

GLOBAL PRISON TRENDS 2025



Global Prison Trends 2025

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Cover photo: Newly arrived women to Thonburi Women's Correctional Institution line up to be counted, Thailand, July 2017. Cory Wright.

Graphic design by Alex Valy.

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'J' (name withheld) takes a break from his work cleaning prison vehicles near Bastøy's prison farm and stable, Norway, 2023. Cory Wright.

The increasing leadership and involvement of people with lived experience of imprisonment in shaping reforms is a crucial step toward building sustainable, people-centred justice systems.

Introduction

by Olivia Rope

Executive Director, Penal Reform International

and Dr Phiset Sa-ardyen

Executive Director, Thailand Institute of Justice

The 2025 edition of our joint annual publication, *Global Prison Trends*, is filled with analysis and trends in prisons and broader criminal justice systems worldwide.

This year's report features new insights on voting rights for imprisoned individuals in the wake of the landmark election year of 2024. It also highlights fresh data on pressing challenges that prison systems face – challenges that critically impact the human rights of those in prison, including issues such as suicide, violence and inadequate healthcare.

The report also explores timely topics such as efforts to enhance environmental sustainability in prisons and the increasing role of technology in corrections.

A promising trend we document is the increasing leadership and involvement of people with lived experience of imprisonment in shaping reforms. Both of our organisations celebrate this development as a crucial step toward building sustainable, people-centred justice systems.

As 2025 marks the 15th anniversary of the UN Bangkok Rules and the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing+30), this report examines progress in implementing gender-sensitive policies for women in prison. While significant advancements have been made – many of these were shared at the largest global gathering on women in corrections in Bangkok in February 2025 – our

analysis underscores that much work remains, especially in reducing the number of women entering prison, a trend that continues to outpace the rate for men.

We publish this report at a time of global upheaval, where armed conflicts continue to affect communities across regions, and political shifts are reshaping societies. Amid these uncertainties, we hope *Global Prison Trends 2025* serves as a vital resource for practitioners and stakeholders, emphasising the urgent need to prioritise prison reform through an evidence-based approach.

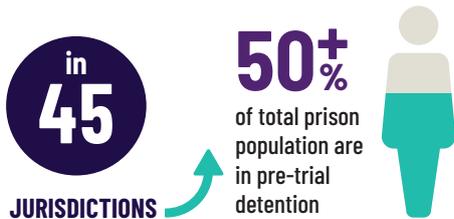
Key facts & figures

Global prison population

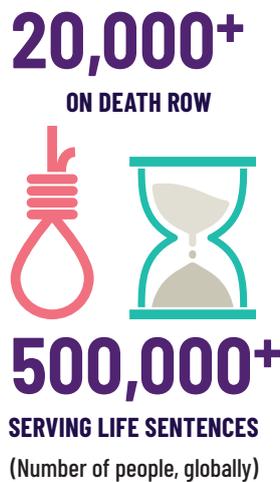
There are more people in prison today than ever before



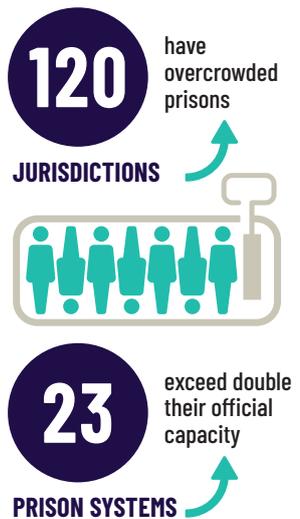
Pre-trial detention



Extreme sentences



Overcrowding



Voting in prison

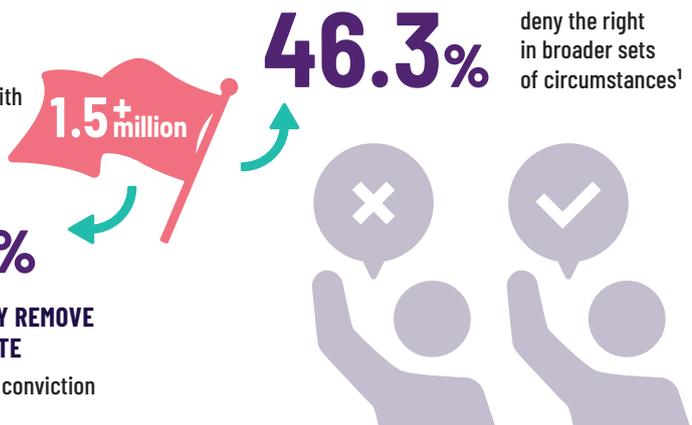


Reforms and implementation of voting rights in prison
Logistical barriers addressed to enable people to vote from prison in mega-election year of 2024

New findings show that of countries with populations over

53.7%

NEVER OR RARELY REMOVE THE RIGHT TO VOTE from people with a conviction



Key facts & figures

Alternatives to imprisonment

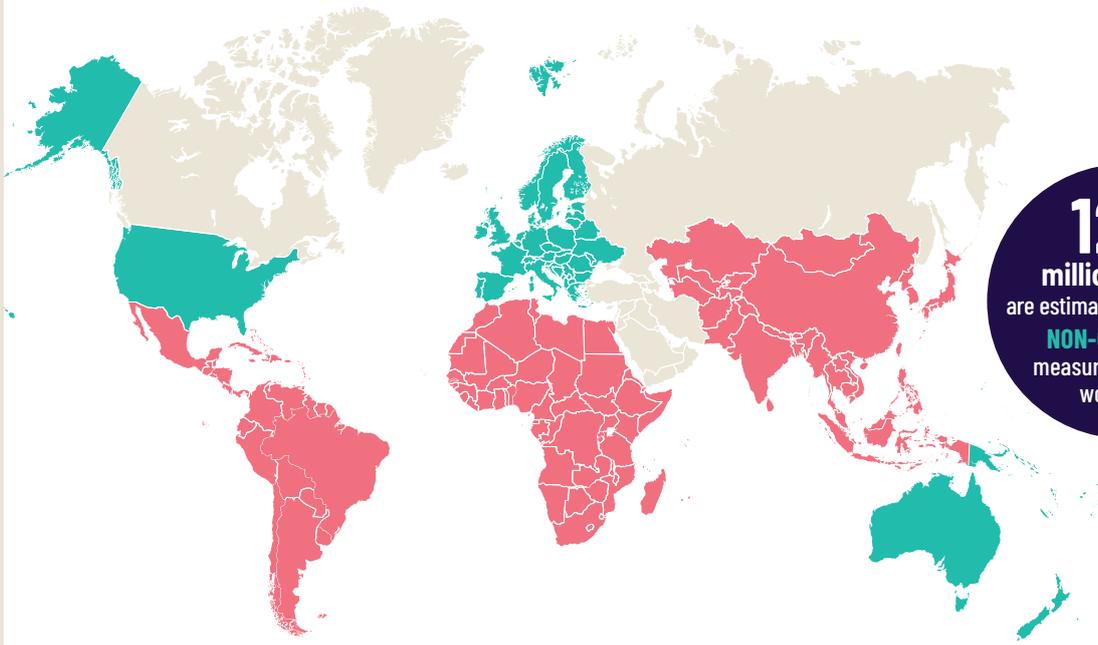
ALTERNATIVES USED MORE THAN PRISON
in Europe, North America and Australasia.



BUT

CONCERNS:

- net-widening
- back-door sentencing
- 'pains of probation'



12.5 million people are estimated to be under a **NON-CUSTODIAL** measure or sanction worldwide

PRISON USED MORE THAN ALTERNATIVES
in South America, Africa and Asia



BUT

BARRIERS TO EXPANSION:

- insufficient resources
- inadequate staffing
- lack of comprehensive legal frameworks
- absence of political will

Positive trends in justice systems



LIVED EXPERIENCE

Reform led and influenced by people with lived experience

A growing movement advocating for, and including, people with lived experience



RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

More restorative justice approaches in prison

REHABILITATION

Formal education and vocational programmes more popular



GREEN PRISONS

More innovative, environmentally sustainable infrastructure and operations in prisons



DECRIMINALISATION

At least 66 jurisdictions across 40 countries have decriminalised drug use in some form, in line with a trend towards human rights and health-based approaches to drug use.

Key messages

- 01 Global imprisonment has reached 11.5 million, with prison populations rising sharply in some regions**

Over the past 25 years, prison populations have surged in South America, Oceania and Africa. Nearly one-third of the global prison population – 3.5 million people – are awaiting trial, reflecting widespread issues with inefficient justice systems. While there are promising initiatives to reduce prison numbers, these remain insufficient to effect systemic change.
- 02 The global female prison population has grown by 57% since 2000, far outpacing the growth of male imprisonment**

Discriminatory, punitive legal frameworks, harsh drug policies, and the criminalisation of poverty and status are driving female prison populations up in some regions. Gender-based violence, inadequate healthcare, and a lack of gender-responsive rehabilitation remain critical concerns in prisons.
- 03 Prison overcrowding has reached alarming levels worldwide, with dire consequences for human rights of people within prison systems**

Across at least 120 jurisdictions, detention facilities operate beyond capacity, with some exceeding double their intended limits. The trend towards longer sentences and the unintended consequences of non-custodial sanctions further exacerbate the crisis. People in overcrowded systems face high levels of violence and poor conditions.
- 04 The use of non-custodial sanctions is increasing, yet their application remains uneven, contributing to prison overcrowding in some regions**

An estimated 12.5 million people worldwide are under non-custodial measures. While such alternatives to imprisonment are underused in South America, Africa and Asia, leading to overburdened prisons, in contrast, greater reliance on probation in North America, Europe, and Australasia raises concerns around ‘net widening’.
- 05 Prison violence is intensifying significantly, driven by overcrowding, corruption, organised crime and systemic failures in governance**

Prisons remain environments where violence, exploitation, and abuse are widespread. Organised criminal networks operate with impunity, influencing internal prison dynamics and, in some cases, direct criminal activity beyond prison walls. Incidents of torture, sexual and gender-based violence, continue to escalate, exacerbated by staff shortages and inadequate security measures.
- 06 The number of armed conflicts worldwide has reached unprecedented levels, significantly impacting millions of people in detention**

Across multiple conflict zones, people in prison face severe human rights violations, including torture, ill-treatment, sexual violence, and denial of access to justice. Reports document dire prison conditions, arbitrary detentions, and systemic abuses including in Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza, Lebanon, Russia, South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine.
- 07 The global movement towards the abolition of the death penalty has gained unprecedented momentum, although significant challenges remain**

There is a growing international consensus against the death penalty. However, some jurisdictions have intensified their application of the death penalty, particularly for drug offences, with executions surging dramatically.

- 08 Punitive drug policies continue to drive global imprisonment, disproportionately impacting racialised and marginalised communities**
- Despite evidence that criminalisation fails to reduce drug use or crime, millions of people are still arrested and imprisoned, deepening systemic inequalities and entrenching cycles of poverty, discrimination and criminalisation. Positively, an increasing number of jurisdictions are embracing decriminalisation and harm reduction approaches to drug use.
- 09 The right to vote is a cornerstone of democracy, yet millions of people in prison are still denied this basic right**
- In 2024, over 4.3 billion people participated in elections across 140 countries, yet millions in detention faced significant barriers to voting. While some jurisdictions have made strides in ensuring voting rights others impose broad restrictions based on conviction status, sentence length, or bureaucratic hurdles. Even where legal rights exist, logistical challenges and concerns over electoral integrity often hinder participation.
- 10 Suicide in prisons is a growing crisis, accounting for more than one in ten deaths in some regions**
- Suicide rates in prisons are highest in Europe and the Americas, with particularly high rates among women. Critical shortages in mental health support contribute to the crisis, though some jurisdictions are responding with improved assessments, staff training, and community-led care.
- 11 There is growing recognition of the importance of involving individuals with lived experience in prison reform**
- The value of involving people with lived experience is gaining traction, in recognition that their insights contribute to more informed and empathetic policies. This approach is gaining support globally, particularly in the Global North, where grassroots organisations and governments alike are championing their role in shaping criminal justice strategies. Challenges include stigma and legal barriers.
- 12 As the environmental impact of prison systems continues to be recognised, efforts are underway to create more sustainable and resilient facilities**
- Some jurisdictions are adopting sustainability measures to enhance resilience and reduce the ecological footprint of prisons, with initiatives like green rehabilitation projects, solar panel installation and energy-saving programmes. Cautions issued focus on sustainability efforts not overshadowing the need for broader prison reforms and risks of 'greenwashing'.
- 13 Prisons in overseas territories face significant challenges, many of which are influenced by historical legacies**
- Overseas territories of countries like the UK, France, the Netherlands, and the US face persistent prison challenges – overcrowding, poor conditions, and violence—often worsened by colonial legacies and complex socio-economic realities, despite ongoing reform efforts.
- 14 Technological advancements are transforming prison systems worldwide, though the pace and scope varies significantly**
- In nations with greater resources, 'smart prisons' are integrating cutting-edge technologies to improve rehabilitation, education and communication. However, the rapid rise of AI and digital surveillance in prisons raises concerns about privacy, autonomy and potential biases, particularly affecting vulnerable individuals.

