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2025 CELEBRATING THE NELSON MANDELA RULES THE BANGKOK RULES

2025 PRISON MATTERS

Global prison population and trends

A focus on rehabilitative environments

Artwork: © Haidy Darwish

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Following its inaugural release, the second edition of Prison Matters continues to present a comprehensive global overview of the latest global prison statistics and emerging trends, with a special focus on rehabilitative prison environments. Relying on data collected annually through the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS), Prison Matters explores prison population estimates, including pretrial detention, as well as the state of overcrowding, prison personnel and custodial deaths and offers valuable insights into the state of incarceration worldwide.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) oversees the UN-CTS, an annual questionnaire that facilitates the collection of data on crime trends and criminal justice systems, including prison population statistics, from Member States. To strengthen data coverage and reliability, UNODC integrates supplementary sources, ensuring the production of robust regional and global prison population estimates.

First outlined in the Kyoto Declaration on "Advancing Crime Prevention, Criminal Justice and the Rule of Law: Towards the Achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", which was adopted as a result of the 14th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice[1], this year's Prison Matters explores the concept of rehabilitative prison environments and illustrates efforts from Member States aimed at translating this concept into practice.

The research brief includes the essential points of view of prisoners, prison staff and prison management from field studies that UNODC conducted between 2019 and 2025 in Albania, Australia, Czechia, Namibia and Thailand to understand the nexus between rehabilitation, social reintegration and reoffending. As such, this publication also reflects the UN Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies) as the latest addition to the UN standards norms related to prison management and the treatment of offenders, which the 34th session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice recommended for adoption by the General Assembly in May 2025.

This year marks the 10th and 15th anniversaries of the adoption of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) and the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules). Prison Matters 2025 aligns with these universally recognized standards to understand global experiences in transforming prisons from sites of incapacitation towards places where institutional climates and conditions support individual transformation and effective rehabilitation.

[1] A/RES/76/181, Annex.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Countries and areas are referred to by the names that were in official use at the time the relevant data were collected. A list of regional groupings is included in Annex II of this publication.

For the purposes of this report, terms relating to incarceration and criminal justice have been used in line with UNODC terminology and the United Nations System Common Position on Incarceration (2021). The term *incarceration* refers to "the state of being deprived of liberty in prisons, including pretrial detention facilities," while *prisons* are "all authorised places of detention within a criminal justice system, including those used for the purposes of pretrial detention and imprisonment upon conviction." The term *prisoner* refers to "all persons who are held in prisons as defined above, irrespective of their legal status, excluding children accompanying an incarcerated parent." The term *prisoner* will thus be used throughout Prison Matters, with the exception of where verbatim quotes are drawn from research interviews, focus groups, or scientific publications. Maintaining fidelity to these original sources complies with ethical research practice.

Furthermore, to maintain consistency with UNODC's data collection mechanisms, this report makes use of the definition of *unsentenced prisoners* used in the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, which is "[p]ersons held in prisons, penal institutions or correctional institutions who are untried, pre-trial or awaiting a first instance decision on their case from a competent authority regarding their conviction or acquittal."

The term *rehabilitative prison environment* appears in various United Nations texts, such as the Kyoto Declaration and the United Nations Common Position on Incarceration. This report builds upon on such references, while also relying on peer-reviewed scientific literature to inform and elaborate the articulation and conceptualisation of rehabilitative prison environments.

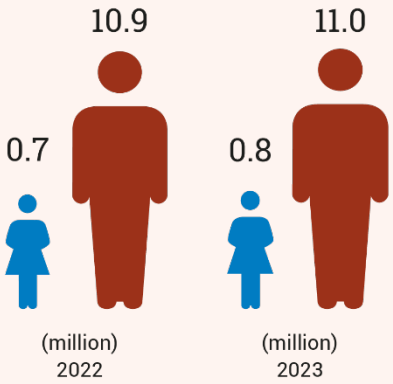
Data used in this report are drawn from Member States national submissions, non-governmental organisations and academic sources. The qualitative data presented and analysed in this report are collected by UNODC in the framework of field studies it carried out. Where available, sex- and age-disaggregated data have been presented.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

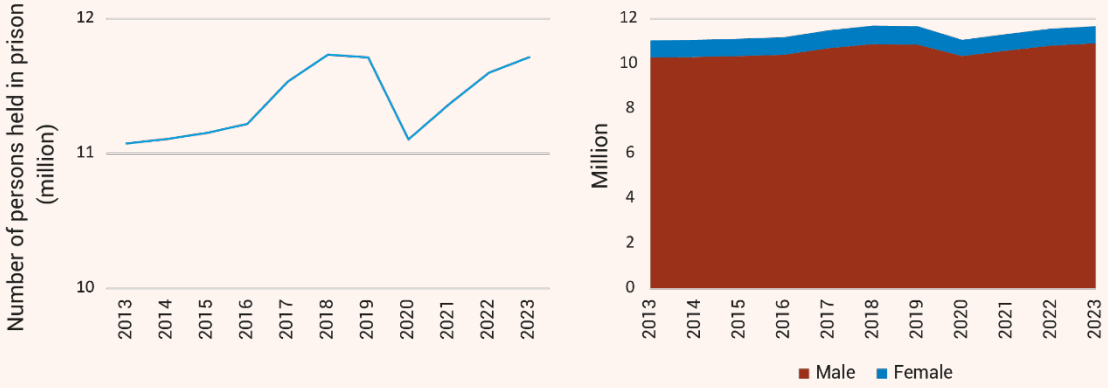
- The global prison population continues to grow, having reached 11.7 million prisoners worldwide at the end of 2023
- Over a third of the global prison population (3.7 million) remains in pre-trial detention
- While men are more likely to be imprisoned, women face a higher risk of pre-trial detention in Africa and Oceania
- Overcrowding continues to blight prison systems globally, but particularly in Africa and the Americas
- High rates of violent deaths in prison in certain regions indicate unsafe prison conditions
- Among all world regions, European prisons stand out as having the most gender-balanced staff and being least under-staffed
- Rehabilitation begins with conditions that allow prisoners to reimagine themselves and their future
- All prison staff have important roles to play in creating rehabilitative prison environments
- Preparation for release and post-release support are crucial in enabling social reintegration during a period of fundamental readjustment
- Rehabilitation requires a conducive environment to take hold
- Rehabilitative prison environments can be planned and managed, and should be formally incorporated in system-wide strategies, including regular monitoring and evaluation
- The effectiveness of psychological intervention programmes in prison settings depends on context and circumstances
- The evidence on the impact of vocational training on recidivism is mixed

11.7 million

Global number of persons in prison at the end of 2023 (+1% since 2022)

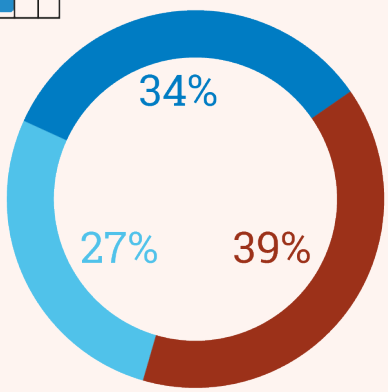


Global prison population (2013–2023)



DISTRIBUTION OF COUNTRIES BY OVERCROWDING STATUS, LATEST AVAILABLE YEAR DURING 2015-2024 (N=181)

Countries where the prison system is overcrowded (operating at > 100%–150% of prison capacity)



Countries where the prison system is severely overcrowded (operating at >150% of prison capacity)

Countries where the prison system is not overcrowded (operating at 100% or lower than prison capacity)

* Based on data from 181 countries (42 from Africa, 44 from the Americas, 32 from Asia, 47 from Europe, 12 from Oceania)

RATES OF HOMICIDE AND SUICIDE CAN BE HIGHER IN PRISON

32.9

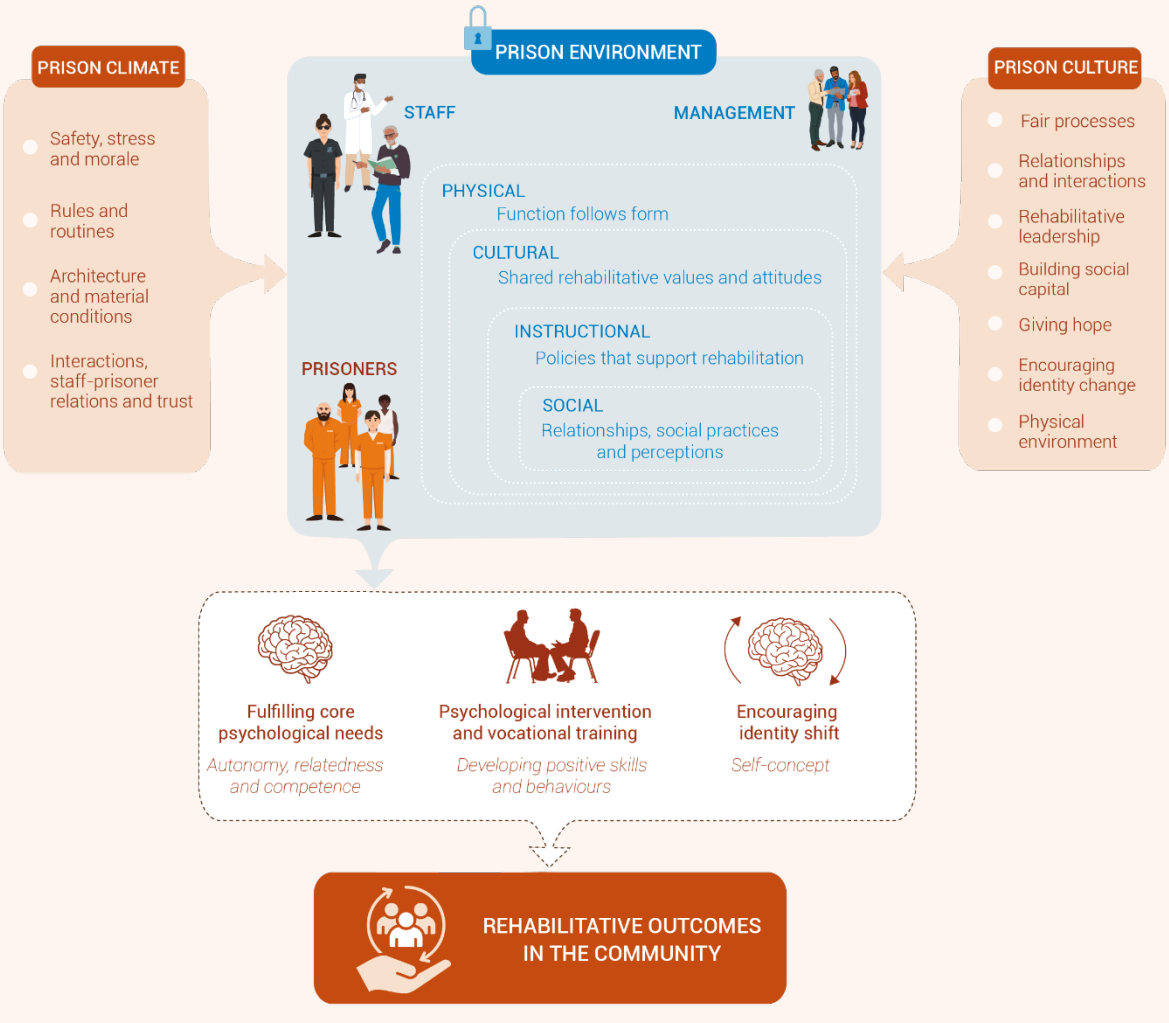
prisoners out of every 100,000 prisoners committed suicide

11.7

prisoners out of every 100,000 prisoners are victims of homicide

* Based on data for 2023 or latest available year from 95 countries
(5 from Africa, 33 from the Americas,15 from Asia, 40 from Europe and 2 from Oceania)

ENVIRONMENTS CONDUCIVE TO REHABILITATION



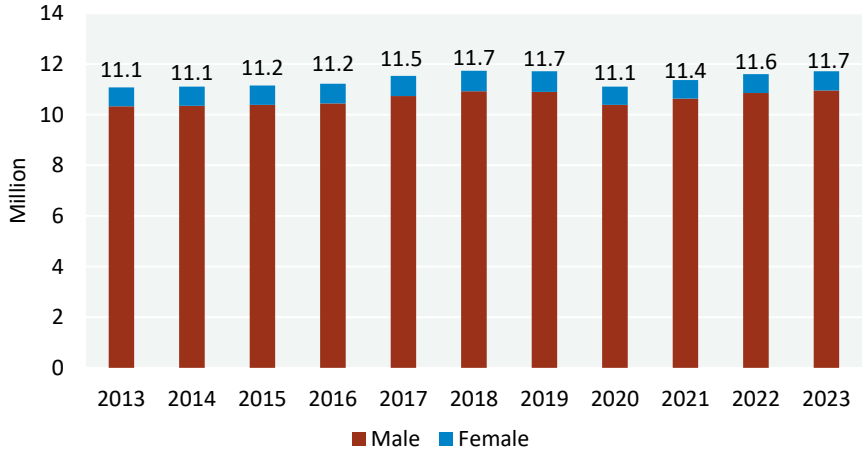
GLOBAL PRISON POPULATION AND TRENDS

GLOBAL PRISON POPULATION AND TRENDS

The global prison population continues to grow, having reached 11.7 million prisoners worldwide at the end of 2023

Following a decrease during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people held in prison worldwide has started to rise again. An estimated 11.7 million people were detained globally in 2023, 5.8 per cent more than a decade ago. Thus, 145 persons out of every 100,000 people worldwide were in prison in 2023.[2]

Figure 1: Global prison population, by sex, 2013-2023



Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

The vast majority of prisoners worldwide are men, representing almost 94 per cent of the prison population or nearly 11 million prisoners in 2023. At the end of the same year, 759,000 women were held in prison. The share of women among all prisoners has remained relatively stable between 2013 and 2023, staying below 7 per cent during the entire period. Furthermore, the share of female prisoners shows little regional variation, with the highest share in the Americas at 7.1 per cent.[3]

