

Press Release



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Awaiting-trial detainees, not convicted prisoners, driving prison overcrowding

The degree of prison overcrowding for awaiting-trial detainees rose by 1 044% and for sentenced prisoners by 18% between 1995 and 2009, according to the South African Institute of Race Relations.

Prison overcrowding is exacerbated by the increase in the duration that awaiting-trial detainees are held in custody.

The number of detainees held for over 24 months went up by 5 000% between 1996 and 2005. The number of those held in custody for between 18 and 24 months rose by 4 000%.

While the Department of Correctional Services reserves 25 000 prison beds for awaiting-trial detainees, their number grew from 27 320 in 1995 to 50 675 in 2009, a rise of 86%. The number of beds for sentenced prisoners increased from 69 796 to 90 297, or by 29%, while the number of sentenced inmates rose from 85 252 to 113 992, or by 34%.

The latest *South Africa Survey*, to be published by the Institute in Johannesburg next week, shows that there were a total 115 297 prison beds for 164 667 prison inmates in December 2009, a 43% degree of overcrowding.

In 2009, the degree of overcrowding was much higher for awaiting-trial detainees at 103% than it was for sentenced prisoners at 26%.

'The fact that awaiting-trial accommodation never increased might have some bearing on the figures, but the fact remains that the number of awaiting-trial detainees has been growing at a much faster rate than that of sentenced prisoners,' said Kerwin Lebone of the Institute's research department.

Overcrowding puts a burden on prison infrastructure, poses difficulties of inmate monitoring, and severely compromises the department's objectives of rehabilitating offenders, Lebone said. Another issue is that people who might otherwise be innocent or unable to afford bail are rendered unproductive and unable to pursue livelihoods, at a huge cost to the taxpayer.

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