

DEATH ROW INMATE SURGE: THE OVERLOOKED THREAT TO CORRECTIONAL CENTRES' LIVING CONDITIONS

Eyitayo J. Oyeyipo <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1408-7405>

Ph.D., Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria.

Email: eyitayo.oyeyipo@uniosun.edu.ng

Olawale James Gbadeyan, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3566-1450>

Ph.D., Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria.

Email: Olawale.gbadeyan@Uniosun.edu.ng

Ademolu O. Adenuga <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3482-1248>

PhD, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria.

Email: ademolu.adenuga@uniosun.edu.ng

Olubukola M. Aratunde <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6355-9211>

PhD, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria.

Email: olubukola.aratunde@uniosun.edu.ng

Abstract: The increasing number of death row prisoners is placing a growing burden on custodial management and inmate welfare in Nigeria. This paper examines the effects of the surge in death row inmates on the quality of life of condemned prisoners in Kwara State, Nigeria, using a qualitative research design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with fifteen death row inmates and analysed using thematic analysis to capture both lived experiences and institutional realities. Respondents were selected from the population of death row inmates using inclusion criteria requiring a minimum of five (5) years on death row. This criterion was considered necessary to obtain rich and reflective accounts of lived experiences. The results show that prolonged overcrowding has severely compromised individual space, sanitation, food and water supply, medical care, and freedom of movement. In addition to material deprivation, the surge has intensified psychological suffering, heightened tension among inmates, and strengthened feelings of neglect and institutional abandonment. The study further reveals that current correctional facilities in Kwara State are not adequately equipped to accommodate the growing death row population. The article recommends population management and sentencing review mechanisms, increased resource allocation, and enhanced budgetary support to improve living conditions and ensure humane treatment in line with international correctional standards. This study contributes to criminological and policy debates on prison overcrowding and capital punishment in Nigeria by foregrounding the voices of death row inmates.

Keywords: *death row inmates, prison overcrowding, congestion, decongestion, living conditions.*



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Received: 17.02.2026

Revised: 08.04.2026

Accepted: 21.04.2026

© The Author(s) 2026

Introduction

The death penalty remains one of the most debated forms of criminal punishment worldwide. While some countries still apply capital punishment for the most serious offences, others have abolished it on the grounds that it violates human rights, risks wrongful convictions, and subjects inmates to prolonged psychological suffering prior to execution (Noor & Ajmal, 2022).

A disturbing trend in retentionist countries is that death row prisoners often spend years, or even decades, awaiting execution - or are never executed at all (ACLU, 2013). This condition is commonly referred to as the *death row phenomenon* or *death row syndrome*, and it raises serious legal, ethical, and humanitarian concerns (Bennett, 2017). However, some scholars argue that abolishing the death penalty may increase miscarriages of justice if legal scrutiny and defence diligence decline (Merriam, 2021).

The debate on the death penalty is dynamic and multifaceted in Africa. While countries such as Rwanda and Burundi have abolished it, others continue to retain capital punishment within their legal systems (Amnesty International, 2023). Even in retentionist states, executions have become increasingly rare, resulting in a growing death row population (International Federation for Human Rights, 2017). Resource limitations, overcrowding, and systemic inefficiencies in African prisons further complicate the management of this population (Baggio et al., 2020). Consequently, inmates often endure prolonged uncertainty, inadequate medical care, and conditions falling far below international human rights standards (Oyeyipo et al., 2021).

Nigeria presents a particularly significant case. As Africa's most populous country, it retains the death penalty for a wide range of offences (Olutola, 2020). However, delays in execution and systemic inefficiencies have contributed to a steady accumulation of death row inmates. Bureaucratic bottlenecks and political reluctance have further exacerbated this situation. According to the Nigerian Correctional Service (2025), more than 3,600 inmates are currently on death row in Nigeria.

This study therefore investigates how the increasing death row population affects inmates' lived experiences and living conditions. It also examines how delayed execution processes contribute to overcrowding, suffering, and systemic strain within correctional institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Although capital punishment remains legally recognised in Nigeria, conditions in death row facilities are poorly documented and understudied. The population of death row inmates continues to rise due not only to new sentencing but also to delays in execution, commutation, or legal review. This has created chronic overcrowding, resource shortages, and deteriorating living conditions in correctional centres.