PART ONE

The use of imprisonment

Prison populations

There are an estimated 11.5 million people held in prison worldwide on any given day, according to the latest global data published in May 2024. This estimate includes a documented total of 10.99 million people in prison, along with estimates from countries where official data is unavailable, such as China and North Korea.²

The World Prison Brief reports that over the past 25 years, the global prison population has increased by 27%, which is slightly less than the world's population growth at 31%. However, some regions have experienced far more dramatic increases. South America has seen a record surge of 224%, while Oceania's prison population has risen by 85% (due to rises in Australia and New Zealand). In Africa, the prison population has grown by 53%, with high rates of pre-trial detention. Europe is the only region where prison numbers have declined since 2000, a trend largely driven by Russia, which has seen a significant 59% drop in its prison population. Excluding Russia, the rest of Europe has seen a 12% increase over the past 25 years.³

The United States has the highest prison population in the world. According to data from the Prison Policy Initiative, nearly 1.1 million people are imprisoned in state prisons, 562,000 in local jails, and 203,000 in federal prisons and jails, bringing the total to over 1.8 million individuals.⁴

Men make up the majority of the global prison population. Women account for about 6.8%, which totals

over 733,000 of the 11.5 million people imprisoned worldwide. The female prison population is growing at a much faster rate than that of men – up by 57% since 2000, compared to a 22% increase for men.⁵ (See [Women](#))

Racialised groups are overrepresented in prison populations relative to their proportion in the general population. This disparity stems from a range of factors, including biased policing practices, discriminatory sentencing, and socio-economic inequalities. (See [Prison populations](#))

Obtaining a global count of children in detention is challenging, as many countries do not collect data, and where records do exist, they are often inaccurate. In 2025, UNICEF published data from a five-year initiative to build a comprehensive database, estimating that nearly 240,000 children are held in detention worldwide – whether in pre-trial custody, post-conviction or police custody.⁶ Previous estimates suggested similar numbers, reinforcing the reality that the number of children in prison worldwide has not significantly decreased despite global efforts and consensus, per the UN Beijing Rules, that the imprisonment of children should be a measure of last resort.

Approximately one-third of the global prison population is held in pre-trial detention – totalling 3.5 million people – presumed innocent. This proportion has remained almost stable since 2012.⁷ High or increasing pre-trial detention rates are often driven by inefficient or dysfunctional

criminal justice systems that result in slow case processing. This is particularly prevalent in Africa, where at least 20 countries have as many or more people in pre-trial detention than those serving post-conviction sentences,⁸ and in South Asia where almost 63% of the sub-regions' prison population are held unsentenced.⁹

Mandatory pre-trial detention for certain offences such as those related to drugs is a key factor driving high pre-trial detention rates in parts of Asia and Latin America. Additionally, risk-averse decision-making is contributing to rises, as seen in Australia, for example, where the number of people held on remand increased by 110% between December 2013 and December 2023, compared to a 6.5% rise in the sentenced prison population.¹⁰

Reoffending rates vary widely, and conducting comparative analysis is challenging due to differences in how recidivism is measured, reported and defined across countries and jurisdictions. A 2023 study that assessed data across 33 countries found that at least one in five individuals released from prison or given a community sentence reoffended within two years. Furthermore, the study suggested that higher imprisonment rates, robbery rates, and homicide rates within a country were linked to higher reported reconviction rates in people released from prison.¹¹

Prison overcrowding

Prison overcrowding remains a critical global issue. Although calculation methods vary, around 120 jurisdictions detain people in overcrowded conditions. In 23 of these jurisdictions, prison populations exceed double the official capacity.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia, Uganda and the Philippines each report prison occupancy levels of more than 350%.¹² In the Philippines, some facilities report even higher levels of overcrowding particularly in pre-trial jails where people wait for long periods before appearing in court or eventually being released without a trial, mostly for drug-related offences. New Bilibid Prison near the capital Manila houses around 30,000 people in space that is intended for just over 6,000. In Uganda, the record high overcrowding rates are due to several factors including long pre-trial detention, executive orders restricting the application of bail for capital defendants periods of time and delayed trials due to infrequent criminal court sessions.

An upward trend in the imposition of longer sentences, including life imprisonment in some parts of the world, means that people are imprisoned for longer. This is also a contributing factor to higher prison populations and, in some cases, higher levels of prison overcrowding. (See [Life imprisonment](#))

Data on non-custodial sentences shows that the expansion of community-based sanctions is also contributing to prison overcrowding, a phenomenon known as 'back door sentencing.' This occurs when people are sent to prison after failing to meet the conditions of non-custodial sentences, such as probation or community service. Essentially, instead of acting as alternatives to

prison, these sanctions can end up sending more people to prison. (See [Alternatives to Imprisonment](#))

Responses to prison overcrowding include building more prison capacity. Ecuador announced plans in December 2024 to build a new facility with a total capacity of 800,¹³ and in Honduras the President announced that a 'mega prison' to house 20,000 people is planned as part of the response to gang violence¹⁴ – originally planned to be built on Indigenous land. This follows El Salvador's opening of the high-security prison which, as of June 2024, imprisoned 14,532 people, representing only 36% of its capacity.¹⁵ In South Africa, the government has ongoing prison construction projects to expand capacity, and the relevant Minister told the Parliament that they need 50,000 spaces to be created 'urgently', to the estimated cost of 36 billion RAN (equivalent of around USD 2 billion).¹⁶

The state of Western Australia plans to build a 'mega-prison' to address overcrowding, estimated to cost AUD \$1 billion.¹⁷ In the UK, amid an overcrowding crisis, the government announced that, along with a review of sentencing laws, 14,000 new prison places would be built by 2031 across England and Wales, with a GBP £2.30 billion investment, with the process to be expedited through a relaxation of planning laws.¹⁸ In Belgium, civil society warned that the newly elected government's measures – expanding prison facilities, tightening sentencing policies and restricting early release – may exacerbate overcrowding issues while lacking long-term rehabilitation solutions.¹⁹

In response to prison overcrowding, some countries have 'rented' prison space from others. This arrangement has been in place

for several years between countries like the Netherlands and Belgium, as well as Denmark and Kosovo. Recently, however, it has gained more attention, with Estonia announcing that it is offering prison space and engaging in discussions with other countries. Additionally, the Trump administration indicated it is considering a proposal from El Salvador to transfer people imprisoned in the US to El Salvador, and in March 2025, 238 alleged members of the Venezuelan criminal organisation Tren de Aragua were sent to the country's mega-prison.

Aside from non-custodial options (See [Alternatives to imprisonment](#)), other positive reforms implemented have focused on decriminalising certain offences. The state of Queensland, Australia decriminalised sex work.²⁰ Moreover, at least 66 jurisdictions across 40 countries having decriminalised drug use in some form. In 2024, Brazil's Supreme Court decriminalised the possession of cannabis of up to 40 grammes of cannabis for personal use, replacing criminal charges with administrative penalties, removing prison sentences and criminal records.²¹ (See [Drug policies](#))

Release initiatives to reduce prison numbers have been implemented – albeit with varying levels of success in terms of public support and sustainability. For example, in 2024, US states like Oklahoma and Michigan used 'second look' and compassionate release policies to authorise re-sentencing in cases involving survivors of domestic violence and persons with chronic medical conditions, respectively.²² In England and Wales, at least 3,100 people were released from prison under an early release scheme to relieve overcrowding in late 2024 and early 2025.

Community service
project, Kenya.
Photo Will Boase/PRI.



**An estimated 12.5 million
people are under a non-custodial
sanction globally.**

Alternatives to imprisonment

It is estimated that about 12.5 million people worldwide are under a non-custodial measure or sanction (although some countries do not report data). This is slightly larger than the global prison population.²³

Published in 2024, the Routledge Handbook on Global Community Corrections detailed that imprisonment was used more than non-custodial options in countries in South America, Africa and parts of Asia, with this trend reversed in Europe, North America and Australasia.²⁴ The underutilisation of non-custodial options in the global south is one key driver to high rates of pre-trial detention and prison sentences.

In North America there are more people serving a community sanction than imprisonment. Fines and fees are frequently imposed as non-custodial sanctions, while individuals on probation are subject to specific conditions designed to aid rehabilitation and ensure adherence to the terms of their sentences. These conditions may include, for instance, prohibitions on gun ownership, mandatory drug testing, or restrictions on associations with certain individuals.. The US has around 2.9 million people on probation, compared to 1.9 million people in prison.²⁵ In Canada, data released in 2023 showed that, in fiscal year 2020-2021, probation remained the most common sentence imposed in adult criminal court cases, with it being imposed in 43% of all cases resulting in a guilty verdict.²⁶

In Latin America, available data show that the use of non-custodial options is low. In Peru and Chile, around a quarter of people under a criminal justice sanction were under a non-custodial option, whereas in Argentina this was only 4%.²⁷ Common alternatives used include house arrest, curfews and, increasingly, electronic monitoring.

The Peruvian Congress has unanimously approved three bills relating to electronic monitoring for minor offences in an effort to reduce overcrowding in the country's prisons. This move comes after 15 years of sluggish implementation of non-custodial options.²⁸ Paraguay has also begun to use electronic monitoring, with the first such sentence given in January 2025 as part of a joint initiative led by the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice and the Judiciary.²⁹

In Sub-Saharan Africa, data on the use of alternatives to imprisonment remains patchy. A few countries, such as Kenya, have dedicated probation services distinct from the prison system or other criminal justice agencies, with many countries having departments attached to existing agencies. Several countries have recently introduced alternatives to ease prison overcrowding. For example, in November 2024, Burkina Faso passed a new law to implement community service. However, the expansion of probation and other non-custodial options in the region is hindered by significant challenges, including insufficient resources, inadequate staffing and the lack of comprehensive legal frameworks. These challenges not only impact the effectiveness of probation services but also contribute to the region's high rates of pre-trial detention, as alternative sentencing options are often underutilised or unavailable.

In recent years, countries across the Middle East and North Africa region have initiated various law reform efforts towards a more rehabilitative approach, moving away from an overreliance on imprisonment. For example, in August 2024, Morocco enacted a new law introducing non-custodial sentencing options for minor offences, marking a significant shift in its approach to criminal justice. This reform, set to take effect in August 2025, and

to be implemented by the General Directorate for Prison Administration and Reintegration (DGAPR), aims to reduce prison overcrowding and promote rehabilitation through measures such as community service, electronic monitoring and other measures.³⁰ Also, in Jordan, non-custodial options were introduced through legal amendments in 2017 and 2022, including community service, travel bans and house arrest.³¹ In 2022, Jordanian courts issued 4,193 community-based sentences, with 1,400 for people who were convicted for the first time receiving a community service sanction.³²

In Europe, the number of people under non-custodial measures or sanctions has remained stable in recent years and the latest data show that in 23 out of 30 jurisdictions more people are under probation than in prison.³³ From 41 out of 51 probation agencies in Council of Europe member states, there were over 1.3 million people under supervision of probation agencies in 2023.³⁴ Common non-custodial options include reporting to a probation officer, travel instructions, participation in a specific programme, drug and alcohol testing and, increasingly, electronic monitoring.

In regions where non-custodial sanctions are widely used, concerns persist that they do not always lead to a reduction in prison populations. This is largely due to 'net widening' – the expansion of the criminal justice system to encompass individuals who might not otherwise be subjected to its control. Growing evidence indicate that as non-custodial sanctions become more prevalent, they can inadvertently extend the system's reach, drawing in individuals who pose little or no risk.

Additionally, imprisonment is often imposed as a consequence for breaches of judge-mandated

probation conditions, further contributing to an increase in prison numbers. Conditions imposed on people under a non-custodial measure or sanction vary from country-to-country. These have been described as ‘the pains of probation’, referring to the impacts of community-based sanctions such as loss of autonomy from the monitoring of the State and the loss of liberty and income due to restrictions put into place.³⁵

In many systems, probation officers or the equivalent, have wide discretion, and in cases of conditions

being breached, they can return or send the person back to prison – ‘back-end’ sentencing. New analysis from the US, for example, shows how the onerous probation conditions – from travel restrictions to payment of ‘user fees’ – is contributing to mass incarceration in the US, in many cases resulting in someone going to prison for something that is not a criminal offence. More than 1 in 10 people admitted to state prisons are there for a technical breach of one or more probation conditions.³⁶

Over the past two decades, various approaches have been developed

to address breaches of probation conditions. In several countries, including Poland, Spain, Kenya and the Netherlands, authorities may impose less severe measures rather than revoking probation altogether. These measures can include official warnings or as seen in Canada, a decision not to file a formal report to the court. In the US state of Maryland, a sophisticated ‘sanctions matrix’ sets out types of infractions in relation to their severity, responses available and the relevant agency who should be involved in decision-making.³⁷

Death penalty

The movement towards the abolition of the death penalty has gained considerable momentum over the past year. One indication of this shift is that in December 2024 a record 130 countries supported a UN General Assembly resolution calling for a moratorium on the death penalty. Notably, countries like Kenya, Zambia, and Bangladesh, which had previously opposed or abstained, voted in favour, underscoring a growing global discomfort with the death penalty.³⁸

There was also progress at the national level, including in Zimbabwe where a new law effectively eliminated capital punishment for ordinary crimes, albeit concerns remain over provisions allowing its reinstatement during a state of emergency. The Government of Côte d’Ivoire officially agreed to a key international agreement aimed at abolishing the death penalty in May 2024, following a vote by the country’s senate in 2023. Zambia also committed to irreversible abolition of the death penalty for all crimes in December 2024. In the same month, US President Biden commuted nearly all federal death sentences to life imprisonment. Malaysia has seen a significant reduction in the number of individuals on death row, following the country’s shift from mandatory to discretionary sentencing. As of

January 2025, women accounted for only 1.43% of those still facing execution, a considerable decrease from 9.65% in 2022.³⁹ Japan saw a landmark legal development when a local court overturned the conviction of an 88-year-old man sentenced to death in 1966, declaring him not guilty following a retrial in September 2024. A French national, who had been on death row in Indonesia since 2007 for drug-related offences, was repatriated to France on humanitarian grounds.

