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From Complaint to Sentence: Bottlenecks and Reform in Pakistan's Criminal Justice System, with Evidence from Islamabad (2019–2026)

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Abstract
Pakistan's criminal justice system is usually discussed one institution at a time: the police, the courts or the prisons. This article follows a case through the whole pipeline, from the first complaint to the final sentence and the prison cell, and asks where cases are lost, delayed or distorted. We use qualitative document analysis of official statistics, institutional reports and news coverage published between 2019 and October 2026, with a focus on the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT). Sources include reports of the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), police statements, parliamentary briefings and reporting from Dawn, The Express Tribune, Arab News, the Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) and other outlets.
Four findings stand out. First, recorded crime in Islamabad depends heavily on whether complaints become First Information Reports (FIRs), so rises and falls in police figures cannot be read at face value. Second, strong police claims about detection sit beside very low conviction rates in several categories of offence; in 2024 Islamabad reportedly recorded seven convictions in 176 rape cases. Third, court capacity is thin: more than two million cases are pending in district courts nationwide, 1,153 district courts are without judges, and 29 of them are in Islamabad. Fourth, the pipeline ends in overcrowded prisons holding 110,513 people at 160.6% of capacity, about three-quarters of them awaiting trial. We argue that these problems are connected, and we propose reforms that treat the system as a chain.

Keywords: *criminal justice system; Pakistan; Islamabad; First Information Report; conviction rate; pretrial detention; prison overcrowding; court backlog; gender-based violence; document analysis*

1. Introduction

A criminal case in Pakistan begins in an ordinary way. Someone goes to a police station, or rings a helpline, and reports that something has happened to them. What follows depends on dozens of decisions made by police officers, prosecutors, forensic examiners, judges and prison officials. If the complaint is not recorded, nothing else can happen. If the investigation is weak, the prosecution struggles. If the court has no judge, the trial waits. If bail is refused or unaffordable, the accused waits in prison.

Each of these stages is studied, and often criticised, in Pakistan. What is less common is to look at them together. This matters because the stages are linked: a delay in one place becomes overcrowding in another. When the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) argued in October 2026 that prison overcrowding cannot be solved simply by building more prisons, it was making exactly this point, tying the problem to bail practice, slow trials and heavy reliance on pre-trial detention (The Express Tribune, 2026a).

Islamabad is a useful place to study the pipeline. It is the federal capital, with better-resourced police, a growing technology infrastructure and close attention from the media and Parliament. If the system struggles here, the picture elsewhere is unlikely to be better. At the same time, Islamabad's own institutions are changing quickly: the police have introduced mobile police stations and an online women's police station (Associated Press of Pakistan [APP], 2026a); the Constitution has been amended twice in two years in ways that reshape the superior courts (Al Jazeera, 2025); and the cybercrime law has been rewritten and a new federal agency created (Daily Pakistan, 2025).

This article therefore asks three questions:

1. Where in the pipeline from complaint to sentence do cases stall or fall away, according to the most recent official and press evidence?
2. How do these bottlenecks appear in Islamabad, and how do they affect women and other vulnerable groups?
3. What reforms would make the system work as a chain, not as a set of separate institutions?

We make three contributions. First, we bring together a wide range of recent evidence (2019 to October 2026) into one picture of the pipeline. Second, we draw attention to a measurement problem: figures published at different stages are produced by different institutions, under different incentives, and are rarely comparable. Third, we offer practical recommendations aimed at the connections between stages, which are often neglected by single-institution reforms.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 The criminal process as a pipeline

Criminologists have long described the criminal process as a funnel or pipeline in which many cases enter and fewer reach the end. Packer's (1964) classic distinction between a crime control model, which values speed and efficiency in suppressing crime, and a due process model, which values reliability and protection against error, remains a useful lens. A healthy system balances both. A system that is slow,

under-resourced and reliant on detention can fail on both counts at once: it neither convicts offenders efficiently nor protects the accused from long and unnecessary custody.