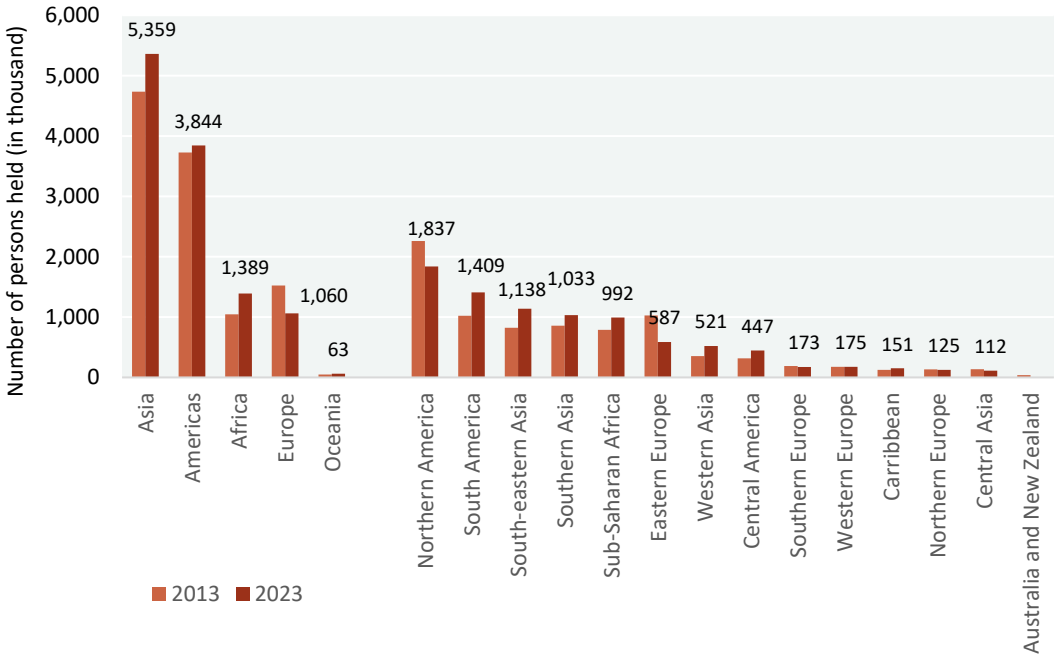
While the number of people in prison has increased since 2013, the proportion of those incarcerated out of the global population has in fact decreased. This means that the general population has grown faster than the prison population between 2013 and 2023 (increase by 11.0 per cent vs. 5.8 per cent),[4] The immediate release of prisoners and decrease in conviction rates that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to have contributed to this trend.[5] The global prison population rate declined by 6.1 per cent (from 150 to 141 per 100,000 population) between 2019 and 2020 before increasing again since 2021 to 145 prisoners per 100,000 population in 2023.[6]

[2] UNODC, 'United Nations Surveys on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS)', 2025.
[3] Ibid.
[4] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision* (New York, NY, 2022).
[5] Available data from 41 countries suggest a general slowing down of the criminal justice process in 2020. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2022). Data Matters 4 - Monitoring SDG 16, A gender perspective.
[6] UNODC, *UN-CTS*.

In 2023, 46 per cent of the global population in prison was incarcerated in Asia, around three percentage points more than in 2013, and 33 per cent in the Americas. Prison population rates, which account for different population sizes and growth rates, differ between regions. Estimates for 2023 indicate that people in the Americas were nearly 4 times more likely to be held in prison than those living in Africa. At subregional level, relatively lower prison population rates below 100 prisoners per 100,000 population were observed in Southern Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Western Europe while the rates in Northern America, the Caribbean, South- and Central America as well as Eastern Europe exceeded 200 prisoners per 100,000 population. [7]

Over the last decade, Eastern Europe has seen the largest decline in the prison population rate from 348 prisoners per 100,000 population in 2013 to 205 per 100,000 in 2023; this reduction of 41 per cent was driven primarily by a reduction in the number of people in prison in the Russian Federation, which accelerated from 2021 onwards. A marked decrease of 25 per cent in prison population rate over the same period was also observed in Northern America. However, despite this reduction, Northern America continues to record the highest prison population rate among all subregions in the world. By contrast, prison population rates increased significantly over the period 2013-2023 in South- and Central America, by 28 per cent and 27 per cent respectively.[8] In South America, the upward trend in prison population rates was driven by increases in the prison population in several populous countries, including in Brazil, Argentina and Peru, while in Central America, the upward trend was driven primarily by a nearly four-fold increase in the prison population in El Salvador.

Figure 2: Number of persons held in prison, by region and selected subregion, 2013 and 2023

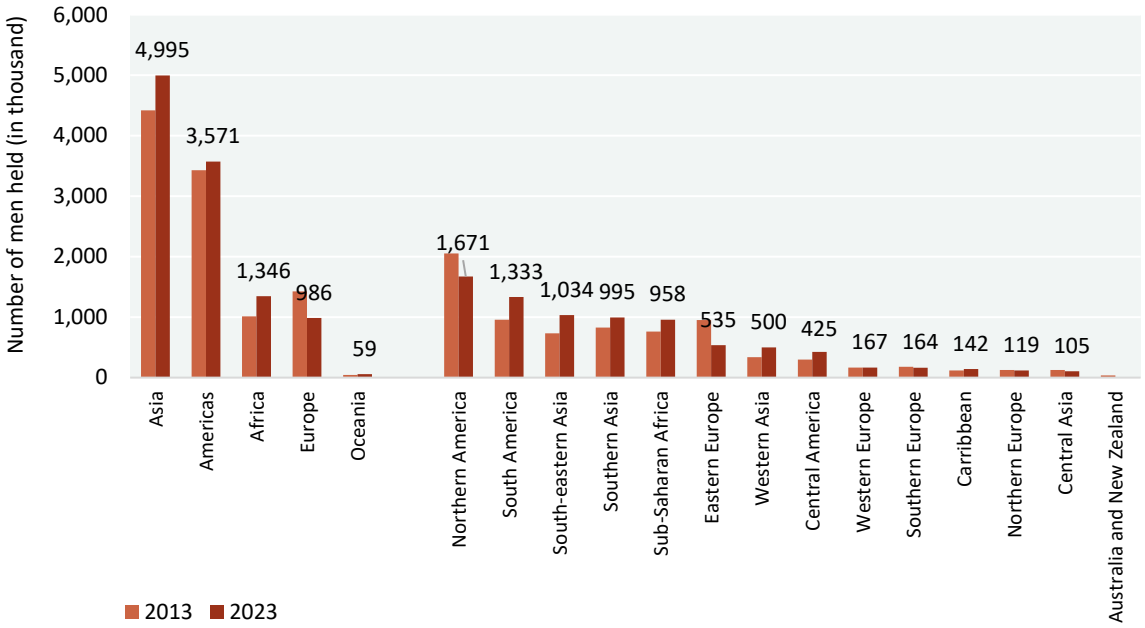


Note: Regions and selected subregions are ranked in descending order of number of persons held in 2023. Data labels refer to 2023. Some sub-regions are omitted due to low data coverage.

Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

[7] Ibid.
[8] UNODC, *UN-CTS*.

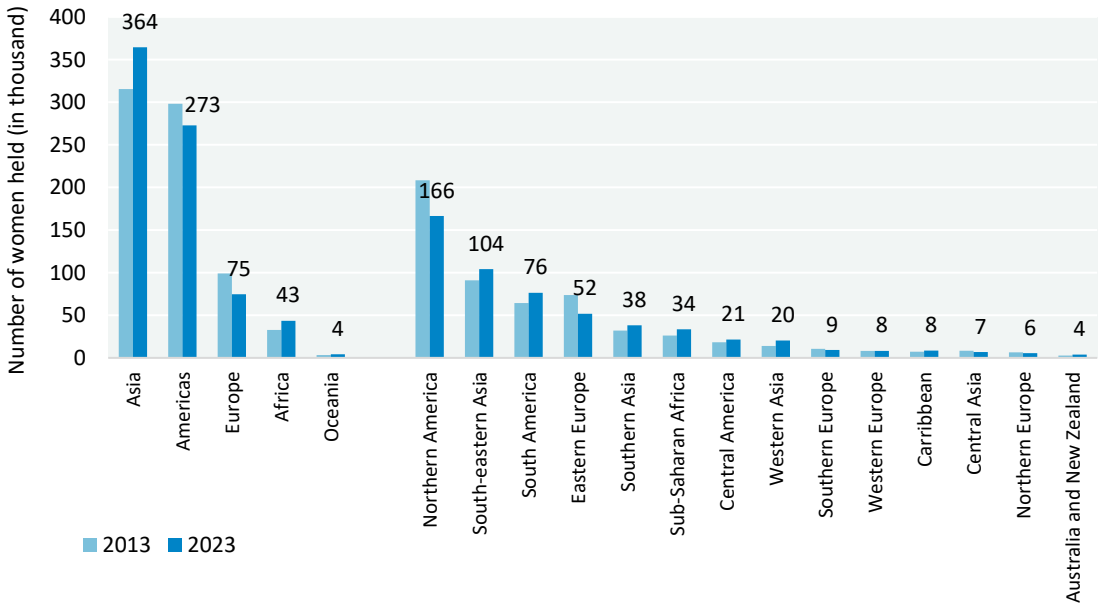
Figure 3: Number of male detainees held in prison, by region and selected subregion, 2013 and 2023



Note: Regions and selected subregions are ranked in descending order of number of male detainees held in 2023. Data labels refer to 2023. Some sub-regions are omitted due to low data coverage.

Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

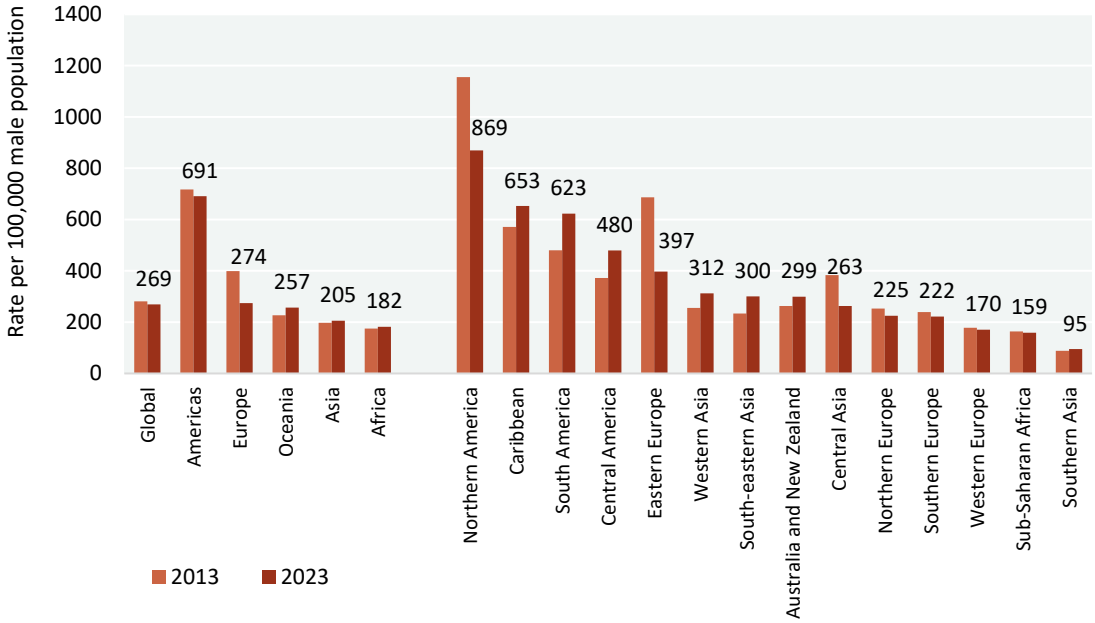
Figure 4: Number of female detainees held in prison, by region and selected subregion, 2013 and 2023



Note: Regions and selected subregions are ranked in descending order of number of female detainees held in 2023. Data labels refer to 2023. Some sub-regions are omitted due to low data coverage.

Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

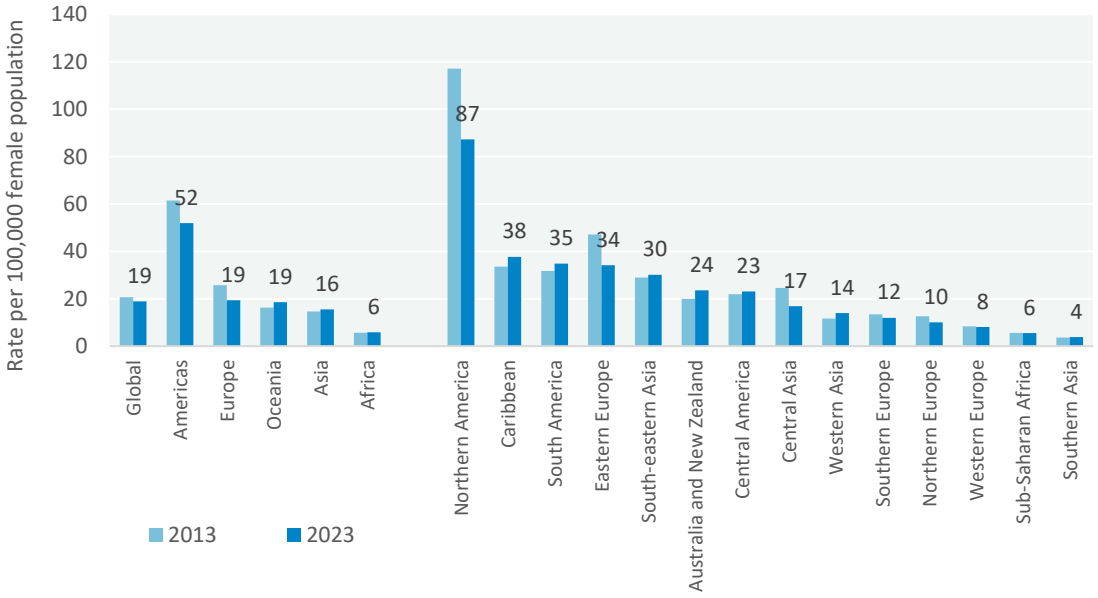
Figure 5: Number of male detainees held in prison per 100,000 population, by region and selected subregion, 2013 and 2023



Note: Regions and selected subregions are ranked in descending order of rate of male detainees held in 2023. Data labels refer to 2023. Some sub-regions are omitted due to low data coverage.

Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

Figure 6: Number of female detainees held in prison per 100,000 population, by region and selected subregion, 2013 and 2023



Note: Regions and selected subregions are ranked in descending order of rate of female detainees held in 2023. Data labels refer to 2023. Some sub-regions are omitted due to low data coverage.

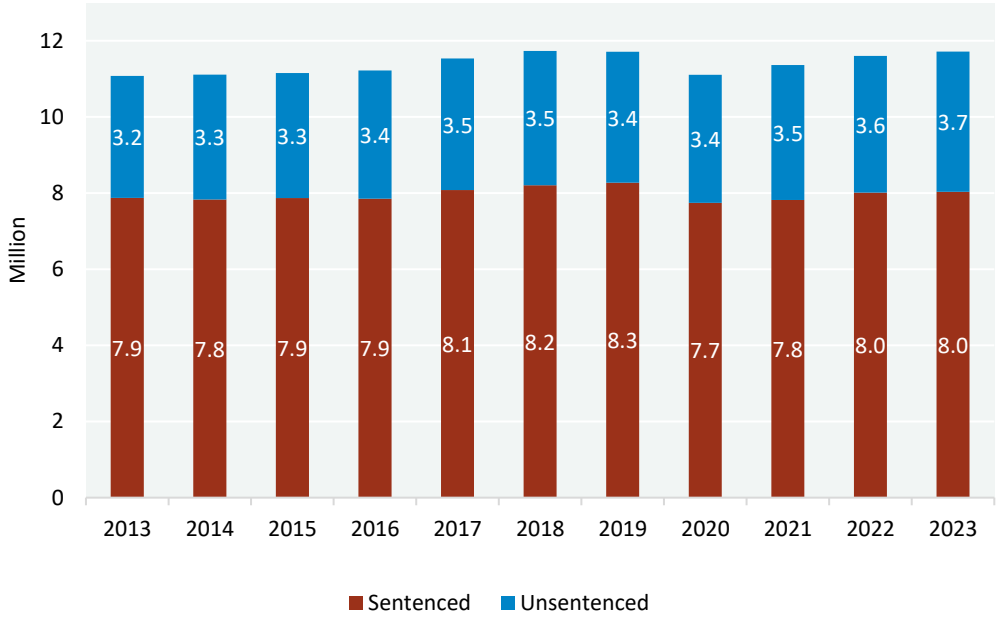
Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

Over a third of the global prison population remains in pre-trial detention

In 2023, around 3.7 million prisoners worldwide were held in pre-trial detention[9] representing an increase since 2013, when it was around 3.2 million, tracking the overall increase in the number of persons held in prison globally. However, the percentage of unsentenced prisoners among all prisoners has remained almost stable at around 30 per cent since 2013.

Across regions, the highest proportion of unsentenced prisoners among the overall prison population is reported in Africa and Oceania (both at 37 per cent in 2023), and the lowest in Europe (19 per cent). Breaking down these data to subregion level, the situation is particularly concerning in Southern Asia where almost two thirds of detainees (64 per cent) are held unsentenced. Furthermore, the situation continues to deteriorate in this subregion, with unsentenced prisoners as a proportion of all prisoners rising between 2013 (54 per cent) and 2023 (64 per cent). In contrast, in Northern Europe, 15 per cent of prisoners were held in detention before sentence.[10]

Figure 1: Number of persons held in prison, by sentencing status, 2013-2023

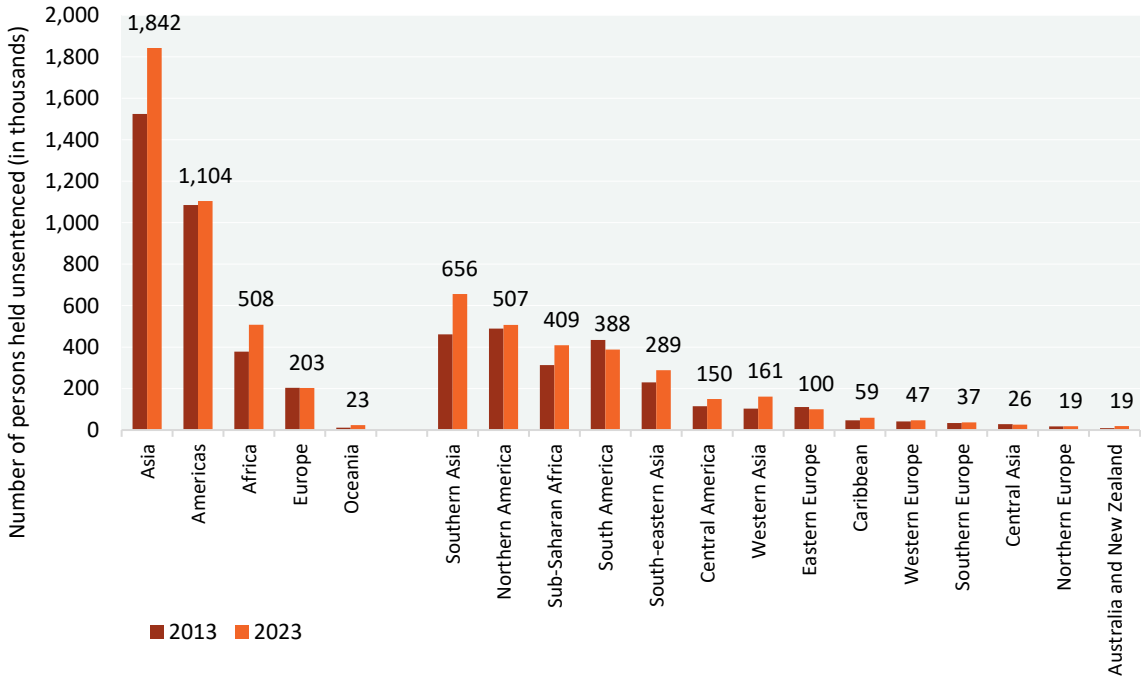


Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

[9] Persons who are held in prisons, penal institutions or correctional institutions and who have not yet received a first instance decision on their case from a competent authority regarding their conviction or acquittal

[10] UNODC, *UN-CTS*.

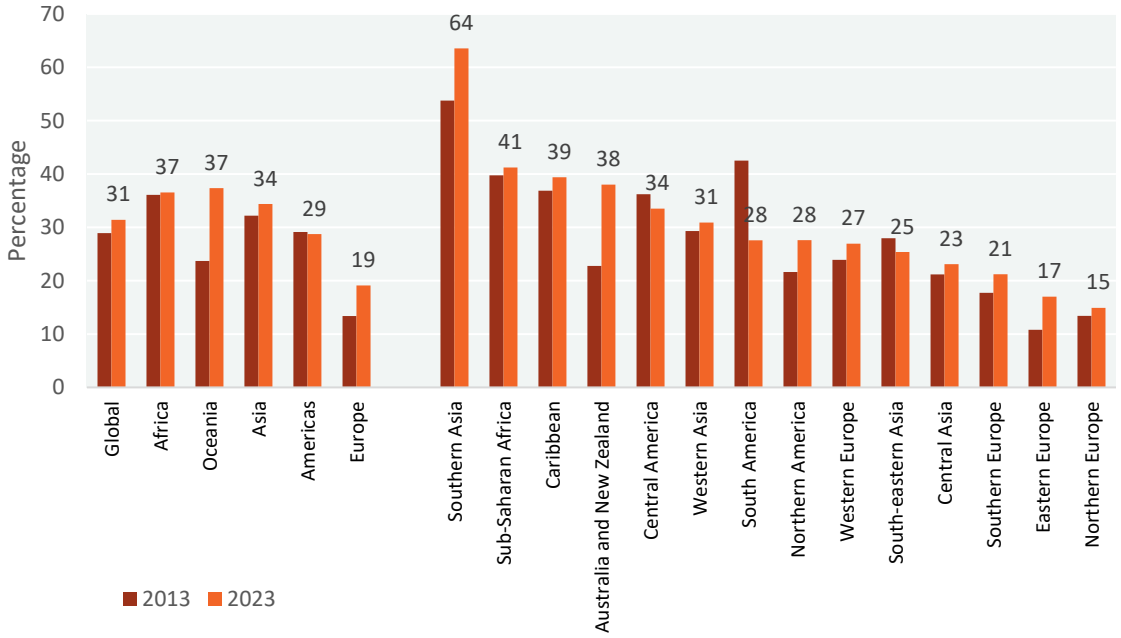
Figure 2: Number of unsentenced prisoners, by region and selected subregion, 2013 and 2023



Note: Regions and selected subregions are ranked in descending order of the proportion of unsentenced detainees of the overall prison population in 2023. Data labels refer to 2023. Some sub-regions are omitted due to low data coverage.

Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

Figure 3: Proportion of unsentenced prisoners among the prison population, by region and selected subregion, 2013 and 2023

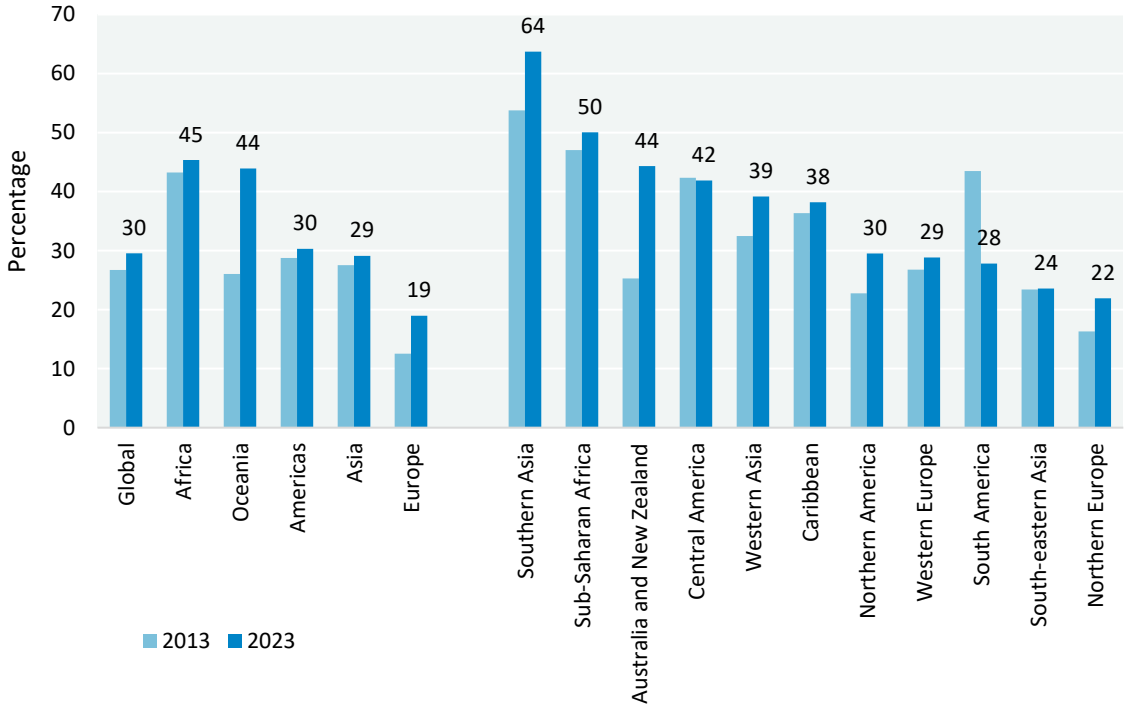


Note: Regions and selected subregions are ranked in descending order of the proportion of unsentenced detainees of the overall prison population in 2023. Data labels refer to 2023. Some sub-regions are omitted due to low data coverage.

Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

Due to men comprising the overwhelming majority of the total prison population in each region and subregion, the trends in the share of unsentenced detention among men closely mirrors the trends in the overall prison population. By contrast, women only make up a relatively small share of the total prison population in each region and subregion, so trends to not always closely track the overall prison population trend. For this reason, trends in the proportion of female unsentenced prisoners among the female prison population are presented below.

Figure 4: **Proportion of female unsentenced prisoners among the female prison population, by region and selected subregion, 2013 and 2023**



Note: Regions and selected subregions are ranked in descending order of the proportion of female unsentenced detainees of the female prison population in 2023. Data labels refer to 2023. Some sub-regions are omitted due to low data coverage.

Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

While men are more likely to be imprisoned, women face a higher risk of pre-trial detention in Africa and Oceania

In 2023, an estimated 3.5 million men and 0.2 million women were held in pre-trial detention worldwide. The proportion of women held in prison without a sentence was 30 per cent at global level, very similar to men (32 per cent).[11]

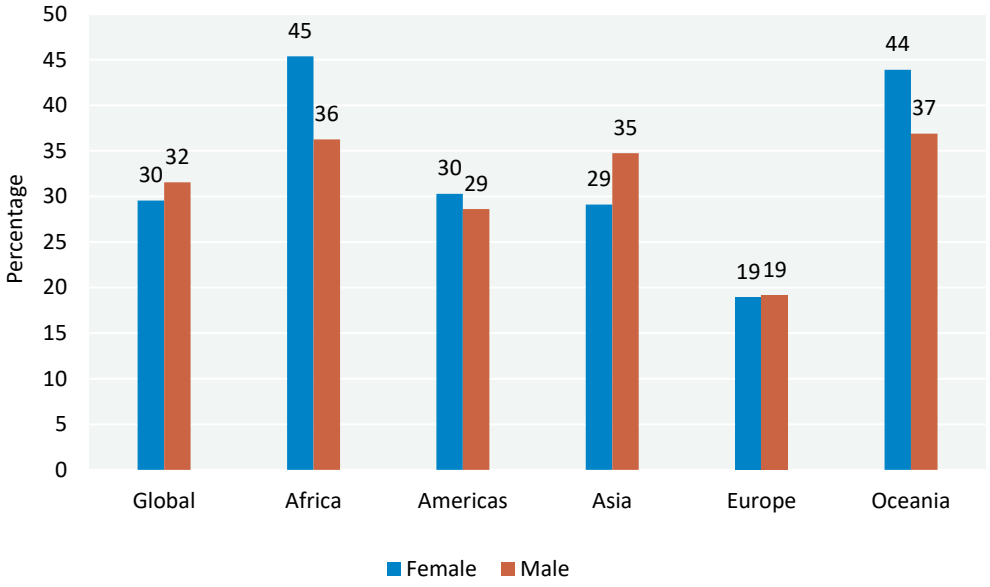
Over time, the share of unsentenced prisoners has remained relatively stable for both sexes, with a slight increase from 29 per cent in 2012 to 32 per cent in 2023 among men, and from 26 per cent to 30 per cent among women.[12]

Although there is no significant global gender gap in unsentenced detention rates, certain regions, such as Africa and Oceania, exhibit higher percentages of women in pre-trial detention, with a

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

difference of more than seven percentage points. In 2023, Africa had the highest gender gap, with 45 per cent of women compared to 36 per cent of men held in prison without a sentence.[13]

Figure 5: **Unsentenced prisoners as a proportion of the overall prison population, by sex and region, 2023**



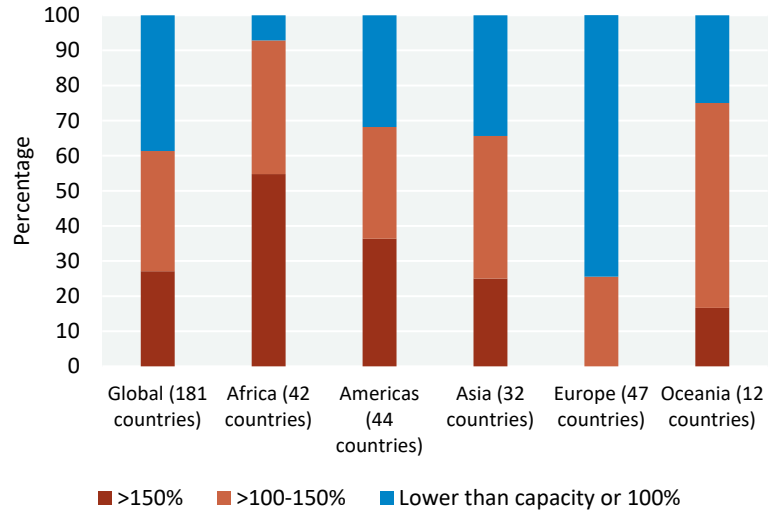
Source: UNODC estimates, based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research) and national sources reviewed by Member States.

Overcrowding continues to blight prison systems globally, particularly in Africa and the Americas

Overcrowding remains a significant concern in many prison systems. In just over 60 per cent of the 181 countries worldwide with available data, prison systems operate at more than 100 per cent of their planned capacity. Alarmingly, more than one in four countries globally is operating at over 150 per cent of their intended national prison capacity. The situation is particularly concerning in Africa and the Americas, where respectively around 90 per cent and 70 per cent of countries with available data report overcrowded prison systems operating at more than 100 per cent of their planned capacity. However, the regional picture can hide significant differences between sub-regions. For example, in South America, more than 90 per cent of countries with data had prison systems operating at more than 100 per cent of their planned capacity, while in Northern America, only 25 per cent of countries with data report overcrowded prison systems.

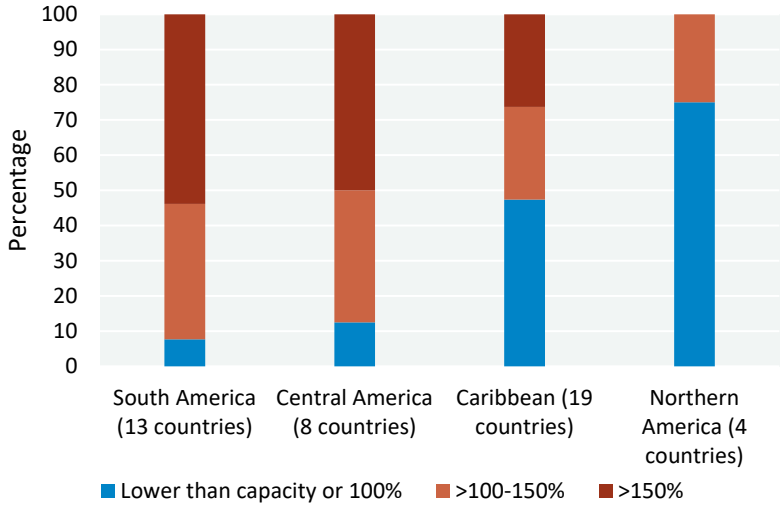
[13] Ibid.

Figure 6: Distribution of countries by prison capacity, by region, 2024 or latest year available since 2015



Source: Figure based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems and data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research).

Figure 7: Distribution of countries by prison capacity, by sub-regions in the Americas, 2024 or latest year available since 2015



Source: Figure based on responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems and data from the World Prison Brief (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research).

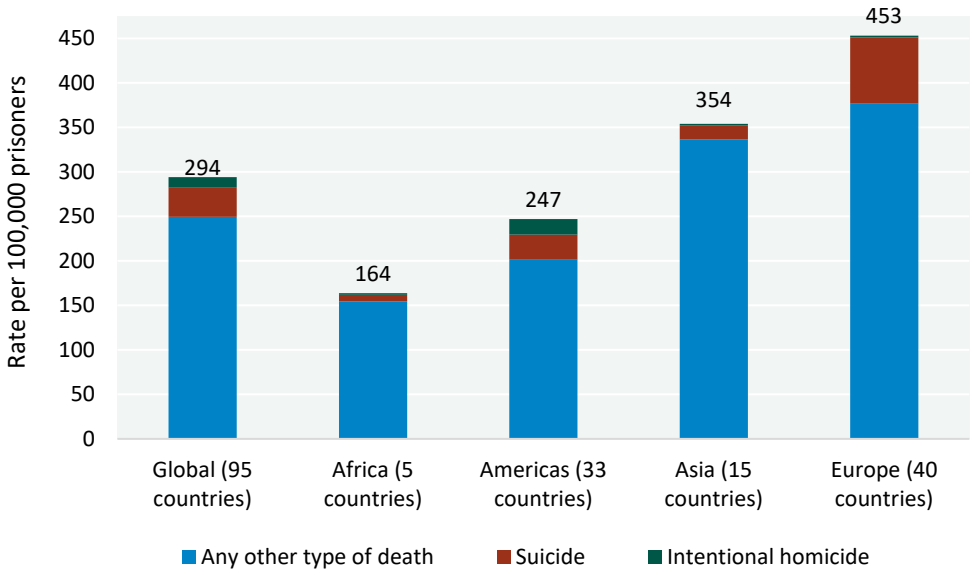
High rates of violent deaths in prison in certain regions indicate unsafe prison conditions

The number and type of deaths occurring in prisons can provide insight into prison conditions and safety in prisons. While data on mortality in prison remain limited in Africa, Asia and Oceania, it is possible to produce a global average (weighted by countries' prison populations) that covers 95 countries. In these countries, 294 deaths in prison per 100,000 prisoners occurred in 2023, slightly

less than 3 deaths per 1,000 prisoners. This is more than 2.5 times lower than the global crude death rate[14] in 2023 (7.6 deaths per 1,000 people),[15] reflecting the fact that people in prison are on average much younger than the general population.

Data reported to UNODC on deaths in prison fall into four different categories of deaths: deaths from natural causes (such as heart diseases or complications from virus infections); accidental deaths; deaths from suicide; and deaths from intentional homicide. The death rate for all causes of death combined was the highest in European countries with data, followed by Asian and American countries. However, reporting countries in the Americas with data had a much higher number of intentional homicides per 100,000 prisoners than countries in other regions, at 17.4 victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 prisoners. This compares to 2.0 deaths by homicide per 100,000 prisoners in European countries with data, the region with the second highest homicide rate in prison. [16]

Figure 8: Number of suicides, intentional homicides and any other type of death per 100,000 prisoners, countries with available data by region, 2023 or latest available year



Notes: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their prison population. The global figure also includes two countries from Oceania. Any other type of deaths includes all deaths occurring in prison except suicides and intentional homicides. Values correspond to the total number of deaths (from all causes) per 100,000 prisoners.

Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

Focusing on countries that reported at least one intentional homicide in prison between 2018 and 2023 reveals that in almost all countries, the rate of intentional homicide is higher among prisoners than in the general population (including prisoners). [17] Ecuador, for example, which saw a rapid increase in the number of intentional homicides in the general population (including prisoners) in the last few years, also reported the highest rate of intentional homicide in prison between 2018 and 2023, with an average of 300 homicides per 100,000 prisoners per year during that period. Other countries in the Americas also report a high rate of intentional homicide in prison, which

[14] The crude death rate indicates the number of deaths in a defined period (usually a calendar year) per 1,000 people. It corresponds to the mortality rate from all causes of death for a population.

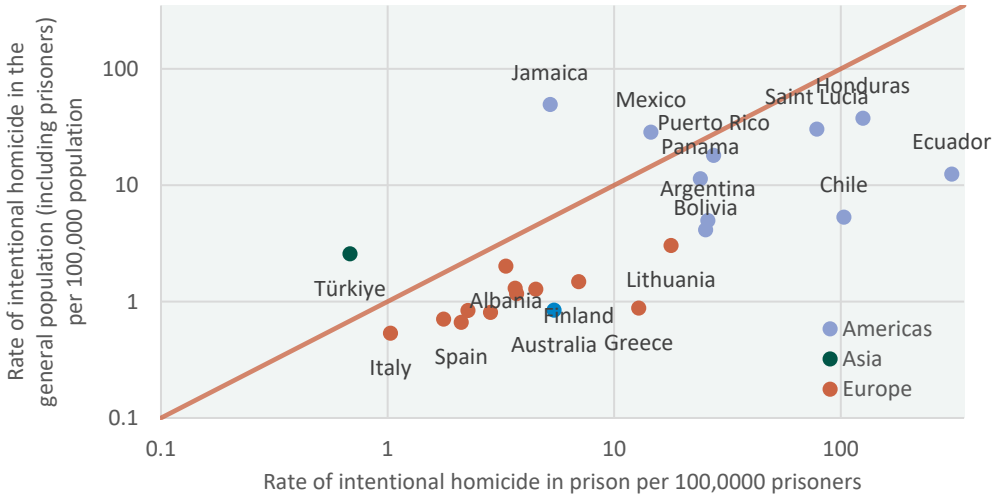
[15] World Bank 2025, ' Death rate, crude (per 1,000 people) '. The World Bank Group. Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CDRT.IN

[16] UNODC, *UN-CTS*.

[17] Ibid.

could be the result of multiple factors, including the influence of organised crime group rivalries in prisons and unsafe prison conditions. [18]

Figure 9: Homicides in prison per 100,000 prisoners and homicides in the country per 100,000 population, selected countries, averages for the period 2018–2023

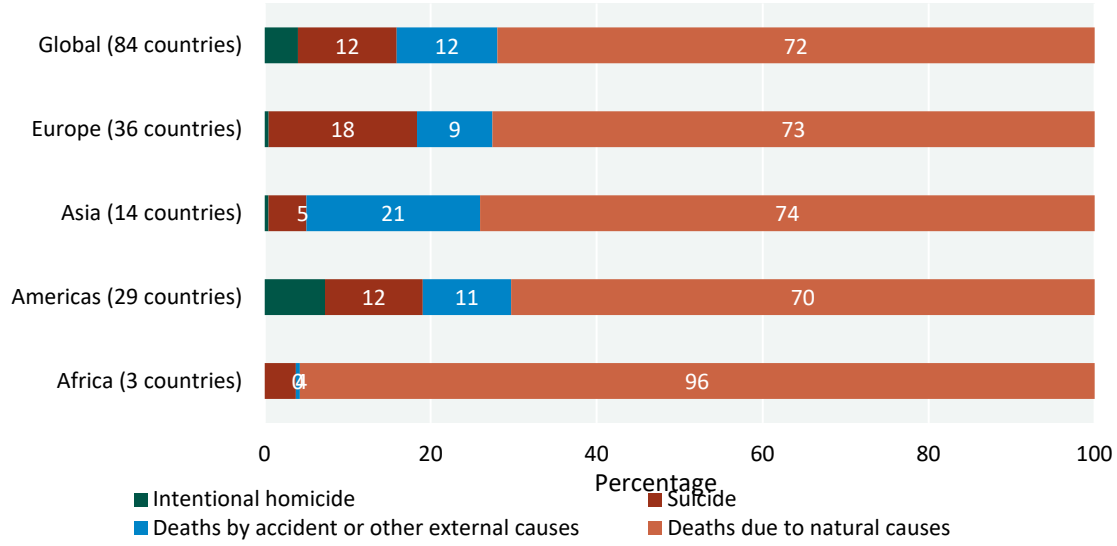


Note: Datapoints refer to country-level averages for the period 2018-2023.

Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

Based on available data in 84 countries worldwide, in 2023, 32.9 prisoners out of every 100,000 prisoners committed suicide, a rate that is more than three times higher than the 2021 global crude suicide rate of 9.1 deaths per 100,000 general population. [19]

Figure 10: Distribution of deaths in prison by cause, by region, 2023 or latest available year



Notes: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their prison population. The global figure also includes two countries from Oceania.

Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

[18] UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023* (New York, 2023).