There has been a sharp rise in global executions, reaching 1,518 – the highest recorded since 2015 – despite the number of retentionist countries remaining at a historic low of 15, according to Amnesty International’s report on the death penalty in 2024.⁴⁰ Among the limited number of jurisdictions that continue to use the death penalty, some intensified its application including for drug offences. According to Harm Reduction International, by the end of 2024, 34 jurisdictions continued to impose capital punishment for drug-related offences, and in 2024 nearly 40% of all known executions were for drug related convictions (at least 615 individuals). This represents a 32% rise from 2023 and an extraordinary 1,950% surge since 2020. At least 377 confirmed death

sentences were carried out across 17 countries, with at least 2,300 individuals currently on death row in 19 nations for drug-related offences; however, these figures are likely underestimated due to censorship and a lack of transparency.⁴¹

Other regressions over the past year included Nigeria’s recent decision in May 2024 to amend its drug law to include the death penalty for drug trafficking offences, which threatens to undermine progress and raises serious concerns among human rights advocates.⁴² Following the reinstatement of the death penalty in the Democratic Republic of Congo in March 2024, an announcement was made in January 2025 regarding the imminent execution of 170 men on death row for their alleged links to urban gangs. Although they were reportedly transferred to Angenga military prison in preparation for execution, no executions had been reported as of March 2025.⁴³

Concerns have also been raised over the discriminatory application of the death penalty. For example, in the US, where 51 women are on death row, the use of gendered stereotypes in criminal trials continues to be reported.⁴⁴ In a notable case in early 2025, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the only woman on death

row in Oklahoma, determining that prejudicial evidence regarding her sexual behaviour and maternal role had violated her constitutional

rights.⁴⁵ There have also been recent cases of the death penalty being applied in cases where the crime was committed by children, such as

in Somalia where four people were executed in August 2024 for crimes committed as children.⁴⁶

Life imprisonment

Global research on life imprisonment estimated that there were around half a million people serving life sentences in 2014, an increase of 84% from 2000.⁴⁷ Accounting for the number of people under 'informal' life imprisonment – sentences not officially called life imprisonment but still capable of detaining a person for life – means that this total would be even greater.⁴⁸ Moreover, obtaining a comprehensive and accurate picture of life imprisonment worldwide is nearly impossible due to the significant challenges in collecting reliable data – or any data in some countries.

There are several factors contributing to the rise of life imprisonment in certain countries. 'Tough on crime' policies have led many countries to implement longer sentences for an increasing number of offences. Additionally, the growing use of mandatory sentencing laws has played a significant role. In some countries, such as Indonesia, Thailand and the United States, drug-related offences can lead to a life sentence. Furthermore, the abolition or moratorium on the death penalty in various jurisdictions has resulted in more commutations to life sentences.

The US holds an estimated 40% of the global population of people serving life sentences, more than any other country.⁴⁹ New data released in a January 2025 report from The Sentencing Project showed that in 2024 nearly 200,000 people across the US were serving life sentences (life with the possibility of parole, life without the possibility of parole or virtual (informal) life sentences). Of this, 56,245 people were serving life without the possibility of parole

(LWOP) – the highest number recorded – with an increase of 68% since 2003. The report also highlighted racial disparities, noting that almost half of people serving life sentences are Black.⁵⁰

India also has a high number of people serving life sentences. In 2022, more than half of India's sentenced prison population – 75,629 people – were serving life sentences.⁵¹ This percentage is expected to rise due to the persistent increase in the number of people on death row, many of whom have their sentences commuted. Analysis by Project 39A highlighted the growing use of LWOP, particularly as a form of commutation of death sentences imposed by the Supreme Court. In 2024, 61% of all commutations resulted in LWOP sentences.⁵²

There have been several developments showing a growing reliance on longer sentences with inadequate opportunities for people to have their sentences reviewed. This trend will lead to more people serving 'virtual' or *de facto* life sentences – informal life sentences involving very long, fixed terms of imprisonment, such as those exceeding 50 years. In the US state of Colorado, mandatory time served requirements were lengthened from 75% to 85% and there was also an elimination of discretionary parole for certain offences. Also, in Louisiana, lawmakers adopted laws eliminating the possibility of parole for most new convictions and increasing mandatory time served requirements before eligibility for release for 'good behaviour' from 35% to 85%.⁵³

In Europe, legislative changes in the Netherlands in 2023 extended the period before pardon procedures can begin by one year, thereby delaying the possibility of release for people serving life sentences. The regime is currently under consideration at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).⁵⁴ The Court's rulings under the 'right to hope', requiring states to give people serving life sentences a real possibility of having their sentences reviewed towards potential release, have seen some change. In Ukraine, a 2023 law reform led to the conversion of 18 life sentences to fixed terms and introduced a new system allowing a first assessment of life-sentenced individuals after 15 years. In October 2024, the ECtHR ruled that this system sufficiently meets the requirement of providing a clear and realistic prospect of release from life sentences.⁵⁵

The conditions for people serving a life sentence vary, but in many countries a harsher, high-security regime is imposed. In Canada, the Office of the Correctional Investigator investigated the conditions of individuals serving life sentences in federal prisons, which includes approximately 3,600 people. The report highlighted that these so-called 'lifers' are often held in higher security levels for extended periods without a clear rehabilitative purpose. It was noted that: 'Security reclassification and the reintegration of life-sentenced individuals carry political risks, leading to minimal opposition to these policies. As a result, lifers are left to languish in higher security settings, seemingly subjected to punitive or retributive objectives.'⁵⁶

The body of research showing the impacts of extreme sentences is growing, including among older persons. A new study exploring the concept of 'hope' among older people who are serving a life sentence found that hope while imprisoned is distinct, often short-term and shaped by resistance, resilience and institutionalisation rather than just release. Hope is dynamic, fluctuating over time, intertwined with past and present experiences, and exists beyond a simple hope/hopelessness binary.⁵⁷

Advocates have long highlighted that people serving these indeterminate sentences experience serious mental health issues. In England and Wales, 90 people in prison under 'public protection' indeterminate sentences have died by suicide, demonstrating the psychological toll of such sentences.⁵⁸ The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture stated that, in many cases this indeterminate sentence amounts to psychological torture.⁵⁹

The issue of 'the right to hope' and the right to be considered for release has been a subject in several jurisdictions recently. In July 2024,

in Kazakhstan, the Constitutional Court struck down the prohibition of conditional release for people with a life sentence who were initially sentenced to death, on several grounds, including that there must be equality between all people serving life sentences.⁶⁰ However, the number of life sentences is expected to rise, as in early 2025 the President signed a law that allows for a life sentence for drug-related offences, including producing, manufacturing or processing drugs.⁶¹ In Poland, legislative changes implemented in October 2023 now give judges discretion in imposing LWOP sentences.⁶²

Drug policies

Punitive drug policies remain a primary driver of imprisonment in many regions, disproportionately affecting racialised and marginalised communities. An estimated 3.1 million people globally were arrested for drug-related offences in 2020, with more than half (61%) of these arrests for possession of drug for personal use. Furthermore, of the 2.5 million people in prison for drug offences, 470,000 have been imprisoned for possessing drugs for personal use (19%), while approximately 1.7 million individuals are in prison for drug trafficking (68%).⁶³ In the US alone, one in five people currently in prison is imprisoned for drug-related offences, totalling around 360,000 people.⁶⁴

These figures reflect the broader global trends in drug enforcement, which continue to place significant strain on criminal justice systems worldwide. According to the 2024 World Drug Report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), approximately 7 million individuals globally had formal contact with the police for drug offences in 2022, with two-thirds of these cases related to drug use or possession. Of these,

2.7 million were prosecuted, and over 1.6 million were convicted, with a significant number of convictions linked to drug possession or use. Regional differences in prosecution and conviction rates are evident, with Europe showing the highest rates for both drug trafficking and use/possession, while Africa and Asia show higher prosecution and conviction rates for drug use and possession compared to trafficking.⁶⁵

Positively, at least 66 jurisdictions across 40 countries have decriminalised drug use in some form. This follows a trend towards human rights and health-based approaches to drug use called for by many world leaders including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who stressed that criminalisation has failed to reduce drug use or crime, advocating for social reintegration instead,⁶⁶ as well as the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health who, in her 2024 report on harm reduction, urged Member States to 'decriminalise the possession, purchase, or cultivation of controlled substances for personal consumption.'⁶⁷

The failings of criminalisation can be evidenced in Singapore, for example, where despite its punitive approach, the reoffending rate among people convicted of drug offences has increased for the third consecutive year, reaching 30.8% in 2022, despite the overall recidivism rate remaining relatively low.⁶⁸

The impacts of different decriminalisation models have been evaluated recently in the Australian Capital Territory where a year after the territory decriminalised small amounts of illicit drugs there were no significant changes in drug use or related harms observed.⁶⁹ Conversely, in the US state of Oregon, the 2024 reversal of drug decriminalisation has sparked concerns about its immediate legal repercussions, particularly the potential for increased racial profiling and systemic disparities, as evidence suggests Black and Brown communities face disproportionately higher imprisonment rates due to targeted policing.⁷⁰

Alongside decriminalisation efforts, some jurisdictions have initiated mass pardons. In August 2024, in Morocco over 4,800 people convicted

or prosecuted for cannabis-related offences were pardoned, aligning with the country's evolving cannabis policies aimed at economic and social reintegration.⁷¹ Similarly, in January 2025, outgoing US President Biden commuted the sentences of nearly 2,500 people imprisoned for non-violent drug offences in recognition of long-standing racial disparities in drug sentencing, especially among Black people.⁷²

In some parts of the world punitive drug policies continue to be pursued aggressively. The Trump administration's hardline stance is expected to centre on the imprisonment of people who use or sell drugs, while imposing harsher penalties and discouraging people from seeking harm reduction and healthcare services.⁷³ Honduras announced plans to build a 20,000-person 'mega prison' as part of its crackdown on drug-related gang violence.⁷⁴ Kazakhstan enacted a law in early 2025 increasing penalties for drug-related offences, including life imprisonment, pointing to an intensification of its fight against illicit drug production and trafficking.⁷⁵ (See [Life imprisonment](#))

In Ecuador, the ongoing state of emergency is used as a justification for militarised drug control efforts. Furthermore, drug control has emerged as a significant factor driving the use of capital punishment globally, hindering efforts towards its abolition. In 2024, nearly 40% of all executions, approximately one in two, were related to drug offences. (See [Death penalty](#))

Former Filipino President, Rodrigo Duterte was arrested in March 2025 following the issuance of an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court, who charged him with a series of murders amounting to crimes against humanity in connection with his 'war on drugs' between 2011 and 2019. The arrest was widely welcomed, including by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who noted it was a step 'towards seeking accountability for the thousands of victims of killings and other abuses, as well as their families who have courageously pursued justice.'⁷⁶ Approximately 70% of people currently in prison in the Philippines have been detained for drug-related offences, some of which are minor. This is largely a

consequence of Duterte's stringent and punitive approach to drug enforcement, which contributed to a surge in the prison population from approximately 95,000 in 2015 to over 165,000 by 2021.⁷⁷

There has been further evidence of systemic inequalities in drug policies and their implementation. A recent report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy reiterated this as seen in data from the US, Australia and New Zealand showing common and serious issues with discrimination of women facing intersecting layers of vulnerability. Black Americans, Indigenous Aborigines and Māori populations, respectively, continue to be imprisoned at rates significantly higher than white women.⁷⁸ In Latin America and Asia, up to 80% of women are in prison for drug-related offences.⁷⁹ In Brazil, Black and mixed-race individuals constitute 68% of the prison population, with drug laws disproportionately affecting them due to the lack of clear legal thresholds for possession, which facilitates arbitrary judicial decisions and reinforces systemic racism.⁸⁰

PART TWO

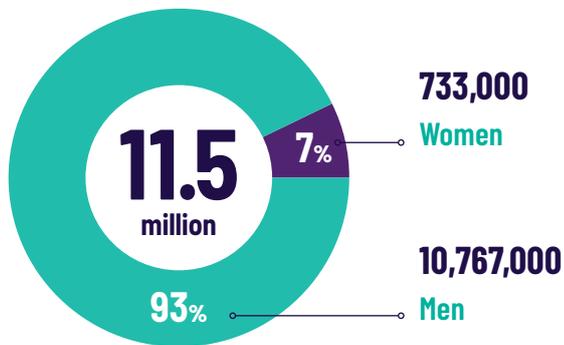
Prison populations

For references see endnote 81.

