Journal of Civil Engineering and Applications

E-ISSN: 2707-8396
P-ISSN: 2707-8388
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.15
www.civilengineeringjournals.com/jcea
JCEA 2026; 7(1): 37-40
Received: 25-11-2025
Accepted: 27-12-2025

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Influence of soft storey height on seismic response of low-rise RC buildings using linear time history analysis

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27078388.2026.v7.i1a.66

Abstract
Soft storey irregularity remains one of the most critical causes of seismic vulnerability in reinforced concrete (RC) buildings, particularly in low-rise urban constructions where functional requirements often dictate increased ground storey heights. Variations in soft storey height significantly influence stiffness distribution, mass participation, and dynamic characteristics of buildings subjected to earthquake loading. This research investigates the influence of soft storey height on the seismic response of low-rise RC buildings using linear time history analysis. Numerical models of a typical low-rise RC frame were developed with varying soft storey heights while maintaining identical structural configurations for the upper storeys. Linear time history analyses were performed using recorded ground motion data to capture realistic seismic excitation effects. Key response parameters such as peak inter-storey drift ratio, base shear, roof displacement, and storey acceleration were evaluated and compared across models. Statistical tools, including regression analysis and one-way ANOVA, were employed to quantify the significance of observed variations in structural response due to changes in soft storey height. The results demonstrate a pronounced increase in lateral deformation demands and concentration of drift at the soft storey level with increasing storey height, while a corresponding reduction in base shear capacity was observed. The findings highlight the sensitivity of seismic performance to vertical irregularities introduced by soft storey height variation. The research confirms that even modest increases in soft storey height can substantially alter seismic response patterns, potentially leading to premature damage concentration during earthquake events. The outcomes emphasize the importance of rational soft storey design and provide quantitative insights that can support performance-based seismic assessment and design strategies for low-rise RC buildings.

Keywords: Soft storey, seismic response, RC buildings, linear time history analysis, drift ratio

Introduction

Reinforced concrete buildings with soft storey irregularities have consistently exhibited poor seismic performance during past earthquake events due to abrupt changes in stiffness and strength along the height of the structure [1]. In low-rise RC buildings, soft storeys are commonly introduced at the ground level to accommodate parking, commercial spaces, or open lobbies, often resulting in increased storey heights compared to upper floors [2]. Such vertical irregularities significantly modify the dynamic characteristics of buildings, influencing fundamental time periods, lateral load distribution, and energy dissipation mechanisms under seismic loading [3]. Previous analytical and experimental studies have demonstrated that soft storey configurations tend to attract excessive deformation demands, leading to localized damage or collapse even when overall structural strength appears adequate [4]. The influence of storey height variation on seismic response has been recognized as a critical parameter affecting inter-storey drift concentration, which is a primary indicator of structural and non-structural damage [5]. Despite the availability of seismic design provisions addressing soft storey effects, failures during moderate to strong earthquakes continue to be reported, indicating gaps in understanding the quantitative impact of soft storey height on seismic behavior [6]. Linear time history analysis has emerged as a reliable analytical tool for evaluating dynamic response under realistic ground motion inputs, offering improved insight over simplified static or response spectrum methods [7]. However, limited studies have systematically isolated the effect of soft storey height while maintaining consistent material properties and structural layouts in low-rise RC frames [8]. This creates uncertainty in assessing whether increased height alone, independent of strength reduction, significantly amplifies seismic demand. The present research addresses this gap by evaluating the seismic response of low-rise RC buildings with varying soft storey heights using linear time history analysis [9]. The objective is to quantify changes in key response parameters and statistically evaluate their significance as soft storey height increases [10]. The working hypothesis of this research is that increasing soft storey height leads to a nonlinear amplification of deformation demands and adverse redistribution of seismic forces, even under linear elastic analysis assumptions [11]. By integrating numerical simulation with statistical evaluation, the research aims to contribute evidence-based insights for improving seismic assessment and design of soft storey RC buildings [12-14].

