

## Tamil Nadu: Most victims were poor and marginalised

An analysis of custodial deaths in Tamil Nadu in the past four years show the majority of victims belong to Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribes and from poor economic backgrounds. Many were arrested for petty crimes.



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Published on: 07 Sep 2025, 9:00 am

For P Marimuthu, July 30, 2025 was supposed to mark the end of a long episode of harassment by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department. A day ago, the 48-year-old tribal man had been acquitted by an Udumalpet court in a ganja case—one that activists say he was falsely accused in. The continuous harassment he had faced in connection with the case had made him shift residence to Suryanelli in Kerala, from his home at the Mel Kurumalai settlement in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu.

After finishing the paperwork related to his acquittal, Marimuthu was on the bus back to Suryanelli when he was apprehended again at the state border for allegedly possessing leopard teeth. He was taken into custody by the Kerala Excise Department and later handed over to the Tamil Nadu Forest Department. Activists allege that he was illegally detained at the Udumalpet Forest Range Office that night.

Around 4.30 am on July 31, Marimuthu was found dead in the bathroom of the range office. While the official version is that he took his own life, injuries on his body indicated brutal custodial torture. His family said that Marimuthu had injuries on his hands, head, and neck. This was not the only case, where the Forest Department came under scrutiny for custodial deaths. In April 2025, Senthil, arrested for elephant poaching by the Pennagaram range forest department was found dead in the Pennagaram reserve forest, a fortnight after his alleged escape from custody.

But it is Tamil Nadu police who have the most blood on its hands when it comes to custodial deaths. Marimuthu's death came exactly a month after Ajith Kumar, a security guard at the Badrakaliamman Temple in Sivaganga district, died in police custody on June 28. Ajith Kumar,

who was detained for questioning in connection with a theft case, had been brutally assaulted in custody.

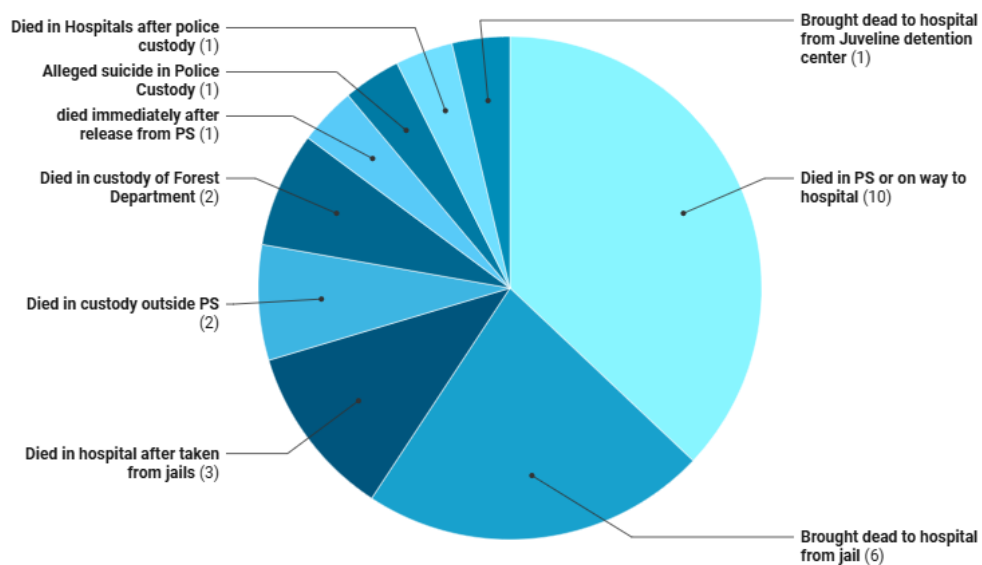
These deaths are not isolated incidents—data compiled by human rights organisation People’s Watch shows that law enforcers in the state faced allegations of torture after 32 people died in custody during the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) regime between May 2021 and August 2025.