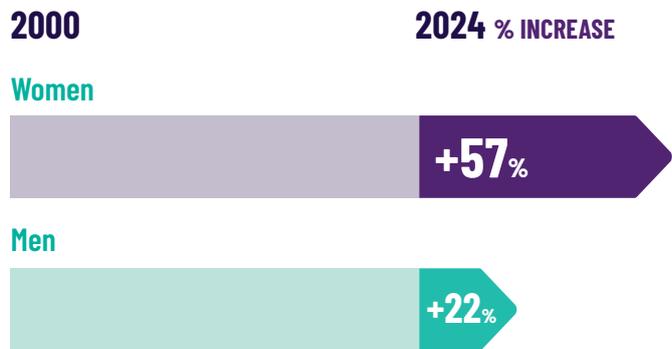
Women

Women remain a minority in all prison systems but there have been significant rises in the number of women in prison since 2000.

GENDER DISTRIBUTION GLOBALLY



INCREASE IN PRISON POPULATION GLOBALLY



SNAPSHOT DATA:

2000 **2024 % INCREASE** (proportionally to the 2000 figure)

Indonesia



Türkiye



The Philippines



Brazil



Children



BUT ISSUES WITH DATA:

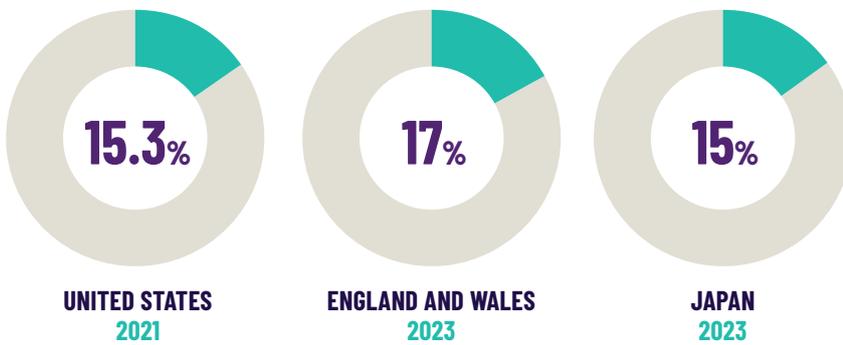
- many countries lack reliable data or do not record information on children in detention
- lack of government transparency and political will often undermine efforts to monitor and report on children in detention
- there is inconsistent quality of data and available data is often uneven, with varying reliability and incomplete age coverage.

CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 Violence against children in prison continues, often socially tolerated and not addressed
- 02 Systems lack the resources and trained staff to protect children
- 03 Lack of legal protection leaves children vulnerable to detention.

Older persons

SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF OLDER PEOPLE IN PRISON



CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 At greater risk of abuse and ill-treatment
- 02 Experience 'accelerated ageing' due to being in prison
- 03 Greater needs than older persons in the community, including mental health problems, drug dependence, sensory impairments, and psychosocial or intellectual disabilities.

LGBTIQ+ persons

Globally, 61 states criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts by law and 131 do not.

SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF LGBTIQ+ PEOPLE IN PRISON



CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 Obtaining accurate data remains challenging because of inadequate data collection by authorities and discrimination
- 02 Violence, discrimination and stigma in prison
- 03 Criminalised and imprisoned for their status.

Race and ethnicity

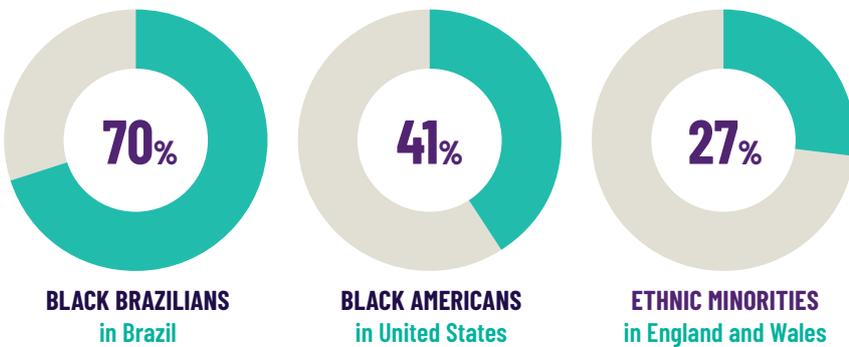
SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN PRISON



CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 Indigenous peoples are disproportionately arrested, criminalised and imprisoned
- 02 Cultural disconnection: severs to land, language and community
- 03 Discriminatory treatment in prison, including higher rates of solitary confinement and use of force.

SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF RACIALIZED GROUPS IN PRISON

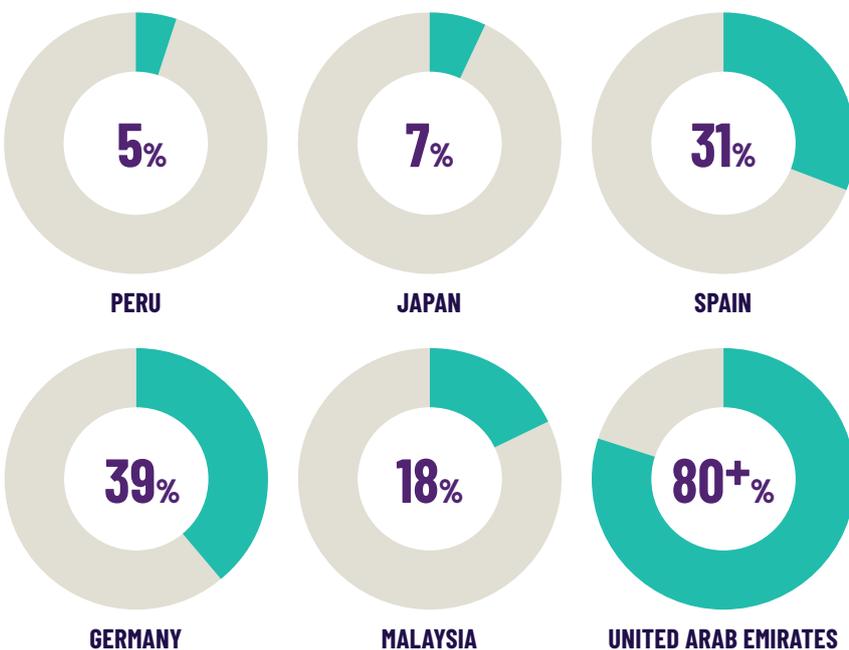


CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 Disproportionate imprisonment due to structural racism in policing and sentencing
- 02 Often face discriminatory treatment and harsher disciplinary measures
- 03 High imprisonment rates fuel intergenerational cycles of trauma and social exclusion.

Foreign nationals

SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF FOREIGN NATIONALS IN PRISON



CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 Lack of contact with family and support networks
- 02 Language barriers and limited legal awareness
- 03 Lack of tailored regimes or rehabilitation programmes.

Spotlight on:**Women**

The global female prison population has increased by 57% between 2000 and 2024. This represents an increase from approximately 466,000 women and girls in prison to more than 733,000, as reported in February 2025 by the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research.⁸² Around a third of women in prison, totalling 216,000, were held in pre-trial detention worldwide in 2022.⁸³

The surge in the number of women in prison globally has outpaced the growth in male prison populations; over the same period, the number of men in prison grew by 22%, while the global population increased by 32%.

In addition to the thousands of women in prison, their children – whether living outside of prison or detained alongside them (approximately 19,000) – are also severely affected by the detrimental impacts of their mothers' involvement in the criminal justice system.

The recent marginal global decrease of 1% – from 740,000 in August 2022 to 733,000 – can be attributed to a reduction in the female prison population in the US, where numbers fell from 211,000 to more than 174,000. The US remains home to the largest number of women in prison, with over 174,000 women currently imprisoned, marking a significant rise in the last twenty years. Although the underlying cause of this trend in the US is hotly debated, some scholars attribute the narrowing of the gender gap to criminal justice policy shifts that promote net-widening.⁸⁴

Central America has seen some of the most striking increases, with El Salvador's female prison population soaring more than

sevenfold. As of January 2025, under President Bukele's 'state of exception', El Salvador's prison population reached 119,200, including 84,200 detained under the policy; however, the number of women remains unknown. In Guatemala, the number of women in prison has nearly increased sixfold since 2000, due to disproportionate impacts of harsh drug policies on women. In other regions, including Oceania, South America and Southeast Asia, there has been a steady rise, with countries such as Brazil, Cambodia and Indonesia reporting sharp rises in female imprisonment over recent years, fuelled by a mixture of gender inequality, harsh drug laws and the criminalisation of poverty.

A recent report published by PRI and Women Beyond Walls (WBW), *Poverty to Punishment*, examined various laws and practices that either explicitly target women or are applied in a way that disproportionately criminalise them. It found that in all regions, women in situations of poverty and vulnerability (for example, working in the informal economy) are being criminalised for actions taken to sustain themselves and their families. In some countries, women have also been criminalised based on their sexuality, gender identity, reproductive health and mental health status. Laws and regulations are leading to prosecutions and imprisonment for acts or behaviours relating to restrictive morality or societal norms, for example, under laws that restrict women's choices about their dress or appearance, adultery or extramarital sex, abortion, sex work, private, consensual same-sex sexual activity or witchcraft.⁸⁵

Gender-responsive rehabilitation programmes are lacking in many parts of the world. Of 62 jurisdictions that responded to a 2024 UNODC survey on rehabilitation, just over half reported that they incorporate a gender-responsive approach to their rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.⁸⁶

However, fifteen years after the adoption of the UN Bangkok Rules, there are various efforts seeing fruitful impact to address women's specific needs. In Lithuania, a mother's home outside the women-only prison's premises is available to women as an open-type place of detention.⁸⁷ In Africa, the Namibian Correctional Service is introducing a gender-specific programme for women, known as 'A Women's Programme,' reporting positive results in promoting empowerment and self-awareness among participants.⁸⁸ Similarly, in Thailand, initiatives such as the Reaun Pathamarong prison museum and vocational training centre provide women in prison with valuable hands-on experience in cookery, food service, massage therapy and call centres. Additionally, the innovative Pre-Release Model – a joint initiative between the Department of Corrections and the Thailand Institute of Justice – aims to enhance pre-release support and ease reintegration into society.

Notwithstanding these efforts, the conditions and treatment of women in prisons worldwide remain of significant concern in all regions of the world, including sexual and gender-based violence. The situation is worse in fragile and conflict contexts. Amid the growing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the

Women in prison
in the public jail of
Eunápolis, Brazil.

“

The staggering rise in the number of incarcerated women – driven by poverty, abuse and discriminatory laws – demands urgent redress. Behind each statistic lies the story of a woman whose potential has been stymied by inequality and injustice.”

Mary Robinson, Former President of Ireland, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Foreword to the report *From Poverty to Punishment*.

worst single atrocities was seen in early 2025 in an attack on the women's wing of Goma's Munzenze prison, amid a mass prison escape. At least 165 women in the prison were reportedly raped and most were later killed in a fire.⁸⁹ In Syria, women in prison under the Assad regime faced sexual violence, and then social stigmatisation upon their release.⁹⁰

Violence against women in prison is a widespread issue that extends beyond conflict-affected countries. In the Netherlands, a report on women's prisons found that sexual misconduct is a systemic problem, yet many women do not report abuses due to fear of retaliation.⁹¹ In Guatemala, authorities have arrested prison staff for sexually exploiting women in prison, exposing systemic corruption and gang control.⁹² In Belarus, a UN Committee reported punitive

measures such as solitary confinement, public humiliation and the incitement of violence among detainees, and a lack of meaningful investigations into the deaths of women in custody.⁹³

Meanwhile, the use of shackles or handcuffs on pregnant women or those giving birth is still reported, including in England, Mexico, and some facilities in the US.⁹⁴ Overuse of solitary confinement is also a common trend that was identified in a 2024 global mapping drawing on data from 46 countries, with countries using it as a punitive response to conflict and behavioural issues for women detained. The mapping found that multiple countries hold women with very high mental health needs in solitary confinement instead of appropriate healthcare facilities.⁹⁵

Women in prison continue to face issues in accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare in

many parts of the world, including provision of basic menstrual products. For example, in South Sudan, the UN reported that at Malakal Central Prison, women do not have access to basic dignity kits.⁹⁶ In the US, while law made it mandatory to provide menstrual care products in federal prisons, 90% of women imprisoned are dependent on state laws and there is an absence of laws on the topic in 35 states, sometimes leading to abusive practices.⁹⁷ The discontinuation of gender-affirming medical care for transgender women placed in federal prisons is one impact of the Trump administration. There are also reports that transgender women were placed in isolation and transferred to men's facilities (despite multiple court rulings blocking this move).⁹⁸

PART THREE

Health in prison

Health in prison

The state of prison healthcare remains dire in many parts of the world, with people in prison still facing much greater health challenges than the rest of the community. A grave indicator is that mortality rates among prison populations are up to 50% higher than those in the general population, largely due to inadequate healthcare, overcrowding and poor living conditions. These factors, combined with non-communicable and communicable diseases, levels of violence and suicide, significantly contribute to fatalities within detention facilities.⁹⁹

