

India's urban poor are being squeezed for living space

Randeep Ramesh in Delhi

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There are few more forbidding environments than the American jail system. But it appears that urban life in India may be worse. According to the latest Indian government figures, people in its cities have just 5.5 sq m (59 sq ft) per person - the minimum specified for US prisons.

According to the country's 63rd national survey, 55% of the country's urban population live, sleep, cook and wash in a space no bigger 5.5 sq m. The comparable figure for the average American is 83.6 sq m per person.

The figures reveal that the country's experience of grappling with urbanisation has become increasingly unsuccessful. Although the landscape of Indian cities is becoming dotted with new apartment blocks and gated communities of white-washed mansions, these sit as small islands in seas of slums.

It has meant that a booming economy has drawn tens of millions off the land to cities where life for the majority has become harder. In the past 50 years, both the number and proportion of Indians living in homes with less than 9 sq m per person have gone up.

The issue of how much space a person needs is likely to become more acute. This year the number of people living in urban areas globally is set to exceed those in the countryside for the first time.

Experts believe that at the heart of the matter is the "routine denial of access to public services to the city poor". Harsh Mander, a former civil servant who runs the Centre for Equity Studies, said that although the poor "subsidise the lifestyles of the middle class in India there is no concern for their well-being".

"There is a deep prejudice about the poor. Their slums are demolished. They have no access to water or health facilities. They are denied access to public amenities and facilities. The state feels it has no duty to them," he said.