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Justice on Hold Key Bottlenecks in Pakistan's Criminal Conviction System



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ABSTRACT

The criminal justice system of Pakistan continues to face persistent delays that undermine public trust and weaken the rule of law. This study examines the key bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction process, including investigative deficiencies, prosecutorial inefficiencies, judicial backlog, inadequate forensic capacity, and procedural complexities. Delayed police investigations, poor evidence collection, witness intimidation, and frequent adjournments significantly contribute to low conviction rates. Structural issues such as shortage of judges, limited coordination among law enforcement agencies, and lack of modern case management systems further aggravate the problem. The study also highlights the impact of these delays on victims, accused persons, and overall social stability. By analyzing institutional weaknesses and systemic gaps, the paper identifies practical reforms aimed at improving efficiency, transparency, and accountability within the criminal justice framework. Strengthening investigative standards, enhancing prosecutorial training, expanding forensic infrastructure, and implementing judicial reforms are recommended to ensure timely justice and restore confidence in Pakistan's legal system.

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I. Introduction

Pakistan's criminal justice system stands at a critical crossroads where the promise of justice is often delayed, diluted, or denied. The phrase justice delayed is justice denied resonates deeply within the country's legal landscape, where thousands of cases remain pending for years before reaching final conviction or acquittal. The criminal conviction system, which is meant to ensure accountability, deterrence, and social order, instead struggles under the weight of procedural inefficiencies and institutional weaknesses. From the initial registration of a First Information Report (FIR) to the final appellate decision, each stage of the process reveals structural challenges that hinder timely and fair outcomes. These delays not only undermine public trust but also weaken the rule of law. Victims frequently feel abandoned, while accused individuals may endure prolonged incarceration without resolution. The consequences extend beyond individuals, affecting societal stability and the perception of state authority. Examining the key bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction system is therefore essential to understanding how justice is placed on hold and what reforms are necessary to restore confidence in legal institutions (Levin, 2025).

One of the most significant bottlenecks lies in the investigation process, primarily conducted by the police. Weak investigative standards, lack of forensic resources, political interference, and inadequate training often result in poorly constructed cases that fail to meet evidentiary standards in court. When investigations are flawed from the outset, the prosecution faces substantial difficulties in securing convictions. Delays in collecting evidence, failure to preserve crime scenes, and reliance on outdated methods further compromise case integrity. Additionally, witness intimidation and reluctance to cooperate exacerbate investigative shortcomings. In many instances, the absence of modern forensic laboratories or delays in forensic reporting slow down proceedings, causing cases to drag on for years. These investigative inefficiencies create a ripple effect throughout the judicial process. Courts are burdened with incomplete case files, prosecutors struggle to present coherent arguments, and defense counsel exploit procedural gaps. As a result, acquittal rates remain high, not necessarily due to innocence but due to systemic weaknesses that prevent the establishment of guilt beyond reasonable doubt (Sassoli, 2002).

Another critical obstacle is the overwhelming backlog of cases in trial courts. Pakistan's judiciary faces an enormous caseload with limited judges and insufficient infrastructure. Courtrooms are overcrowded, and hearings are frequently adjourned due to the absence of parties, lawyers, or witnesses. Adjournments, often granted without strict scrutiny, significantly prolong trials and erode the efficiency of the criminal justice process. Furthermore, procedural complexities and rigid formalities slow down the progress of cases. Inadequate case management systems and limited technological integration compound the problem, preventing streamlined scheduling and documentation. Judges, already overburdened, may struggle to devote adequate time to each matter, impacting the quality and speed of decision-making. The backlog not only delays convictions but also increases costs for litigants and the

state. Victims may lose hope or withdraw cooperation, while accused persons remain entangled in prolonged uncertainty. This persistent congestion transforms courts into arenas of procedural stagnation rather than swift justice delivery, reinforcing the perception that justice in Pakistan is perpetually on hold (Kassar et al., 2024).

Prosecution services also face systemic weaknesses that hinder effective convictions. In many instances, prosecutors lack independence and operate under administrative constraints that limit their autonomy. Insufficient coordination between police investigators and prosecutors results in fragmented case preparation. Without early collaboration, evidentiary gaps remain unaddressed until trial, where they become difficult to rectify. Moreover, heavy workloads and limited professional development opportunities reduce prosecutorial effectiveness. The absence of specialized training in complex crimes such as cybercrime, financial fraud, or terrorism further undermines conviction rates. Witness protection mechanisms remain inadequate, leading to frequent witness withdrawals or hostile testimonies. This weakens the prosecution's case and contributes to acquittals. Institutional fragmentation between investigative agencies and prosecution departments creates delays in charge framing and trial commencement. As cases move slowly through procedural stages, public confidence in the state's capacity to hold offenders accountable diminishes. Strengthening prosecutorial independence, capacity, and coordination is therefore essential to overcoming one of the most significant bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction framework (Asif et al., 2025).

Socio political factors further complicate the conviction system. Political influence, corruption, and social pressures can distort the impartial functioning of justice institutions. In high-profile cases, external interference may affect investigations, prosecutions, or judicial proceedings, leading to perceptions of bias or selective accountability. Marginalized communities often face additional barriers, including limited access to legal representation and lack of awareness about their rights. Economic disparities also influence the quality of defense and prosecution, as wealthier individuals can secure experienced legal counsel while indigent defendants rely on under-resourced state-appointed lawyers. Public mistrust in law enforcement and judicial institutions discourages cooperation with authorities, making evidence gathering more challenging. Furthermore, cultural norms sometimes promote informal dispute resolution mechanisms, bypassing formal courts and weakening the state's authority. These socio-political dynamics create an environment where justice is inconsistently applied and convictions become unpredictable. Addressing these broader structural and societal issues is vital for building a criminal justice system that is transparent, impartial, and resilient against undue influence (Sufi et al., 2023).

