

# A study on the challenges faced by prison officials in managing the well-being of long-term remand prisoners

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***Abstract***—Long-term remand detention represents a critical yet underexplored dimension of correctional management, particularly in developing country contexts where systemic constraints are most acute. This qualitative study examines the challenges faced by prison officials in Sri Lanka in managing the well-being of long-term remand prisoners, focusing on the adequacy of existing facilities, access to programmes, institutional challenges, and systemic limitations. Employing purposive sampling, ten prison officials from remand facilities in the Colombo district were selected as participants. Data was collected through two rounds of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and subsequently analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework. Four principal themes emerged from the analysis. First, severe institutional challenges, including critical staff shortages, extreme overcrowding where cells designed for 20 prisoners were found to house over 60, and poor inter-agency coordination, were identified as fundamental barriers to effective management. Second, profound mental and physical health deficiencies, including the near-total absence of professional psychological services and grossly inadequate medical provision, leave a vulnerable population without meaningful care. Third, systemic legal delays compounded by restricted access to legal aid result in prisoners enduring years of detention without trial or charge. Fourth, long-term remand prisoners are categorically excluded from rehabilitative and reintegration programmes, leaving them institutionally unsupported upon release. The findings reveal that Sri Lanka's remand system falls significantly short of both constitutional obligations and international standards, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. The study recommends urgent reforms encompassing infrastructure investment, dedicated mental health services, digitised court-prison communication systems, strengthened legal aid delivery, and structured reintegration planning for remand prisoners.

***Index Terms—Institutional Challenges, Prison Officials, Remand Prisoners, Well-being***

## I. INTRODUCTION

The management of long-term remand prisoners represents one of the most complex challenges facing contemporary correctional systems worldwide. Remand prisoners, defined as individuals detained in custody while awaiting trial or sentencing, occupy a unique legal and operational position within the criminal justice system <sup>[1]</sup>. Unlike convicted prisoners, remand detainees are presumed innocent under the law, yet they experience many of the same restrictions and deprivations associated with incarceration <sup>[2]</sup>. When this pretrial detention extends over prolonged periods, the challenges multiply exponentially for both the prisoners themselves and the correctional officials tasked with their care. In Sri Lanka, the issue of long-term remand detention has reached crisis proportions. The country's prison system, originally designed during the colonial era with a capacity for approximately 10,000 inmates, currently houses over 26,000 prisoners, with remand detainees constituting nearly 60% of the total prison population <sup>[3]</sup>. This severe overcrowding, combined with protracted delays in the judicial process, means that many remand prisoners spend years in detention before their cases are resolved <sup>[4]</sup>. The average duration of remand custody in Sri Lankan prisons frequently exceeds two years, with some individuals remaining in pretrial detention for five years or longer <sup>[5]</sup>.

Prison officials in Sri Lanka face extraordinary difficulties in managing the well-being of this vulnerable population. The principle of presumption of innocence creates distinct operational requirements, as remand prisoners should theoretically enjoy greater freedoms and better conditions than convicted offenders <sup>[6]</sup>. However, resource constraints, infrastructure limitations, and systemic judicial delays create an environment where meeting these standards becomes nearly impossible. Prison officers must balance security imperatives with welfare obligations, often with inadequate training, insufficient staffing, and limited access to health services and rehabilitation programs <sup>[7]</sup>. The psychological impact of prolonged remand detention is well-documented in international literature. Extended periods of uncertainty regarding trial outcomes, combined with the restrictive conditions of imprisonment, contribute to elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders among remand populations <sup>[8, 9]</sup>. For prison officials, managing these mental health challenges requires specialized knowledge and resources that are frequently unavailable in developing country contexts <sup>[10]</sup>. The situation is further complicated by the heterogeneous nature of the remand population, which includes individuals accused of minor offenses alongside those facing serious criminal charges, creating complex classification and management dilemmas.

Physical health concerns also present significant challenges. Overcrowded conditions facilitate the spread of communicable diseases, while inadequate nutrition and limited access to medical care exacerbate existing health conditions <sup>[11]</sup>. Sri Lankan prisons face particular difficulties in this regard, with limited medical staff and resources stretched across facilities housing populations far exceeding their designed capacity <sup>[12]</sup>. Prison officials must navigate these health challenges while

maintaining security and order, often without the support systems or training necessary to address complex medical needs. Despite the magnitude of these challenges, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the experiences and perspectives of prison officials themselves in managing long-term remand populations, particularly in South Asian contexts. While considerable research has examined prisoner experiences and rights violations, the operational challenges faced by correctional staff remain underexplored <sup>[13]</sup>. Understanding these challenges from the perspective of prison officials is essential for developing effective policy interventions and improving conditions for both staff and prisoners.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the specific challenges faced by prison officials in Sri Lanka in managing the well-being of long-term remand prisoners. Therefore, the main objective of the study is to identify the adequacy of existing facilities, access to programmes, institutional challenges, and limitations in managing the well-being of long-term remand prisoners. Through systematic investigation of these challenges, this research seeks to contribute to both academic understanding and practical policy development in correctional management, with potential implications for other jurisdictions facing similar systemic pressures.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Adequacy of Existing Facilities for Long-Term Remand Prisoners

