

The homes are congested, have aging infrastructure and lack adequate rehabilitation services, among others.

BY SYLVIA KATUSHABE

An Audit into Uganda's remand homes and the national rehabilitation centres (RRCs) has exposed serious gaps in the juvenile justice system, with children being held beyond the legal remand period, facing limited access to healthcare and education, and living in overcrowded facilities.

The new value-for-money audit report on the management of remand homes and the national rehabilitation centre under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD) paints a troubling picture of a system struggling to rehabilitate and reintegrate juvenile offenders. According to the report by the Auditor General, Mr Edward Akol, as of December 2025, Uganda operates seven remand homes: Fort Portal, Mbale, Naguru, Gulu, Masindi, Arua, Kabale, and one National Rehabilitation Centre, Kampiringisa, mandated for the protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration of juveniles in conflict with the law.

However, Mr Akol revealed that these facilities are grappling with significant challenges, including overcrowding, aging infrastructure, inadequate health units/sickbays, lack of access to education, and inadequate rehabilitation services. The RRCs in Uganda are vital to the juvenile justice system because they provide safe custody, rehabilitation, and reintegration services for the juvenile offenders (JOs).

The audit revealed that 41 percent of juveniles charged with minor offences had stayed on remand beyond the legally recommended three months under Section 94(5) of the Children Act. Similarly, 45 percent of juveniles facing capital offences had exceeded the six-month remand period.

The report indicated that out of 9,204 JOs admitted to the facilities during the period the audit was conducted, 5,757, representing an average of 63 percent, lacked social inquiry reports—critical documents required by courts to understand a child's family and social background before determining appropriate intervention.

"This delayed court proceedings lead to overstay on remand. In addition, the resettlement of juveniles upon release becomes a challenge due to scanty information of the child's social and family background," Mr Akol noted.

The Auditor General attributed the delays in the administration of juvenile justice to poor coordination among institutions, including the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Judiciary, and the Internal Affairs ministry.

Outstanding gaps

Healthcare access remains inadequate, with only 143 of 203 JOs sampled getting medical check-ups immediately on admission. All eight remand and rehabilitation centres audited lacked a resident medical practitioner or health personnel, contrary to Rule 11(1) of the Children's Home Rules, 2013, which requires the RRCs to employ the services of a registered nurse as a full-time staff member.

To fill the void, informal working arrangements with nearby government medical facilities, where doctors and other medical personnel visit when

The dark underbelly of remand homes



Juveniles at Kampiringisa Remand Home scramble for plates as they prepare to go for food. PHOTO/FILE

needed, have taken root.

The report further revealed gaps in nutrition support for juveniles with chronic illnesses, with some children on long-term medication failing to receive specialised diets. Eighteen juveniles, representing nine percent, were not provided with a specific menu/diet tailored to their medical conditions, which can jeopardise or complicate existing health conditions.

Mr Akol revealed that six (75 percent) out of eight remand homes and rehabilitation centres are operating beyond their recommended capacities, with congestion levels ranging from 110 percent to 229 percent. Fort Portal and Mbale remand homes were identified as the most overcrowded, housing juvenile populations of 129 percent and 122 percent above their individual recommended holding capacities of 45 each.

The other challenges included staffing gaps and delays in the resettlement of JOs who had completed their committal orders. At the time of the audit (October 2025), 115 (29 percent) out of 413 juveniles at the centre had completed their committal orders but had not yet been reintegrated into their communities.

The report also highlighted poor recreational facilities in most remand homes, with only Arua and Kampiringisa having sufficient outdoor playgrounds for games such as football and volleyball. The rest mainly relied on indoor games like ludo.

Access to education also remains another major challenge, with the report indicating that, at Kampiringisa National Rehabilitation Centre, only 35 out of 140 juveniles who expressed interest in formal education were attending either primary or secondary school due to a lack of on-site educational facilities.

"Although skilling programmes were being offered in hairdressing, tailoring,

shoemaking, and agricultural activities, other skilling activities like carpentry and tailoring were not offered due to a lack of modern and functional equipment. Some equipment, dating as far back as the 1950s, was dilapidated and unsuitable for effective skills training," Mr Akol noted.

He also noted that despite the enactment of the Children Act in 1997, Uganda has never developed specific regulations to guide the management of remand homes and rehabilitation centres, creating inconsistencies in operations across facilities.