According to UNAIDS, HIV prevalence among people in prison in 2023 was nearly twice as high as in the general population.¹⁰⁰ The highest rates were recorded in Eastern and Southern Africa, with some countries reaching rates as high as 35%.¹⁰¹ Additionally, over 15% of the global prison population is living with hepatitis C (HCV), while chronic hepatitis B (HBV) affects 5%;¹⁰² the US is experiencing HCV rates nearly nine times higher than in the wider community.¹⁰³ While around 2.8% of people in prison have active tuberculosis globally,¹⁰⁴ a 2024 study further highlighted the severe health risks associated with overreliance on imprisonment, revealing a 29.4% increase in tuberculosis incidence in Latin America since 1990, making imprisonment a more significant TB risk factor than HIV or undernutrition.¹⁰⁵ In

Europe, prison populations have up to 10 times higher rates of TB and lower cancer screening rates and delayed diagnoses.¹⁰⁶

Budgetary constraints, along with challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified healthcare staff, are common barriers to adequate prison healthcare in all settings. Only around 10% of prison staff are dedicated to prisoner health, including mental health support and rehabilitation initiatives such as education, training, and specialised programmes.¹⁰⁷ In South Africa, where healthcare staff shortages have led to excessive workloads and high turnover rates, the situation is further exacerbated by uncompetitive salaries and prolonged hiring processes, making it increasingly difficult to maintain a stable and well-resourced healthcare workforce within the prison system.¹⁰⁸

Where prison populations are ageing, there are often struggles to adequately meet their healthcare needs. In the US, research highlights the inadequate care provided to older persons in prison, particularly in relation to end-of-life care.¹⁰⁹ In Nicaragua, a lack of adequate medical care in detention was also documented by the UN, particularly impacting older persons, those who suffer from chronic diseases, and women.¹¹⁰ Japan has witnessed a significant rise in the number of older persons within its prison system, with figures quadrupling since

2003. This rise is driven by poverty among older persons, affecting 20% of those over 65, prompting some to commit a crime to access free healthcare and nursing care in prison. The strain on prison staff has led to younger people in prison assuming caregiving roles.¹¹¹

The 2024 Global State of Harm Reduction report highlights the significant shortage of harm reduction services for people in prison, despite their growing recognition as an essential component of the right to health and HIV prevention.¹¹² Only 11 countries offer needle and syringe programmes (NSPs) in prisons, and Naloxone is available in prisons in just 11 countries across Europe, North America and Oceania.¹¹³ Moreover, while 93 countries provide opioid agonist therapy (OAT) in the community, only 60 offer it in prison settings. Condoms and lubricants are available in prisons in only 55 countries worldwide.¹¹⁴ The UN Committee against Torture has issued recommendations aimed at improving access to drug services in custodial settings during at least seven country reviews, acknowledging their close connection to the prohibition of ill-treatment.¹¹⁵ A recent global mapping found prison harm reduction services to be largely absent for women and gender-diverse people who use drugs including in nine countries in Latin

America where between 35% and 70% of women are detained for non-violent drug offences.¹¹⁶

It is now widely accepted that coordination between different agencies and the integration of

prison healthcare with public health systems are best practices. Transfers have been approached in various ways, ranging from the transfer of responsibility and accountability to the Ministry of Health, as has

happened in at least 13 Council of Europe Member States, to joint governance models, as exemplified in Türkiye and Malta.¹¹⁷

Mental health

Evidence consistently shows that people in prison have higher rates of mental health needs compared to the general population. An article published in 2025 found that among almost 60,000 people in prison in 43 countries, those detained in low and middle-income countries had higher prevalences for depression than in high-income countries, with considerable variation in the quality of healthcare provided (even in high-income settings).¹¹⁸ Another recent study that looked at data from 50 countries, including on more than 2 million people in prison, reiterated that the global prison population experiences a range of complex, often overlapping physical and mental health conditions. These included higher rates of depression (11.4% versus 6–8% in the general population), post-traumatic stress disorder (9.8%), psychotic disorders (3.7%), and dependence on alcohol (23.8%) and drugs (38.9%) upon entry.¹¹⁹

Most prison systems – and wider criminal justice systems – struggle to meet the mental health needs of their population effectively. Marginalised populations are disproportionately impacted. The Global Action on Men's Health have stated that Black men in prison in majority-white countries are less inclined to seek mental health assistance due to the system's inability to address their specific needs.¹²⁰ In Australia, First Nations Peoples avoid seeking mental healthcare services in prison out of fear that doing so may jeopardise their chances of being granted bail or early release.¹²¹ In Belgium, where women face higher rates of severe

psychological distress than men (52% vs 36%), they were also found less likely to reach out for mental health support services in prison, due to stigma.¹²²

Mental healthcare in prisons is often severely limited by a lack of suitably qualified and trained staff and appropriate facilities. In Norway, 'considerable prevalence' of self-harm in the prison system is exacerbated by limited access to mental health facilities and a lack of appropriate facilities within the prisons.¹²³ In South Africa, it was reported that individuals with mental health issues in prisons had limited access to healthcare, and referral hospitals did not have the capacity for them.¹²⁴ There are cases of people waiting for months before being able to see a psychiatrist.¹²⁵ Across 21 prisons in England and Wales, people needing to be transferred to a mental healthcare facility waited on average 85 days.¹²⁶

High turnover of specialised mental healthcare staff also severely impacts the provision of appropriate care. There are reports from countries such as Belgium, Colombia and Ecuador that have suggested continuity of mental healthcare is impacted by lack of permanent specialised staff, with staff rotating every few months.¹²⁷

The availability and quality of mental healthcare after release from prison is also a common challenge. In Thailand, people reported that post-release mental healthcare services were limited to the prescription of medication rather than providing holistic care.¹²⁸ A study in New

South Wales, Australia, revealed that while 85% of men in prison for minor offences engaged with mental health professionals during their imprisonment, planning for post-release was inadequate. Only 5% received referrals to community mental health teams and 12% were offered any form of follow-up support upon release.¹²⁹

In February 2025, the Council of Europe adopted a new Recommendation aimed at promoting and protecting the mental health of people in prison and probationers.¹³⁰ Among other things, it emphasises the need for specialised staff training, equal access to quality mental healthcare, early screening, and humane intervention strategies, and advocating for a supportive prison and probation environment.¹³¹

Recent evidence shows that lower prison occupancy rates are associated with a higher prevalence of prison suicide.



A woman in prison talking to a psychologist in the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women, US.

Spotlight on:**Suicide in prison**

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among people in prison in some regions, with UNODC reporting that more than 1 in 10 deaths occurring in prison is a suicide, which is more than three times higher than the global suicide rate reported in 2023. The highest rates of prison suicides are reported in Europe, followed by the Americas.¹³²

A recent 2024 review of evidence across 82 jurisdictions drew a correlation between the prevalence of prison suicide and lower prison occupancy rates. In high-income countries, including in Europe, where single-cell occupancy is more prevalent, there are lower imprisonment rates, yet suicide rates are higher, despite more efficient mental healthcare provision. The link between higher prison occupancy and reduced suicide rates across countries is potentially due to shared living arrangements. However, in low- and middle-income countries, factors such as misclassification, stigma and other causes of death, such as violence and infectious diseases, may obscure the suicide incidence rate.¹³³

The same study also found that prison suicide rates were found to be more than 10 times higher in the female population relative to the general population.¹³⁴ National studies have found even greater disparities. In France, the risk of suicide among women in prison is 40 times higher than that of the general population.¹³⁵ In Mexico, the country's sole federal prison for women previously reported

that 20% of its population was identified as being at risk of suicide.¹³⁶ Between 2022 and 2024, 19 suicides were recorded, with 2023 seeing the highest incidence at 11 cases, followed by six by the end of 2024.¹³⁷

The growing concern surrounding suicide within prison systems is exacerbated by a significant shortage of staff, such as psychologists. The situation in Hawaii, US showed such impacts recently when the Correctional System Oversight Commission observed a surge in women on suicide watch following the loss of a psychologist in early 2024, resulting in prolonged periods on watch extending from days to weeks or months.¹³⁸ (See [Mental health](#))

Certain interventions have come under scrutiny for potentially exacerbating issues related to mental health and suicide, including the use of solitary confinement. In Delaware, US, individuals identified as being at risk of suicide or self-harm are placed under Psychiatric Close Observation, a practice criticised for potentially worsening symptoms, as individuals are subjected to locked self-isolation.¹³⁹ Similarly, in Norway, self-harm management has included the use of observation cells, security cells and physical restraint, reflecting a more punitive and disciplinary approach to care.¹⁴⁰

In Europe, various initiatives have been taken to respond to the high suicide rate in prisons.

In the UK, authorities have committed to monitoring staff training completion following a senior coroner's request.¹⁴¹ Spain has developed an action plan that stresses the importance of risk assessment, inter-agency coordination and specialised staff training to mitigate the crisis.¹⁴² In France, there is growing recognition of the benefits of inter-prisoner discussion groups and emotional support initiatives as part of a broader effort to improve mental well-being among imprisoned individuals.¹⁴³

Other initiatives are emerging elsewhere including in New Zealand, where the Department of Corrections published a Mental Health Operations Manual in December 2024 to support staff.¹⁴⁴ A suicide prevention strategy and a standard operating procedure for healthcare in prisons in North Macedonia has been adopted as well as an agreement for a 30% increase in the salaries of prison health workers.¹⁴⁵ In Colombia, the Constitutional Court has mandated a comprehensive assessment of both the number of people in prison with mental illnesses and the availability of appropriate healthcare services.¹⁴⁶ In response to rising suicide rates among women in prison, a collective of women in prison at Bogotá's El Buen Pastor prison has, since 2022, transformed a cell into a mental health support space, addressing gaps in institutional care where many psychologists are merely interns.¹⁴⁷

PART FOUR

Prison management

Security and violence

Prison systems globally continue to report high levels of violence, with a myriad of drivers and impacts for people in prison and staff working in them. High levels of prison overcrowding, corruption, organised crime, a persistent culture of violence, and a lack of political will or financial resources to implement evidence-based solutions are common challenges.

Numerous reports have confirmed that people held in detention in conflict zones and fragile contexts – such as Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo – have faced alarming levels of violence, sparking widespread condemnation. Reports of torture, ill-treatment, and sexual and gender-based violence within detention facilities underscore the devastating consequences of a total breakdown in the rule of law and the absence of security. (See [Prisons in fragile and conflict-affected situations](#))

Organised criminal networks continue to operate, and in some cases are expanding their influence, from within prisons. Latin American prisons continue to be plagued by violence linked to organised crime. In early 2024, following the escape of prominent gang leaders, Ecuador's President declared a state of emergency, granting military control over the country's prisons, including the Litoral Penitentiary in Guayaquil. However, clashes between rival gangs erupted within the facility in November 2024, resulting in at least 15 deaths and 14 injuries. Subsequent security operations

uncovered caches of grenades and assault rifles, highlighting ongoing challenges in maintaining order within the prison system.

Similarly, in Colombia and Guatemala, authorities recently identified people in prison engaged in criminal activities as part of organised crime networks. Various high-profile individuals were transferred to different prisons, in an attempt to dismantle these networks and prevent violence. However, these efforts have been met with limited success, as prison overcrowding, insufficient security measures and entrenched gang influence continue in both countries. In Mexico and Venezuela, prison authorities' efforts to address criminal activities within prisons, violent outbreaks have occurred as a response from people in prison.¹⁴⁸

In Europe, the impacts of organised crime on prison security are attracting more attention.¹⁴⁹ For instance, in Serbia, it has been reported that younger people in prison are mentored by their older peers with organised crime links, and upon release subsequently join these groups.¹⁵⁰ There have also been some high-profile cases, such as the fatal violent prison escape in May 2024 of a gang leader in France and an Italian operation discovering a network of encrypted telecommunications which showed that gang-affiliated leaders in Italian prisons were holding video conferences and supervising ambushes.¹⁵¹

Elsewhere, such as in Jamaica, violent incidents related to organised crime in prisons have also been reported. A mass killing in August 2024 was committed by detainees involved in organised crime, triggering a previous discussion on constructing a high-security prison.¹⁵² In India and Venezuela, there are reports that people imprisoned are engaging in criminal activities within the prison, with access to weapons and contraband phones.¹⁵³

Over the past year, there have also been violent incidents related to militant groups in prisons. In Tajikistan, five supporters of the Islamic State were killed after they coordinated an attack on staff in an attempt to escape the prison.¹⁵⁴ In Russia, individuals with links to ISIS took prison staff hostage in a detention centre before being killed by special forces, and a few months later, four ISIS-affiliated people in prison carried out a similar attack, resulting in the deaths of both the attackers and several staff members.¹⁵⁵ In Somalia, armed people in prison from al-Shabab, a group linked to al-Qaeda, attempted to escape from prison, leaving three soldiers and five people in prison dead.¹⁵⁶ In India, one prisoner allegedly supporting the Islamic State tried to escape from jail, assaulting staff in the process.¹⁵⁷

The impacts of prison overcrowding and staff shortages are evidenced in data released on violence against prison staff. In France, Romania, Belgium and Quebec, Canada, violent

incidents have prompted staff to call for government action.¹⁵⁸ In England and Wales, more than 10,000 violent incidents were recorded between June 2023 and June 2024, the highest in 21 years – with many cases not being investigated.¹⁵⁹ There have been cases of prison staff being subjected to violence at home, such as in Belgium when a Molotov cocktail was thrown into a staff member's house who had also been previously threatened.¹⁶⁰ In April 2025, a series of coordinated attacks targeted multiple French prisons, involving acts of intimidation against staff such as vehicle arson and, in at least one case, the use of automatic firearms.¹⁶¹

The mistreatment of women in prisons remains a pressing issue across all regions, with sexual and gender-based violence being a persistent concern, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected areas. New reports point to systemic abuse, including sexual violence, arbitrary punitive measures and unchecked violence by prison staff. (See [Spotlight on women](#))

Accountability for any form of violence in prisons remains patchy, even in cases of torture or death, raising human rights and prison management issues. For instance, in Hungary, the Council of Europe's detention monitoring body reported in 2024 that there

were credible allegations of physical ill-treatment by staff in facilities lacking CCTV cameras. It was also noted that some people in prison refrained from reporting incidents of violence, either because doing so could exacerbate the situation or because they believed it would be ineffective.¹⁶² In Rwanda, however, there was a successful prosecution of a former director of prisons who was convicted in April 2024 for the assault and murder of a detainee at Rubavu prison in 2019, alongside two prison officers and seven people in prison who were convicted for their involvement in deaths of detainees at the same facility.¹⁶³

Prisons in fragile and conflict-affected situations

The number of armed conflicts worldwide has been rising, impacting millions of people. In 2023, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) recorded 59 state-involved conflicts, which constitutes the highest number since the Program's data collection began in 1946.¹⁶⁴ People who are held in detention – either under criminal justice measures or for conflict-related reasons – often face violence, dire prison conditions, and a complete lack of access to justice during armed conflict. Over the past year there have been reports detailing the extent of human rights violations in detention facilities in several countries.