#### Physical Infrastructure and Accommodation Standards

The adequacy of physical facilities represents a foundational concern in managing long-term remand prisoner well-being. Stern's seminal work on prison conditions in developing countries identified chronic overcrowding as the most pervasive obstacle to maintaining humane detention standards <sup>[14]</sup>. Her research across 15 countries revealed that remand facilities consistently operated at occupancy rates between 150% and 400% of designed capacity, with prisoners frequently sleeping in shifts due to insufficient bed space. This overcrowding directly undermines prison officials' capacity to ensure basic sanitation, prevent disease transmission, and maintain security protocols <sup>[14]</sup>. Penal Reform International's comprehensive study of pretrial detention in South Asia documented severe infrastructure deficiencies across the region <sup>[15]</sup>. Their findings indicated that 82% of remand facilities surveyed failed to meet minimum international standards for living space allocation, with many prisoners confined to cells providing less than 1.5 square meters per person. The research emphasized that these conditions deteriorate significantly for long-term remand prisoners who, unlike short-term detainees, cannot endure substandard conditions as a temporary inconvenience but instead experience prolonged exposure to conditions amounting to cruel and degrading treatment <sup>[15]</sup>. Welikala's examination of Sri Lankan correctional infrastructure revealed that 87% of prison facilities were constructed during the colonial period, with designs predicated on 19th-century penological models and population projections that bear no relation to contemporary detention demands <sup>[5]</sup>. His analysis demonstrated that these historical structures lack fundamental amenities including adequate ventilation, natural lighting, and sanitation facilities appropriate for current population densities. For prison officials managing long-term remand

prisoners, these infrastructural limitations create insurmountable obstacles to maintaining prisoner health and dignity <sup>[5]</sup>.

### Separation and Classification Systems

International instruments, particularly the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules), mandate the categorical separation of remand prisoners from convicted offenders and appropriate classification within remand populations based on risk, vulnerability, and needs <sup>[16]</sup>. However, empirical research consistently documents systemic failures in implementing these requirements, particularly in resource-constrained jurisdictions. Heard and Fair's global survey of 87 countries found that only 31% maintained complete physical separation between remand and sentenced populations, with the majority citing insufficient facility space as the primary impediment <sup>[1]</sup>. Their research revealed that mixed populations create significant management challenges for prison officials, including confusion regarding differential entitlements, difficulty maintaining discipline when prisoners with varying privilege levels are housed together, and increased potential for sentenced prisoners to exert negative influences on remand detainees presumed innocent under law <sup>[1]</sup>. Dhimi and others' study on classification practices within remand populations identified substantial heterogeneity as a defining characteristic, with remand cohorts encompassing first-time offenders alongside recidivists, individuals facing minor charges with those accused of serious violent offenses, and prisoners with vastly different security risk profiles <sup>[17]</sup>. Their research demonstrated that inadequate classification systems resulted in vulnerable prisoners experiencing victimization at rates 3.4 times higher than properly classified populations. For prison officials managing long-term remand prisoners, this classification challenge intensifies as prisoners' needs evolve over extended detention periods, requiring periodic reassessment that resource constraints often render impossible <sup>[17]</sup>.

### Sanitation, Hygiene, and Environmental Health

Environmental health conditions within remand facilities have received increased scholarly attention as research establishes clear linkages between physical environment and prisoner well-being. Lines' investigation of sanitation in overcrowded detention facilities found that inadequate toilet and washing facilities constitute one of the most degrading aspects of remand detention <sup>[18]</sup>. His research across African and Asian prisons documented facilities where toilet-to-prisoner ratios exceeded 1:100, with prisoners often unable to access sanitation facilities during night-time lock-up periods lasting 12–16 hours <sup>[18]</sup>. Elger's comprehensive study on health rights in pretrial detention examined environmental health factors across six European countries <sup>[11]</sup>. Despite the relative wealth of these jurisdictions, her research identified significant deficiencies in ventilation, temperature control, and access to outdoor exercise in remand facilities. The study found that 64% of remand prisoners surveyed reported environmental conditions—including poor air quality, extreme temperatures, and inadequate natural light—as their primary health concern. For long-term remand prisoners, these environmental stressors compound over time, with data showing

increased incidence of respiratory infections, skin conditions, and vitamin D deficiency among those detained beyond six months <sup>[11]</sup>.