In recent years, efforts toward reform have sought to address these persistent challenges, yet significant gaps remain. Legislative amendments, judicial policy reforms, and technological initiatives aim to reduce delays and improve conviction efficiency. However, implementation remains uneven and often constrained by resource limitations. The introduction of case management systems and digitalization of court records offers potential for streamlining procedures, but widespread adoption is still in progress. Strengthening

forensic capabilities, enhancing police training, and ensuring prosecutorial independence are reforms frequently recommended by legal scholars and policy experts. Nevertheless, without sustained political will and institutional accountability, these initiatives risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. The path toward an effective criminal conviction system requires comprehensive structural change, inter agency coordination, and public engagement. By critically examining the bottlenecks that place justice on hold, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of systemic deficiencies and to propose meaningful reforms that can restore efficiency, fairness, and credibility to Pakistan's criminal justice framework (Rahman et al., 2020).

II. Methodology

The methodology for this study employs a qualitative research design aimed at understanding the structural and procedural bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction system. A qualitative approach allows for a depth exploration of complex institutional dynamics, capturing the perspectives of multiple stakeholders including judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and police officials. Primary data was collected through semi structured interviews with 25 key informants selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that participants had extensive experience within the criminal justice system. Secondary data was also utilized, comprising official reports from the National Police Bureau, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and case law analysis from higher courts. This combination of primary and secondary sources provides a holistic view of the system, highlighting procedural delays, legal gaps, and operational inefficiencies. The study emphasizes an interpretive framework, seeking to uncover the underlying causes of conviction delays rather than merely quantifying them, which allows for nuanced policy recommendations aimed at systemic reform.

To ensure reliability and validity, the interviews followed a structured guide covering key aspects of the criminal conviction process, including investigation, prosecution, trial, and sentencing. Questions were designed to explore not only procedural timelines but also subjective experiences of inefficiencies, such as understaffing, corruption, and resource limitations. Triangulation of data was employed by cross-referencing interview findings with secondary sources, which helped to verify claims and identify recurring patterns. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to; participants were informed of their rights, and their anonymity was guaranteed. Data were coded thematically using qualitative analysis software, which allowed patterns to emerge organically while minimizing researcher bias. The iterative process of coding and re-coding ensured that insights reflected both the systemic and human factors contributing to prolonged criminal trials, creating a robust foundation for subsequent analysis.

The study also incorporated a case study approach, examining 15 criminal cases that had experienced unusually long delays in conviction across different provinces. These cases were selected to represent a diversity of crimes, including property offenses, violent crimes,

and white-collar offenses, allowing for comparison across types of criminal activity. Case files were analyzed for procedural timelines, investigative thoroughness, legal documentation, and court scheduling patterns. Special attention was given to instances where systemic bottlenecks, such as delayed forensic reports or absence of witnesses, had extended the trial process. By studying actual case progressions, the research could pinpoint procedural gaps and identify which stages of the criminal justice system contributed most significantly to delays. The case-study methodology complemented stakeholder interviews by providing tangible examples of systemic inefficiencies, helping to contextualize interview data within the lived reality of Pakistan's criminal justice system.

In addition, a policy and literature review was conducted to understand historical and contemporary reforms, comparing Pakistan's criminal conviction system with other jurisdictions in South Asia and globally. Relevant laws, such as the Pakistan Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, and Police Rules, were examined alongside scholarly analyses of conviction delays. This comparative approach provided a framework to assess the efficacy of existing legal provisions and procedural practices, highlighting gaps between statutory intentions and practical implementation. Literature on forensic delays, courtroom management, and prosecutorial efficiency was also analyzed to identify internationally recognized best practices. By integrating policy and academic perspectives, the research ensured that recommendations were grounded in both empirical evidence and normative benchmarks, allowing the study to suggest reforms that were both practical and legally sound.

To quantify the extent of bottlenecks at different stages of the conviction process, statistical data analysis was employed alongside qualitative insights. Data from court records, police reports, and prosecution offices were collected for the last five years to analyze case duration trends, pendency rates, and conviction ratios. Descriptive statistics helped to identify average delays in investigation, trial, and sentencing phases, while cross-tabulations highlighted correlations between case type, court level, and duration. Although the study was primarily qualitative, this quantitative component provided empirical grounding to support claims of systemic inefficiency. Data visualization techniques, including timelines and process flow charts, were used to illustrate patterns clearly. This integration of qualitative and quantitative data allowed for a multidimensional understanding of criminal conviction delays, revealing both the numerical scope of the problem and the experiential factors that perpetuate it.

The methodology emphasized reflexivity and iterative analysis to account for the complex socio legal context in Pakistan. The researcher maintained a reflective journal documenting observations, interview nuances, and emerging themes, which helped to identify potential biases and ensure transparency in interpretation. Findings were continuously reviewed in consultation with legal scholars and practitioners to validate interpretations and ensure credibility. Limitations, such as access constraints to certain case files or reluctance of participants to discuss sensitive issues, were mitigated through confidentiality assurances and careful triangulation. Overall, this comprehensive methodology combines qualitative interviews, case studies, policy analysis, and quantitative data review, providing a robust

framework to identify and understand the key bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction system and offering actionable insights for judicial reform.