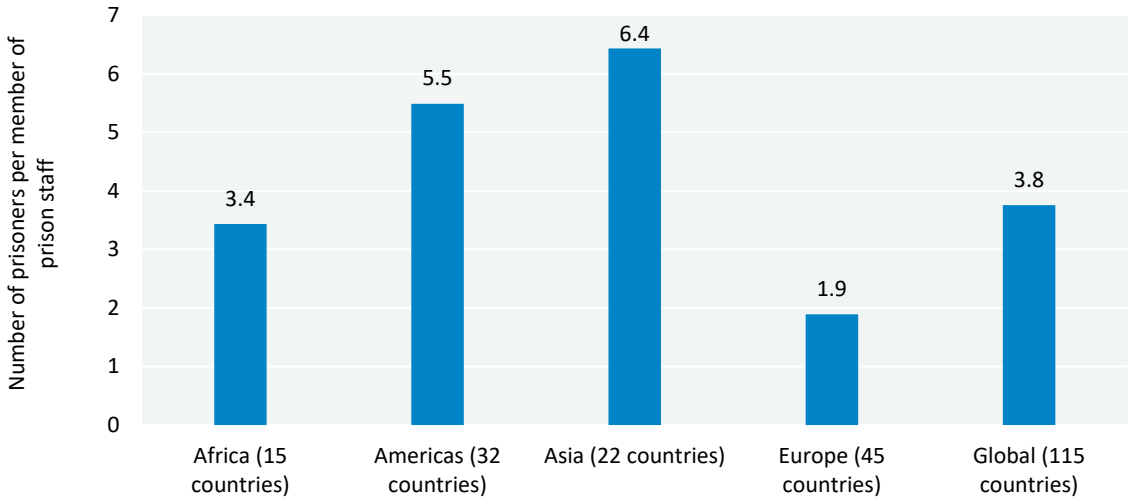
[19] World Bank Group, Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.SUIC.P5. Note that this comparison does not take into account the demographic structure of prisoners, which are in large majority male.

Among all world regions, European prisons stand out as having the most gender-balanced staff and being the least under-staffed

Significant differences exist in prison staffing between different regions of the world. In the 115 countries with data, there were on average 3.8 prisoners per member of prison staff in 2023. Countries in Europe with data had about 1.9 persons detained for each member of prison staff in 2023. This number is much lower than in other regions, especially in Asia, where there were on average 6.4 persons detained for each member of prison staff in the 22 countries with data.[20] However, in some regions such as the Americas, the regional averages hide significant variation across different subregions. For example, while countries in Northern America with data reported on average 1.2 prisoners per prison staff member, this increases to, on average, 6.2 prisoners per staff member in South American countries with data. Although such wide differences exist, no international norms or guidance on ideal prisoner–staff ratios have been developed to date, partly reflecting the fact that different prison characteristics (such as the physical architecture, or security rating) demand different staffing numbers and profiles.

Looking at the rate of prison staff over the general population, countries with data in Europe reported on average a much higher number of prison staff compared to the size of their general population than countries in other regions in 2023. Together with a relatively low prison population, this resulted in a low number of prisoners per member of prison staff. The situation is different in the countries of the Americas with data. In 2023, they had the second highest number of prison staff relative to their general population, at 50.3 prison staff per 100,000 population. However, they also had by far the highest rate of prisoners per 100,000 population. As a result, the number of prisoners to prison staff, at 5.5-to-one, was higher than the global average (at 3.8-to-one). Meanwhile, countries in Asia with data had the lowest number of prison staff relative to their general population, which, together with a relatively large prison population, explains the high ratio of prisoners to prison staff there.[21]

Figure 11: Number of prisoners per member of prison staff, by region, 2023 or latest year available

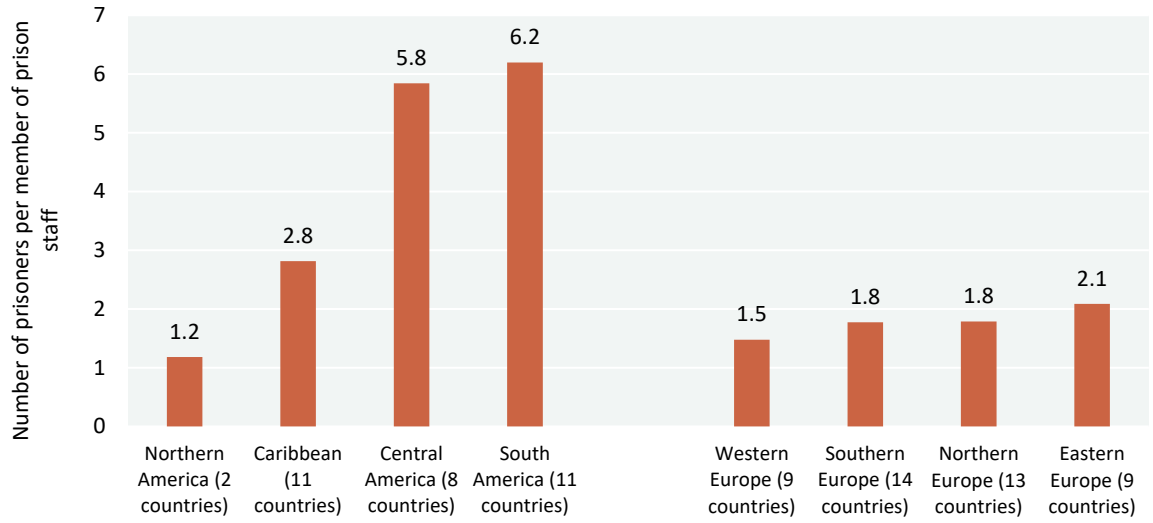


Notes: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their prison staff size. The global figure also includes one country from Oceania.

Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

[20] UNODC, *UN-CTS*.
[21] Ibid.

Figure 12: Number of prisoners per member of prison staff, by selected subregion, 2023 or latest year available

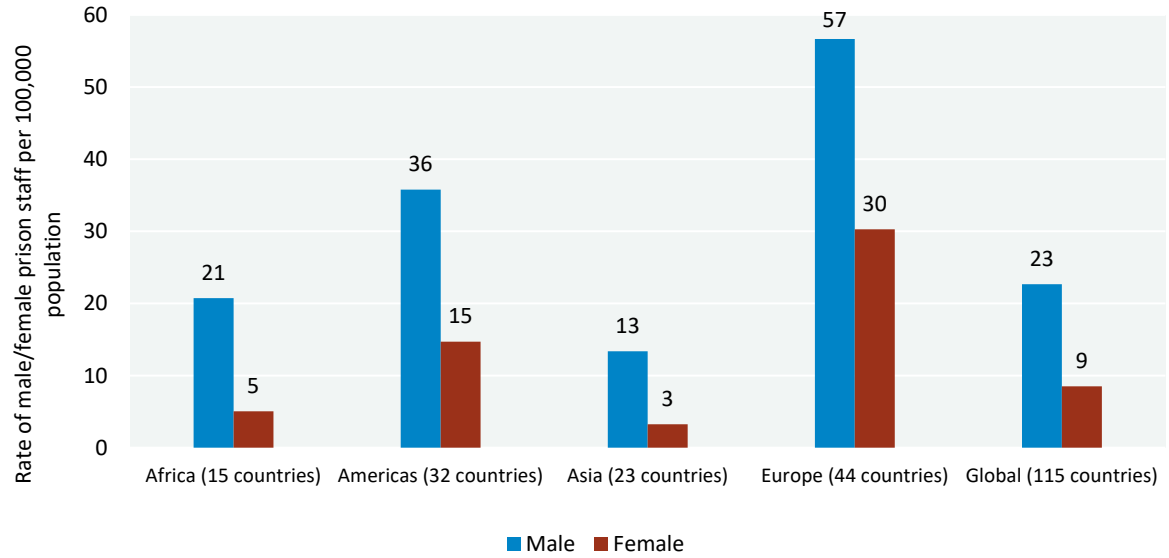


Notes: Subregional figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their prison staff size.

Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

The share of women employed in prisons varies across regions with the highest share of women among all prison staff at 35 per cent in countries with data in Europe and the lowest at 20 per cent in countries with data in Africa and Asia.[22]

Figure 13: Rate of male and female prison staff per 100,000 population, 2023 or latest year available

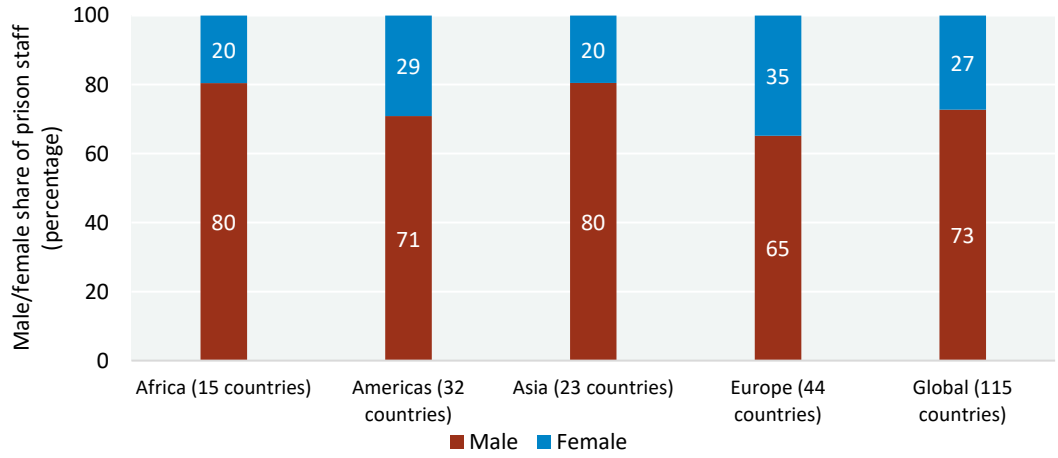


Notes: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their population. The global figure includes one country from Oceania.

Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

[22] Ibid.

Figure 14: Male and female share of prison staff, 2023 or latest year available

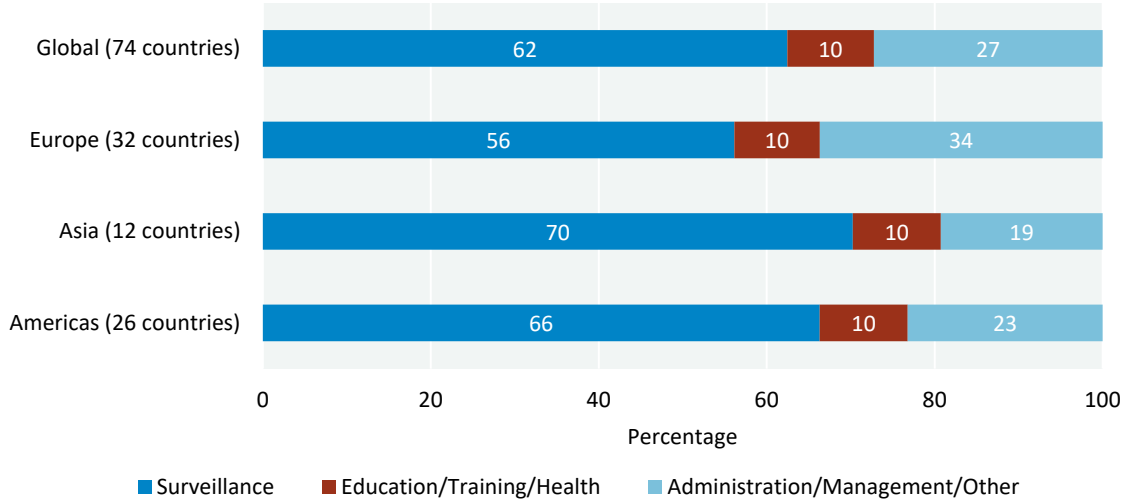


Notes: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their population. The global figure includes one country from Oceania.

Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

In contrast to the number of prisoners per member of prison staff, the distribution of prison staff members by function is relatively similar between regions. Based on 74 countries with data, globally, more than 6 out of 10 those working in prisons are responsible for the surveillance of prisoners, while nearly 3 out of 10 are part of the prison administration and 1 out of 10 are employed to support prisoner health (including mental health) or the rehabilitation and social reintegration of prisoners, such as through education, training, or specialised programmes.[23] Countries in Europe are, on average, somewhat more likely than countries in other regions to report a larger share of prison staff working in administrative roles (34 per cent of prison personnel), while the share of staff responsible for surveillance is comparably smaller than in other regions (56 per cent).

Figure 15: Distribution of prison staff by function, 2023 or latest year available



Notes: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their prison staff size. The global figure includes four countries from Africa.

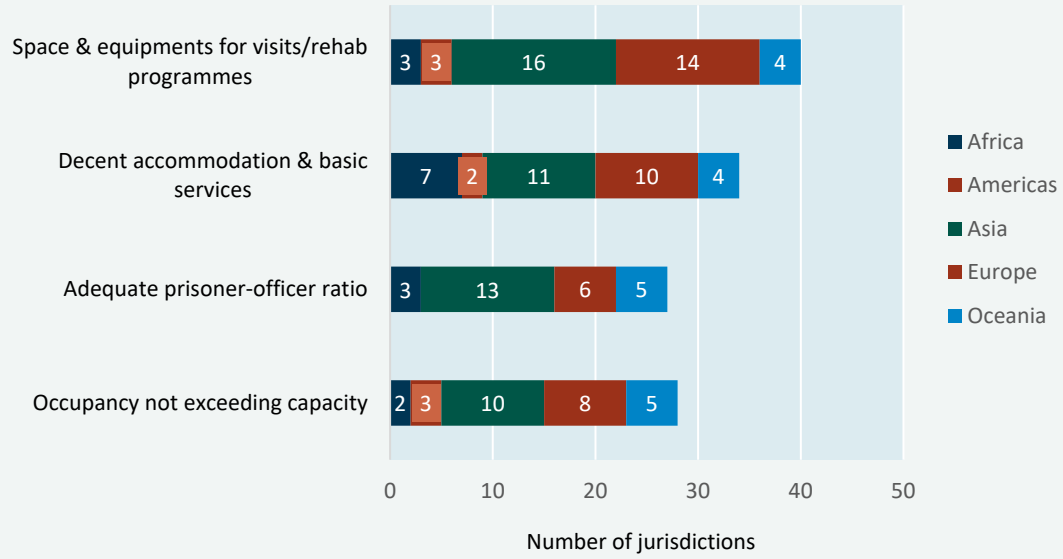
Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

[23] Ibid.