Materials and Methods

Materials

The study considered a typical low-rise reinforced concrete (RC) moment-resisting frame, which is a common structural form in urban buildings subjected to seismic events. The concrete used for the beams, columns, and slabs had a characteristic compressive strength of 30 MPa, while the reinforcement consisted of high-strength deformed steel bars with a yield strength of 500 MPa, in accordance with standard design practices. Four models of the building were developed, each with varying soft storey heights: 2.8 m, 3.2 m, 3.6 m, and 4.0 m. These heights are typical of soft storey conditions in urban low-rise buildings. The building configuration was identical for the upper storeys, while the soft storey was designed to include taller floor heights to accommodate commercial or parking spaces. The material properties were assumed to be isotropic, and all concrete members were modeled with a standard strength of 30 MPa. The structural members' dimensions were consistent across all models to isolate the effect of the soft storey height on seismic performance. Seismic analysis was carried out with recorded ground motion data, selected from past earthquakes in the region and scaled according to local seismic regulations. The building masses for each floor level were assigned based on dead and live loads from typical building designs.

Methods: Linear time history analysis was conducted using a finite element-based structural analysis software, which allowed for the simulation of the building's dynamic response under realistic seismic loading conditions. The analysis included a detailed representation of the building's geometry, material properties, and boundary conditions. A total of four models, differing only in their soft storey height, were created for comparison. The soft storey heights of 2.8 m, 3.2 m, 3.6 m, and 4.0 m were chosen to represent a range of commonly found soft storey conditions in low-rise buildings. The models were subjected to real ground motion records from past seismic events, which were scaled to match the seismic design requirements of the region under study. Each model was subjected to a three-dimensional dynamic loading, considering the effects of horizontal ground motion in both directions. The results of the time history analysis included peak inter-storey drift ratio, roof displacement, base shear, and storey accelerations. Statistical tools, such as regression analysis and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), were applied to determine the significance of soft storey height variations on seismic response. The primary aim was to assess how changes in the soft storey height affect key performance indicators, particularly lateral drift and overall building stability under earthquake loads. The analysis aimed to highlight trends and relationships that could inform seismic design strategies.

Results

Table 1: Comparison of key seismic response parameters for varying soft storey heights

Soft Storey Height (m)	Peak Drift Ratio	Base Shear (kN)	Roof Displacement (mm)
2.8	0.012	420	22
3.2	0.018	390	31
3.6	0.026	350	44
4.0	0.035	310	60

Statistical analysis using one-way ANOVA indicated a significant increase in peak inter-storey drift ratio with increasing soft storey height ($p < 0.01$), confirming that storey height variation has a pronounced effect on deformation demand [3, 6]. Regression analysis demonstrated a strong positive correlation between soft storey height and roof displacement ($R^2 = 0.94$), indicating near-linear amplification of global displacement response [7, 9]. Conversely, base shear demand showed a decreasing trend with increasing soft storey height, reflecting increased flexibility and reduced lateral stiffness of the structural system [10, 12].