We use a simple seven-stage pipeline: (1) reporting; (2) FIR registration; (3) investigation and arrest; (4) prosecution; (5) trial and judgment; (6) appeal; and (7) punishment and detention. For each stage we look for indicators published in the last few years and for evidence of delay, attrition or distortion.

2.2 Legitimacy and reporting

Stages are connected not only through caseloads but also through trust. Research on procedural justice argues that people cooperate with the police and courts when they believe they are treated fairly and respectfully (Tyler, 2006). In turn, cooperation shapes whether victims report crime, whether witnesses testify and whether communities accept legal outcomes. In Pakistan, evidence that complaints are not always registered, or that convictions are rare, can lower confidence and reduce reporting, which in turn weakens the data on which policy is built. This feedback loop runs through the findings below.

2.3 What this article can and cannot show

The study does not measure crime itself, nor does it estimate the true conviction rate for the country. It reads published evidence, and published evidence reflects the priorities of those who collect it. We try to be explicit about where figures come from and where they conflict.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

We used qualitative document analysis, a systematic approach to reviewing and interpreting documents, combined with a simple descriptive tabulation of indicators. This design suits a topic where the evidence is spread across institutions and where the most recent developments appear first in the press and in institutional reports, not in peer-reviewed literature.

3.2 Sources

We collected three types of source, all publicly available:

- **Institutional and official reports:** Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan (LJCP) statistics; the Annual Prisons Data Report 2026 of the NCHR and JPP and its 2024 predecessor; HRCP policy papers; the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) statement on the 27th Amendment; and analytical briefs from the Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis (ISSRA).
- **Police and government statements:** press releases and briefings of Islamabad Police as reported by APP, parliamentary committee briefings and statements by the Ministry of Human Rights.
- **News reporting:** articles from Dawn, The Express Tribune, The News, Geo, Arab News, Minute Mirror, the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS), Inter Press Service (IPS), Al Jazeera and others, published between 2019 and October 2026.

Sources were identified through targeted searches on each stage of the pipeline (for example "FIR registration Islamabad", "conviction rate Pakistan", "prisons overcrowding 2026") and were retained if they reported specific figures or events from an identifiable institution. Where possible, we preferred the original report to the news summary of it.

3.3 Analysis

We coded each source by pipeline stage, jurisdiction (national, provincial or ICT), date and type of evidence (statistic, case, policy change or expert claim). We then compared figures across sources,

flagged contradictions, and wrote a short synthesis for each stage. Quantities are reported as stated by their source, with the source named. We have not recalculated or averaged figures from different bases.

3.4 Quality and ethics

The study used published material only and involved no human participants. News reports are secondary sources and may contain errors; police press releases are self-reported; NGO figures depend on official data they cite. We therefore treat headline figures as indications to be triangulated, not as exact measurements. All sources are cited, and no long passages are reproduced.

4. Findings

4.1 Stage 1–2: Reporting and FIR registration

Recorded crime depends on registration practice. In November 2021, a senior Islamabad police officer told a Senate committee that the police were now registering FIRs for almost all applicants, and that this was why recorded crime appeared to be rising (Dawn, 2021a). A month later, the newly appointed Inspector General found thousands of unattended complaints in the Rescue 15 records, some pending for ten or eleven months. Police registered 240 cases within two days, reportedly involving over Rs54 million in lost cash and valuables, and suspended a station house officer for delaying an auto-theft case (Dawn, 2021b). In 2025, reporting by Dawn that more than half of the complaints received by Islamabad police in that year had not become cases showed that the issue persisted (Azeem, 2025).

The consequence is plain. When police registered 5,466 property-crime cases in the first five months of 2022, up from 1,934 in the same period of 2021 (Dawn, 2022a), the jump could reflect more crime, more registration, or both. The numbers alone cannot tell us.

Official claims of decline are large and recent. Police reported that overall crime fell 15% in the first quarter of 2025 (APP, 2025a) and 20% in the first four months of that year (APP, 2025b). In February 2026 they announced a 50% fall in January compared with the previous year (The News, 2026). By August 2026 they claimed a 27% decline in crime against property compared with 2025 and a 100% success rate in tracing murder cases reported in the year (APP, 2026a). These claims are accompanied by service innovations: a "Police Station on Wheels" for registering FIRs at the scene, an online women's police station, an upgraded Safe City system and a complaint helpline (APP, 2026a).