ADEQUATE PRISONER-OFFICER STAFFING RATIOS ARE LACKING IN MANY JURISDICTIONS

Findings from the UNODC survey on prison rehabilitation undertaken in May 2024 indicate that only around half of the 55 responding jurisdictions (49 per cent) reported they had adequate prisoner-to-prison-officer staffing ratios, reflecting the acute capacity and resource pressures felt in many penal systems. [24]

Availability of practices and factors related to prison capacity and conditions that can advance rehabilitative prison environments, by region, 2024



Note: 55 out of 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on prison capacity and conditions.
Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

[24] UNODC, *Prison Matters 2024: Global Prison Population and Trends; a Focus on Rehabilitation*, Prison Matters (United Nations, 2024). For more information on the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments, please see Annex I of the publication.

A FOCUS ON REHABILITATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

A FOCUS ON REHABILITATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Rehabilitation begins with conditions that allow prisoners to reimagine themselves and their future

> *"They say create for you another life."*
> (Focus group #2, male prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

More than 30 years of research—mostly in high income countries—on how offenders manage to abandon crime – termed the process of desistance – converges on three key processes.[25] [26] At the centre lies the individual's capacity to imagine being a new, different person, creating for themself a new identity. Sometimes the three processes are termed primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance, but it may be more appropriate to describe them as "act desistance", "identity desistance", and "relational desistance".[27] Imprisonment means that for many offenders "act desistance" is imposed on them, for a while at least and hopefully they can make it permanent. Crucial to the process of giving up crime, though, is the change in self-identity – "identity desistance" – the ability to imagine oneself as a non-offending, pro-social individual.

UNODC's field research carried out in Namibia in 2025 showed that, among male and female prisoners alike, the important role of prison staff emerged as the first trigger for such change, giving prisoners permission and space to think differently and to imagine a crime free life.[28] While for men the process of imagining a different self was more instrumental – a task to be taken hold of – for women it was more relational, and that began with a process of recovering self-dignity and with the profound impact for many women of being cared for and respected by officers.[29]

> *"They make me recover who I am, and through recovering who I am,*
> *they gave me strength to take books and start studying.*
> *And through them, they have been all by my side."*
> (Focus group #7, female prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

Being reminded of their own humanity was for many women a first step in a process of 'becoming' supported by officers. As officers themselves recognised, many women entered the prison at a low ebb in their lives and some found care in this unexpected place:

> *"When you're entering the correctional facility, the world outside has been bad for some of us. So, we never hoped of finding good people anymore. It's like, yeah, let me just go there [to prison]. So, when you come here and find people, people who treat you differently, who talk to you, and then you start feeling like, oh, I was once also a human being."*
> (Focus group #7, female prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

[25] Joanna Shapland et al., eds., *Global Perspectives on Desistance: Reviewing What We Know and Looking to the Future* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).
[26] Shadd Maruna and Hans Toch, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*, 8th print (American Psychological Association, 2015).
[27] Briege Nugent and Marguerite Schinkel, 'The Pains of Desistance', Criminology & Criminal Justice 16, no. 5 (2016): 568–84.
[28] UNODC, 'UNODC Research on Prisons in Namibia', March 2025. A total of 14 focus groups were conducted: seven with male prisoners across two men's prisons, three with female prisoners at a women's prison, and four with staff members from the respective facilities.
[29] Focus Group #7, interview by UNODC, March 2025.

REHABILITATION, SOCIAL REINTEGRATION AND DESISTANCE

Rehabilitation broadly refers to structured efforts that aim to reintegrate offenders into society.[30] Since the 1990s, the dominant model in many high-income Anglophone countries has been the "risk-needs-responsivity" (RNR) approach.[31] This model targets criminogenic needs—such as antisocial thinking, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills—prioritising high-risk individuals and tailoring interventions to personal learning styles.[32]

Social reintegration refers to the process through which individuals are successfully reabsorbed into society, marked by a reduction or end of offending.[33] Terms such as "resettlement," "resocialisation," and "relational rehabilitation" are often used interchangeably, though all point to the same goal: sustained reintegration.[34]

Desistance, by contrast, is defined as the long-term, often non-linear process through which individuals stop offending and begin to lead more pro-social lives. Research identifies three overlapping dimensions: act desistance (the behavioural cessation of crime), identity desistance (a shift in self-concept away from an offender identity), and relational desistance (being recognised by others as changed).[35]

The impact of officers was felt in two ways; both through the programmes that the more specialist staff delivered, and through the creation of a holistic environment conducive to rehabilitation that all officers contributed to.[36] Out of this milieu of support emerged, for many women, new ways of thinking about themselves and new visions for their future:

> *"I'm very grateful for being here. It's not that I'm happy by being here, but there will be a day that we will go out, and we will go out as different persons, we will go out with new mentality, new minds. You can even think of doing your own business by your own hands, doing things with your own hands."*
> (Focus group #7, female prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

All prison staff have important roles to play in creating rehabilitative prison environments

In Namibian prisons, both prisoners and staff involved in the research recognised front line officers as the fulcrum upon which a rehabilitative prison environment balanced.[37] For officers of all types, this was expressed in terms that focused on teamwork.[38] When asked what allowed them to do their best work, to be most effective as rehabilitation professionals, officers overwhelmingly described instances of effective teamwork and a whole-of-institution rehabilitative alignment and focus. What stood out in the data was the extent to which officers at all levels – from frontline

[30] Fergus McNeill and Hannah Graham, 'Conceptualizing Rehabilitation: Four Forms, Two Models, One Process, and a Plethora of Challenges', in *The Routledge Companion to Rehabilitative Work in Criminal Justice* (Routledge, 2019).
[31] James Bonta and D. A. Andrews, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, 7th ed. (Routledge, 2023).
[32] Ibid.
[33] Federica Coppola and Adriano Martufi, 'Introduction', in *Social Rehabilitation and Criminal Justice*, 1st ed., by Federica Coppola and Adriano Martufi (Routledge, 2023).
[34] Ibid.
[35] Nugent and Schinkel, 'The Pains of Desistance'.
[36] Focus Groups #2–7, interviews by UNODC, March 2025.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Focus Groups #8–10 and #14, interviews by UNODC, March 2025.

security, through workshop supervisors, case management, education, and programmes – had reflected deeply on their own practice as effective supporters of prisoners' rehabilitation and social reintegration prospects.[39]

Three facets of staff alignment and teamwork and the pivotal role of security officers emerged in the qualitative research in Namibia. First, programmes staff recognised that their capacity to work effectively with prisoners was heavily dependent upon the quality of care and level of attention to prisoners' wellbeing provided in the living units, where offenders spent the vast bulk of their time.[40] [41]

> *"What has assisted me in working well with these inmates or getting a big output from them is if their needs are met. For example, if the complaints are attended to, if the medical complaints, legal complaints, if those are attended to by other divisions from the units, then once they come to class you see these are people that you can work with. Instead of someone sitting here with a complaint that they just don't even focus or listen to what you want to give them."*
> *(Focus group #9, prison programme officer, Namibia, March 2025)*

Second was a recognition of security officers' important role in ensuring order and safety as well, since an unruly prisoner was no more 'available' to the efforts and attentions of programme staff than one whose basic needs and welfare concerns had not been met.[42] [43]

> *"I think the security division plays a huge role in instilling discipline and listening to authority and rules and stuff in the institutional rules, which I think that's quite important in there. Because I cannot talk to an inmate about their rehabilitation if the inmate is unruly, if they are not disciplined and stuff. So, you can set a foundation of how to behave when you come to me."*
> *(Focus group #8, prison security officer, Namibia, March 2025)*

Third, converging evidence from prisoners and officers alike in Namibia highlighted the special status of security officers as closest to the prisoner, most able to discern how other staff could assist the prisoner.[44] [45] [46]

> *"When you unlock the inmates, if, for example, the security officers can notice in the morning this guy is in a bad mood, and then they try to attend to it or they notify the next person, and then you call this person in as a one-on-one. Then he has the opportunity to open up. So those little details that you're paying attention to really also contribute to the person."*
> (Focus group #9, prison programme officer, Namibia, March 2025)

Alternatively, as many prisoners noted, security officers could offer their own support and guidance; prisoners expressed the importance of this professional relationship, alliance, or rapport in different ways.[47] [48]:

> *"There are times that you really feel lonely. If you feel lonely, they will come and ask you, are you fine? Take you inside the room."*

[39] Ibid.
[40] Focus Group #9, interview by UNODC, March 2025.
[41] Focus Group #14, interview by UNODC, March 2025.
[42] Focus Group #8, interview by UNODC, March 2025.
[43] Focus Group #14.
[44] Focus Group #2, interview by UNODC, March 2025.
[45] Focus Group #3, interview by UNODC, March 2025.
[46] Focus Group Interview #8.
[47] Focus Group #7, interview by UNODC, March 2025.
[48] Focus Group #2.

> *You will cry as you wish and talk out whatever you are having.*
> (Focus group #7, female prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

> *They [security officers] really are key. They are key on my side. … You can spend a day just in the courtyard, just talking to a security officer, maybe you are already friendly with him. During our stay, you also create friendship with your officers somehow. Because they are also human beings like us. You can be friends, you can talk. So that conversation that you have assists you sometimes.*
> (Focus group #2, male prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

On the other hand, equally strong converging evidence collected in Namibia illustrated that when frontline prison officers failed to engage with their rehabilitative role and the prison service's efforts to prioritise that as an organisational mission, the quality of the rehabilitative environment was deeply eroded.[49] [50] [51] [52]

> *A correctional facility is a place where you must teach a person to stay away from wrong. Not [bring trouble] into that person's life. Because as you are [bringing trouble] to that person, that person is not rehabilitating. We are putting rage in that person.*
> *(Focus group #3, male prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)*

> *The institution is not making the most of them [security officers]. In terms of how they, you know, just the sense of pulling on the oar. Where we're all going in the same direction.*
> (Focus group #9, prison programme officer, Namibia, March 2025)

Preparation for release and post-release support are crucial in enabling social reintegration during a period of fundamental readjustment

In Namibia, all research participants—female and male prisoners, as well as prison officers in various roles—converged in their thinking to a remarkable degree about what an effective rehabilitative prison environment looked like (when things came together well) and how an ideal prison might be designed to embed it more deeply and sustainably.[53] In guiding prisoners towards these visions, officers of all grades were described by prisoners as affirming them as potentially non-criminal, non-deviant, non-bad people.[54] Women frequently framed this in terms of having their dignity and humanity (re)affirmed,[55] While both men and women also spoke about being treated as normal:

> *I think my success was contributed by education officers involved with prison, those ones that helped me. I mean I was not seen as an inmate but just as a normal person.*
> (Focus group #4, male prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

[49] Focus Group #1, interview by UNODC.
[50] Focus Group #3.
[51] Focus Group #7.
[52] Focus Group #9.
[53] Focus Groups #1–14, interview by UNODC.
[54] Focus Groups #2–7 and #11–13.
[55] Focus Group #7.

This recognition and affirmation, which some researchers describe as "de-labelling", marks the crucial third process of desistance, "relational desistance". [56] [57] [58] [59] It is initiated and enabled by prison officers who are supportive, who treat the individual with dignity and respect, recognising the person behind the "prisoner" label and encouraging them toward a new future. But both prisoners and officers in Namibia, almost to a person, pointed to the huge gap that must be bridged between prison (no matter how supportive) and the community.[60] For desistance rests not only on these encouragements and recognitions inside the prison, but crucially upon the acceptance and affirming recognition of members of the community into which prisoners will ultimately be released.

Officers noted that they could do all the pre-release work in the world, but if the community was afraid of or stigmatised the offender, their chances of reintegration were far slimmer. Many officers offered suggestions for how the prison itself could and should do more to prepare not only the prisoner for their release but also the community for their reception.[61]

> *"So, you prepare your inmate, but you don't prepare the community."*
> (Focus group #8, case management officer, Namibia, March 2025)

Some officers suggested greater sensitisation of the community to what was being done inside the prison, while others echoed prisoners' concerns about barriers to reintegration placed by government policies regarding criminal record checks.[62]

> *"We have inmates whom we release with qualifications and skills but once they go for vetting or something then their criminal record is there so you are not employed. At least [it should be introduced that] if you are from the correctional facility and you are rehabilitated then you are free from the criteria."*
> *(Focus group #14, prison programme officer, Namibia, March 2025)*

The research in Namibia, showed that the outside community was recognised as a crucial participant in "relational desistance" processes, yet one that was too far divorced from the prison and prisoners.[63] For female prisoners, whose needs were more relational – i.e., dependent upon relationships and interactions with family and important others – this was perplexing, and they voiced in different ways a desire for more contact with the community that ultimately held the keys to their successful reintegration.[64] [65]

> *"They just go on what the newspapers were saying about you, or the radio said about you. And they don't know who you truly are. Because this is what reintegration is, isn't it? Reintegration."*
> (Focus group #6, female prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

[56] Shadd Maruna et al., 'Pygmalion in the Reintegration Process: Desistance from Crime through the Looking Glass', Psychology, Crime & Law 10, no. 3 (2004): 271–81.
[57] Grace Low, 'Working Through Desistance: Employment in Women's Identity and Relational Desistance', *The British Journal of Criminology* 64, no. 4 (2024): 846–62.
[58] Robin Gålnander, '"Shark in the Fish Tank": Secrets and Stigma in Relational Desistance from Crime', *The British Journal of Criminology* 60, no. 5 (2020): 1302–19.
[59] Nugent and Schinkel, 'The Pains of Desistance'.
[60] Focus Groups #1–14.
[61] Focus Group #8.
[62] Focus Group #14.
[63] Maruna et al., 'Pygmalion in the Reintegration Process'.
[64] Focus Group #6, interview by UNODC.
[65] Aisling O'Meara et al., 'Listening to Women: Relational Approaches to Female Offender Management', *The Journal of Forensic Practice* 23, no. 1 (2020): 1–12.