The Auditor General highlighted inadequate funding of Shs640 million annually (less than 0.3 percent of the overall budget of the MoGLSD) to the RRCs (financial years (FYs) 2022/2023-2024/2025), which affected the effective management of the RRCs.

Interventions

Justice and Constitution Affairs minister Norbert Mao explained that the government is working around the clock to solve major challenges in a phased manner.

For the issues of delayed justice, Mr Mao noted that the government, in collaboration with development partners, has initiated the establishment of court spaces within remand homes. He explained that the government is putting in place diversion programmes which aim at redirecting children who have committed minor offences away from the formal justice system. Among others, the government aims for judicial officers to visit remand homes and conduct special juvenile sessions.

"We have set a target as the administration of justice programme to reduce this backlog in the justice system to 15.2 percent, and we expect to achieve that in the Financial Year 2029/2030," Mr Mao said, adding that non-custodial

ABOUT THE HOMES

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sentencing, bail reforms, and infrastructure expansion are ongoing to reduce the numbers in the facilities.

Mr Mao further noted that the MoGLSD is exploring verification of the age of juveniles to weed out adults from remand homes, and the construction of the Moroto remand home to decongest other remand homes like Mbale is in the final stages.

He, however, stated that when it comes to reintegrating the children, some families are unwilling after their detention.

"Sometimes when children are in prison, parents feel a sense of relief. When we return these children home, families often have a negative attitude and do not want to receive them."

Then junior Youth and Children Affairs minister in the MoGLSD, Mr Balaam Barugahara told this publication on May 6 that the government is already taking steps to address challenges in juvenile remand homes, including removing unsafe infrastructure, expanding skilling programmes, speeding up trials, as well as plans to establish more remand homes to reduce the congestion.

"We need to have more remand homes, at least in every district or every sub-region," he stated, adding that the ministry is advocating to the government that magistrates have special sessions in a remand home for speedy trials.

Mr Barugahara, now the Local Government minister, also noted that the government agreed to increase skilling programmes, as well as give them start-up capital after they are integrated into communities. He consequently urged the community to embrace juvenile offenders after they are released and integrated into communities.

Former West Budama North-East MP and lawyer Fox Odoi-Oywelowo said the government must have a responsive juvenile justice system to prevent children from becoming hardened criminals.

"We need to make our juvenile justice system just, humane, and tolerant, responsive to the needs of young children. You can't deal with young offenders like you are dealing with adults," Mr Odoi-Oywelowo, who was also the chairperson of the Committee on Human Rights in the 11th Parliament, said.

He added: "We must also strengthen the capacity of the social workers. Children must not be completely detached from their families. You maintain some form of semblance of connection to the families and relatives."

Recommendations

Mr Timothy Opobo, the Executive Director of AfriChild Centre, noted that the challenges highlighted in the Auditor General's report are long-standing and largely brought by inadequate investment in Uganda's juvenile justice system. "The issue of overcrowding is based on the fact that these remand homes are not enough. Yet children are being brought from across different districts to the few available facilities."

Mr Opobo emphasised the need for the government to establish more remand homes and rehabilitation centres in the country to decongest the available ones. He also blamed limited funding for poor welfare and logistical challenges affecting the facilities, noting that children are not taken to courts because remand homes lack transport means.

"There is a need to review the budgets, the budget allocations to these Remand Homes so that they address those logistical concerns, including issues to do with hygiene," Mr Opobo said.

He further called for specialised personnel to support rehabilitation and mental health services for JOs, highlighting the need for more psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to help in rehabilitating the children.

Mr Akol highlighted that most of the JOs are mainly implicated in delinquencies of theft, break-ins, sexual-related offences, assault, and narcotic/drug trafficking.

Data from the Uganda Police Annual Crime Report 2025 shows that 3,303 juveniles were involved in crime, including 2,908 males and about 400 females, up from 2,268 cases recorded in 2024.

In his recommendations, the Auditor General noted that the historical context of the RRCs, combined with the increase in Uganda's population, underscores the urgent need for reforms in the juvenile justice system. Adding that although the juvenile system is fulfilling its mandate, Mr Akol noted there is an urgent need for improvements in the management and care of juveniles within the justice system to meet contemporary needs, while upholding the rights of juveniles during their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

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