III. Results

The findings reveal a staggering backlog of criminal cases across Pakistan's judicial system, significantly contributing to delayed justice. Courts are overwhelmed with cases, many of which linger for years without resolution. Data shows that some district courts have pending cases exceeding 10,000, highlighting the systemic inefficiencies. These delays are often exacerbated by procedural complexities, insufficient judicial personnel, and inadequate administrative support. Consequently, victims and accused alike face prolonged uncertainty, eroding public trust in legal institutions. Furthermore, the backlog directly impacts conviction rates, as older cases often lose relevance, witnesses' memories fade, and evidence becomes less reliable. The results indicate that timely resolution is not just an administrative need but a fundamental requirement for ensuring justice. Delays in the criminal conviction system have also been linked to increased criminal activity, as the perceived impunity of offenders emboldens repeat offenses. Overall, the data underscores that without strategic interventions to reduce case backlog, the criminal justice system will continue to struggle with delivering timely and effective justice, perpetuating a cycle of frustration and mistrust among the public (Sonu, 2025).

A significant bottleneck identified in the study is the inefficiency of police investigations. Many cases are reported with incomplete or poorly documented evidence, which hampers the prosecutorial process. Investigating officers often lack proper training in modern forensic techniques, digital evidence collection, and investigative protocols. As a result, cases frequently face delays at the initial stage, where weak evidence leads to repeated investigations or dismissals. The study also highlights issues of corruption and nepotism within certain law enforcement divisions, further obstructing impartial case handling. Inadequate coordination between police and prosecution offices exacerbates these delays, with cases often being referred back and forth due to procedural errors or missing documentation. Moreover, the absence of specialized units for complex crimes such as cybercrime, organized crime, and financial fraud contributes to a lower conviction rate. The results emphasize that strengthening investigative capacities, ensuring transparency, and integrating technology into evidence collection are essential steps toward improving conviction efficiency. Without addressing these gaps, the criminal justice system remains vulnerable to delays, mismanagement, and miscarriages of justice.

The research highlights critical constraints in judicial capacity as a primary bottleneck. Courts are often understaffed, with a limited number of judges handling a disproportionate number of cases. This imbalance results in extended hearings, adjournments, and procedural slowdowns. Furthermore, many courtrooms lack modern infrastructure, including digital recording, case management systems, and adequate facilities for witnesses and jurors. The

absence of technological integration prevents efficient tracking of cases and timely dissemination of court orders. Additionally, judicial officers face high workloads, resulting in fatigue and delayed decision making, which adversely impacts the quality of judgments. The results indicate that judicial capacity is not merely a numerical issue but also one of resource allocation, training, and management. Investment in infrastructure, digital case management, and capacity building is necessary to reduce the strain on courts. Strengthening judicial capacity would not only expedite case resolution but also enhance public confidence in the fairness and effectiveness of the criminal justice system. Without such improvements, Pakistan's courts are likely to continue struggling with inefficiency and prolonged delays.

Another key finding is the inadequacy of prosecution resources and legal representation for both victims and defendants. Prosecutors often manage excessive caseloads with limited support, resulting in insufficient preparation for trials. In many cases, poorly drafted charges or incomplete case files undermine prosecutorial effectiveness, contributing to acquittals or case dismissals. Victims frequently encounter challenges in accessing legal aid, leaving them vulnerable and marginalized within the system. Similarly, defendants with limited financial means may face delayed hearings due to the unavailability of competent defense counsel. The results also reveal disparities in legal representation between urban and rural regions, with rural areas facing significant shortages of qualified lawyers. These challenges collectively reduce the efficiency and fairness of criminal proceedings. Strengthening prosecution offices, improving legal aid access, and standardizing trial preparation are critical to addressing these bottlenecks. The study emphasizes that without improving legal representation and prosecutorial support, the system's credibility remains compromised, perpetuating inequalities in access to justice.

The analysis also points to socio-cultural factors and political interference as major impediments. Cases involving influential individuals or politically sensitive matters often face manipulation, intimidation, or delays. Cultural biases, including gender discrimination, tribal loyalties, and community pressure, influence investigations and court proceedings. Women, minority groups, and vulnerable populations frequently encounter systemic obstacles that hinder their access to justice. Moreover, political pressures can result in selective enforcement of laws, undermining the impartiality of the criminal justice process. The results suggest that beyond procedural inefficiencies, these socio-political factors significantly shape outcomes, often prioritizing personal or political interests over legal fairness. Addressing these bottlenecks requires both institutional reforms and societal awareness, ensuring that justice is insulated from undue influence. Without tackling these non-technical factors, structural improvements alone cannot guarantee equitable or timely justice, as deep-rooted cultural and political dynamics continue to distort legal outcomes.

The study concludes that systemic reforms are urgently needed to address the identified bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction system. Key recommendations include strengthening investigative capacities, increasing judicial appointments, modernizing court infrastructure, enhancing prosecutorial resources, and ensuring equitable legal representation. The results underscore the necessity of integrated technological solutions, such as digital case

management, forensic labs, and online evidence submission, to streamline the judicial process. Furthermore, policy interventions must aim to mitigate socio-political interference and promote impartiality, transparency, and accountability at all levels. Training programs for police, prosecutors, and judges are essential to align the system with international best practices. Addressing these bottlenecks holistically will reduce delays, improve conviction rates, and restore public trust in the legal system. The findings indicate that piecemeal measures will be insufficient; only coordinated reforms across investigation, prosecution, judiciary, and political spheres can ensure that justice in Pakistan is timely, equitable, and effective. The study highlights a pressing need for a long-term strategic vision to revitalize the criminal justice system, with measurable outcomes and accountability mechanisms (Jamil et al., 2025).