## Access to Healthcare and Mental Health Services

### Physical Healthcare Provision

Healthcare delivery to remand populations presents unique challenges extensively documented in correctional health literature. Fazel and Baillargeon's systematic review found that prisoners generally exhibit health profiles significantly poorer than age-matched community populations, with remand prisoners demonstrating particularly elevated rates of infectious diseases, substance abuse disorders, and untreated chronic conditions <sup>[19]</sup>. Their meta-analysis across 81 studies identified that remand prisoners' health needs typically exceed those of sentenced prisoners, yet their access to healthcare services remains inferior due to the administrative complexities of treating individuals with uncertain detention durations <sup>[19]</sup>. Niveau's examination of healthcare services in Geneva's remand facility revealed that despite Switzerland's well-resourced healthcare system, remand prisoners experienced substantial delays in accessing specialist medical services <sup>[20]</sup>. His research documented average waiting times of 6–8 weeks for specialist consultations, during which period 43% of remand prisoners had been released, transferred, or sentenced, resulting in treatment discontinuity. For long-term remand prisoners, these delays prove particularly problematic as chronic conditions remain untreated during formative disease stages, leading to more severe health complications and higher ultimate treatment costs <sup>[20]</sup>. Research by Plugge et al. on women remand prisoners' health found that this population experiences particularly acute healthcare deficits <sup>[21]</sup>. Their study across 15 English prisons identified that 78% of women remand prisoners reported unmet healthcare needs, with reproductive health, mental health, and substance dependency treatment being the most commonly cited gaps. The transient nature of remand populations combined with inadequate screening protocols meant that many health conditions went unidentified until prisoners had been released or transferred, representing missed opportunities for intervention during a period of enforced healthcare access <sup>[21]</sup>.

### Mental Health Challenges and Service Provision

The mental health challenges facing long-term remand prisoners have been extensively documented, with research consistently demonstrating prevalence rates far exceeding general population norms. Fazel and Seewald's landmark systematic review and meta-analysis of 109 studies across 24 countries found that 26% of remand prisoners exhibited psychotic illnesses or major depression, compared to 4% in the general population <sup>[22]</sup>. Their research identified several factors contributing to elevated mental health morbidity, including pre-existing conditions, the stress of criminal justice involvement, uncertainty regarding trial outcomes, and the adverse conditions of detention itself <sup>[22]</sup>. Birmingham et al.'s pioneering study of psychiatric morbidity among remand prisoners in England found that 9% exhibited psychotic disorders, 10% demonstrated major depressive episodes, and 30% reported recent self-harm or suicidal ideation <sup>[23]</sup>. Their research emphasized that the remand period represents a particularly high-risk phase for

psychiatric crisis, with suicide rates among remand populations exceeding those of sentenced prisoners by a factor of three. The authors attributed this elevated risk to the acute stress of arrest and prosecution, separation from family and community support, and the profound uncertainty characterizing pretrial detention <sup>[23]</sup>. Hassan et al.'s study on suicide and self-harm in remand populations examined the specific risks faced by long-term pretrial detainees <sup>[24]</sup>. Their research found that suicide risk follows a bimodal distribution, with peaks occurring in the first week of detention and again after six months of remand custody. The latter peak corresponds to the point at which the initial acute stress has subsided but the chronic stress of prolonged uncertainty and deteriorating hope regarding trial resolution begins to dominate prisoners' psychological experience. Prison officials interviewed in the study reported feeling ill-equipped to identify and respond to this evolving suicide risk profile, particularly given limited access to mental health professionals and inadequate training in suicide prevention <sup>[24]</sup>.

### Substance Abuse Treatment

Substance abuse represents a pervasive challenge within remand populations, with research consistently documenting prevalence rates substantially exceeding community norms. Fazel et al.'s systematic review found that approximately 30% of male remand prisoners and 51% of female remand prisoners met diagnostic criteria for substance dependence <sup>[25]</sup>. Their research emphasized that the period immediately following detention represents a critical window for intervention, as enforced abstinence creates an opportunity to engage prisoners in treatment who might otherwise be difficult to reach in community settings <sup>[25]</sup>. However, MacDonald's research on substance abuse programs in remand facilities found that such services remain severely underdeveloped relative to need <sup>[26]</sup>. Her study across Canadian provinces revealed that while 68% of sentenced prisoner facilities offered structured substance abuse programming, only 23% of remand facilities provided equivalent services. Prison officials interviewed attributed this disparity to the uncertainty regarding remand prisoners' continued presence, making it difficult to justify enrolling them in multi-week programs they might not complete. For long-term remand prisoners, this institutional logic proves particularly problematic, as they spend sufficient time in custody to benefit from programming yet remain categorically excluded from access <sup>[26]</sup>.

### Access to Educational, Vocational, and Rehabilitative Programs

#### Educational Opportunities

Educational programming represents a fundamental component of correctional rehabilitation, yet research consistently demonstrates that remand prisoners experience severely restricted access relative to sentenced populations. Hawley et al.'s examination of prison education across England and Wales found that only 12% of remand prisoners participated in any educational activity during their detention, compared to 64% of sentenced prisoners <sup>[27]</sup>. The authors identified multiple barriers including administrative assumptions that remand detention would be short-term, prisoners' own uncertainty about detention duration discouraging commitment to educational programs, and institutional prioritization of sentenced prisoners for limited program places.

Batchelder and Pippert's research on literacy levels among remand populations found that this cohort exhibits substantially lower educational attainment than the general population, with 47% functioning below basic literacy levels [28]. Their study emphasized that this educational deficit correlates strongly with criminal justice involvement, creating a compelling case for educational intervention during detention. However, their research also documented that remand facilities typically lack even basic educational materials such as libraries, reading materials, or distance learning resources, let alone structured educational programs. For long-term remand prisoners, this educational deprivation extends over months or years, during which time no personal development occurs and existing skills atrophy [28].

