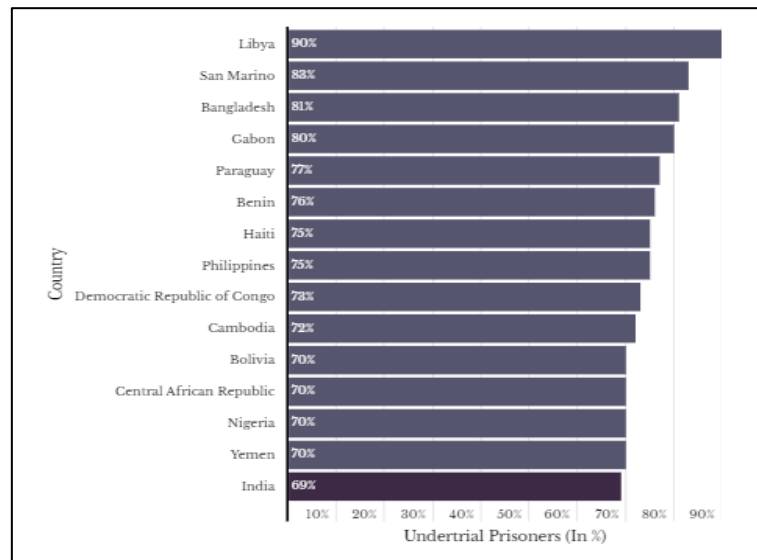
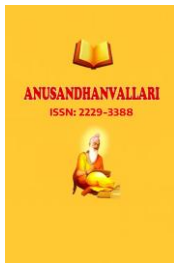


Figure 4: Countries with Higher Proportions of Undertrial Prisoners Compared to India

(Source: Scroll, 2025)

¹⁷ Shah, Saeedah, Novera Bhatti, and Tanveer Ahmed Daudani. "Prison Overcrowding and its Impact on Rehabilitation Outcomes: A Comparative Policy Analysis." *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 10.1 (2026): 253-266.

¹⁸ Jena, Bikram Kumar. "A Dilemma of Living in the Society: A Socio-Cultural Insight into Mental Health Challenges of Ex-Prisoner Women in India." *Studies in Indian Anthropology and Sociology* 2.1 (2025): 1-20.



The findings of the study indicate that the overcrowding of prisoners in the jail has direct and significant impact on psychological health and human dignity of the undertrial prisoners. Overcrowding puts inmates in a crowded living environment, lacking sanitation and privacy, access to poor health care and rehabilitation programs. These situations contribute to the emotional instability, anxiety, depression and cognitive disturbances of prisoners. Long term pre-trial detention also causes psychological trauma, because there is a sense of uncertainty among the pre-trial detainees regarding their legal situation and their future, as revealed in the study. The study also shows that socio-economic marginalisation plays an important role in this instance of excessive undertrial detention. Those from weaker sections of society are detained in jail for a longer duration because of poorly-educated lawyers, lack of money and awareness about the legal rights. Delayed court cases, poor court management and lack of adequate judges are also responsible for overcrowding in prisons and mental agony of inmates.

One important finding is that the existing legal safeguards and constitutional rights are not necessarily implemented in detention centres. Judicial measures have led to an expansion of prisoners' rights, and while the emphasis is on human treatment, there remain practical problems such as inadequate infrastructure and trained mental health professionals. The study also reveals the strain that custodial isolation puts on social connections and its impact on the behavioural health, leading to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. It is seen in the discussion that the issue of overcrowding in prisons is not just an administrative issue, but also a socio-legal and human rights issue. Trauma reduction and better custodial justice for undertrial prisoners need effective prison reforms, speedy trial, availability of legal aid and psychological counselling services.¹⁹

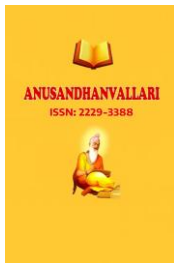
12. Recommendations and Policy Suggestions

The results of the study suggest that the current scenario of correctional institutions and the criminal justice system need in-depth reforms to tackle the issues of overcrowding and psychological trauma faced by undertrial prisoners. One of the key recommendations is the enhancement of the prison infrastructure and the governance of institutions. The living conditions in the correctional facilities should be modernised with proper space, bathroom, provision of health care and recreation facilities to make the environment of the inmates humane. Also, separate facilities must be provided for undertrial prisoners too to ensure that they are protected from violence, intimidation and any negative influence in prisons. Mechanisms for improving transparency and accountability of the administration of prisons and monitoring conditions in places of detention should be strengthened. The study also suggests that the mental health intervention program and psycho-social rehabilitation services need to be scaled up in correctional institutions. The professional psychologists, psychiatrists and trained counsellors should be regularly assigned to conduct mental health assessments and counselling support for prisoners who are emotionally distressed and have trauma. Stress management programs, emotional resilience and rehabilitation should be implemented for improvement of psychological health of prisoners. Emotional health and successful community reintegration after release can also be fostered through family engagement, family learning, skills development and family reintegration programs.²⁰

The highlight of another recommendation is the need to have rapid and efficient judgship and to do away with frivolous pre-trial detentions. To reduce delays in the criminal justice process, mechanisms such as speedy trial, simplified bail, digital case management systems and enhanced judicial capacity are crucial. The representation

¹⁹ Kaul, Lepakshi, Swikar Lama, and Priyaranjan Maral. "Reconnoitering the Association Between Childhood Trauma and Perceived Attachment Styles: A Study Conducted in Northern and Western Prisons of India." *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine* (2026): 02537176251406856.

²⁰ Sinha, Dakshayani, and Pallavi Keswani. "Rehabilitation vs Punishment: How prison design system shapes behaviour." *Innovative Multidisciplinary Approaches to Global Challenges: Sustainability, Equity, and Ethics in an Interconnected World (IMASEE 2025)*. Atlantis Press, 2025.



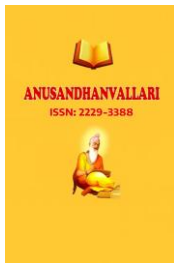
and access to justice for economically marginalised prisoners should be enhanced via the legal aid system. Alternative correction methods like community service, probation, parole and open prison systems should be advocated for light offences in order to decongest prisons. The study also recommends that the international human rights standards on dignity of prisoners and custodial welfare be implemented. Governments, prisons and judicial institutions should strive to develop prison policies that are aimed at rehabilitation, respect and promote human dignity, mental health and social reintegration. Effective prison reforms can lead to significant psychological trauma, a more humane and balanced criminal justice system and an improvement in the custodial justice.

13. Conclusion

Prison overcrowding and long-term pre-trial or post-trial custody, a kind of undertrial detentions, have turned out to be a huge socio-legal and human rights concern affecting the psychology of inmates. The study draws the following conclusions: poor conditions of prisons, delay in the courts, socio-economic inequalities, and mental health care are all factors that bring emotional distress and custodial trauma to undertrial inmates. Protective measures have been taken with the Constitution and the Court for prisoners' rights, but these have been difficult to implement. There is need to improve the prison system, fast-track courts, rehabilitative approach and psychological support systems to attain human dignity, custodial justice and criminal justice systems that are more humane.

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