While two of these deaths have been blamed on the Forest Department, the Prohibition Enforcement wing under the Excise Department and Juvenile Justice Department have been accused of causing the death of two other suspects. All the rest died, allegedly, due to police excesses. Significantly, 40% of the victims were from the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities

TNM looked at 27 of these deaths and our analysis of the data for the past four years shows that nine people were declared brought dead to the hospital from police stations, while seven were brought dead from prisons after they were remanded to judicial custody.

One person died immediately after release from custody while two suspects allegedly died by suicide inside police stations. Three people – two from judicial custody and one from a police station – died after being taken to hospitals. Further, there are three cases of people who died allegedly by suicide after being released by the police but these have not been considered for this report.

### Site of Death

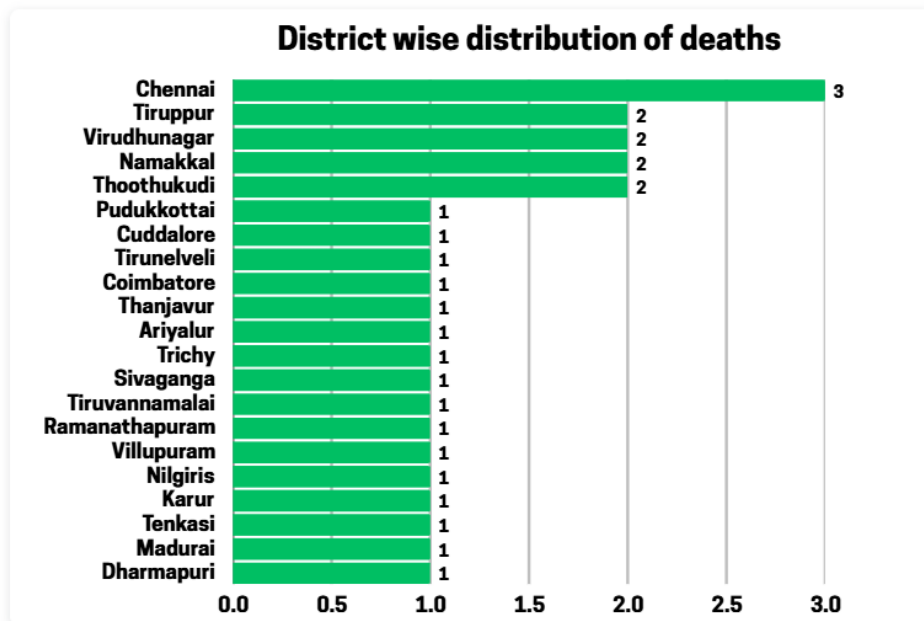


Source: People's Watch • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

In most of the cases, the police cited illness as the cause of death. But post-mortem examinations, FIRs, and statements by victims’ families say otherwise. Some cases led to suspensions or arrests of police personnel. Others remain under investigation, or have vanished from headlines.

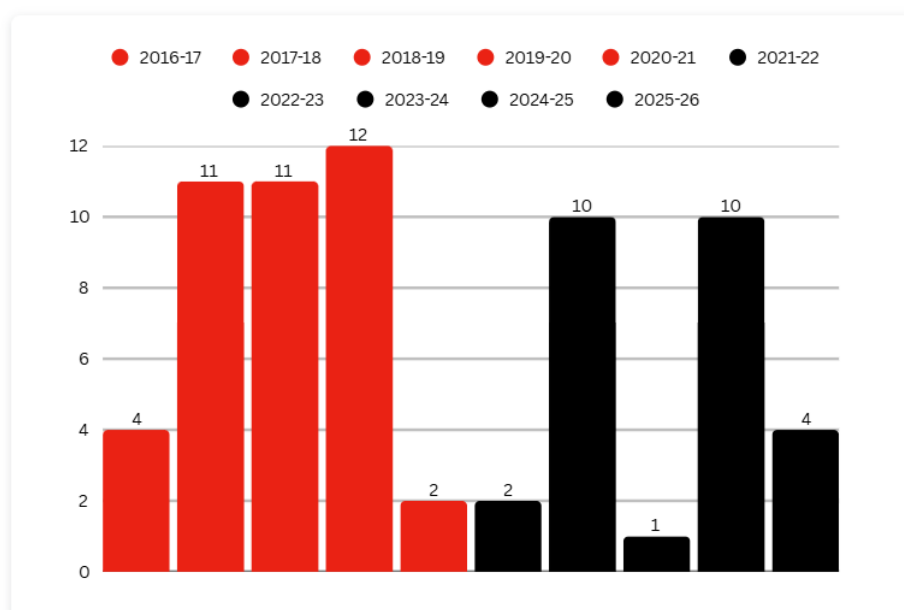
The deaths span the South, North, West, and Central police zones in Tamil Nadu. But it is the South Zone that recorded the highest number of custodial deaths. Comprising Madurai, Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram, Tenkasi, Virudhunagar, and Sivaganga, the zone accounts for eight