#### Vocational Training and Work Opportunities

Vocational training and prison work programs constitute core components of correctional rehabilitation in sentenced prisoner facilities, yet research demonstrates near-complete absence of such opportunities for remand populations. Duwe's comprehensive evaluation of prison employment programs found substantial evidence that such programs reduce recidivism and improve post-release employment outcomes [29]. However, his research also documented that vocational programs remain almost exclusively restricted to sentenced populations, based on institutional logic that remand prisoners' presumption of innocence makes rehabilitation programming conceptually inappropriate and their uncertain detention duration makes such programming practically infeasible [29]. Visher and Courtney's research on employment and prisoner reentry found that the period immediately following release represents a critical window for employment engagement, with individuals who secure employment within the first month post-release demonstrating substantially lower recidivism rates [30]. For remand prisoners ultimately released without conviction, the months spent in detention without vocational activity or work experience represent lost opportunities to develop employment readiness. Their research emphasized that many remand prisoners, particularly those facing minor charges or those ultimately acquitted, would benefit significantly from continued employment skill development during detention [30].

#### Recreational and Physical Activity Programs

Access to recreation and physical activity represents both a legal entitlement under international standards and a practical necessity for maintaining prisoner's health and institutional order. Meek and Lewis's research on prison sport and exercise programs found that such activities serve multiple functions, including physical health maintenance, psychological well-being support, violence reduction, and provision of a structured daily routine [31]. However, their study across English prisons documented that remand prisoners' access to recreational facilities averaged only 47% of the access provided to sentenced prisoners, primarily due to security protocols, staffing limitations, and infrastructural constraints in remand facilities [31]. Nurse et al.'s examination of health promotion in correctional settings identified physical exercise as one of the most cost-effective interventions for addressing both physical and mental health challenges among prisoners

<sup>[9]</sup>. Their research found that regular exercise correlated with reduced rates of depression, anxiety, and aggressive behaviour, while improving sleep quality and general health indicators. For long-term remand prisoners facing extended periods of confinement, the health benefits of regular exercise prove particularly important, yet institutional barriers typically restrict access to levels inadequate for meaningful health impact <sup>[9]</sup>. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners mandate that all prisoners receive at least one hour of outdoor exercise daily, weather permitting <sup>[16]</sup>. However, research by Penal Reform International found that this standard remains widely unmet in remand facilities globally, with many prisoners confined to cells for 22–23 hours daily <sup>[32]</sup>. Their study across 34 countries found that 61% of remand facilities failed to provide the minimum one-hour daily outdoor exercise, with infrastructural limitations—including lack of exercise yards or staff to supervise outdoor time—cited as primary obstacles. For prison officials managing long-term remand populations, these limitations create significant challenges in maintaining prisoner health and managing institutional tension <sup>[32]</sup>.

## Institutional Challenges in Managing Long-Term Remand Prisoners

### Staffing Levels and Qualifications

Adequate staffing represents a foundational requirement for effective correctional management, yet research consistently identifies staffing deficiencies as a pervasive challenge in remand facilities. Liebling and others' comprehensive study of prison staffing found that remand facilities typically operate with lower staff-to-prisoner ratios than sentenced prisoner facilities, despite the arguably greater complexity of managing remand populations <sup>[33]</sup>. Their research across 12 English prisons documented staff-to-prisoner ratios in remand facilities averaging 1:7.3 compared to 1:4.8 in sentenced facilities, with this disparity attributed to budget allocation formulas that fail to account for the distinctive challenges of remand management <sup>[33]</sup>. Crawley's ethnographic research on prison officer culture revealed that officers assigned to remand facilities often felt inadequately prepared for the specific challenges of this environment <sup>[13]</sup>. Her research found that officer training typically emphasizes security protocols and management of sentenced populations, with minimal attention to the distinctive legal status, entitlements, and psychological vulnerabilities of remand prisoners. Officers interviewed reported difficulty managing the high turnover characteristic of remand populations, which prevents relationship development and makes individualized risk assessment challenging <sup>[13]</sup>.

### Training and Professional Development

Professional training for prison staff represents a critical determinant of institutional effectiveness, yet research indicates that officers managing remand populations receive inadequate preparation for their distinctive responsibilities. Coyle's examination of prison staff training internationally found that most correctional training programs focus predominantly on security and control, with minimal emphasis on prisoner welfare, mental health awareness, or the specific entitlements of remand prisoners <sup>[34]</sup>. His research across 15 countries found that specialized training on managing remand populations averaged only 4–6 hours within training curricula spanning several weeks,

insufficient to develop meaningful expertise in this specialized domain. Research by Bogue et al. on staff training needs in mental health identified substantial knowledge gaps among correctional officers regarding mental illness recognition and crisis response<sup>[35]</sup>. Their study found that officers could correctly identify only 34% of mental health crises presented in scenario-based assessments, with particularly poor performance in recognising depression and suicide risk indicators. Given the elevated mental health morbidity among remand populations, these knowledge deficits prove especially problematic in remand facilities. Officers interviewed reported feeling helpless when confronting prisoners in obvious psychological distress but lacking the knowledge to intervene appropriately or access timely mental health support.