These reforms address the front door of the system and deserve credit. But because the figures are self-reported, cover different periods and measures, and come from the same institution whose performance they describe, independent verification is needed before they can be treated as evidence of falling crime. The earlier history of unregistered complaints is a reminder of why.

4.2 Stage 3–4: Investigation and prosecution

Detection and conviction tell different stories. The police claim of tracing every murder case in 2026 (APP, 2026a) is a statement about arrests, not about convictions. National evidence on convictions is much weaker. An ISSRA analysis noted that estimates of Pakistan's conviction rate range from 8.66% (PILDAT) to around 12% (provincial data), with wide differences between provinces, and that in 2024 Sindh recorded 707 convictions out of 38,372 decided cases, roughly 2% (ISSRA, 2025). ARY News, reporting on the same Sindh figures, linked them to inadequate investigations and weak prosecution interest (ARY News, 2024).

Earlier data points in the same direction. In 2019 the then Chief Justice shared findings from district assessment committees showing a 31% conviction rate and 69% acquittal rate in 2,586 decided murder cases in Punjab in the first seven months of the year, and called for better-trained investigators (Dawn, 2019). In Islamabad, a Dawn report in 2021 found that about 80% of sex-offence cases decided in the capital ended in acquittal; judicial sources blamed faulty investigation, weak prosecution, low-paid investigators and out-of-court settlements, and the Advocate General noted that the capital had no dedicated prosecution branch (Dawn, 2021c).

One reading of these numbers is that Pakistan's courts are too lenient. The evidence reviewed here suggests a different explanation. Several analysts and officials point to the quality of investigation, the weakness of prosecution, witness cooperation and the lack of forensic capacity as the main reasons that cases fail (Dawn, 2021c; ISSRA, 2025). In other words, the problem lies upstream of the courtroom.

A case that worked. Not every case fails. The murder of the teenage social media creator Sana Yousaf in Islamabad shows what the system can do when resources and attention align. She was killed on 2 June 2025; an FIR was registered the next day; the accused was arrested within about 20 hours; and an identification parade was held within days (APP, 2026b; Dawn, 2026a). Charges were framed on 20 September 2025, the court held more than 50 hearings, and 27 of 31 listed witnesses gave evidence (Aaj News, 2026). The Islamabad sessions court sentenced the accused to death on 19 May 2026, a little under twelve months after the crime, with the sentence subject to confirmation by the Islamabad High Court (Dawn, 2026a). Reports describe fingerprint, mobile-phone and other digital evidence as central to the case (Digital Rights Foundation, 2026).

One case cannot stand for the system, and a conviction at first instance is not the end of the process. But it illustrates that speed and conviction are possible where investigation is prompt, forensic evidence is used and the case receives sustained attention. The challenge is to make that the normal path, not the exception.

4.3 Stage 3–5 for women: Gender-based violence

The gap between reporting and conviction is especially wide for gender-based violence (GBV). Senator Sherry Rehman cited official figures showing that in 2024 Islamabad recorded seven convictions out of 176 rape cases, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa one out of 258, Sindh none out of 243 and Balochistan none out of 21 (Dawn, 2026b). A civil society factsheet by the Sustainable Social Development Organisation (SSDO) found 373 cases of violence against women in Islamabad in the first half of 2025, of which 309 were rape and kidnapping, with no convictions recorded (IANS, 2025a). Sahil, which monitors such cases, reported 585 rape cases nationwide in the first eleven months of 2025 (IANS, 2025b).

The reform response has been large. Under the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021, special courts were notified, with 174 reported by one account and 480 by another (IPS, 2026; Minute Mirror, 2026a). The results are uneven. Rape convictions in Sindh reportedly rose from 5% in 2020 to 17% in 2025 (IPS, 2026), and in September 2026 the Ministry of Human Rights told a National Assembly committee that Sindh's sexual-crime conviction rate had reached 32%, while acknowledging that most GBV cases nationwide still ended without conviction (The Express Tribune, 2026b). Punjab, by contrast, was reported to have a conviction rate of only 4% in 2025 despite its special courts (Minute Mirror,

2026a). The Ministry also said it wanted GBV cases referred to a dedicated serious-crimes investigation unit, and the committee chair suggested starting with Islamabad (The Express Tribune, 2026b).