Prolonged uncertainty exposes inmates to severe psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and other adverse health outcomes. In many cases, scholars refer to this condition as *death row syndrome* or the *death row phenomenon*. Despite occasional public debate, there is limited empirical research focusing on the lived experiences of death row inmates in Nigerian correctional facilities and how delayed execution affects their daily lives and well-being.

Therefore, it is urgent to examine how the increasing death row population contributes to overcrowding, human rights concerns, and declining living conditions within correctional centres.

Research Question: what is the impact of the death row inmate surge on the living conditions of inmates?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Stress Process Theory developed by Pearlin (1981). The theory explains how chronic stressors - such as prolonged imprisonment, legal uncertainty, and lack of closure - negatively affect individuals' psychological and physical health. In the context of death row incarceration, persistent uncertainty and isolation function as continuous stressors that exacerbate mental and physical deterioration.

Methodology

This study adopted a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of death row inmates. Fifteen inmates were selected for in-depth interviews (IDI). The sample size was considered appropriate given the homogeneity of the population.

Nigeria was purposively selected due to its relevance to the study. The country is divided into six geopolitical zones, with the North Central zone selected due to accessibility and proximity to the researchers. Within this zone, Kwara State was selected purposively for similar reasons.

Correctional facilities were mapped within the state, and a maximum-security prison housing death row inmates was selected. Data were analysed using content analysis, where recurring themes were identified and interpreted in relation to the research question.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Nigerian Correctional Service. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained. Findings were disseminated through academic conferences and peer-reviewed publications.

Findings

Table 1: Interview Profile

A _n	Age Grade	Category	Sex	Location	Religion
A ₁	31-40	Inmate	M	Mandala Facility	Islam
A ₂	41-50	Inmate	M	Oke Kura Facility	Islam
A ₃	21-30	Inmate	M	Oke Kura Facility	Christianity
A ₄	31-40	Inmate	M	Oke Kra Facility	Christianity
A ₅	41-50	Inmate	M	Mandala Facility	Islam
A ₆	41-50	Inmate	M	Oke Kura Facility	Islam
A ₇	31-40	Inmate	M	Oke Kura Facility	Islam
A ₈	31-40	Inmate	M	Mandala Facility	Christianity

A ₉	41-50	Inmate	M	Oke Kura Facility	Islam
A ₁₀	41-50	Inmate	M	Mandala Facility	Islam
A ₁₁	31-40	Inmate	M	Oke Kura Facility	Islam
A ₁₂	31-40	Inmate	M	Oke Kurai Facility	Christianity
A ₁₃	31-40	Inmate	M	Mandala Facility	Islam
A ₁₄	21-30	Inmate	M	Oke Kura Facility	Islam
A ₁₅	41-50	Inmate	M	Mandala Facility	Christianity

Source: Survey, 2025. **Note:** All respondents were male due to the absence of female death row inmates at the time of data collection.

The analysis of fifteen death row inmate interviews revealed several interconnected themes illustrating the impact of the death row inmate surge on living conditions within the custodial environment. Direct excerpts from respondents are provided to substantiate each finding. All respondents were male due to the unavailability of female death row inmates at the time of data collection.

Table 2: Theme 1 – Coded Description of the Impact of the Death Row Inmate Surge on Living Conditions

Theme	Code Description
Environmental Impact	Overcrowding and loss of personal space; deterioration of sanitation and hygiene facilities; reduced access to medical care and institutional services
Social Impact	Inadequate food, water, and basic supplies; restricted movement and reduced activity time
Psychological Impact	Increased stress and tension; heightened feelings of neglect and isolation

Source: Survey, 2025

The coded descriptions of participants' responses regarding the impact of the death row inmate surge on living conditions within the custodial environment are presented in Table 2. The table identifies three major themes that dominate participants' accounts.

Table 3: Theme 2 – Environmental Impact

Participant	Comment
A3	The surge means we now share cells that were meant for one person. There is barely space to move or sleep comfortably.
A4	Overcrowding has made the place hotter and stuffier. Ventilation is poor, and the heat makes it difficult to sleep.
A5	Sanitation has worsened; the bathrooms are always occupied and dirty.
A9	The toilets fill up faster, water runs out, and cleaning does not keep up.