Some were prepared even to face the ire of community members who might be allowed into the prison, calculating that the contact would help them more than it hindered.[66] Women even suggested they needed that organic feedback from community, rather than professional prison officers, and could be responsive to it in return:

> *"So somewhere, stakeholders, they need to come in and also interact with offenders. Advise, blame if you can blame, just to motivate us to keep going."*

> *"At the end of the day, being here inside, we are still going outside in the community. So, we need also to help that, to see that no, the government did not throw us away. A mistake is a mistake, and it can be forgiven."*

> *"We really need those stakeholders to come in and push us to move forward. Not for us to be dragged back that no, we are not human beings anymore, as they are saying outside."*
>
> (Discussion among female prisoners in focus group #6, Namibia, March 2025)

While the concerns of the men were somewhat different, focusing more on post-release supports, in both cases and aligned with officers themselves, a vision emerged of a rehabilitative prison environment which would blur and make more porous those walls of the prison.[67] This would allow community actors into the prison to support release transitions, and it would extend the prison outwards into the community through their coordination of post-release programming, supports, and assistance-based monitoring of social reintegration.

Rehabilitation requires a conducive environment to take hold

In Namibia, prisoners and officers who participated in the research recognised the power of the prison environment to support or undermine rehabilitation. This was particularly so when prisoners received positive supports from their officers, or via programmes or education and vocational training. When the whole prison was working as one, oriented toward shared rehabilitative goals, everyone felt it working well. But when the converse was true, everyone also felt it, and in that case many officers lamented they were unable to do the best work they were capable of.

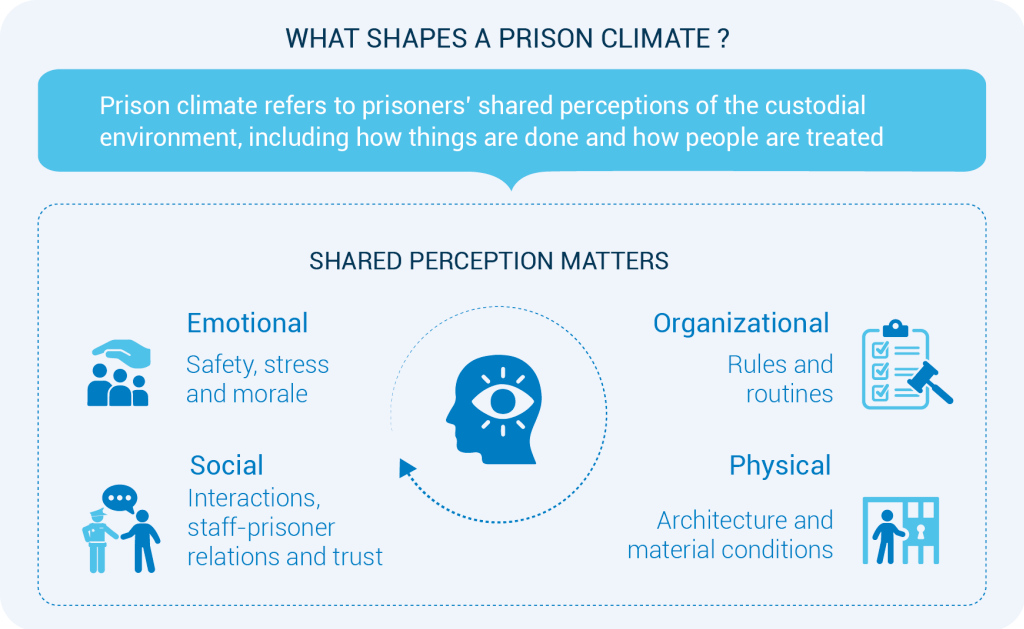
Recognition of rehabilitation's importance and of creating a conducive environment for it to take hold was also found in UNODC"s 2024 survey of Member States on approaches to prisoner rehabilitation.[68] Three quarters (74%) of the 62 responding jurisdictions reported having some form of dedicated rehabilitation strategy, model, or regulatory framework. Almost the same proportion ranked specialised rehabilitation and treatment programmes as amongst their highest priorities. Yet the evidence emerging from field research conducted by UNODC in New South Wales, Australia, and Namibia in 2025 illustrates the additional importance of embedding specialist programmes in a wider system of support that we have termed a rehabilitative prison environment.

Several intersecting lines of research have developed over recent years that contribute to the evidence base for the concept of rehabilitative prison environments, though it still lacks a precise definition. One approach has been to explore the impact of a positive and supportive prison climate. Another has examined the impacts of fostering a more rehabilitative culture within prisons. Still more recent work has attempted to synthesise both these approaches within a social ecological

[66] 'Focus Group Interview #6', March 2025.
[67] Focus Groups #2–4 and #8–14.
[68] UNODC, *Prison Matters 2024: Global Prison Population and Trends; a Focus on Rehabilitation*.

model of the prison environment based on the empirical research evidence. These are discussed below.

Research in contexts ranging from business environments to classroom education shows how positive social climates improve both overall outcomes and the wellbeing of the people who inhabit those spaces.[69] [70] There is broad consensus in the research literature on the definition of prison social climate, as reflected in one recent study which defined it as "the enduring social, emotional, organisational and physical characteristics of a prison as perceived by inmates and staff".[71] Since the nature of social climate is a subjective experience, operationalising that definition has been a challenge. However, robust measurement tools have been developed; they show that distinct features of a prison climate that is conducive to rehabilitation include perceptions of perceived safety and security, a sense of cohesion among prisoners, and a level of perceived therapeutic support provided by the prison.[72] [73]



Source: UNODC elaboration, based on different scientific studies on prison climate.

The concept of rehabilitative prison culture emerged in England and Wales, United Kingdom, as a prison environment characterized by shared attitudes and values supportive of rehabilitation. According to this approach, the objective of a rehabilitative culture is that "all the aspects of the prison intend to support rehabilitation, contribute to the prison being safe, decent, hopeful and supportive of change, to progression, and to help people desist from crime".[74] As such, a rehabilitative culture shares clear similarities with prison climate; but unlike the latter, the concept

[69] Benjamin Kutsyuruba et al., 'Relationships among School Climate, School Safety, and Student Achievement and Well-Being: A Review of the Literature', *Review of Education* 3, no. 2 (2015): 103–35.

[70] Kevin Daniels et al., 'Well-Being and the Social Environment of Work: A Systematic Review of Intervention Studies', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14, no. 8 (2017): 8, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14080918.

[71] Jayson Ware and Jennifer Galouzis, 'Impact of Prison Climate on Individuals with Sexual Convictions: Desistance and Rehabilitation', in *Sexual Crime and the Experience of Imprisonment*, ed. Nicholas Blagden et al. (Springer International Publishing, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04930-0_2.

[72] Norbert Schalast et al., 'EssenCES, a Short Questionnaire for Assessing the Social Climate of Forensic Psychiatric Wards', *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 18, no. 1 (2008).

[73] Alison Liebling et al., *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality, and Prison Life*, Clarendon Studies in Criminology (Oxford University Press, 2005).

[74] Flora Fitzalan Howard and Helen Wakeling, 'Evaluating the Impact of "Rehabilitative Adjudications" in Four English Prisons', *Psychology, Crime & Law* 27, no. 10 (2021): 1010–31.

of a rehabilitative culture in prisons currently remains too diffuse to measure beyond a prison system's overall compliance with international minimum standards.[75] Nevertheless, research on implementing such a culture has provided some insight into the potential, but also challenges associated with, efforts to change the culture of prisons to be more supportive of prisoner rehabilitation.[76] [77]

Source: UNODC elaboration, based on Ruth E. Mann, 'Rehabilitative Culture Part 2: An Update on Evidence and Practice'. *Prison Service Journal, no. 244* (July 2019).

Understanding environments: Prison environment microsystems

Thinking of prison as encompassing a number of environmental microsystems can help to put in practice prison reforms geared towards fostering a prison climate or a prison culture that is conducive to rehabilitation. In New South Wales, Australia, for example, extensive work on mapping and modelling prison-level and system-level dynamics has begun.[78] It follows new research in the Netherlands that reveals statistically significant differences in recidivism rates not only between different prisons, but also between of units within a single prison, although specific characteristics of Dutch prisons make interpretation of these findings difficult.[79] Synthesising a large body of research on the social ecology of institutions, a research team from New South Wales, Australia has identified four micro-systems under the control of prison planners and administrators that have direct causal impact upon offenders' rehabilitation and their journey toward desistance from crime.[80] Thinking about a prison in terms of its microsystems is thus a useful way of reducing

[75] UNODC, *Assessing Compliance with the Nelson Mandela Rules: A Checklist for Internal Inspection Mechanisms* (United Nations, 2017).
[76] Flora Fitzalan Howard et al., *Understanding Culture Change - A Case Study of an English Prison*, Case study, Ministry of Justice Analytical Series (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2023).
[77] Matthew Cracknell, '"Trying to Make It Matter": The Challenges of Assimilating a Resettlement Culture into a "Local" Prison', *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 23, no. 2 (2023): 165–82.
[78] UNODC, 'UNODC Research on Prisons in New South Wales, Australia', June 2025.
[79] Esther F.J.C. van Ginneken and Hanneke and Palmen, 'Is There a Relationship Between Prison Conditions and Recidivism?', *Justice Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2023): 106–28.
[80] Jennifer Galouzis et al., 'Designing a Rehabilitative Prison Environment', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Design*, ed. Dominique Moran et al., Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology (Springer International Publishing, 2023).

complexity and operationalising key insights about the way prison environments and prisoners interact to shape rehabilitative outcomes.

Focusing on the prison environment, four microsystems and their interaction with the individual have been highlighted by the New South Wales led research team. The first microsystem is physical space, recognised as a microsystem where the principle that function follows form implies that even outdated or antiquated facilities can be adapted to support rehabilitation—for instance, using colour or soundproofing to improve the environment. The second microsystem involves cultural aspects, reflecting a shared set of values and attitudes that align with and reinforce a rehabilitative culture and form a supportive social climate. The third is instructional mechanisms, referring to institutional policies and practices that are shaped by evidence indicating their potential to encourage attitudes and behaviours in prisoners that are conducive to rehabilitation. Finally, socially structured space constitutes a microsystem of relationships, social practices, and perceptions that collectively contribute to supporting prisoner rehabilitation.[81]

Source: UNODC elaboration, based on: Jennifer Galouzis et al., 'Designing a Rehabilitative Prison Environment', in The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Design, ed. Dominique Moran et al., Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023

Describing the prison environment through these microsystems reflects an important change in thinking: from the prison environment as a *setting* in which assistance is delivered to prisoners – such as via therapeutic programmes, education, or vocational training – to the environment as a *causal driver* of rehabilitation in its own right. This is achieved because the four prison micro-systems reinforce the three foundational pillars of rehabilitation and desistance: satisfaction of the prisoner's basic psychological needs; the transfer of pro-social skills and knowledge; and support for the prisoner's transformation towards a positive, non-criminal identity.[82] Each of these pillars was reported during UNODC field research in Namibia[83] by both male and female prisoners as they

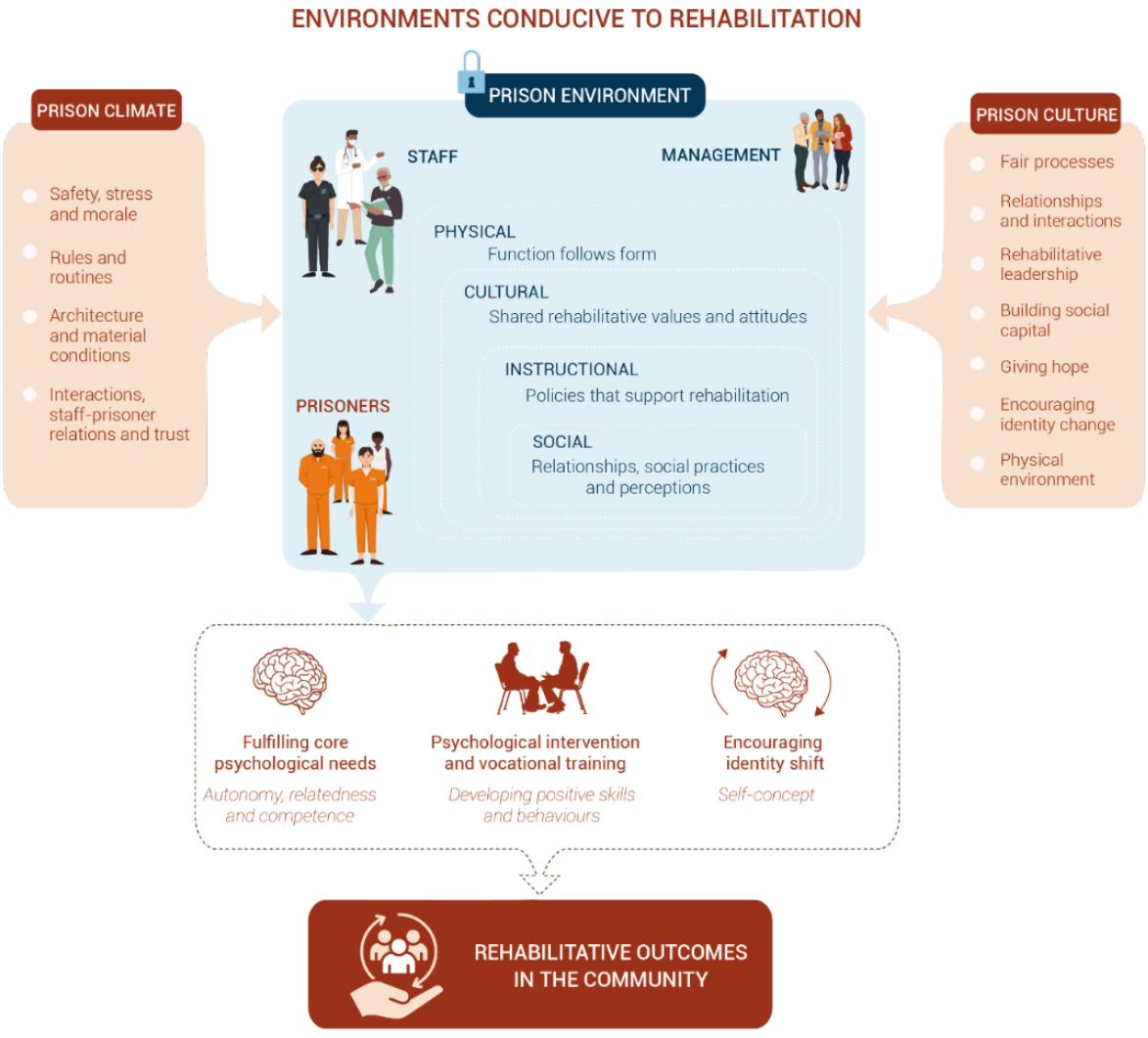
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Focus Groups #2–7 and #11–13.

spoke, for example, of being supported to imagine a new self, such that they might leave the prison on a new, pro-social trajectory. [84]

> *"It's not that I am happy by being here, but there will be a day that we will go out, and we will go out as different persons, we will go out with new mentality, new minds. – Female prisoner, Namibia"* (Focus group #7, female prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

The goal of the microsystems approach is to provide prison planners and administrators with a tool for reviewing and mapping their own prisons, and for thinking differently about how rehabilitation and desistance can be achieved. Moreover, it also provides an accountability mechanism to track the transfer of policy into practice, as well as to fine tune delivery.