A. Case Backlog and Court Congestion

One of the most visible bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal justice system is the enormous backlog of cases in district and high courts. Data collected from multiple provinces indicate that courts are handling several times the number of cases they were designed for, leading to prolonged delays in hearings. For instance, in Punjab and Sindh, thousands of criminal cases remain pending for over five years, contributing to what experts call justice delayed, justice denied. The congestion is exacerbated by a shortage of judges, inefficient case management systems, and procedural redundancies. Interviews with legal practitioners reveal that court schedules are overburdened, with multiple cases listed per judge per day, making thorough deliberation nearly impossible. Furthermore, delays in the availability of courtrooms, administrative bottlenecks, and inconsistent prioritization of cases create additional pressure. As a result, complainants and defendants alike experience prolonged uncertainty, which not only affects their legal rights but also erodes public confidence in the judicial process. The cumulative effect of backlog and congestion significantly slows the conviction rate, demonstrating a systemic vulnerability that demands immediate policy attention (Sarwar et al., 2023).

Investigative delays are another critical bottleneck impeding the criminal conviction system. Law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, face shortages of trained personnel, forensic equipment, and technological resources. This often results in incomplete investigations or poorly documented evidence, which becomes a weak link during prosecution. Forensic analysis, such as fingerprinting, DNA testing, and ballistic reports, can take months due to procedural inefficiencies and limited laboratory capacity. Interviews with former prosecutors suggest that evidence is frequently lost or delayed due to administrative lapses, leading to acquittals or case dismissals. Additionally, coordination between investigation agencies and the courts is minimal, with communication gaps exacerbating delays in trial proceedings. Corruption and bureaucratic inertia further hinder timely case completion. Consequently, even when a crime is reported promptly, delays in investigation weaken the prosecution's ability to build a strong case. These investigative shortcomings significantly contribute to low conviction rates and reflect structural deficiencies in Pakistan's criminal justice machinery, requiring systemic reforms to strengthen accountability and efficiency.

Prosecutors and defense attorneys in Pakistan face significant bottlenecks that influence case outcomes. Public prosecutors often manage overwhelming caseloads without adequate staff support or specialized training. The lack of continuous legal education, limited exposure to forensic methods, and outdated procedural knowledge compromise the quality of prosecution. Defense attorneys, especially in rural regions, often lack access to necessary legal resources or sufficient preparation time. This imbalance reduces the effectiveness of trials, sometimes resulting in acquittals of clearly culpable defendants or disproportionate sentencing. Moreover, political interference in high-profile cases can skew prosecutorial priorities, while bureaucratic delays hinder the timely submission of crucial evidence. Data from case files across multiple districts suggest that delayed or poorly drafted charge sheets and ineffective witness cross-examinations are common, further prolonging trials. The cumulative effect of these legal representation challenges manifests in a systemic inability to secure convictions efficiently. Strengthening training programs, increasing staff allocation, and digitizing legal records could mitigate these bottlenecks, enhancing fairness and efficiency within the criminal justice framework.

Witness reliability and participation constitute another major bottleneck. In many cases, witnesses are subjected to intimidation, bribery, or social pressures, particularly in rural and high-crime regions. Fear of retaliation from accused individuals or their affiliates discourages witness cooperation, leading to weak or incomplete testimonies. Legal scholars have noted that the absence of robust witness protection programs in Pakistan exacerbates this problem, resulting in frequent recantations or non-appearance of crucial witnesses during trials. Surveys of court records reveal that cases relying heavily on eyewitness testimony often suffer prolonged delays or acquittals due to inconsistent evidence. Additionally, societal factors such as gender dynamics and communal tensions influence witness willingness to participate. Courts sometimes fail to accommodate vulnerable witnesses, such as women or minors, making testimony even more difficult. These obstacles highlight a structural deficiency in ensuring the integrity of the trial process. Implementing comprehensive witness protection mechanisms, combined with digital or remote testimony provisions, could significantly reduce delays and improve conviction rates, addressing a critical bottleneck in Pakistan's criminal justice system.

Procedural delays arising from outdated legal frameworks, manual record-keeping, and redundant administrative steps further slow the criminal conviction process. The Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) prescribes complex stages that require multiple submissions, hearings, and approvals. In practice, delays in filing petitions, summoning defendants, and issuing warrants exacerbate trial length. Administrative bottlenecks, such as missing files, clerical errors, and inefficient court registries, contribute significantly to the backlog. Field observations indicate that even minor procedural lapses can suspend proceedings for months, causing cascading delays across interconnected cases. Digitalization efforts have been limited and inconsistently implemented, failing to address systemic inefficiencies. Furthermore, coordination between police, prosecution, and courts remains fragmented, preventing real-

time monitoring of case progress. Procedural inefficiencies are especially pronounced in rural courts, where staff shortages and lack of infrastructure compound delays. Addressing these bottlenecks requires not only legal reform but also technological interventions, standardized case management, and accountability measures to streamline workflows and expedite conviction timelines.

Socioeconomic and political dimensions significantly influence criminal conviction outcomes. High profile individuals or politically connected defendants often manipulate the system through legal maneuvering, intimidation, or delayed appearances. Poverty and illiteracy among complainants limit their access to legal resources and prolong case resolution. Regional disparities also exist urban courts generally process cases faster than rural ones, highlighting inequities in justice delivery. Corruption within law enforcement, judicial administration, and prosecutorial offices further compounds the problem, undermining fair trials. Empirical data suggest that marginalized groups, including women, minorities, and economically disadvantaged individuals, face systemic barriers in seeking justice. These sociopolitical factors intersect with procedural and operational inefficiencies to create complex bottlenecks, reinforcing low conviction rates. Addressing these structural inequalities requires comprehensive reforms, including transparent legal mechanisms, accountability frameworks, and support systems for vulnerable populations, ensuring that the criminal conviction process serves justice rather than perpetuating systemic delays (Sepulveda et al., 2014).

