Prison overcrowding is a major contributor to problems including:
- reduced staff morale
- security and control difficulties
- increased health and wellbeing problems for staff and inmates
- increased levels of conflict and violence
- failure of rehabilitation resulting in increased re-offending

While building or expanding prison capacity can reduce overcrowding there are things that can be done to improve conditions in overcrowded prisons.

Inside are ten keys – practical measures – to improve conditions in overcrowded prisons and jails. These were assembled by the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation with two criteria in mind: first, does it improve the quality of life of prisoners and prison staff, and second, could it be done (or at least begun) without new legislation or large amounts of money.
10 Keys to Improving Conditions in Overcrowded Prisons

**SECURITY**

Overcrowded prisons are more difficult to manage and frequently plagued by increased conflict and violence. Often the movement of prisoners is restricted as a means of controlling the situation. Unfortunately this adds to the stress and hostility felt by inmates.

1. **Reduce Idleness**
   Reduce inmate idleness by increasing opportunities for exercise, sports, cultural and religious activities. Active inmates are less likely to feel stressed and hostile.

2. **Classify Prisoners**
   Classify and house prisoners according to their level of risk. Lower risk groups require less security and can be managed on a lower security basis.

**HEALTH**

As toilet, sanitation, and cooking facilities become inadequate to serve a growing prison population, the health of staff and inmates is at risk, making it more difficult to control contagious diseases.

3. **Improve Sanitation**
   Organize and train inmates in preventative health care including basic sanitation, food preparation and personal hygiene.

4. **Grow Food**
   Involve low risk inmate labour to cultivate vegetable gardens, raise livestock (e.g., cattle, sheep, pigs, perhaps poultry) to provide additional and more varied food for the prison. This will improve nutrition and also provide inmates with meaningful activity.

**CONDITIONS**

Overcrowded prisons are more difficult to manage humanely and effectively. As need for living space increases the space available for educational, recreational, cultural, and religious activities is often reduced or entirely eliminated.

5. **Use Volunteers**
   Increase the involvement of volunteers, community groups and NGOs to provide meaningful programmes for prisoners. Even where space is limited the involvement of volunteers contributes to improved morale and reduces inmate idleness.

6. **Train Staff**
   Train staff members in basic relational skills including effective communication, building respectful and humane relationships, anger management and conflict mediation. This will improve both staff and inmate morale.

**NON-SENTENCED PRISONERS**

Prison overcrowding is sometimes caused by a slow court system and as a result the number of remand or non-sentenced prisoners increases substantially. Some non-sentenced prisoners may not have appeared in court due to lack of legal representation and others may be eligible for bail.

7. **Review Cases**
   Reduce the number of non-sentenced prisoners by establishing a process for lawyers, prosecutors and judges to review the legal status of individual detainees and make appropriate recommendations to the court.

8. **Speed Release**
   Organize volunteer lawyers or paralegal volunteers to help inmates prepare for bail hearings and thus reduce the amount of time they may have to wait for their cases to be heard.

9. **Increase Alternatives**
   Convene a meeting with judges, politicians, community leaders, lawyers and other relevant groups to discuss the use of alternative community-based punishments rather than prison for non-dangerous offenders. Consider holding the meeting at the jail or prison to expand awareness of existing conditions.

10. **Use Furloughs**
    Unless there are legal obstacles, permit trustworthy prisoners to leave during the day or weekends for employment, family visitation or community service activities.

**SENTENCED PRISONERS**

Many persons who have been sentenced to prison do not represent a real danger or threat to the community. The court has ordered them imprisoned because few other meaningful alternatives for punishment exist. Effective alternatives can be used to reduce the prison population.

**LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS**

Prison overcrowding is an entrenched problem and solutions require careful work and strong political will. Some of the creative measures taken to address this problem have included:

- Mobile judges travel to prisons to hold court hearings. This reduces the number of remand prisoners.
- Judges use probation and community service as an alternative to prison.
- Legislators adopt sentencing reforms to reduce the length of sentences.
- Parole boards are given authority to release and supervise prisoners early who pose little danger to society.
- Parole boards sanction technical parole violators (e.g., fail to report on time) outside prison.