of the total custodial deaths in the state. Chennai had the highest count with three cases while Tirunelveli, Virudhunagar, Namakkal, and Thoothukkudi had two cases each.



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Custodial deaths aren't, unfortunately, a novelty in Tamil Nadu. Under the rule of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), between 2016 and 2021, the state saw investigation in 40 custodial death cases in police stations, according data tabled in the Parliament. No police officers faced prosecution during the period though disciplinary action was taken against one officer in 2021-22. This excludes the incident in which 13 persons were shot dead by the police in Thoothukudi in 2018 during the Sterlite protests.



These custodial deaths raise serious questions about the unscientific nature of investigation in the state and the lack of accountability of police officers.

TNM examined the First Information Reports (FIR) of seven of the 27 reported cases for this story. We also spoke to families of seven victims, namely: Sathavayanan of Thanjavur, Thangamani of Tiruvannamalai, Appu alias Rajasekar of Chennai, Akash of Chennai, Karthi of Madurai, Baskar of Cuddalore, Manikandan of Ramanathapuram.

#### Arrested for petty crimes

Many of those who died in custody were arrested for petty crimes, and not for any large-scale financial crimes or high profile cases. Twelve of the men were in custody for alleged theft, or robbery. There were two instances of alleged bike snatching, one attempted murder case, and one brawl.

Police used violence as a tactic in investigation to elicit confession leading to grievous injuries. Also the victim's families were not financially sound enough to give proper treatment to them.

Take the case of Akash, who died in custody at Otteri on September 29, 2022. His mother Lakshmi told TNM that he was arrested in connection with a broken car window. She recounted, "He was the eldest of my two children. He was picked up by the police 10 days before his death. He never returned. My husband was so traumatised by Akash's death that he passed away on October 15, just weeks later."

Gandhimathi, wife of Baskar who died at Cuddalore in August 2024 shared a similar story. "We were daily wage workers. Baskar was arrested for allegedly selling tobacco and sent to Cuddalore jail. He told me he feared for his life. One day, the local town president received a call from the police informing them that my husband was in Cuddalore Government Hospital. By the time we arrived, he was dead."