#### Resource Constraints and Budget Limitations

Financial resources constitute a fundamental determinant of correctional system capacity, with research consistently identifying budget constraints as a primary obstacle to adequate remand prisoner management. Atabay's handbook on management of remand facilities emphasized that resource scarcity affects every aspect of operations, from physical infrastructure and staffing levels to healthcare provision, programming, and basic amenities<sup>[36]</sup>. Her research across developing country contexts found that remand facilities typically receive lower per-capita budget allocations than sentenced facilities, based on assumptions that remand detention represents a temporary status requiring minimal investment. Research by Walmsley on prison conditions in Africa documented severe resource deficits across the region, with many remand facilities operating on budgets providing less than \$1 per prisoner per day for all operational costs including food, healthcare, and maintenance<sup>[37]</sup>. His research found that these resource constraints created impossible choices for prison administrators, who must prioritize immediate survival needs while neglecting medium and long-term requirements such as infrastructure maintenance, staff training, and program development. For long-term remand prisoners, these resource deficiencies result in prolonged exposure to conditions that would be considered inhumane in any context.

#### Coordination with External Systems

Effective remand prisoner management requires coordination between correctional, judicial, legal, and healthcare systems, yet research consistently documents poor inter-system integration. Schönreich and Mabunda's study of awaiting-trial prisoners in South Africa identified dysfunctional court-prison coordination as a major factor contributing to prolonged remand detention<sup>[38]</sup>. Their research found that prisoners were frequently transported to court only to have hearings postponed, that case files went missing necessitating repeated adjournments, and that communication breakdowns between courts and prisons resulted in prisoners being overlooked for scheduled appearances. These coordination failures directly impacted prison officials' management capacity by creating unpredictability regarding population size and movement, complicating resource allocation and program planning. Research by Open Society Justice Initiative on pretrial detention reform emphasized that prison officials typically lack influence over the primary determinants of remand population size—namely arrest practices, bail decisions, and

case processing speed <sup>[39]</sup>. Their multi-country study found that prison administrators might implement excellent management practices yet still face insurmountable challenges due to judicial system dysfunction beyond their control. The research emphasized need for systemic reform rather than institution-level interventions yet noted that political will for such reform remains limited in most jurisdictions.

### Limitations and Systemic Constraints

#### Legal and Policy Framework Deficiencies

The legal and policy frameworks governing remand detention exhibit substantial deficiencies that constrain prison officials' capacity to manage prisoner well-being effectively. Van Zyl Smit and Snacken analyzed pretrial detention law across Europe and found that while legal instruments establish principles such as presumption of innocence and right to humane treatment, they typically lack operational specificity regarding remand prisoner entitlements and facility standards <sup>[40]</sup>. This legal ambiguity leaves prison officials without clear guidance regarding their obligations and creates discretionary space that resource constraints typically resolve against prisoner interests. Research by Open Society Justice Initiative on pretrial detention reform documented that many jurisdictions lack specific regulations governing remand facility operation, instead applying general prison regulations developed with sentenced populations in mind <sup>[41]</sup>. Their study across 20 countries found that this regulatory gap meant that remand-specific issues—including greater visitation entitlements, enhanced access to legal counsel, restrictions on work requirements, and differential privilege systems—often went unaddressed or were handled inconsistently across facilities. Prison officials interviewed reported confusion regarding remand prisoners' legal entitlements and feeling vulnerable to litigation regarding management decisions.

#### Judicial Delays and Case Processing Dysfunction

Prolonged remand detention typically results from judicial system dysfunction rather than correctional policy, yet prison officials bear the operational consequences. Schönteich's analysis of criminal justice processing in South Africa identified multiple factors contributing to case delays including inadequate judicial resources, poor case management systems, frequent adjournments, and defense attorney tactics <sup>[42]</sup>. His research found that the median time from arrest to case resolution exceeded 18 months, with many cases extending beyond three years. During this extended period, prison officials must manage prisoners' deteriorating psychological state, growing frustration with the justice system, and declining hope regarding case resolution. Research by Subramanian and Shames on pretrial detention in the United States emphasized that case processing speed varies substantially by offense type, defendant resources, and jurisdiction <sup>[2]</sup>. Their data demonstrated that indigent defendants facing serious charges experienced the longest remand periods, often exceeding two years while cases proceeded through pretrial motions, discovery disputes, and overcrowded trial dockets. For prison officials, this means that the most challenging prisoners to manage—those facing serious charges who maintain innocence claims

and those experiencing greatest stress regarding potential sentence length—remain in remand facilities for the longest periods.

### Societal and Political Context

The broader societal and political context significantly influences correctional policy and resource allocation, typically to the detriment of remand prisoner management. Pratt's analysis of penal populism in modern democracies found that political discourse increasingly emphasizes punitive responses to crime, with pretrial detention particularly vulnerable to populist pressure given defendants' inability to advocate for themselves and public perception that those arrested must be guilty <sup>[43]</sup>. His research demonstrated that this political environment discourages investment in remand facility improvement, as politicians fear appearing "soft on crime" by improving conditions for individuals facing criminal charges. Research by Gottschalk on the political economy of mass incarceration emphasized that correctional expenditure faces constant pressure in competition with other public priorities such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure <sup>[44]</sup>. Her analysis found that remand facilities typically lose in this budgetary competition because their population lacks political voice, generates minimal public sympathy, and produces no organized constituency advocating for their interests. The result is systematic underinvestment perpetuating the institutional challenges that prison officials face in managing remand populations.