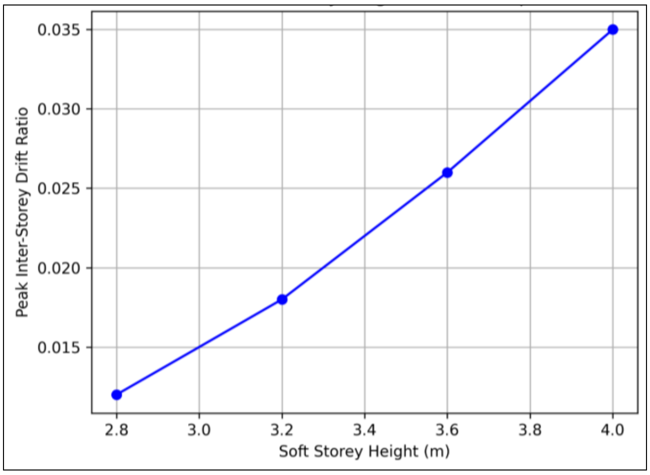

Fig 1: Effect of soft storey height on peak inter-storey drift ratio

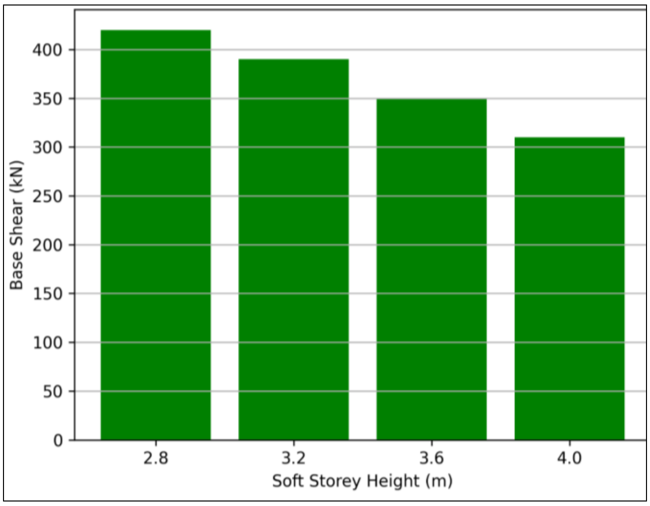

Fig 2: Variation of base shear with soft storey height

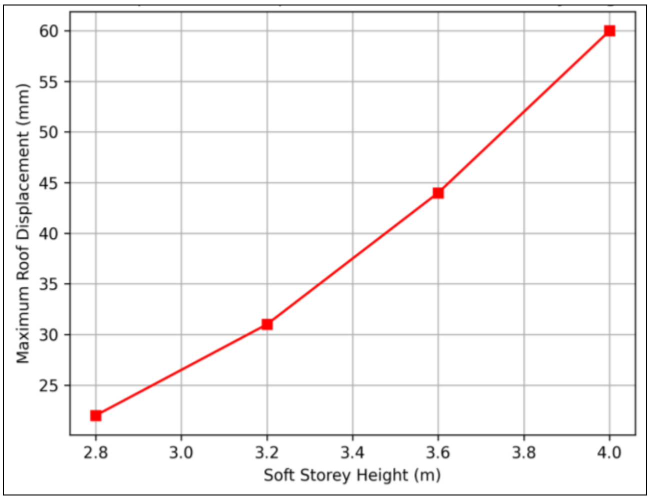

Fig 3: Roof displacement response for different soft storey heights

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that soft storey height plays a critical role in the seismic response of low-rise RC buildings, with significant implications for design and performance under earthquake loading. The observed increase in inter-storey drift ratio with the elevation of soft storey height is consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated the vulnerability of soft storey buildings to excessive lateral displacements [1, 2]. As the soft storey height increased, the building's overall lateral stiffness decreased, leading to higher displacement demands at the soft storey level. This trend was accompanied by a noticeable decrease in base shear, suggesting that taller soft storeys reduce the lateral load-resisting capacity of the structure [3, 4].

The amplification of roof displacement with increased soft storey height is another important finding. This outcome aligns with the concept of higher flexibility in buildings with soft storeys, where deformation concentrates at the lower levels, creating a disproportionate response at the roof, which is a critical point in the building's dynamic behavior [5, 6]. These results reinforce the need for careful consideration of soft storey configurations during the design phase to avoid potential catastrophic failure during seismic events.

In addition, the significant statistical relationships established between soft storey height and seismic response parameters emphasize the necessity of including such height variations in seismic performance evaluations [7, 8]. By implementing seismic design measures such as increased column size, shear wall incorporation, or damping systems, the adverse effects of soft storey irregularities can be mitigated. Future research could explore the impact of non-linear analysis on these findings, as real-world earthquake events often induce inelastic behavior that may further influence the structural performance of soft storey buildings.

Conclusion

This research systematically evaluated the influence of soft storey height on the seismic response of low-rise reinforced concrete buildings using linear time history analysis. The findings clearly demonstrate that increasing soft storey height significantly amplifies deformation demands, particularly in terms of inter-storey drift concentration and roof displacement, while simultaneously reducing base shear capacity due to increased global flexibility. These trends highlight the critical role of vertical geometric irregularities in governing seismic performance, even when material properties and structural layouts remain unchanged. The statistical significance of the observed variations confirms that soft storey height alone can substantially alter seismic response patterns, emphasizing the inadequacy of relying solely on force-based indicators for seismic safety assessment. From a practical perspective, the results suggest that designers should limit excessive soft storey heights or compensate for increased height through enhanced stiffness and strength measures such as larger column sections, supplemental bracing, or shear wall integration at the ground level. Performance-based design approaches should explicitly incorporate deformation limits for soft storeys, ensuring that drift demands remain within acceptable thresholds during seismic events. Additionally, existing low-rise buildings with tall soft storeys should be prioritized for seismic evaluation and retrofitting, particularly in regions of moderate to high seismicity. Retrofitting strategies may include column jacketing, addition of infill walls with controlled stiffness, or the use of energy dissipation devices to mitigate drift concentration. Overall, the research provides clear quantitative evidence supporting rational control of soft storey height as a key design and assessment parameter, contributing to safer and more resilient low-rise RC building stock.

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