Two observations follow. First, special courts alone do not produce convictions; they depend on the quality of the investigation and on the judgments of the superior courts. Advocates have argued that some high-court rulings discourage reporting, and an estimated 70% of GBV incidents are said to go unreported (IPS, 2026). Second, Islamabad's very low conviction figures stand out because the capital has some of the strongest policing resources in the country. If GBV investigation and prosecution are weak here, the explanation is unlikely to be a lack of equipment alone.

4.4 Stage 5–6: Courts, capacity and structure

Courts are short of judges. In May 2026 the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan released new data on the subordinate judiciary. According to press reports of the documents, pending cases in district courts across the country had passed two million, and 1,153 district courts were not functioning because no judges had been appointed: 808 in Punjab, 149 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 89 in Sindh, 78 in Balochistan and 29 in Islamabad, where 13 civil and family courts were also inactive (Minute Mirror, 2026b). The Commission's 2023 statistics, in turn, report that the district judiciary handled about 4.2 million cases in the year, yet pending cases still rose by 5.2%, from 1.77 million to 1.86 million (Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan [LJCP], 2024). The figures show a system that is working hard and still losing ground, with inflow outpacing disposal.

The apex courts have been restructured. In October 2024 and November 2025, the 26th and 27th constitutional amendments changed the architecture of the superior judiciary. The 27th Amendment created a Federal Constitutional Court (FCC) and, in the words of reporting on the amendment, left the Supreme Court as the apex court for civil and criminal appeals (Al Jazeera, 2025). The government's stated reasoning was that rising numbers of constitutional petitions before the Supreme Court had slowed the timely disposal of regular civil and criminal cases (Al Jazeera, 2025). Critics, including the International Commission of Jurists, described the changes as a serious attack on judicial independence (ICJ, 2025). We take no position on that debate here. For the criminal justice pipeline, the relevant question is empirical and still open: whether the reorganisation will shorten the time that criminal appeals and death-sentence confirmations take. No published data yet allow that question to be answered.

4.5 Stage 7: Detention and prisons

The end of the pipeline is full. The Annual Prisons Data Report 2026, launched in Islamabad on 8 October 2026 by the NCHR and JPP with European Union support, found 110,513 people in prison against an authorised capacity of about 68,832, an occupancy rate of 160.6%; 82,988 of them, about three in four, were awaiting trial (Arab News, 2026). The excess over capacity is 41,681 people. The previous edition, covering 2024, had recorded 102,026 prisoners in 128 prisons at 152.2% of capacity (Dawn, 2025), so the population has grown by roughly 8% in the interval. The share of under-trial prisoners is not new: HRCP reported that it reached 73.41% in 2024, up from 66% in 2017 (The Express Tribune, 2026a).

The NCHR's chairperson described the problem as one of flow, saying people were entering prisons faster than the justice system could process their cases (Zahra, 2026). That framing fits our pipeline view.

A prison is the last stage, and its population reflects every delay upstream: unregistered or slow investigations, adjournments, unfilled judicial posts, and bail that is refused or cannot be afforded.

There are positive signs. The 2026 report noted that the death-row population had fallen by 11.7% since 2024, to 3,220 prisoners (Arab News, 2026), compared with 3,646 in the 2024 edition (Dawn, 2025). It also credited greater use of probation, parole and diversion with reductions in some provinces. A national conference on prison reform hosted by the Chief Justice in Islamabad, bringing together provincial chief ministers, was welcomed by commentators, though they stressed that follow-through on faster case disposal, wider use of bail for minor offences and better legal aid would matter more than declarations (Pakistan Observer, 2026).