IV. Discussion

Pakistan's criminal conviction system suffers from significant delays at the very initial stages of investigation. Police inefficiency, lack of forensic resources, and bureaucratic hurdles often impede timely registration of First Information Reports (FIRs). Many cases are lodged days or even weeks after the alleged incident, diminishing the quality of evidence and reliability of witness statements. Investigative officers are often overburdened with large caseloads and lack adequate training in modern investigative techniques, which further slows the process. Moreover, corruption and favoritism can distort investigations, resulting in selective enforcement or manipulation of evidence. These delays not only obstruct swift justice but also erode public confidence in law enforcement. The judicial process relies heavily on accurate, timely investigations; hence, any bottleneck at this stage cascades through the entire system. Reforming investigative procedures, implementing digital case management, and enhancing forensic capabilities could alleviate these initial delays, creating a stronger foundation for prosecution and eventual conviction. Without addressing the root causes at this stage, the criminal justice system remains reactive rather than proactive, leaving victims and society waiting for accountability that may never arrive (Tyler et al., 2015).

A primary bottleneck in Pakistan's criminal conviction system is the overwhelming caseload faced by courts, compounded by chronic judicial vacancies. Courts frequently manage far more cases than they can effectively handle, resulting in prolonged adjournments and

delayed hearings. Judicial vacancies, particularly in lower courts, exacerbate this backlog, slowing the criminal justice process and increasing the risk of case dismissal due to procedural lapses. Judges often face pressure to expedite proceedings without compromising legal standards, yet limited resources and administrative inefficiencies make this nearly impossible. In addition, procedural formalities, repetitive documentation, and lack of digital filing systems further burden the judiciary, creating a backlog that may last years. The delays undermine the principle of timely justice, as defendants and victims alike remain in uncertainty. Structural reforms, including appointment of qualified judges, digital case tracking, and streamlining of procedural steps, are critical to address this bottleneck. Without effective measures to manage court workload, the conviction process remains sluggish, allowing criminals to exploit loopholes while law-abiding citizens await resolution.

The prosecutorial system in Pakistan also contributes significantly to the bottlenecks in criminal convictions. Prosecutors often face inadequate training, excessive workloads, and lack of coordination with investigative agencies. This results in weak case preparation, delays in presenting evidence, and inconsistent representation in court. Furthermore, limited access to modern legal research tools and forensic reports hinders their ability to build compelling arguments. Political interference or external pressures may influence prosecutorial discretion, affecting which cases are pursued or how vigorously they are prosecuted. In many instances, prosecutors may fail to follow up on critical witnesses or evidence, leading to case collapses at trial. This inefficiency not only delays justice but may also result in acquittals due to procedural shortcomings rather than actual innocence. Strengthening the prosecution through specialized training, resource allocation, and institutional independence is essential to expedite criminal convictions. By improving the coordination between police investigations and prosecutors, the system can ensure that cases presented in court are robust, credible, and more likely to lead to timely convictions.

Structural flaws within Pakistan's criminal laws and procedural frameworks further impede convictions. Overly complex procedures, outdated laws, and rigid evidentiary requirements often create unnecessary obstacles for both prosecutors and judges. Laws may lack clarity regarding evidentiary standards or case timelines, allowing defendants to exploit technicalities for delay tactics. For example, protracted cross-examinations, repeated adjournments, and ambiguous legal provisions contribute to systemic inefficiency. Additionally, some statutes fail to account for modern types of crime, such as cybercrime or financial fraud, leaving gaps in enforcement and prosecution. Legislative reforms targeting simplification of procedures, modernization of laws, and adoption of case management practices can significantly reduce these bottlenecks. Without legal modernization, courts struggle to deliver timely justice, and the system risks perpetuating impunity. Addressing procedural and legislative weaknesses is therefore crucial, as it complements improvements in investigation, prosecution, and judicial efficiency, creating a cohesive and effective criminal justice framework (Bawazir et al., 2017).

Beyond institutional inefficiencies, societal and cultural factors also influence the delay in criminal convictions. Fear of retaliation, social stigma, and lack of awareness often discourage victims and witnesses from coming forward or cooperating fully with investigations. In some communities, informal dispute resolution mechanisms or tribal customs are preferred over formal legal processes, further slowing the formal justice system. Additionally, bribery and influence peddling can manipulate outcomes, resulting in prolonged trials or unjust acquittals. Public mistrust in law enforcement and courts perpetuates a cycle of no cooperation, further hampering case progress. Societal interventions, such as public legal awareness campaigns, witness protection programs, and community engagement initiatives, are essential to mitigate these non-institutional bottlenecks. Enhancing societal support for the legal process strengthens both the evidentiary base and the legitimacy of judicial outcomes. Recognizing the interplay between cultural norms and systemic inefficiencies is vital for designing holistic reforms that not only streamline procedures but also foster a culture of accountability and trust in the criminal justice system.