### Gaps in Existing Literature

While substantial research examines remand detention from prisoner rights, judicial process, and policy reform perspectives, significant gaps remain in understanding the operational challenges faced by prison officials managing long-term remand populations. Most existing literature adopts an external evaluative stance, assessing correctional performance against standards, rather than examining the constraints and dilemmas confronting practitioners attempting to manage remand populations within severely resource-constrained environments <sup>[45]</sup>. Research has particularly neglected prison officials' perspectives in developing country contexts, where resource constraints prove most severe and the gap between international standards and operational reality most pronounced. The limited literature examining South Asian correctional systems tends to focus on legal and policy analysis rather than ground-level operational challenges <sup>[46]</sup>. This gap in understanding prison officials' experiences and perspectives limits both academic knowledge and practical policy development.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the challenges faced by prison officials in managing the well-being of long-term remand prisoners. To establish a sound theoretical foundation and identify gaps in the existing body of knowledge, I conducted a comprehensive review of literature related to remand imprisonment and prisoner well-being, which informed the precise focus of this research. I utilised purposive sampling to select ten (10)

prison officials as participants, given their direct professional experience and institutional knowledge relevant to the research problem. For data collection, I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with each of the ten participants, supplemented by focus group discussions, which together enabled me to gather rich, in-depth data from multiple perspectives. The data generated through these methods were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis, through which I identified key patterns and themes related to the challenges prison officials encounter in managing the well-being of long-term remand prisoners.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This thematic analysis explores the challenges and institutional constraints encountered by prison officials in Sri Lanka in ensuring the needs and well-being of long-term remand prisoners. Data gathered through semi-structured interviews were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Recurring patterns in participants' responses were identified and interpreted, culminating in five principal themes: institutional challenges, mental and physical health issues, legal delays, rehabilitation access, and safety and welfare concerns. The following discussion presents the findings under Theme 3, organised across four themes and their respective sub-themes.

##### Theme 1: Institutional Challenges

The management of long-term remand prisoners within the Sri Lankan prison system is profoundly constrained by a range of institutional challenges. Prison officials consistently identified systemic inefficiencies and organisational limitations as significant barriers to ensuring the well-being of remand prisoners. Three sub-themes emerged under this theme: staff insufficiency and work overload; overcrowding and inadequate facilities; and bureaucratic challenges.

##### Sub-theme 1.1: Staff Insufficiency and Work Overload

A critical systemic issue identified by all participants was the severe shortage of prison staff relative to the remand prisoner population. Officials highlighted that they are required to simultaneously manage administrative duties, supervision, and frequent conflict management, leaving little time to attend to the individual needs of long-term remand prisoners. This imbalance between staff strength and prisoner population was identified as a fundamental structural failing of the system.

The situation is particularly acute when one considers that just five officers may be responsible for more than 300 remand prisoners, making it practically impossible to ensure individual attention, welfare monitoring, or the upholding of basic human rights within the facility. As a result, critical concerns such as mental health, personal grievances, and rehabilitation needs are frequently overlooked in favour of urgent security matters.

*"We have around 300 remand prisoners and only about five officers to manage them. That number is not enough to look after everyone." — Participant 1*

This condition is further theorised through the lens of psychological stress theory. The inadequate staffing, work overload, and limited resources create conditions consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's stress appraisal framework, where officials perceive demands as exceeding their available resources. In addition, Maslow's hierarchy of needs supports the finding that when basic needs — safety, shelter, and adequate care — are unmet, higher-level psychological development is unattainable for remand prisoners.

*"What is expected of us is not just to hold them here. Managing their health, discipline, and overall welfare — that is also expected of us." — Participant 2*

#### Sub-theme 1.2: Overcrowding and Inadequate Facilities

Severe overcrowding emerged as one of the most pressing institutional challenges reported by prison officials with reference to the Colombo and Maligawa remand prisons. Officials reported that remand prisoners are confined in extremely overcrowded conditions, often without adequate space, sanitation, or ventilation. Cells designed to accommodate 20 individuals are frequently housing more than 60 remand prisoners, including those who have been detained for three, four, or even five years without resolution of their cases.

*"Some cells are meant for about 20 people. There are over 60 inside. People who have been there for 3, 4, 5 years are among them. There is no order for them to sleep or sit. They just exist there. What can you do?" — Participant 3*

The prolonged detention of unconvicted individuals in overcrowded and poorly maintained conditions constitutes a significant violation of human dignity and poses serious risks to both physical and mental health. The lack of bedding facilities, compelling prisoners to sleep on the floor — sometimes on top of one another — exacerbates communicable disease transmission, heightens stress, and contributes to aggressive behaviour. Officials acknowledged that these conditions also create a continuously tense environment, increasing the potential for violence and unrest.