A report titled 'Web of Agony' issued by the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in January 2025 detailed the gross violations of human rights in detention under the Assad regime. Torture, ill-treatment, enforced disappearances, killings, rape and sexual violence have been documented since 2011. It summarised that: 'The prevalence of detention violations coupled with widespread impunity is cited

as a key driver, and one of the many manifestations of the root causes, of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.'¹⁶⁵

Sexual violence in prisons in conflict zones is a widespread problem. In South Sudan, patterns of torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence, at the hands of government security agencies and non-state armed groups, was also reported by the UN. Many of the people were held in arbitrary detention. There were reports of torture and ill-treatment including flogging, cold exposure and restraints.¹⁶⁶ The UN published a report in March 2025 on detention conditions in Sudan's prisons, documenting a dire picture with people held – often arbitrarily – in overcrowded and unsanitary facilities with severe restrictions to food and water and a lack of medical care, resulting in preventable deaths.¹⁶⁷

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, prison breaks in 2024 and early 2025 amid the deteriorating security situation, ended in hundreds of fatalities. It was reported by the UN that as many as 268 out of 348 women held in Makala Central Prison

in the capital, Kinshasa, were victims of rape and other sexual violence during the riots in September 2024, which led to 129 fatalities.¹⁶⁸ In early 2025, around 4,000 men fled during a prison escape in the city of Goma, and many women were raped and did not survive, as the women's section had been lit on fire. (See [Spotlight on women](#)) This was followed by another major incident in February 2025 when about 2,500 detainees escaped from Bukavu prison, followed by further escapes from two other prisons.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated the prison system's challenges with overcrowding and deteriorating infrastructure as well as inadequate healthcare and lack of meaningful activities for people in prison.¹⁶⁹ In Ukraine, a law passed in April 2024 allows some people in prison to serve in the armed forces in exchange for a reduced sentence. It outlines specific categories of eligibility (excluding for example, people convicted of sexual crimes, certain violent offences and treason) and requires the submission of a formal appeal to the head of the prison. Separate units of Ukrainian

forces have been established.¹⁷⁰ As of mid-2024, over 3,000 people in prison had joined, with a government goal of enlisting around 10,000.¹⁷¹

Russia has also recruited up to an estimated 170,000 people from prison to fight in the war in Ukraine. A UN monitor stated in September 2024 that some of the returning fighters who receive a pardon for their service are perpetrating new crimes, sometimes violent. The British Defense Ministry noted that recent and often traumatic combat experience will exacerbate the risk of reoffending by these soldiers.¹⁷²

In Gaza, an attack in March 2025 destroyed a prison in the Shati refugee camp, reportedly killing dozens of people detained and police officers. Moreover, high-resolution satellite imagery captured in September 2024 indicates that two-thirds (66%) of all structures in the Gaza Strip have sustained damage.¹⁷³ It has been inferred that prisons and other detention centres have been impacted, for instance in Khan Younis prison where over 80% of the buildings were destroyed, according to an initial assessment by the municipality.

Since early November 2023, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have taken into custody thousands of Palestinians in Gaza, including at least 310 medical staff, as well as patients, companions and internally displaced persons (IDPs) during raids on hospitals and shelters. They have generally been held in military facilities before being transferred to detention centres and prisons within Israel and the occupied West Bank. Additionally, over 10,000 workers and patients from Gaza, who were legally present in Israel on October 7, were also detained, with approximately 1,000 still unaccounted for.¹⁷⁴

According to testimonies gathered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), detainees were held in makeshift military barracks, subjected to inhumane treatment and denied access to basic needs such as food, water and toilets.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, prolonged restrictions on humanitarian access – including visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross¹⁷⁶ – have prevented detainees from receiving essential aid, exacerbating health crises and human rights violations within detention settings.¹⁷⁷

In October 2024, Israeli airstrikes in southern Lebanon had significant repercussions on the country's prison infrastructure. High-risk detention facilities in the affected regions were deemed unsafe, necessitating the urgent transfer of detainees to other prisons across the country. This further strained Lebanon's already overcrowded prison system. Roumieh Prison – the largest correctional facility in the country – was particularly impacted, as it was unable to accommodate additional detainees due to capacity limitations. The volatile security situation caused a mass prison escape on 29 September 2024. In total 138 people escaped from Jezzine Prison.¹⁷⁸ Security sources reported that armed groups assisted in the breakout, storming the facility and facilitating the escape. All those who had escaped were arrested. An estimated 1.2 million people were displaced in Lebanon,¹⁷⁹ which further strained the country's resources, including its detention facilities, making it difficult to provide adequate conditions in prisons, including healthcare, sanitation and security.

Voting in prison

2024 was a year of elections; more than 4.3 billion people casted their votes in 140 elections around the world.¹⁸⁰ The legal recognition of voting rights for people in detention varies significantly across countries. A 2024 report by The Sentencing Project found that 73 of 136 countries with populations of 1.5 million and above, never or rarely deny a person's right to vote because of a conviction. It also found that, in the other 63 countries laws deny the right in broader sets of circumstances.¹⁸¹

Many jurisdictions allow people in pre-trial detention to vote but impose restrictions on people who are convicted and are serving sentences, with some differing

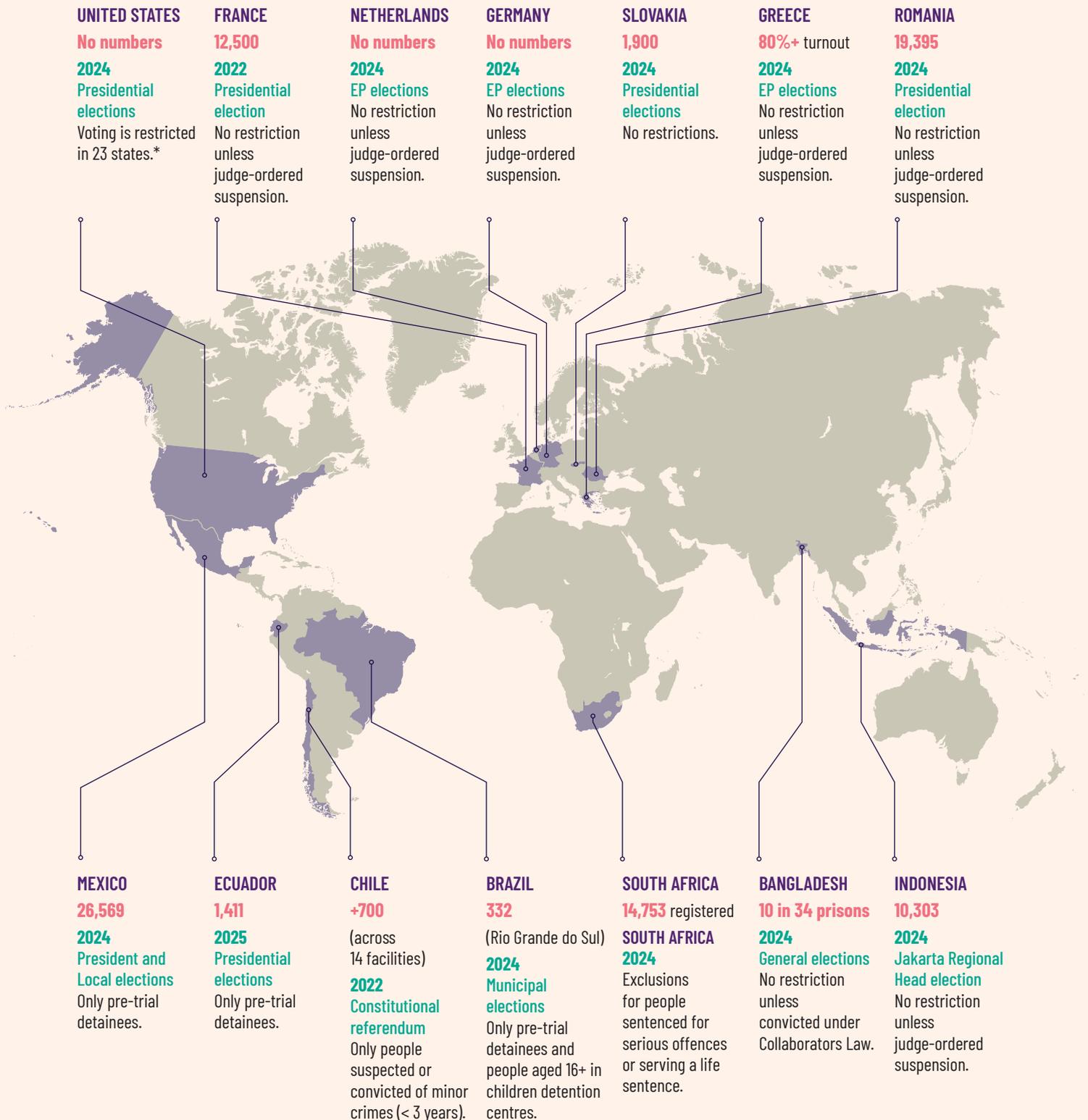
rules based on the severity and type of offence or length of sentences. Some also impose restrictions even after individuals have completed their sentences.

Efforts to realise voting rights for people detained have seen some impact in recent years, including through litigation. In Mexico, for the first time, more than 31,000 people in pre-trial detention were declared to be eligible to vote in the 2024 general elections. This was following the ruling by the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judicial Branch in 2019, which gave individuals in pre-trial detention the right to vote.¹⁸² In Nepal, a 2022 Supreme Court order paved the way for people in prison

to vote in parliamentary elections, although ultimately a low number were registered to vote.¹⁸³

In New Zealand, several legal challenges to a blanket ban on voting in prison were heard in the decade leading up to 2020 when the Electoral Act was amended to allow people serving a sentence for three years or less, or those on remand, to vote in prison. One report suggested that turnout for the 2023 general election, among the 5,000 or more eligible people in prison, was low.¹⁸⁴ In Japan, although the case was dismissed, the disenfranchisement of people in prison was challenged in front of the Tokyo High Court in 2024, sparking a discussion on the topic.

RECENT ELECTIONS: VOTING FROM PRISON¹⁸⁵



Key:

COUNTRY

NUMBER

of eligible people who voted

YEAR Election

Legal framework on the right to vote

* Estimated 4 million people were enfranchised due to felony convictions. In the US, two states and two jurisdictions allow voting, including with felony charges, and few localities allow it for pre-trial detainees and misdemeanour charges.

People in prison casting their ballot, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, 2014.



The legal recognition of voting rights for people in detention varies significantly across countries. People in pre-trial detention may be allowed to vote, but people who are convicted and are serving sentences are often excluded.

Other reforms have been achieved through advocacy of civil society and other public interest groups.