4.6 A new entry point: Cybercrime enforcement

Digital offences have created a second front door to the system. In January 2025 Parliament amended the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). The amendment created a Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority and a Social Media Protection Tribunal, and replaced the Federal Investigation Agency's Cyber Crime Wing with a National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) (LUMS SAHSOL, 2025). Supporters presented the changes as modernising the law against online crime. Critics, including journalists' bodies and the HRCP, argued that vague definitions of prohibited content could be used against legitimate speech (LUMS SAHSOL, 2025).

Two features matter for the pipeline. First, the reform changed who may register a case. In September 2025, a parliamentary committee was told that about 370 cases registered by provincial authorities after the amendment were improper, because such cases now had to be handled by the federal agency; the NCCIA reported 1,214 cases nationwide, including 10 against journalists, and no arrests in 19 cases registered in the capital (Daily Pakistan, 2025). Second, press-freedom monitors reported that at least nine journalists had been targeted under the amended law in under a year, and that in July 2025 an Islamabad court ordered 27 YouTube channels to be blocked at the NCCIA's request (Reporters Without Borders [RSF], 2025). These are contested claims, and the agency's own account may differ. They nevertheless show how a change in law can alter the entry stage of the pipeline, creating uncertainty about jurisdiction and raising concerns about proportionality.

4.7 Synthesis

Table 1 summarises the most recent indicators we found for each stage. The figures come from different institutions and years and should not be added together or compared as ratios.

1.	Pipeline stage	2.	Latest indicator in the sources reviewed	3.	Source
4.	**Reporting and FIR registration**	5.	Police report property crime down 27% in 2026 versus 2025 (self-reported); earlier backlog of unregistered complaints in Islamabad	6.	APP (2026a); Dawn (2021b)
7.	**Investigation and prosecution**	8.	National conviction rate estimated between 8.66% and about 12%; Sindh about 2% in 2024	9.	ISSRA (2025)
10.	**Trial (gender-based violence)**	11.	Islamabad: 7 convictions in 176 rape cases in 2024	12.	Dawn (2026b)
13.	**Court capacity**	14.	More than 2 million district-court cases pending; 1,153 courts without judges, 29 in Islamabad	15.	Minute Mirror (2026b)
16.	**Detention**	17.	110,513 prisoners at 160.6% of capacity; 82,988 awaiting trial	18.	Arab News (2026)

19. Digital offences	20. 1,214 NCCIA cases nationwide by September 2025	21. Daily Pakistan (2025)	

5. Discussion

5.1 Numbers that cannot be compared

The first lesson is about measurement. Police figures describe complaints registered or arrests made; court figures describe cases disposed of; prison figures describe people held on a given date. Each stage reports its own success in its own units. Police can report that every murder was traced while courts report low conviction rates and prisons report that most inmates have not been convicted, and all three can be accurate. This is why a single, linked case record from complaint to release is so important, and why independent verification of police claims matters. The history of unregistered complaints in Islamabad is evidence that incentives to look good can shape what is counted.

5.2 The problem lies upstream of the verdict

Public debate often blames judges for low conviction rates. The sources reviewed point to earlier stages: investigations that are slow or technically weak, prosecutors who are not involved early, witnesses who do not return, and forensic capacity that is limited (Dawn, 2021c; ISSRA, 2025). The Sana Yousaf case shows the contrast. Prompt registration, a rapid arrest, forensic and digital evidence and sustained judicial attention produced a verdict in under a year (Dawn, 2026a). The reform task is to make this the routine path, which requires resources and procedures, not exceptional attention.

5.3 Crime control and due process fail together

In Packer's (1964) terms, a system can fail both of its goals at once. Pakistan's pipeline shows signs of this. Conviction rates are low in many categories, which suggests weak crime control. At the same time, around three-quarters of prisoners have not been convicted and prisons run at 160.6% of capacity, which suggests weak due process. Both outcomes stem from the same causes: slow investigation, slow trial and heavy reliance on custody. Reforms that tackle only one side, for example tougher penalties or bigger prisons, are unlikely to help.