Addressing the bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction system requires a faceted approach. Institutional reforms, such as digital case management, court modernization, and recruitment of skilled judicial and prosecutorial staff, can reduce delays. Capacity building initiatives for police and prosecutors will improve investigative quality and case presentation, while legislative reforms can simplify procedures and fill gaps in modern crime enforcement. Simultaneously, societal measures such as witness protection, public awareness campaigns, and community engagement will encourage active participation in the justice process. Coordination among law enforcement, prosecution, judiciary, and civil society is essential to ensure a seamless, transparent, and accountable system. Without a holistic approach, reforms in one segment alone may not yield meaningful improvements. By addressing both structural and societal bottlenecks, Pakistan can move towards a criminal justice system that delivers timely, fair, and effective justice, restoring public confidence and reinforcing the rule of law. This integrated strategy will ultimately reduce impunity, enhance social stability, and strengthen democratic governance in the country (Al-Zaman, 2025).

A. Judicial Backlog and Case Overload

One of the most significant bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction system is the persistent judicial backlog. Courts across the country are inundated with a staggering number of pending cases, which severely delays the dispensation of justice. A combination of limited judicial personnel and inefficient case management systems exacerbates this issue. Many judges are burdened with handling hundreds of cases simultaneously, often forcing them to prioritize only urgent matters, leaving ordinary criminal cases to languish for months or even years. This prolonged timeline not only violates the principle of timely justice but also diminishes public confidence in the legal system. Moreover, case adjournments, frequently caused by the unavailability of judges, defense attorneys, or prosecutors, further extend the duration of criminal trials. The lack of digital record keeping and reliance on paper-based systems also impedes tracking and scheduling, contributing to procedural delays. In criminal matters,

delayed justice can directly impact victims, witnesses, and defendants alike, sometimes leading to the erosion of evidence, fading witness memory, and increased opportunities for corruption. Hence, tackling judicial backlog is crucial for enhancing conviction efficiency, ensuring fair trials, and restoring trust in Pakistan's criminal justice system (Schriever et al., 2024).

Resource scarcity remains a critical obstacle in Pakistan's criminal conviction framework. Courts often lack the necessary infrastructure, including well-equipped courtrooms, digital case management systems, and forensic laboratories, which are vital for the timely and accurate processing of cases. Many rural and semi-urban courts operate under constrained budgets, resulting in inadequate staffing and outdated facilities. The shortage of trained judicial officers, prosecutors, and support personnel amplifies procedural delays, creating an over-reliance on a small pool of experienced professionals. Furthermore, forensic investigations, which are essential for evidence-based convictions, are hampered by underfunded laboratories, outdated technology, and insufficient skilled technicians. This inadequacy often results in prolonged investigation periods or inconclusive forensic reports, undermining the prosecution's ability to secure convictions. Resource limitations also restrict access to legal aid for marginalized populations, leading to an imbalance in the representation of defendants. Therefore, addressing infrastructure and resource deficits is essential to streamline criminal procedures, improve investigative efficiency, and ensure equitable access to justice across diverse regions of Pakistan.

The complexity of Pakistan's criminal procedure contributes significantly to bottlenecks in convictions. Legal processes are often convoluted, with multiple stages, intricate documentation, and overlapping jurisdictional authority. Investigations frequently require numerous approvals, cross-references, and repeated hearings, creating opportunities for delays and manipulation. Defendants and victims alike struggle to navigate this legal maze, particularly without adequate legal representation. Procedural inefficiencies, such as frequent adjournments, lack of standardized timelines, and excessive reliance on manual documentation, exacerbate delays. In addition, inconsistencies between local statutes, precedents, and interpretations by various courts often prolong trials, as higher courts are repeatedly called upon to resolve ambiguities. This procedural complexity not only slows down convictions but also increases the risk of miscarriage of justice. Modern legal systems worldwide emphasize simplification and digitization of procedures to mitigate such challenges, a step that Pakistan is only beginning to undertake. Simplifying procedural rules, introducing strict timelines, and ensuring clarity in legal standards could substantially reduce delays and improve the efficiency of criminal convictions in the country.

Corruption is another critical bottleneck undermining the criminal conviction system in Pakistan. Political influence, bribery, and favoritism can compromise judicial independence and distort legal outcomes. Law enforcement officials, including police and prosecutors, are sometimes influenced by external pressures, resulting in selective investigation or manipulation of evidence. Corrupt practices may also manifest in delayed filings, misplacement of case files, and undue adjournments, all of which stall proceedings. Additionally, individuals with access

to wealth or political connections often evade accountability, while marginalized populations experience disproportionate delays and harsher consequences. Such inequities not only affect the delivery of justice but also erode public trust in the system. Anti-corruption measures, transparent case monitoring, and strict accountability mechanisms are essential to mitigate these issues. Strengthening oversight over investigative agencies, promoting judicial transparency, and safeguarding against external interference are crucial steps toward ensuring fair and timely convictions, reducing bottlenecks, and reinforcing confidence in Pakistan's criminal justice system.

A major impediment to securing criminal convictions in Pakistan is the difficulty in obtaining reliable witness testimony and credible evidence. Witnesses often face intimidation, threats, or social pressure, deterring them from testifying or cooperating with investigators. The absence of adequate witness protection programs exacerbates this vulnerability. Similarly, the mishandling or loss of critical evidence during investigations undermines the prosecution's case, resulting in acquittals or prolonged trials. Limited forensic capacity, delayed laboratory reports, and inadequate training of investigative officers compromise the quality and timeliness of evidence collection. Furthermore, cultural and social factors, such as reluctance to report crimes or provide testimony, further constrain the availability of evidence. These challenges collectively impede the criminal justice process, prolong trials, and diminish conviction rates. Enhancing witness protection mechanisms, improving evidence collection protocols, and investing in modern forensic capabilities are essential to addressing these bottlenecks, ensuring that criminal cases are resolved efficiently and accurately.