In Ireland, civil society organisations, and in Belgium, the Central Prison Supervisory Board, advocated for prison authorities to support registration and facilitate voting procedures ahead of the 2024 elections.¹⁸⁶ In Nigeria, stakeholders adopted a draft framework to ensure the voting rights of people in prison developed by the Carmelites Prisoners' Interest Organization and are working with the National Assembly for legal reforms.¹⁸⁷ In Peru, Congress is considering granting voting rights to people in pre-trial detention, following the initiative of a multisectoral working group led by the Ombudsperson.¹⁸⁸

Even when voting rights are legally granted to people in prison, logistical and bureaucratic hurdles often limit actual participation. In South Africa, election officials visited prisons with the aim of registering 100,000 people in prison, but ultimately only reaching 17,000,¹⁸⁹ with concerns about voter registration processes in prison.¹⁹⁰ In Chile, the constitution grants voting rights to individuals in pre-trial detention for minor crimes or those serving sentences of less than three years, but it was only in 2022 that voting was practically implemented, resulting in more than 700 people voting across 14 prisons.¹⁹¹ In the US, where most people in pre-trial detention are eligible to vote, they

face significant obstacles due to the lack of in-person polling stations and voting by mail proving to be difficult with mail delays, registration issues and lack of voter guidance.¹⁹² One of the biggest barriers is that eligible voters, as well as officials, might not know that they have the right to vote.¹⁹³ This sparked efforts by civil society and public bodies in states such as Colorado and Nevada to ensure voting services are available for eligible individuals in jails.¹⁹⁴

Another significant issue is the lack of coordination between election and prison authorities. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, people in only 10 out of 115 facilities were registered to vote before the 2023 general elections resulting in eligible voters to be unregistered, and inadequate logistical support meant that many eligible voters were unable to participate.¹⁹⁵ In Bangladesh and Pakistan, complex bureaucratic procedures, such as requesting ballots and providing extensive documentation, resulted in extremely low voter turnout. Across 34 jails it was reported that only 10 out of 47,000 eligible voters cast their vote in Bangladesh,¹⁹⁶ and in one Pakistani prison, fewer than 100 people voted out of 7,000.¹⁹⁷

Similarly, in Mozambique, Nepal and Sri Lanka, adequate voter registration was not conducted in prisons ahead of elections, effectively disenfranchising many eligible people in prison.¹⁹⁸ In the

Netherlands, authorities set up mobile voting locations for the European Parliament elections; however, as the people in prison were informed too late, some had thrown away their voting pass.¹⁹⁹

Beyond logistical barriers, concerns about the integrity of the voting process in prisons persist. Reports from Georgia indicate that 'powerful' individuals within prisons coerced others to vote for specific parties in the 2024 parliamentary elections.²⁰⁰

Successful cases where prison voting was facilitated through strong institutional coordination have been seen, for example, in Indonesia, where the collaboration between prison and election authorities enabled 10,000 Jakarta citizens to vote in 2024.²⁰¹ Romania also established inter-institutional links, ensuring that people detained received valid identification documents ahead of the 2024 presidential elections, allowing over 19,000 eligible people in prison to vote.²⁰² In Ghana and Namibia, electoral commissions worked closely with prison authorities to register eligible voters ahead of the 2024 elections, ensuring accessible voting practices.²⁰³ For the 2024 European Parliament Elections, eligible people in prison in countries such as France, Germany and Greece were able to vote through the effective and timely organisation of either special polling stations or mailing systems.²⁰⁴

Rehabilitation and reintegration

Access to and the quality of prison rehabilitation and reintegration programmes vary widely across the world, reflecting a stark contrast in approaches and investment. Some countries have developed advanced systems with comprehensive risk and needs assessments, leading to tailored rehabilitation programmes designed to support reintegration. At the other end of

the spectrum, rehabilitation is little more than basic vocational or work programmes – or, in some cases, barely exists at all. In many cases, civil society organisations step in to fill a gap where states do not provide rehabilitation programmes. The lack of funding and resources along with overcrowding hindering rehabilitation processes has been reported widely.

Responses to a UNODC survey on the topic from 62 jurisdictions found that a large majority had implemented education and vocational training programmes, and 68% reported more specialised programmes, albeit it was noted that the scope and realities of accessing these is not known. Only 54% of the jurisdictions that responded had programmes developed on an evidence-based

model, with a similarly low number (57%) incorporating a gender-responsive approach.²⁰⁵

Positively, several countries have brought in new reforms to see a more rehabilitative prison system. Set to take effect in June 2025, Japan's revised Penal Code has a stronger focus on rehabilitation than on punishment, a significant change in the country's criminal justice approach. Authorities have been preparing to implement the reforms including introducing personalised rehabilitation plans.²⁰⁶ In Pakistan, where rehabilitation programmes have been reported to be inadequate and local NGO Justice Project Pakistan revealed regimes where people (including the sick and older persons) were subjected to long working hours, a National Jail Reform Policy foresees comprehensive programmes.²⁰⁷ Similarly, in Maharashtra State in India, a bill has been passed to reform the state's prison system, placing a strong focus on rehabilitation.²⁰⁸

A recognition that adequately trained staff is an essential part of ensuring effective rehabilitation programmes has translated to investment in several countries. For example, in Armenia, social workers from

10 prisons completed comprehensive training to enhance their ability to support the rehabilitation process of people in prison in 2024.²⁰⁹

In other places such as Guyana, Ukraine, South Sudan, Liberia and Mozambique, prison staff have benefitted from training on supporting rehabilitation processes, mostly funded and supported by UN agencies.²¹⁰ In Morocco, trainers are creating tools based on the new Penal Execution Ethics Charter which will soon train prison staff on rehabilitative approaches in prison.²¹¹

Efforts to increase access to formal education to people in prison is a global trend that continues.

There are a growing number of examples where authorities have collaborated with ministries to integrate education into prison systems and introduce or continue primary and secondary education programmes. Prison libraries are somewhat commonplace, but new initiatives are promoting their expansion and linking them to early release opportunities. For example, in the Philippines, the 'Read Your Way Out' programme facilitates the early release of individuals who engage in supervised reading, book clubs and other literary activities.²¹²

To showcase and promote effective prison education initiatives, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) launched a collection of 16 case studies on education in prison in October 2024, highlighting successful initiatives in prison libraries, like those seen in Thailand and Norway.²¹³

Given the established link between employment and reducing recidivism among people who have been released from prison, vocational training – often linked to market needs – is expanding. In Kenya, the Correctional Services have started to implement new programmes in modernised industries and enterprises for people in prison.²¹⁴ Furthermore, new vocational training centres have been established in several countries, such as Armenia and Jordan.²¹⁵ There is also a growing emphasis on digital skills, shaping rehabilitation programmes.²¹⁶ For example, labs for computer literacy and digital skills have been established in prisons in India and Sierra Leone, while stakeholders in Azerbaijan have recommended technology and digital literacy courses to be added as courses in prisons.²¹⁷

Restorative justice in prisons

Restorative justice within the context of prison rehabilitation is attracting attention as an effective approach, with more programmes emerging. For instance, capacity building initiatives among prison staff on restorative justice practices have been rolled out in Singapore, the UK, the US, Zambia and Malawi.²¹⁸ In the US, a county in New Hampshire offers Restorative Learning Dialogues, an eight- to ten-week programme aimed at repairing relationships with oneself and others.²¹⁹

In Japan, prison staff collect victim testimonials including feelings and use these reports in the rehabilitation process of people in prison. With the

victim's consent, the reaction of the person who committed the crime is also communicated to the victim.²²⁰ In India, although letters are not sent out, people in prison are engaging in writing activities that process their emotions and reflect accountability.²²¹

Restorative justice has also been implemented as a means of facilitating dialogue and mediation among people in prison. In Argentina, conflict resolution committees are being implemented to address any interpersonal conflicts between women in prison and prison staff. Such approaches are reported to be effective and show that disciplinary sanctions

are only necessary in exceptional circumstances.²²² In a prison in London, England, a specialised team on gangs works with peer mentors to target conflicts between people in prison before they escalate and get involved in mediation to resolve tensions. They also have a restorative justice lead organisation that plays a part in conflict resolution and mediation between people in prison who are involved in violence.²²³

Restorative justice approaches have also been used in Singapore and the UK to repair damaged relationships between family members and people in prison.²²⁴

Spotlight on:

Lived experience informing prison reform

There is increasing recognition that prison reform efforts are most effective when they meaningfully engage individuals with lived experience of imprisonment or the wider criminal justice system. In several countries – particularly in the Global North – a growing movement is advocating for their inclusion. Often spearheaded by grassroots organisations, it is now gaining traction among government authorities and funders.

A growing body of research highlights the benefits of such approaches, including that a deeper comprehension of the challenges faced by affected communities leads to more informed and empathetic policies.²²⁵ Studies also point to the complexities and experiences of such engagement, including exploitation and ensuring authentic involvement, as well as issues of ongoing stigmatisation of people who have been convicted of a crime.²²⁶

While there are established practices in related fields such as HIV, mental health and forensic care of involving ‘users’ or people who have directly been impacted by the services, when it comes to criminal justice systems stigma and preconceptions have presented barriers to their involvement in shaping policies and reforms in many countries. For example, mandatory disclosure of criminal record policies often hinders the inclusion of people with lived experience in reform efforts,²²⁷ as recognised in an intergovernmental expert meeting on equal access to justice for all in late 2024.²²⁸

In the US, the Credible Messenger movement, which began in the 1970s and predates the broader lived experience movement, involves individuals who have successfully navigated the justice system and now mentor others. Other US organisations such as InsideOut Writers and Juvenile Rights are led by people with lived experience, who leverage their insights to support their peers and advocate for systemic reform.

In Europe, the Prison Reform Trust in England established the Prisoner Policy Network, bringing together people currently and formerly in prison, their families and advocacy organisations. Also in the UK, the NGO Peer Power collaborates with youth support services to integrate young people’s lived experience into service design. In Ireland, the NGO Spéire Nua supports individuals with firsthand experience in the criminal justice system, helping them contribute to reform and mentor others. Young Perspectives in the Netherlands has been at the forefront of training young people with lived experience to become advocates for justice reform. They work closely with public justice practitioners to enhance their skills and drive systemic change. Furthermore, many Dutch social work bachelor’s programmes offer specialisations in experiential knowledge, preparing students to become professional lived experience experts.

In Africa, the Tithandizane Comfort Homes in Zambia advocates for justice reform alongside women with lived experience. In Kenya, Clean Start Africa has built a support network of formerly

imprisoned women who also campaign for change. A similar, albeit more informal, support network has recently emerged in Kazakhstan. In Latin America, NGOs like Mujeres Libres, led by women with lived experience in Colombia, have successfully advocated for greater access to non-custodial options for women and girls in conflict with the law. In Guatemala, Colectivo Artesana works to defend the rights of women in prison and their children, ensuring that sentences do not harm families, while also addressing children’s nutrition in prison.

At the international level, networks such as the International Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women and the Incarceration Nations Network have effectively brought together individuals with lived experience from diverse regions, advocating for meaningful change. Similarly, the International Network of Women Relatives of Persons Deprived of Liberty (RIMUF) advocates for the rights of families affected by imprisonment. International NGOs, including Penal Reform International and Fair Trials, have also set up formal structures to drive this movement forward.

In addition to initiatives driven by civil society and activist groups, governments in several countries are increasingly involving people with lived experience in both informal and formal processes, suggesting broader commitment to inclusive reform. For instance, since 2018, the Prison and Probation Service in England and Wales has led the Lived Experience Engagement Network

(LEEN), working with over 30 organisations. A key outcome has been the development of the Lived Experience Engagement Standard of Excellence.²²⁹

The Irish Department of Justice has formally recognised the value of lived experience in its latest strategy, evidenced for example by the holistic Lived Experience Leadership Programme.²³⁰

Additionally, the Irish Prison Service continues to employ people with lived experience for peer-to-peer projects. In the US, Los Angeles County has adopted the Credible Messenger initiative to support detained and recently released youth. This initiative is implemented in partnership with various local civil society organisations.²³¹

According to a survey conducted by UNODC, 32 jurisdictions have either engaged or are planning to engage prisoner and/or family voices in the planning of their strategies on prison rehabilitation. Most of these jurisdictions are in Asia and the Americas, with none in Africa.²³²

Green prisons

Authorities around the world continue to explore ways to make prison systems environmentally sustainable and more resilient to the impacts of climate change. There is increasing evidence to demonstrate that access to green spaces and nature-based activities help to reduce violence, improve mental health in prisons, and improve rehabilitation prospects. For example, at a European workshop in September 2024 on the topic, research presented showed that biodiverse garden spaces can enhance the well-being of both people in prison and staff, and that different sustainability initiatives can increase work and training opportunities for people in prison.²³³

It is also becoming clearer that greener prisons can lead to significant long-term cost savings for prison administrations. For instance, in Ireland, a LED light replacement programme has reduced power usage resulting in annual cost savings of around EUR 265,000 and a reduction of the power consumption of the lights by 50%.²³⁴ In Malawi, one prison is reported to be saving USD \$400 every month on firewood and electricity since installing a biodigester for fuel production.²³⁵

The environmental impact of prisons remains significant, particularly in terms of the use of

natural resources, the amount of waste produced and the potential consequences on local eco-systems. In Ecuador, plans to construct two large, maximum-security prisons in sensitive ecosystems and Indigenous communities, without prior consultation, sparked protests from ancestral community organisations in the affected areas. Already, 74 acres of tropical dry forest, one of Ecuador's most threatened ecosystems, have been cleared for one of the sites.²³⁶ In Honduras, plans to build a new prison on one of the Swan Islands have raised concerns among conservationists due to the potential impact on the island's terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.²³⁷

In March 2025, Penal Reform International and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) issued a guide to creating environmentally sustainable prisons, with promising practice examples and practical steps on how to minimise environmental impacts while also promoting a healthier, more rehabilitative environment.²³⁸ The guide points out that while prisons are often overlooked in discussions around environmental sustainability despite their significant carbon footprint, they can also play an extremely important role in environmental efforts, including through the direct

participation of people living in prison and integrating well-being and rehabilitation opportunities.