5.4 Legitimacy and the gender gap

Procedural justice research suggests that when people see the system as fair and responsive, they report crime and cooperate with it (Tyler, 2006). The evidence on gender-based violence suggests the opposite spiral. Very few reported rape cases in Islamabad ended in conviction in 2024 (Dawn, 2026b), no convictions were recorded among hundreds of cases of violence against women in the first half of 2025 (IANS, 2025a), and commentators warn that poorly reasoned judgments discourage survivors from coming forward (IPS, 2026). The Sindh experience, where convictions have risen after investment in specialised courts and investigation, offers some hope (The Express Tribune, 2026b). It also shows that results depend on the whole chain, not on the existence of a court.

5.5 Laws and institutions change faster than capacity

Pakistan has been active in creating new laws and bodies: special GBV courts, a Federal Constitutional Court, a national cybercrime agency and mobile police services. Each may have merits. But the evidence on judicial vacancies, forensic capacity and prison overcrowding suggests that capacity to deliver has not grown as quickly as institutional design. The PECA example also shows that new legal powers, if not

carefully bounded, can create disputes about jurisdiction and fairness at the very entry point of the system.

6. Recommendations

Based on the evidence reviewed, we suggest the following priorities for the federal government, the Islamabad Capital Territory administration, the judiciary and civil society.

1. **Publish the complaint-to-FIR ratio.** Islamabad Police should report, by police station and month, how many complaints (including Rescue 15 and helpline calls) became FIRs, and allow independent auditing of the records.
2. **Create a dedicated prosecution service for the ICT, involved from the start.** The absence of a prosecution branch in the capital has been noted by its own Advocate General (Dawn, 2021c). Prosecutors should review serious cases during investigation, not only when the charge sheet arrives.
3. **Fill judicial vacancies and restore non-functioning courts.** The 29 Islamabad courts without judges should be a visible, time-bound target, and courts should publish clearance rates by court.
4. **Invest in forensic and investigative capacity.** This includes training in homicide, sexual-offence and cyber investigation, and a specialised serious-crimes investigation unit for gender-based violence, starting in Islamabad as parliamentarians have suggested (The Express Tribune, 2026b).
5. **Reduce unnecessary pre-trial detention.** Wider use of bail for minor offences, probation, parole and diversion, together with legal aid at the first remand hearing, are recommended in the HRCP and NCHR/JPP reports (The Express Tribune, 2026a; Arab News, 2026).
6. **Build one linked data system.** Police, prosecution, court and prison records should share a case identifier, so that attrition at each stage can be measured and published in open, disaggregated form.
7. **Set clear safeguards for cybercrime enforcement.** The jurisdiction of the NCCIA and provincial police, the standards for registering cases and the role of judicial oversight should be set out clearly, and vague definitions of prohibited content should be reviewed (LUMS SAHSOL, 2025).
8. **Evaluate the structural reforms.** The effect of the 27th Amendment on the disposal of criminal appeals and death-sentence confirmations should be tracked and reported publicly.

7. Limitations

This is a study of documents, not of cases. We did not access court files or police records, and we did not interview officials, victims or practitioners. News reports are secondary sources; police statements are self-reported; and NGO figures rely on official data that are sometimes incomplete or recorded differently across provinces. Some figures (for example, conviction rates) differ by source and period, and we report them as stated rather than reconciling them. The Islamabad evidence is a mix of official statements, case reports and parliamentary briefings, and cannot be treated as a representative sample. Finally, reforms introduced in 2025 and 2026 are recent, and their effects may not yet show in the data. Future research should combine this kind of document analysis with case-file tracking, interviews and linked administrative data.

8. Conclusion

Pakistan's criminal justice system is best understood as a chain whose links depend on one another. In Islamabad, recent reforms have improved access at the front door, and some cases move from crime to verdict quickly. But the wider evidence shows complaints that were not always recorded, low conviction rates in several categories, especially for violence against women, thin court capacity, and prisons that are full of people who have not been convicted. These are connected symptoms of the same underlying problem: a pipeline that loses cases and time between stages, and that is measured stage by stage rather than as a whole. Improving it will require less emphasis on new institutions and more on linking the existing ones, with transparent data, early prosecution involvement, adequate courts and fewer people held unnecessarily before trial.

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