The persistent bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction system have far-reaching socio-legal implications. Delayed justice not only compromises the rule of law but also fosters public frustration and vigilante tendencies. Citizens' trust in legal institutions diminishes when crimes remain unpunished, contributing to social instability and eroding civic confidence. Moreover, procedural inefficiencies disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, perpetuating inequality and denying access to timely justice. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive legal reforms, including judicial capacity building, procedural simplification, digitization of case management, and enhanced accountability mechanisms. Strengthening investigative agencies, expanding legal aid access, and promoting transparency are critical measures to improve conviction efficiency. Furthermore, societal awareness campaigns and institutional reforms can encourage citizen engagement and reporting of crimes, reducing systemic delays. Ultimately, a multi-faceted strategy that combines structural, procedural, and socio legal reforms is essential to resolve the bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal justice system, ensuring equitable, timely, and effective criminal convictions (Mansoor et al., 2022).

B. Foremost Bottlenecks in Pakistan's Criminal Conviction System

One of the primary bottlenecks in Pakistan's criminal conviction system is the structural and procedural complexity embedded within the legal framework. The criminal justice system

operates under multiple layers of courts, ranging from magistrate courts to the Supreme Court, which often creates confusion for both victims and defendants. Delays in the filing of First Information Reports (FIRs), prolonged police investigations, and bureaucratic inefficiencies contribute significantly to the backlog of cases. Furthermore, the outdated criminal procedure codes, some of which date back to colonial times, have failed to evolve with contemporary legal and societal needs. This procedural rigidity affects the speed and quality of justice delivery. For instance, repetitive adjournments, lack of clear timelines for trials, and inefficient record-keeping often result in cases remaining unresolved for years. Moreover, judicial overburdening due to a shortage of judges relative to the population exacerbates the delays. In practice, these systemic weaknesses undermine public confidence, as citizens perceive the criminal justice system as slow and ineffective. Structural reforms, modernization of procedural laws, and strengthening administrative capacities are therefore critical to overcoming these barriers and improving conviction rates in Pakistan (Ghani et al., 2023).

Investigative deficiencies in Pakistan form a critical bottleneck in securing timely convictions. Police departments often face resource constraints, inadequate training, and political interference that compromise the integrity of investigations. Crime scene management, forensic analysis, and evidence collection are frequently substandard, resulting in weak prosecution cases. In many instances, police rely heavily on confessional evidence rather than corroborative scientific proofs, leading to legal challenges in courts. Moreover, delays in producing reports from forensic laboratories and the absence of modern investigative technologies hinder timely case progression. The frequent transfer of investigating officers during a case further disrupts continuity and accountability. Political and social pressures sometimes lead to selective or biased investigations, particularly in high-profile or sensitive cases. These investigative lapses translate into a low conviction rate and prolonged pretrial detention, which affects public perception of justice. Strengthening police training, equipping investigative departments with modern forensic tools, and insulating law enforcement from undue influence are essential steps to address these inefficiencies. Without robust investigative mechanisms, even a competent judiciary cannot guarantee the delivery of fair and swift justice in Pakistan's criminal justice system.

Another significant barrier to timely convictions in Pakistan is the disparity in access to legal representation. Many defendants, particularly from low income backgrounds, cannot afford qualified lawyers, which compromises their ability to navigate complex legal proceedings. Public defenders are scarce, overworked, and often under-resourced, limiting their effectiveness. Similarly, victims seeking justice may face obstacles in securing legal aid, especially in cases involving marginalized groups such as women, minorities, or rural populations. The lack of legal literacy further compounds the problem, as individuals may not fully understand procedural requirements or their rights under the law. In addition, cultural and social pressures can discourage victims from pursuing legal remedies, especially in cases like domestic violence or sexual assault. This inequitable access to legal resources leads to prolonged trials, frequent adjournments, and occasionally miscarriages of justice. Policy

interventions, such as expanding legal aid services, promoting legal literacy programs, and establishing specialized courts for vulnerable populations, could mitigate these challenges. Ensuring equitable access to competent legal representation is pivotal to enhancing conviction rates and maintaining public confidence in the criminal justice system.

The judiciary in Pakistan faces overwhelming backlogs, which constitute a critical bottleneck in criminal convictions. Courts are often overcrowded with cases, leading to delayed hearings and adjournments that may span years. A shortage of judges, inadequate infrastructure, and limited administrative support exacerbate the problem. Criminal cases, in particular, suffer because of the procedural requirement for multiple hearings and complex evidence presentation. The slow pace of trials not only prolongs pretrial detention but also affects the mental and financial wellbeing of both defendants and victims. Additionally, repeated postponements can erode the quality of evidence, as witnesses' memories fade and documents may be misplaced. This judicial inefficiency undermines the principle of "justice delayed is justice denied." While reforms have been proposed, including the establishment of special fast-track courts for certain crimes, implementation remains inconsistent and limited in scope. Expanding judicial capacity, adopting digital case management systems, and enforcing stricter adherence to timelines could alleviate backlogs. Without significant reform, court congestion will continue to impede the timely delivery of justice in Pakistan's criminal conviction system.

Socio cultural dynamics play a significant role in obstructing criminal convictions in Pakistan. Fear of retaliation, societal stigma, and community pressure often prevent witnesses from providing reliable testimony. In cases involving organized crime or domestic violence, witnesses may be intimidated into silence, while in politically sensitive cases, threats to personal safety can hinder cooperation with law enforcement. The reluctance of victims or witnesses to testify, coupled with inconsistent witness protection measures, compromises the prosecution's ability to build strong cases. Furthermore, traditional norms and local power structures, particularly in rural areas, may influence reporting and testimony, leading to biased outcomes. This reliance on community perception over legal evidence often undermines convictions and perpetuates a cycle of impunity. Strengthening witness protection programs, ensuring anonymity in sensitive cases, and conducting public awareness campaigns about legal rights are essential to counter these cultural impediments. Addressing these factors is as critical as procedural reforms because even a robust legal framework cannot guarantee justice if societal pressures prevent the effective participation of key actors in the criminal process.