Positive steps to embed sustainability principles into prison policies and develop climate action plans specifically for prisons have been taken in several countries. In Canada, the 2023–2027 sustainability strategy of the Correctional Service prioritises energy, water and waste reduction measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.²³⁹

Kenya's Strategic Guiding Framework for greening the country's justice system outlines the sector's role in taking adaptation and mitigation measures to counter the adverse impacts of climate change and includes plans to make the prison service greener, with firm links to rehabilitation.²⁴⁰ New initiatives include a programme to repurpose and recycle clothing, which promotes environmental sustainability, community empowerment and individual rehabilitation, aiming to equip people with practical expertise in green industry as well as training in business and marketing skills.²⁴¹ Plans are also in place to modernise prison farms to achieve self-sufficiency in food production and enable sale of any excess produce.²⁴²

Prisoners check fencing ahead of a press conference announcing the reopening of Kingston's prison farm programme, Ontario, Canada. August 2019. Cory Wright.



Biodiverse garden spaces can enhance the well-being of both people in prison and staff, and different sustainability initiatives can increase work and training opportunities for people in prison.

Sustainability initiatives in prisons continue to be looked at to help address food insecurity issues, including in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The roll out of the Green Corrections Initiative in South Sudan has included training in agricultural skills to enhance food security and improve agricultural livelihood opportunities.²⁴³

There are more examples emerging of prisons switching to renewable energy sources and adopting energy efficiency measures to reduce the facilities' carbon footprints and running costs. For example, the Irish Prison Service aims to install solar

panels across all its prisons.²⁴⁴ Solar systems have also recently been installed in six prisons in Pakistan to tackle frequent power cuts and provide stable and more financially viable sources of energy. Authorities have noted that the new and more reliable energy source has enabled them to consistently keep food and medicine cool and run efficient digital information management systems.²⁴⁵ Some prison systems have also made recent moves to introduce greener prison transport, including in Canada where authorities plan to have at least 50% zero emission vehicles or hybrids before 2027.²⁴⁶

As authorities look at ways to make prisons greener, prison reform advocates continue to warn against the threat of 'greenwashing' and to point out that a more effective way to make prison systems more environmentally sustainable and cost effective is through broader penal reform, including reducing the number of people in prison and improving conditions of detention.²⁴⁷ There are also concerns that the 'greening of prisons' in some locations might overlook human rights considerations, including concerns over working conditions and unfair remuneration.²⁴⁸

Prison systems in overseas territories

Many countries maintain overseas territories – regions geographically separated from the mainland but governed under varying degrees of administrative, legal and political control. The main countries with overseas territories are France, UK, US, the Netherlands, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand and Norway. Their justice and prison systems are governed under differing status, with varying degrees of administrative, legal and political autonomy.

Many of the prison systems in overseas territories bear the marks of historical legacies – some colonial. During colonial rule, prisons often served as tools of racial, social and political control, primarily focused on maintaining order and enforcing authority. They were also a source of forced labour.²⁴⁹ This has left a lasting imprint on the way prisons are organised, often overcrowded with outdated infrastructure and limited resources, as the systems are based on models that were never intended to serve large, diverse populations with a focus on rehabilitation. As a result, these systems continue to struggle with reintegration and

effective rehabilitation, illustrating how colonial influences persist in shaping modern justice practices.

The Dutch overseas territories – collectively referred to as the Caribbean Netherlands – several islands with varying degrees of autonomy, including Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten, which are autonomous jurisdictions, whereas Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba are special Dutch municipalities. Their legal systems are founded upon Dutch law, with the Dutch government exercising authority over judicial matters. In recent years, this has included interventions in prison reform and law enforcement, particularly in response to poor detention conditions and high crime rates. The European Court of Human Rights has heard cases concerning prison conditions and the irreducibility of life imprisonment sentences²⁵⁰ in Sint Maarten and Curaçao, respectively, which the Netherlands defended.

The prison systems on these islands are impacted by significant challenges related to drug trafficking, due to their position near major drug-trafficking routes

straddling Colombia and Venezuela, a factor that contributes to a steady rise in pressure on the prison system.²⁵¹ A recent report from the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) on prison conditions in Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten reported that although some improvements have been made to prison facilities, overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and mental health support remains severely limited.²⁵²

To address overcrowding, ageing infrastructure and damage from extreme weather in the territories there has been a commitment of investment. For example, the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), backed by \$52 million from the Sint Maarten Government and the Dutch Government, will build a new prison, with work expected to start in 2025.²⁵³ This was in response to discussions ongoing since 2017 in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma. Certain detainees were relocated to the Netherlands, while eleven container cells were dispatched to Sint Maarten, albeit unused (with logistical challenges been cited as the main reason).²⁵⁴

Furthermore, in Sint Maarten, the Pointe Blanche prison was supported by the Dutch military amid significant security concerns, particularly with a search operation conducted in February 2025. The operation, led by the local Police Force jointly with the Dutch military, resulted in the confiscation of weapons, mobile phones and drugs.²⁵⁵

France's overseas territories are all legally under the authority of the French Ministry of Justice and are supported to varying degrees by France although the level of autonomy differs depending on their legal status. A 2025 Senate report highlights a deepening security crisis marked by rising violent crime, urban unrest and increasing attacks on law enforcement officers in recent years.²⁵⁶ The report explained the expanding influence of drug trafficking networks, particularly in the Caribbean and French Guiana, and the severe overcrowding of prisons, the acute shortage of correctional staff, and the poor conditions of detention.

These challenges have also drawn the attention of international human rights bodies. In its 2025 report, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) has strongly criticised the severe overcrowding, inadequate detention conditions, and persistent violence in prisons across Guadeloupe and French Guiana, highlighting concerns over the lack of proper mental healthcare and urging French authorities to implement urgent reforms to prevent inhumane and degrading treatment.²⁵⁷

In Mayotte, a French overseas department in the Indian Ocean, the average occupancy rate in Majicavo prison, the only male prison on the island, reached 320% in January 2025 and in Guadeloupe, the Baie-Mahault Penitentiary Centre is severely overcrowded, housing 750 prisoners in a facility originally designed for 520 for the same period. This situation was condemned by the Administrative Court of Guadeloupe.²⁵⁸

The French Government has responded to its overcrowding crisis with a programme aimed at expanding its prison estate adding 15,000 new prison places over a ten-year period, with projects underway in Martinique, Guadeloupe, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna at a cost of almost 2 billion EUR.²⁵⁹ However, the opening of the new prison in Koné, New Caledonia, in February 2023 has not resolved the chronic overcrowding issue at Nouméa's Camp-Est prison. By December 2024, Koné was already nearing full capacity, while Camp-Est still faced severe overcrowding, with occupancy rates of 157% in the remand section and 149% in the detention centre. The Government has plans to build a new 600-place facility in Ducos, which is scheduled for completion in 2032.²⁶⁰

New Caledonia continues to be affected by the colonial-era policies that have shaped its justice system.²⁶¹ These policies have led to disproportionate imprisonment rates among the Indigenous Kanak population, further compounded by socio-economic inequalities and systemic biases.²⁶² The imprisonment rate in New Caledonia is more than twice that of mainland France, with some detainees being transferred to prisons thousands of kilometres away on the French mainland. In May 2024, violent protests erupted in the capital, Nouméa, over proposed voting reforms perceived as marginalising the Indigenous Kanak people. The unrest led to casualties, property damage and a prison crisis, with a brief hostage situation involving three prison staff during a mutiny. France declared a state of emergency, deploying security forces, including prison personnel, and arresting pro-independence activists, seven of whom were controversially transferred to mainland France.²⁶³

Prisons across British Overseas Territories mostly hold less than 100 people in various detention facilities. For example, HMP Anguilla East holds just 50 people in prison, well below its capacity of 116.

Natural disasters, especially extreme weather, are increasingly impacting Territories in the Caribbean. After the 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria, the UK provided disaster response, including the deployment of specialist prison officers to run the Virgin Islands' prison and 21 detainees – deemed 'most high risk' were transferred by air to a prison in St Lucia.

Puerto Rico is classified as an unincorporated territory of the United States. Although the island was authorised to draft its own constitution – subject to approval by the US Congress – it remains under US jurisdiction with limited self-governance. Consequently, its residents are unable to vote in presidential elections and lack full representation in Congress, being represented only by a non-voting delegate in the House of Representatives. Scholars have argued that territories like Puerto Rico highlight the colonial nature of such relationships, wherein exploitation is perpetuated rather than addressing systemic issues. This dynamic extends beyond economic and political spheres, influencing other institutions, including prisons.²⁶⁴

In 2020, concerns were raised by Puerto Rico's nonvoting member of Congress following the transfer of 54 people in federal prisons from the US to Puerto Rico's Metropolitan Detention Center in Guaynabo during the COVID-19 pandemic. At least seven of the people transferred tested positive for the virus upon arrival, and reports suggested that local authorities were neither consulted nor informed about the reasons for the transfer.²⁶⁵ Disparities in the treatment of people in prison are also evident in instances such as natural disasters. During Hurricane Fiona in 2022, the US Government's response to the crisis in Puerto Rico was markedly less comprehensive than the support offered to people in prison in Florida during Hurricane Ian, which occurred in the same year.²⁶⁶

PART FIVE

Role and use of technologies

Technological innovation and progress vary significantly between countries. While some are introducing or expanding ‘Smart prisons’ that integrate cutting-edge technology into all aspects of prison design and operations, other prison systems are only beginning to replace paper-based file management systems with digital records.

Where there are resources and infrastructure, the application of various technologies within prison environments is advancing at a rapid pace. These technologies are increasingly used across all facets of prisons, such as tools for day-to-day prison management, security, healthcare, case management, education and training, preparation for release, virtual visits, staff training and the monitoring of the behaviour of people in prison.

The use of technology in education, training and rehabilitation within correctional facilities continues to expand, playing a crucial role in enhancing digital literacy among people in prison. Furthermore, technology is being used to facilitate better engagement from people detained, and the collection of lived experiences, allowing people in prison to express their views on prison life. In Finland, people detained in ‘Smart Prisons’ were given the opportunity to anonymously provide feedback on proposed amendments to the Prison Act and the Pre-Trial Detention Act via in-cell computers. This initiative reflects efforts to promote responsible legislation by incorporating the views of people usually excluded from discussions about laws that directly impact them.²⁶⁷

A number of jurisdictions have recently invested significantly to address security problems. In October 2024, the Dominican Republic allocated USD \$5.3 million to support the Public Prosecutor’s Office in installing signal blockers in some prisons, aiming to curb cybercrimes using mobile phones within these facilities.²⁶⁸ In Peru, a report revealed that mobile and internet blocking systems are non-functional in 33 prisons nationwide. The systems are run by a private entity, which blames the issues on non-payment by the National Penitentiary Institute (INPE).²⁶⁹

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems within prison systems is becoming more popular with the growing commercial market for such products pushing their growth. Examples of AI in prisons include the monitoring and predicting of the behaviour of people in prison in countries like Hong Kong, the US, Singapore and the Netherlands. The security surveillance market is rapidly evolving, driven by AI-powered advancements for monitoring, forensic analysis and incident detection. High-resolution cameras, AI-driven analytics and integrated surveillance solutions are increasingly being adopted in prisons for security purposes and real-time response capabilities. This technology includes AI-powered cameras and video analytics capable of identifying individuals, monitoring behaviours and alerting prison staff, as well as systems that analyse body language to predict potential violence.²⁷⁰ Similarly, pilot testing has taken place in Spain to trial technology

which analyses images of facial expressions and body language to counter risks of escape, riots or smuggling of drugs into prisons.²⁷¹ Other technologies include motion detection, people counting and real-time incident detection.²⁷²

The use of AI and other digital technologies by both prison and probation services – as well as wider justice systems – continues to raise ethical and human rights concerns, including disproportionately affecting those in vulnerable situations.

In November 2024, the Council of Europe adopted new recommendations on the use of AI in prisons and probation as an effort to support regulation. It requires the legitimate and proportionate use of AI technologies and only if they contribute to rehabilitation. The recommendations acknowledge that while AI can assist in maintaining safety and security, they should be used to assist rather than replace staff members. The recommendations also call for any decisions based on the use of AI that may affect human rights to be subject to human review and effective complaints mechanisms.²⁷³ Also, at an international expert group convened in December 2024 under a UN resolution on access to justice, calls were made to recommend that the responsible deployment of technology, including AI, is regulated and assessed for its impact on access to justice, aligning with international standards.²⁷⁴

There is also increasing concern over the use of algorithms for prison classification or to assess the risk of

Construction simulator in a prison in Leicester, England.



The Council of Europe's new recommendations on the use of AI in prisons and probation requires the legitimate and proportionate use of AI technologies and only if they contribute to rehabilitation.

recidivism in bail or parole decisions. One recent study found that there is a lack of information and transparency about the operation of the algorithm systems and highlighted potential for racial bias and discrimination.²⁷⁵

With 'Smart prisons' in higher-income countries becoming more popular, there have been efforts to monitor their effectiveness and impact. Positives include the autonomy that digital devices give to people in

prison, providing them with access to information, education and more frequent communication with friends and family, and more potential for effective rehabilitation.²⁷⁶ There has been some criticism, however, that technologies used in smart prisons to monitor temperature, air quality, water and energy usage have also led to increased surveillance and control over people in prison with negative impacts on their privacy, autonomy and eventual rehabilitation.²⁷⁷

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