#### Signs of torture

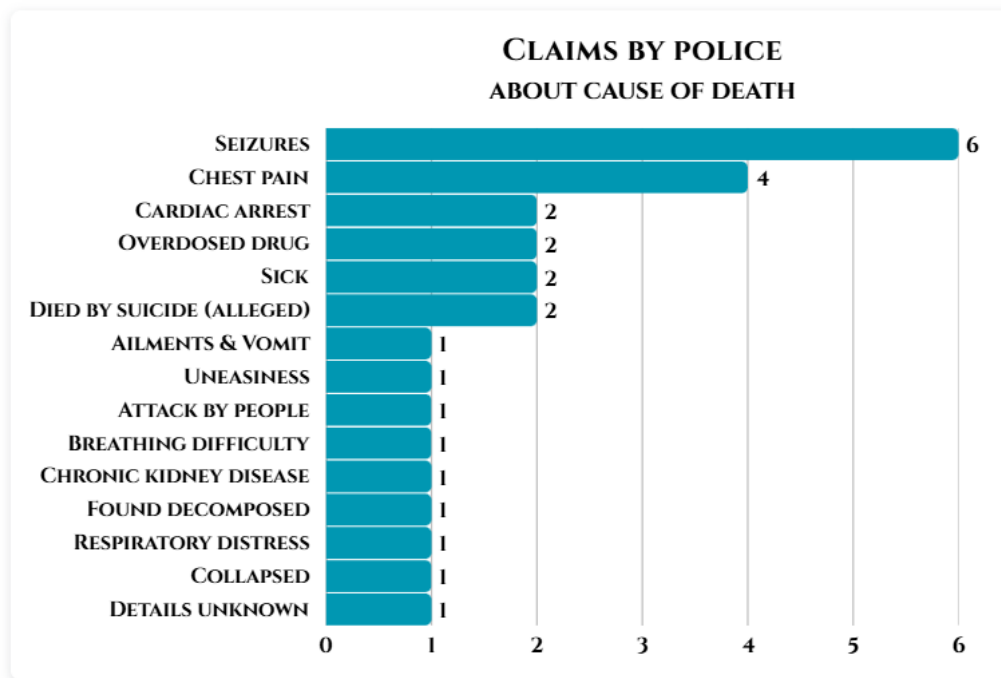
Manikandan, a third year student of BA English was picked up by the Ramanathapuram police for merely failing to stop his bike during a routine traffic check. His relative Radhika said, "He had gone out to buy a birthday cake."

Radhika recollected how Manikandan had vomited blood when he reached home later that day. "When he vomited blood at home, the police said it was due to a snake bite or that he could have consumed poison," she said. At the time, the police said he had died by consuming poison, but his family raised questions after the post-mortem report showed multiple injuries.

In the 2022 custodial death of Vignesh in Chennai, there were allegations that the police had instructed that the body be cremated and not buried, presumably so that it may not be exhumed for medical examination later on. The family, who were not allowed to see his body, also accused the police of trying to cover up his custodial murder by paying them hush money. While the police stated he had died of 'seizure', the post-mortem report detailed extreme horrors, including at least 44 injuries.

Epileptic seizure is one of the top cited causes for death by the police in a total of six cases. Thangapandi (33), Gokul Sri (17), Karthi (30), Thadiveeran(38), Vignesh (25), Ajith Kumar (29) .

Other reasons cited include chest pain, general uneasiness, vomiting, and miscellaneous ailments. But post-mortem reports often told a different story.



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### Cause of death

The family of [Appu, alias Rajsekhar](#), learned about his death through a TV news report. He died in custody at Kodungaiyur in Chennai in June 2022. “His body was covered in injuries. His fingers were broken and he had injuries on his knees. We are certain he was tortured to death. They said he died of seizures, but we know the truth. Police officers from Sholavaram, Villivakkam, and Mylapore urged us to withdraw the case. They even offered us Rs 20–50 lakh to settle,” Appu’s brother Manikandan told TNM.

Thirty-three-year-old lorry driver Sathyavannan died in August 2021 in Thanjavur. His mother recounted how she heard of his death, “One day, police officers came to our house asking for him. We weren't informed about any arrest. Suddenly, they told us he was dead. The police claimed he died of typhoid and had been arrested in connection with a theft case. We never saw him after the arrest. His body had visible injuries, and blood marks on his nose and feet. We firmly believe my son was killed after a brutal assault. No action has been taken against the police officials involved.”

Minors have also not been spared from torture.

On December 29, 2022, Gokul Sree, a 17-year-old resident of West Kannadapalayam in Tambaram, was arrested for allegedly trying to steal batteries from railway premises by the Railway Police Force. Later, he was lodged at the Chengalpattu juvenile reform home.

The day after his detention, on December 31, Gokul fell seriously ill and died shortly after being rushed to Chengalpattu Government Hospital. The staff of the home alleged the death was due to food poisoning, but his mother noticed visible injuries on his body. The FIR filed by the police said that Gokul had a history of seizures and that he died after developing one around 4 am on December 31, 2022.