Participant	Comment
A14	It now takes longer to get medical attention. Minor illnesses turn into more serious conditions due to delays.
A15	It used to be easy to report complaints. Now the queue is long, and many of us feel ignored.

Source: Survey, 2025

Table 4: Theme 3 – Social Impact

Participant	Comment
A1	Food rations have reduced. Although the quantity is said to be the same, it does not go round due to the increased population.
A2	Hygiene items finish faster. Soap, detergents, and even water are shared among too many people.
A7	Sanitation has worsened; the bathrooms are always occupied and dirty.
A12	Space for exercise and outdoor activity has reduced. We spend more time locked up because officers cannot manage the larger population.

Source: Survey, 2025

Table 5: Theme 4 – Psychological Impact

Participant	Comment
A6	The surge makes us feel forgotten. There is no adjustment to the facilities—just more people squeezed in.
A8	The environment feels more depressing. You see despair around you every day.
A10	When more death row inmates were added, tension increased. Everyone is stressed, and arguments break out more often.
A11	New inmates bring anxiety and conflict. This increases the general sense of fear.
A13	Every day feels like the last. Even when loved ones visit, the moment your name is called, you feel like the end has come.

Source: Survey, 2025

Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that the influx of death row inmates has significantly disrupted living conditions within correctional facilities. Overcrowding has intensified psychological distress and placed additional strain on institutional infrastructure. Participants' accounts of insufficient personal space align with global research linking prison overcrowding to deteriorating living conditions, increased health risks, and human rights violations.

Inadequate access to food, water, and hygiene materials reflects systemic resource constraints and poor institutional planning. The inability to proportionally adjust

resources to population growth highlights chronic underfunding within Nigerian correctional services.

Psychological distress is also evident, with inmates reporting heightened anxiety, despair, and emotional exhaustion. Given that death row incarceration already involves extreme psychological pressure, overcrowding further aggravates mental health risks.

Health-related concerns are also prominent. Delayed medical attention and poor sanitation increase vulnerability to disease outbreaks, consistent with findings in existing prison health literature. Restricted movement and prolonged confinement further contribute to physical and psychological deterioration.

Finally, feelings of neglect and institutional abandonment reflect a breakdown in custodial care. Such perceptions may undermine inmate compliance and further complicate correctional management.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the increasing population of death row inmates has significantly worsened living conditions in Nigerian correctional facilities. Overcrowding remains the central issue, producing a cascade of negative effects, including poor sanitation, inadequate nutrition, delayed healthcare, restricted movement, and increased psychological distress.

The findings also indicate that existing correctional infrastructure is insufficient to manage the growing death row population. Beyond physical deprivation, inmates experience profound psychological suffering characterised by despair and institutional neglect, raising serious human rights concerns.

Recommendations

- **Population management and sentencing review:** Expedite appeals, commutations, and sentence reviews to reduce death row congestion.
- **Resource scaling and budgetary support:** Adjust correctional funding to reflect population realities and ensure adequate provision of food, sanitation, and healthcare services.

References

- ACLU. (2013). *Solitary confinement on death row*.
- Amnesty International. (2023). About the death penalty. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/death-penalty>
- Baggio, S., Peigné, N., Heller, P., Gétaz, L., Liebreuz, M., & Wolff, H. (2020). Do overcrowding and turnover cause violence in prison? *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 10*, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2019.01015>
- Bennett, J. V. (2017). The death penalty. In *Capital punishment*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315081809-12>
- International Federation for Human Rights. (2017). *Triggers for abolition of the death penalty in Africa: A Southern African perspective*.
- Merriam, G. (2021). The paradox of innocence. *Criminal Justice Ethics, 40*(3), 214–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0731129X.2021.2013684>
- Nigerian Correctional Service. (2025, March 13). 3,688 prisoners on death row. *Punch Newspaper*. <https://punchng.com/3688-prisoners-on-death-row>

- Noor, S., & Ajmal, A. (2022). United Nations resolution for moratorium on death penalty. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2110196>
- Olutola, A. (2020). Punishment of crime in Nigeria and South Africa. *The Oriental Anthropologist*, 20, 276–291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972558X20952658>
- Oyeyipo, E., et al. (2021). Prison overcrowding trend in Nigeria. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1956035>

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.