*"Some remand prisoners have been here for years. They are truly suffering — mentally. Because there is no trial. They have to endure everything inside. If they were convicted, at least something could be done for them inside." — Participant 4*

#### Sub-theme 1.3: Bureaucratic Challenges

The analysis further revealed that weak coordination between remand prisons and external institutions — including the courts, the police, and the Attorney General's Department —

significantly contributes to the prolonged detention of remand prisoners. Delays in the transfer of legal documents, postponement of court dates, and a lack of timely information exchange between agencies were identified as key contributing factors.

*"Sometimes, the message reaches us on the day of the court hearing itself. Or a day or two after the hearing has already taken place." — Participant 9*

These communication failures result in missed court appearances for remand prisoners, which in turn deepens their sense of injustice, erodes trust in the legal system, and intensifies feelings of frustration and hopelessness. Officials indicated that the existing communication mechanism typically begins with the court notifying the registrar, who is then expected to relay information to prison authorities — a process that is demonstrably unreliable. The need for a more efficient, transparent, and accountable communication system among the courts, registrars, and prison officials was strongly emphasised.

## Theme 2: Mental and Physical Health Issues

Prison officials unanimously acknowledged that the current remand prison environment is ill-equipped to adequately address the mental and physical well-being of long-term remand prisoners. The uncertainty associated with prolonged unconvicted detention and the resulting deterioration of mental health and physical health services were identified as serious systemic concerns.

### Sub-theme 2.1: Mental Health Issues

Officials consistently reported that mental health deterioration is a widespread and serious problem among long-term remand prisoners. The uncertainty surrounding court dates, the indefinite nature of their detention, and separation from family members — particularly children and elderly dependents — contribute significantly to psychological suffering. Anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and increased aggression were identified as commonly observed characteristics among remand prisoners.

*"Most of them do not know when their case will be heard. Some have been here for about two years with not even a single court hearing. These people are mentally broken." — Participant 6*

Officials further noted the emotional distress caused by family separation, particularly during visits. Many remand prisoners silently weep following family visits, and officials acknowledge their inability to offer meaningful support beyond emotional reassurance. This sense of helplessness on the part of both prisoners and officials reflects the deeply inadequate nature of the institutional response to psychological need.

*"Some of them cry quietly after family visits. They tell us their sorrows. All we can do is console them — there is nothing else we can do." — Participant 7*

The psychological impact of prolonged uncertainty is profound. Criminological literature confirms that chronic stress, depression, and the gradual erosion of hope — consistent with what officials describe as prisoners being 'mentally broken' — can, in extreme cases, contribute to suicidal ideation. The absence of professional mental health services within the remand prison system renders this risk virtually unaddressed.

#### Sub-theme 2.2: Inadequate Medical Facilities

Beyond mental health, prison officials highlighted critical deficiencies in the physical healthcare services available to remand prisoners. A single prison hospital and only three or four medical officers serve the combined remand prisoner populations of Welikade, Maligawa, and Colombo prisons — an estimated 15,000 prisoners across two categories. This acute imbalance between supply and demand renders the provision of adequate medical care nearly impossible.

*"There are three prisons in this area — Welikade, Maligawa, and Colombo. Both remand facilities together hold about 15,000 prisoners. There is only one prison hospital for all of them, and only three or four doctors — and not all of them are there at the same time." — Participant*

*1*

Officials reported that prisoners suffering from chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol are among the remand population, yet the institution frequently lacks the necessary medications to treat them. In cases where external hospital treatment is required, obtaining the necessary authorisation involves a lengthy bureaucratic process that can span several hours or even a full day. Communicable diseases, respiratory infections, and gastrointestinal illnesses are regularly reported but frequently go untreated due to resource constraints.

*"If someone needs treatment that is unavailable here, we have to get permission from outside to take them to a hospital. That is not something that can be done easily. It is a big process." —*

*Participant 6*

#### Theme 3: Legal Delays

Legal systemic delays constitute one of the most damaging and persistent challenges confronting long-term remand prisoners and the officials tasked with managing them. Two sub-themes were identified under this theme: delayed trials, and lack of access to legal assistance.

##### Sub-theme 3.1: Delayed Trials

Prison officials expressed deep concern over the excessive delays in conducting trials for remand prisoners. Many individuals are held for years without a single hearing or formal charge being filed against them — a situation that constitutes not only a systemic failure but a serious human rights violation. Poor coordination among the courts, police, and the Attorney General's Department was identified as a primary driver of these delays, particularly with respect to the submission of investigation reports and charges.

*"Many of the remand prisoners here do not even know when their case is scheduled. Some have been here for about two years without a single court appearance." — Participant 1*

*"Some remand prisoners are here without charges even being filed against them. That mostly happens when there is insufficient evidence." — Participant 2*

These prolonged delays result in a profound sense of abandonment and injustice among remand prisoners. Officials noted that some prisoners are entirely unaware of their case numbers, hearing dates, or legal status — a state of institutional neglect that deepens psychological distress and further erodes confidence in the justice system. This finding aligns with the broader principle of the right to a speedy trial, enshrined in international human rights instruments.

#### Sub-theme 3.2: Lack of Access to Legal Assistance

Compounding the problem of delayed trials is the severely limited access to legal aid available to remand prisoners. The majority of long-term remand prisoners come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and are unable to afford private legal representation. While legal aid services exist in principle, officials indicated that their practical implementation is deeply flawed and inconsistently available.