A post-mortem examination revealed 96 different injuries, including contusions, abrasions, and wounds possibly inflicted by blunt-edged weapons. The cause of death was confirmed as shock and hemorrhage from torture.

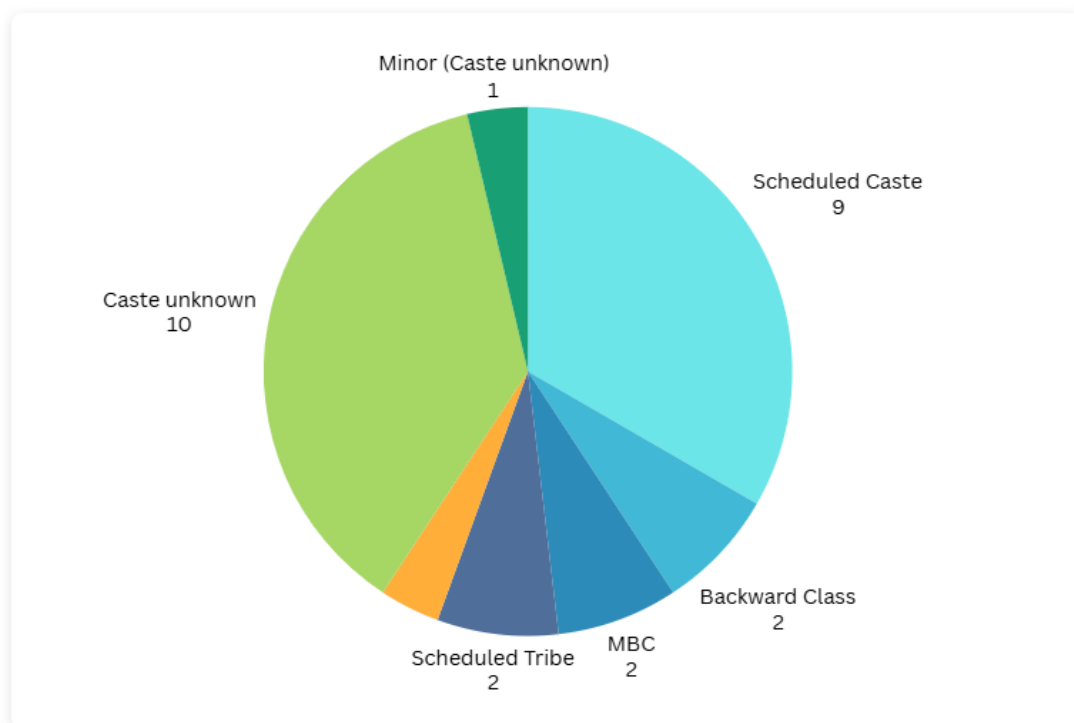
Following a magistrate inquiry, six personnel from the juvenile correctional facility in Chengalpattu, including the superintendent and wardens, were arrested under IPC Section 302 (murder). The case is now being investigated by the CB-CID.

“Though the investigation is progressing slowly, I believe justice is still possible. The truth is out there and the evidence clearly shows what was done to my son. We are holding on to hope,” Gokul’s mother Priya told TNM.

### Dalit victims

Of the 27 cases, 9 were from Scheduled Castes while two persons including Marimuthu were from the Scheduled Tribes community.

Two of the victims were from the Most Backward Classes (MBC) and two including Ajith Kumar, were from the Backward Classes (BC). The list also includes one, Muslim and one minor. The caste of 12 victims could not be verified.



