

PRISON CONDITIONS SRI LANKA

As a nation committed to the principles of custody, care, and corrections, the Department of Prisons has seen its daily average inmate population surge dramatically in recent years, reaching levels that far exceed the authorised accommodation capacity of its facilities.

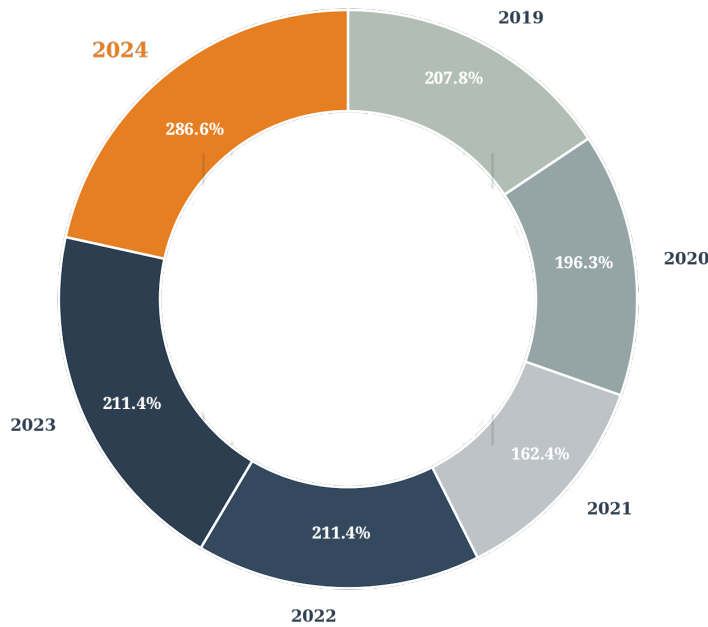
Operating at nearly 300% of designed capacity, the system is under immense pressure, with inmates often sharing limited space, inadequate sanitation, and stretched medical and counselling services. The consequences are far-reaching, compromised safety and health for prisoners and staff alike, delayed trials, reduced opportunities for rehabilitation programmes, and a growing strain on national resources that undermines the very goals of reform and social reintegration the prison system is meant to uphold.

This situation demands urgent attention from policymakers, as sustained overcrowding not only violates basic human dignity but also weakens the overall effectiveness of Sri Lanka's justice and corrections system.



COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTING
RIGHTS OF PRISONERS

PRISON OVERCROWDING CRISIS



Prison capacity has remained largely unchanged at around 10,000–13,000 spaces, while the inmate population has grown significantly, leading to severe overcrowding. Occupancy rose from 153.0% in 2015 to a peak of 286.6% in 2024 the highest in the decade—with only a temporary dip during the COVID period in 2020–2021.

29,789

Daily Average Prison Population

10,395

Authorized Accommodation

286.6%

of Capacity
(nearly 3 times over.
some facilities 300–400%+)

65%

of daily average populatio are unconvicted

Unconvicted (remand) prisoners dominate: 65% of daily average population (19,479 unconvicted vs 10,310 convicted). Many spend extended periods in custody (31% for 1–6 months as of 31 Dec 2024).



10,310

Daily average convicted

Every day, 9,795 convicted men are imprisoned, while 515 convicted women are imprisoned. This means that for every 19 convicted men who are imprisoned, roughly 1 convicted woman is imprisoned.



19,479

Daily average unconvicted

Every day, 8,423 unconvicted men are imprisoned, while 1,056 unconvicted women are imprisoned. This means that for every 8 unconvicted men who are imprisoned, roughly 1 unconvicted woman is imprisoned.

Why This Matters

Severe overcrowding undermines rehabilitation, increases health risks (including mental health and disease transmission), and hinders effective corrections. Drug offenses are the primary driver, highlighting the need for alternatives to incarceration, expanded treatment programs, and infrastructure upgrades.