

Indian jails plagued by overcrowding, lack of medical, mental health professionals: report

Only 25 psychologists available for India's entire prison population of 5.7 lakh inmates despite doubling in reported mental health illness; 43% vacancy among prison medical officers nationally

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In this file photo, an Indian police officer prepares to close one of the gates at Tihar Jail, the largest complex of prisons in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: AP

With a national average occupancy rate of more than 131%, Indian jails face extreme overcrowding and are battling multiple health challenges, according to the recently

released India Justice Report 2025. The report highlights the fact that India's prison inmate population is projected to reach 6.8 lakh by 2030, even though prison capacity is only likely to grow to 5.15 lakh.

The capacity shortage is not restricted to space alone, but extends to health staff. There are only 25 psychologists for the entire nation's prisoners, at a time when the recorded number of prisoners with mental illnesses has jumped from 4,470 in 2012 to 9,084 in 2022. Yet, the response remains largely absent, the report says.

Prisons also record a 43% vacancy among medical officers. The report, titled 'The State of Public Health in India's Prisons: India Justice Report 2025— Findings on Gaps in Staffing & Medical Care', explains that the model prison manual (2016) benchmarks the prisoner-doctor ratio at 300 prisoners to 1 doctor. "India's national average far exceeds that, standing at 775 prisoners per doctor," says the report.

It also highlights the non-availability of health data on prisoners entering jail with a disability, and those who acquire a disability within the prison.

Overcrowded jails

Overcrowding could also be a root cause of the spread of several communicable diseases, the report says. In the decade between 2012 and 2022, there have been worrisome upward shifts in prison populations in several areas.

"The total number of people incarcerated has gone up from 3.8 lakh to 5.7 lakh; national occupancy rates have spiked from 112% to 131%. Overall, the 27% increase in prison housing capacity between 2012 and 2022 (from 3.4 lakh to 4.3 lakh) has not kept pace with need. Levels of overcrowding have also escalated. For instance, in 2012, Maharashtra averaged a 99% occupancy rate but in 2022, this had increased to 161%," the report says.

Insufficient mental health staff

As of 2022, no State or Union Territory met the benchmark of one psychologist or psychiatrist per 500 inmates. At that time, there were only 69 sanctioned posts for psychologists and psychiatrists across India's 1,330 prisons and 5.7 lakh inmates, but not even half these positions were filled.

“The data records the presence of only 25 or one for every 22,929 prisoners. Twenty-five States/ Union Territories make no provision for a psychologist or psychiatrist within their cohort of correctional staff,” said Valay Singh, the lead author of the India Justice Report.

The India Justice Report (IJR) 2025 is a collaborative effort with multiple agencies in the field and is a quantitative index which uses government data to track improvements and persisting deficits in each State’s structural and financial capacity to deliver justice. It is based on quantitative measurements of budgets, human resources, infrastructure, workload, and diversity across police, judiciary, prisons, legal aid, and Human Rights Commissions for all 36 States and UTs.

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