*"Some remand prisoners do not even know whether they have a lawyer. Legal aid lawyers do not come regularly. Many of them do not even know properly what is happening in their own cases." — Participant 5*

Language barriers, low literacy levels, and a general lack of awareness of legal procedures further isolate remand prisoners from the justice process. Officials acknowledged that the absence of reliable legal aid coordination mechanisms means that prisoners who most need legal support are the least likely to receive it. This systemic gap prolongs remand detention and intensifies the cumulative burden experienced by long-term remand prisoners across social, economic, health, and psychological dimensions.

#### Theme 4: Access to Rehabilitation

The question of rehabilitation access for remand prisoners emerged as a significant area of institutional neglect. Two sub-themes were identified: the non-implementation of rehabilitation programmes; and gaps in reintegration planning.

##### Sub-theme 4.1: Non-Implementation of Rehabilitation Programmes

A critical institutional gap identified by officials is the near-total exclusion of remand prisoners from structured rehabilitation programmes. Because remand prisoners have not been convicted of any offence, they are legally classified as innocent under international standards and are therefore not subjected to the same rehabilitation protocols as convicted prisoners. While this is legally defensible, the practical consequence is that long-term remand prisoners spend years in custody

with virtually no access to social, educational, psychological, vocational, or economic development programmes.

*"Rehabilitation programmes are given to convicted prisoners — those who have done wrong. They are not given to innocent people. That is the basis on which these things are withheld from them." — Participant 3*

Officials noted with regret that the only structured activities available to remand prisoners are religious programmes and limited cultural events such as Sinhala and Hindu New Year celebrations. Cricket matches, organised through the welfare division, represent virtually the only recreational outlet available — a minimal provision that officials acknowledge is insufficient for maintaining psychological equilibrium over extended periods of detention.

*"For convicted prisoners, there are social, religious, mental health, economic, educational programmes — many types. But for remand prisoners, it is only religious activities. Beyond that, some cultural activities. Without even that, these people would go mad." — Participant 6*

#### Sub-theme 4.2: Gaps in Reintegration Planning

A further dimension of this theme concerns the complete absence of reintegration planning for remand prisoners upon their release. Unlike convicted prisoners, for whom the prison administration may provide guidance or facilitate participation in reintegration-focused interventions prior to sentence completion, remand prisoners are released — whether acquitted or otherwise — without any structured support, assessment of needs, or linkage to external services.

*"There is no plan for releasing them. If convicted, they are processed. Otherwise, they simply go. They have to take care of themselves." — Participant 3*

*"For those who have been here long-term, almost 100% of their jobs will be gone by the time they leave. But no action has been taken to create opportunities for them." — Participant 4*

Officials further noted that the temporary nature of remand status — which may last days, months, or years — makes it administratively difficult to plan vocational training or structured reintegration support. However, they simultaneously acknowledged that this institutional gap leaves long-term remand prisoners wholly unprepared for reintegration after years of detention, having lost employment, family ties, and housing in the interim. The result is a deeply unjust situation in which individuals detained without conviction bear the heaviest post-release burden with the least institutional support.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thematic analysis has illuminated the deeply entrenched systemic challenges confronting long-term remand prisoners within Sri Lanka's prison system. Four interconnected themes — institutional challenges, mental and physical health deficiencies, legal delays, and restricted access to rehabilitation collectively reveal a framework that falls significantly short of both domestic constitutional obligations and international human rights standards. The findings demonstrate that remand prisoners, despite their unconvicted status, endure conditions that systematically undermine their dignity, psychological well-being, and prospects for reintegration. The cumulative burden borne by this population, characterised by indefinite detention, institutional neglect, and structural invisibility, demands urgent, coordinated reform.

Therefore, the government must prioritise investment in prison infrastructure to reduce overcrowding to internationally acceptable standards and substantially increase staffing ratios to ensure adequate supervision and welfare monitoring. Cell occupancy must be brought into compliance with minimum standards prescribed under the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). Prisons should be equipped with dedicated psychological support services staffed by qualified mental health professionals. Regular psychological assessments, structured counselling sessions, and crisis intervention protocols must be established to address the documented prevalence of anxiety, depression, and hopelessness among long-term remand prisoners. A digitised, real-time communication mechanism linking courts, the Attorney General's Department, police, and prison authorities should be implemented to eliminate delays in document transfer and court notifications. Clear accountability benchmarks must be established to ensure timely case progression and prevent the indefinite detention of uncharged individuals. The government should strengthen and systematise legal aid delivery within remand facilities, ensuring consistent access to legal representation regardless of socioeconomic status. Legal literacy programmes delivered within prisons would further empower prisoners to meaningfully engage with their own proceedings. While recognising their unconvicted status, remand prisoners should be offered voluntary access to educational, vocational, and psychological development programmes during extended detention. Upon release, structured reintegration planning — including employment linkages, housing support, and social services referral should be institutionalised as a standard administrative process. These reforms, pursued collectively, would represent a meaningful step towards a remand system that upholds the presumption of innocence not merely in legal text, but in lived institutional practice.

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