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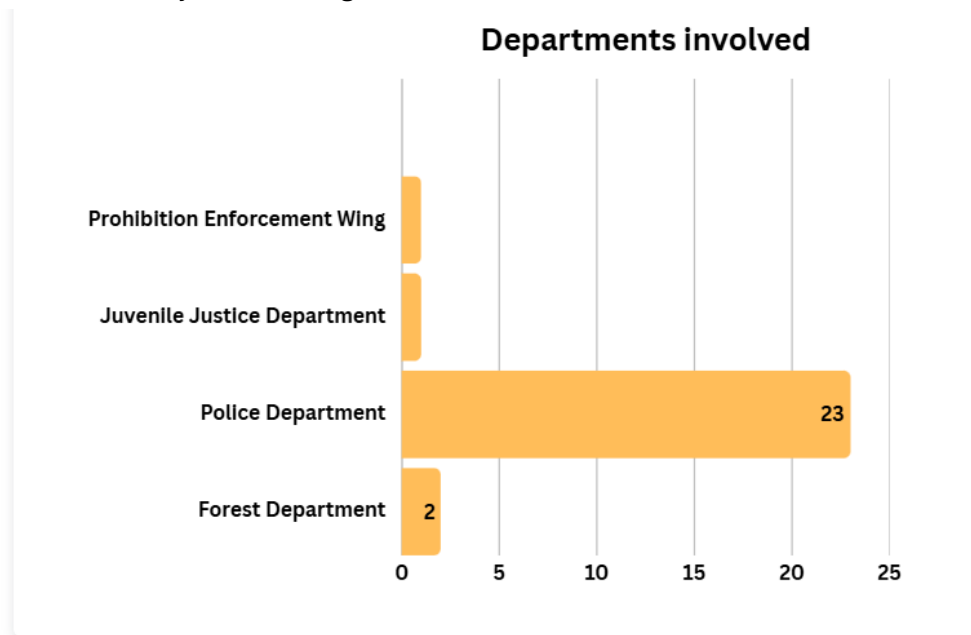
“Half of the custodial deaths are from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. Isn't it a shame for the ‘social justice government’? Is this the way Dalits are to be treated?” asked Henri Tiphagne, executive director of People’s Watch.

This includes the case of [Thangamani](#), a member of the Malai Kuravar tribe picked up by the police in Tiruvannamalai in February 2022 for allegedly brewing illicit liquor. According to the police, he suddenly developed seizures while in custody and died the next day.

Baskar, a Dalit man arrested by the police in 2024 in Cuddalore died after falling sick after being remanded, the police say. The FIR says, “He was found in his cell sweating and did not wake up

in the morning. He was sent to the Government Hospital in an auto rickshaw in the morning but the doctor who examined him said that he had died en route.”

Talking to TNM, his wife Gandhimathi said that he was subjected to torture and that there were bruises all over his body and swelling on his face.



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### Action against cops

Lokniti – Centre for the Study Developing Societies (CSDS) report titled [State of Policing 2025](#) put Tamil Nadu at second place after Gujarat where police endorsed custodial torture. The report says, 56% of police personnel in Tamil Nadu expressed ‘high support’ for the idea that violence is sometimes necessary and acceptable to gain information while 17% expressed ‘moderate support’.

According to NCRB data, only one police officer has been convicted for custodial violence in Tamil Nadu between 2011 and 2022. It was in [2013](#). In 23 cases, between 2016 and 2022, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) recommended monetary compensation totalling Rs 62.25 lakh to victims of torture or their kin.

In Tamil Nadu, even cases that have received significant public attention are yet to be closed. Final judgement is pending even in the [Sathankulam custodial deaths](#) of P Jayaraj and J Bennix in 2020.

“In most of the cases legal interventions were initiated but there is no fast track process in the lower courts or High Court regarding custodial deaths. Whenever we ask for CCTV footage, the state public prosecutor states that it was deleted within 15 days, which is illegal. Shouldn’t the court have immediately pulled up the police for that? The least that the High Court can do is ask the legal authorities to investigate and file a report and ensure that the District Level Oversight Committee (DLOC) and State Level Oversight Committee (SLOC) to oversee CCTVs in police stations are active,” Henri said.

Advocate Edgar Kaiser of People’s Watch echoed a similar view: “The police machinery definitely needs to be revamped. If public trust in police is not restored under Stalin’s leadership, it would simply be a betrayal of the principles espoused by Periyar and Anna.”

<https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/kerala-records-lowest-infant-mortality-rate-in-india-at-5-per-1000-births>