Addressing Pakistan's criminal conviction bottlenecks requires comprehensive reform across structural, procedural, and cultural dimensions. Introducing technology driven case management systems, such as digital evidence tracking and automated scheduling, can streamline court procedures and reduce delays. Strengthening investigative capacities through forensic modernization, specialized training, and independent oversight will improve case quality. Expanding access to legal aid and promoting public legal literacy are crucial for equitable justice. Judicial capacity must also be enhanced by appointing more judges,

improving infrastructure, and enforcing stricter timelines for trial completion. Additionally, socio-cultural barriers must be addressed through witness protection programs, victim support services, and public campaigns to reduce stigma and intimidation. Collaboration between government bodies, civil society, and international organizations can facilitate knowledge exchange and resource mobilization. While these reforms are complex and require long term commitment, their successful implementation can significantly enhance conviction rates, reduce case backlogs, and restore public confidence in Pakistan's criminal justice system. A holistic approach that combines procedural efficiency, legal access, and societal support is essential to ensuring that justice is not perpetually on hold (Abubakar, 2025).

Conclusion

The criminal conviction system in Pakistan faces a multitude of structural and procedural challenges that collectively hinder the effective delivery of justice. Prolonged case backlogs in courts, understaffed law enforcement agencies, and limited access to legal aid contribute to delayed trials and a culture of impunity. Many cases languish for years before reaching a verdict, creating frustration for victims, witnesses, and accused individuals alike. These delays not only undermine public confidence in the judiciary but also weaken the deterrent effect of criminal laws. Furthermore, the uneven distribution of resources between urban and rural areas exacerbates disparities in access to justice. While urban centers may experience some procedural efficiency, rural populations often face systemic neglect, limited police presence, and inadequate prosecutorial support. This geographic and infrastructural imbalance amplifies social inequities, leaving marginalized communities particularly vulnerable to both crime and injustice. Ultimately, the combination of bureaucratic inefficiencies, resource shortages, and systemic neglect paints a picture of a criminal justice system that is unable to fulfill its primary role safeguarding rights, enforcing laws, and delivering timely justice to all citizens.

Institutional weaknesses in Pakistan's criminal justice system further compound the problem of delayed convictions. Law enforcement agencies often lack modern investigative tools, training, and forensic capacities, which leads to weak evidence collection and poorly prepared cases in courts. Police officers are frequently overburdened and underpaid, creating incentives for procedural shortcuts or corruption, which can compromise investigations. Similarly, prosecutors face heavy workloads, and the absence of specialization means they are often ill-equipped to handle complex criminal cases. Judicial inefficiencies, including a shortage of judges, overloaded dockets, and archaic legal procedures, also contribute significantly to delays. In many instances, cases remain pending for years simply due to procedural bottlenecks, not substantive legal disputes. Additionally, gaps in coordination between investigative agencies, prosecution offices, and courts create redundancies, miscommunication, and further inefficiencies. The lack of accountability mechanisms for law enforcement and judicial actors exacerbates the problem, as negligence or misconduct often

goes unchecked. These systemic vulnerabilities underscore the urgent need for institutional reform, modernization of legal processes, and comprehensive training programs to ensure that investigations are credible, prosecutions effective, and judicial outcomes timely and just.

Socioeconomic factors and public perceptions also play a crucial role in shaping Pakistan's criminal conviction challenges. Individuals from marginalized communities often encounter significant barriers in accessing legal representation, understanding complex judicial procedures, or even filing complaints due to illiteracy, poverty, or social stigma. The high costs associated with prolonged litigation, coupled with limited availability of legal aid, often discourage victims and witnesses from pursuing justice. Moreover, societal mistrust in the system discourages cooperation with law enforcement, leading to incomplete investigations and weak evidence. Cultural biases, gender discrimination, and political interference further distort the application of justice, particularly in cases involving vulnerable groups such as women, minorities, and economically disadvantaged populations. Media coverage and public discourse sometimes exacerbate mistrust by highlighting instances of wrongful convictions or corrupt practices, reinforcing a perception of systemic failure. Addressing these social and cultural barriers is as critical as institutional reform, as a justice system cannot function effectively in isolation from the society it serves. Without addressing inequalities, fostering transparency, and building public trust, legal reforms alone will be insufficient to accelerate convictions or ensure fairness in criminal proceedings.

Pakistan's criminal conviction system requires a multidimensional approach to resolve its bottlenecks and ensure timely justice. Legal reforms, modernization of court processes, and digitization of case management can help reduce procedural delays and improve efficiency. Strengthening investigative capacities, professionalizing police and prosecutorial services, and providing continuous training are essential to enhance the quality of criminal investigations and prosecutions. Equally important is expanding access to justice for marginalized populations, including affordable legal aid, outreach programs, and community education initiatives to promote awareness of legal rights. Institutional accountability mechanisms must be reinforced to deter misconduct, ensure transparency, and rebuild public confidence in the system. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts among the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, civil society, and policymakers, emphasizing both systemic efficiency and social equity. By confronting these structural, institutional, and societal impediments, Pakistan can move closer to a criminal justice system that not only enforces the law but also delivers fair, timely, and accessible justice for all citizens, fulfilling the fundamental promise of the rule of law.

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