> *"[The microsystems model] sets up opportunities for an indicators framework to measure performance on different elements of rehabilitation or assisted desistance, and you need to have some data that shows that you're doing it rather than it's just an idea you're interested in."* (Interview #7, Rehabilitation specialist, NSW, June 2025)



Source: UNODC elaboration, adapted from: Jennifer Galouzis et al., 'Designing a Rehabilitative Prison Environment', in The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Design, ed. Dominique Moran et al., Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023 and on Ruth E. Mann, 'Rehabilitative Culture Part 2: An Update on Evidence and Practice'. Prison Service Journal, no. 244 (July 2019).

[84] UNODC, 'UNODC Research on Prisons in Namibia'.

Assisted desistance: a proactive approach to align prison management with offender's holistic needs

> *"There are those that see a potential in me, to hold [time for me], take their time and then I'll talk to you. I've seen some of them they called in an inmate and then you will see some changes. So, there are those officers who are in for the profession"*
> (Focus group #4, male prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

The term "assisted desistance" broadly refers to a prison-wide approach that translates aspects of rehabilitation and the desistance process into practical tasks and guidance for prison officers. As the forgoing discussion of prison environment microsystems suggests, assisting desistance is not the same as simply providing programmes, education, vocational training, and the like. Rather, the desistance approach recognises that leaving behind an offending way of life and the self-identity that forms around it is a more fundamental human process to which those activities may make some contribution but are not sufficient on their own.

As such, the process of social reintegration involves not only desisting from crime in terms of criminal acts themselves, and criminogenic factors that trigger them, such as anger, but also changes in the person's self-identity.[85] [86] UNODC field research in Namibia showed how this identity change can be led by an attentive, supportive prison officer. Yet, it is something prisoners in different countries remark they are left to undertake on their own, unsupported by the prison administration, such as for example has been found in England and Wales.[87] Leaving behind a lifestyle involving contact with the criminal justice system, along with the changing self-identity that forms around such a motivation, is a fundamental human process and is one target of assisted desistance work with prisoners.

In the same way that the prison environment microsystems approach remaps prisons and suggests their considerably extended potential for impact on rehabilitation, the assisted desistance approach asks how criminal justice agencies of different sorts can better support the desistance process. The term was coined by researchers working in probation to refer to desistance-supporting assistance offered by probation professionals or by elements of court sanctions. [88] While there is currently no commonly agreed definition of such assistance,[89] it may include assistance from informal as well as professional actors, such as community organisations and families.

Focusing on professionals highlights the importance of the prison environment as a location where assisted desistance work can be focused. One example is the way prisoners are assisted to prepare for release, including by establishing the network of contacts and relationships that will support them as they move back into the community.[90] Another is the potential that assisted desistance as an effective probation practice can bring to the offender on supervised re-entry into the community.[91]

[85] Shapland et al., *Global Perspectives on Desistance*.
[86] Nugent and Schinkel, 'The Pains of Desistance'.
[87] Karen Bullock and Annie Bunce, '"The Prison Don't Talk to You about Getting out of Prison": On Why Prisons in England and Wales Fail to Rehabilitate Prisoners', *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 20, no. 1 (2020): 111–27.
[88] Sam King, 'Assisted Desistance and Experiences of Probation Supervision', *Probation Journal* 60, no. 2 (2013): 136–51.
[89] Frédéric Ouellet and Marie-Ève Dubois, 'Got Assistance? Profit-Driven Criminal Careers and Assisted Desistance', *Crime & Delinquency* 70, no. 3 (2024): 894–920.
[90] Corrective Services NSW, 'Interview #1', interview by UNODC, June 2025.
[91] Marie-Pierre Villeneuve et al., 'Assisted Desistance in Formal Settings: A Scoping Review', *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* 60, no. 1 (2021): 75–100.

Rehabilitative prison environments can be planned and managed, and should be formally incorporated in system-wide strategies, including regular monitoring and evaluation

To better understand the way prison systems might be reoriented in their practice to embed holistic support for prisoners and drive more effective rehabilitation practices, UNODC undertook research with senior managers and rehabilitation and evaluation specialists in the state of New South Wales (NSW), Australia.[92] Since 2018 NSW has developed a set of intersecting initiatives to reduce reoffending and support prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration. The goal of creating prison environments that are more conducive to rehabilitation has been at the centre of these efforts. [93] The experience of NSW provides learning opportunities for how prison administrations can think about and implement reforms based on a theory of change model, working across a whole prison system, to improve rehabilitative outcomes.

Drawing on the philosophy of evidence-based practice, measurement has been at the centre of the NSW initiative. This includes not only the more conventional application of rigorous (including quasi-experimental) evaluation methods. It has also included monitoring of administrative data for short term course correction, development of bespoke measurement tools to support the work of operationalising theory of change models, such as assisted desistance, plus tools that allow system-wide comparison of the effectiveness of different prisons' rehabilitation effectiveness and identification of prison environment factors driving observed differences.

High level political commitment to the change process was an important element in pushing through difficult and complex reforms.[94]Managers in NSW referred to this commitment as creating an "authorising environment" that not only supported the change process within the prisons system but also gave them access to high level decision makers who could coordinate across government.

> *"I think that the authorising environment gave us the ability to get further than we would have otherwise."*
> *(Interview #2, Senior manager, NSW, June 2025)*

Important to this vision of rehabilitative prison environments is a shift in thinking about risk. Since the emergence of risk assessment tools such as the US Parole Commission's Salient Factor Score[95] in the 1970s and then, from the 1980s, widespread adoption of the Canadian Level of Supervision Inventory (LSI, later LSI-R), [96] reoffending risk has been located primarily in the offender. These assessments have been used for risk-based release decision making and linked to psychological intervention models that target individual-level risk markers (often referred to as the Central Eight programming targets, such as antisocial ways of thinking or behaving).[97] The NSW initiative aims to complement this focus on offender risk and criminogenic need with attention to how prisons carry their own risks and, as such, reoffending risk emerges out of the *interaction* between the prisoner and the prison environment. [98] Some prison environments are thus

[92] UNODC, 'UNODC Research on Prisons in New South Wales, Australia'. The research involved interviews with 7 senior managers from the Corrective Services New South Wales, who engage directly with the conceptualisation and implementation of rehabilitative prison environments at a systemic and strategic level, in June 2025.
[93] 'Strategic Programs to Reduce Reoffending', Corrective Services NSW Home, NSW Department of Communities and Justice, 22 November 2023.
[94] UNODC, 'UNODC Research on Prisons in New South Wales, Australia'.
[95] Peter B. Hoffman and James L. Beck, 'Parole Decision-Making: A Salient Factor Score', *Journal of Criminal Justice 2*, no. 3 (1974): 195–206.
[96] Donald Arthur Andrews, *The Level of Supervisory Inventory (LSI): 1. The First Follow-Up* (Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services, Planning and Support Services …, 1982).
[97] UNODC, 'Introductory Handbook on the Prevention of Recidivism and the Social Reintegration of Offenders', United Nations, 2012.
[98] Corrective Services NSW, 'Interview #2', interview by UNODC, June 2025; Corrective Services NSW, 'Interview #5', interview by UNODC, June 2025.

rehabilitative, if they reduce risk of reoffending, while other prisons may be criminogenic, exacerbating risks to the community through some aspects of their performance, something supported by global research on prisons and recidivism.[99] Finding out what those features of the prison environment are and accentuating the positive, while ameliorating the negative, has been the aim of this programme of work in NSW.

The prison environment can have an impact on reducing recidivism

To better understand how individual prisons affected prisoners' recidivism risk, analysis was undertaken of the status 12 months after release of 11,285 male prisoners who served sentences of between 90 days and three years in any of NSW's 45 prisons. Individual-level data on demographic characteristics, risk of reoffending scores and other relevant variables were collected alongside a wide range of prison-level variables including size, crowding/occupancy levels, programme delivery, safety factors such as violence and misconduct rates, and the like. Two outcome measures of status were employed: reimprisonment for parole breach, or reimprisonment for a new offence.

> *“So how can you measure the effect of a correctional centre on re-offending outcomes? What are the ways you might be able to quantify those elements of it and to see what are those things that do make a difference and don't make a difference. So, we've got a lot of information and a lot of capacity and a lot of good people who can do that work now. But we're still at a fairly early stage.”*
> (Interview #3, Senior manager, NSW, June 2025)

Findings revealed that not only do different prisons in NSW have different levels of post-release recidivism, but that these differences remain even after controlling for prisoner characteristics, such as the clustering of higher-risk individuals in certain parts of the system, for example in maximum-security prisons. [100] [101]

> *“[The research] has been able to control for exposure to different prison environments, and it demonstrates differential effects. And it clearly does make a difference. If you're in site X rather than site Y, prisons have different histories and cultures and traditions... [which] makes a difference on the [rehabilitative] outcome.”*
> (Interview #7, Rehabilitation specialist, NSW, June 2025)

The research used a variety of statistical measures to control for both measured and unmeasured confounding factors that might affect recidivism outcomes. This showed how certain types of interaction between prisoners and the prison environment reduce or elevate risk. It revealed, for example, statistically significant effects for family visitation, which was associated with reduced post-release recidivism, while prisons that made extensive use of rule violation processes were significantly associated with increased recidivism. These are person-environment interactions, but the research also identified prison environment characteristics that exert their own independent effects. Prisoners housed in facilities with less prisoner turnover, for example, reoffend less frequently than those in facilities with more “churn” (constant movement of prisoners in and out), as do those housed in smaller facilities. [102]

[99] Charles E. Loeffler and Daniel S. Nagin, ‘The Impact of Incarceration on Recidivism’, *Annual Review of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (2022): 133–52.
[100] Jennifer Galouzis, ‘A Rehabilitative Environment Approach to Reducing Prison Violence’, in *Te Taipitopito Understanding Prison Violence in Aotearoa III*, ed. Armon Tamatea (Nga Tūmanakotanga, 2023).
[101] Corrective Services NSW, ‘Interview #7’, interview by UNODC, June 2025.
[102] Ibid.

> *We've created these facilities that are too big.*
> (Interview #3, Senior manager, NSW, June 2025)

Shifting attention toward the prison environment as a way to impact recidivism at the system level occurred against a backdrop in Australia of questions being asked about the power of offender treatment programmes in prison to impact community safety. A review in 2020,[103] for example, estimated on the basis of international evidence that just one in 15 treated sex offenders would not reoffend as a result of that prison-based treatment, while for violent offenders 10 would need to be treated in order for one to be rehabilitated. At the same time, high-quality evaluations of programming in NSW prisons were producing findings about their rehabilitative value that was at best inconclusive. Domestic violence programming, for example, was found in one evaluation [104] to have no impact on reoffending after 12 months, while another[105] detected an impact on general reoffending, but no impact of the treatment target – domestic violence – or indeed any other kind of violence. Furthermore, fidelity to risk-needs-responsivity principles was concentrating efforts on high quality individualised assessment systems to stream high-risk prisoners into intensive programme pathways. When reviewed at the system level, this approach was ultimately found to be wanting.

> *We realised that despite spending a lot of money on assessment, a lot of people weren't getting very much [programming] at all. … When reducing the recidivism rate [across the whole system] became a priority, we looked at our results, and whilst we had some modest success with some of our efforts, we weren't getting [much] despite all this effort to create this high-quality model. … The whole focus was on [criminogenically] high-risk people only, and not enough attention was given to the whole person.*
> (Interview #3, Senior manager, NSW, June 2025)

In NSW a theory of change was therefore developed to guide efforts to create more rehabilitative prison environments across all prisons, with certain facilities being used for piloting purposes tied to monitoring, evaluation and learning.

> *Rather than taking [on] the system at large, we piloted, evaluated, then used that to inform how we would scale.*
> (Interview #2, Senior manager, NSW, June 2025)

Recognising the inherent limitations of a reliance upon therapeutic programmes to drive rehabilitation, the larger system-level theory of change was supplemented with fine-grained work to produce a more coherent and coordinated response to the needs of prisoners. Partly, this was a challenge of communication to ensure that, in the same way as officers in Namibia had observed, all staff pulled in the same direction.

> *Programmes, they're not going to reduce reoffending alone. … [We're now asking the question] how do all the things like assisted desistance, criminogenic programmes, education, traineeships, how do they actually fit together so that [staff in all roles] understand they don't happen in isolation … [so that] we're putting the person [prisoner] at the centre.*
> (Interview #5, Rehabilitation specialist, NSW, June 2025)

[103] Andrew Day, 'At a Crossroads? Offender Rehabilitation in Australian Prisons', *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 27, no. 6 (2020): 939–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2020.1751335.
[104] Sara Rahman and Suzanne Poynton, 'Evaluation of the EQUIPS Domestic Abuse Program', *Crime and Justice Bulletin*, no. 211 (March 2018).
[105] Yun Zhang et al., 'Evaluation of EQUIPS Treatment Pathways for Domestic Violence Offenders in New South Wales', *NSW Government Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics*, no. 61 (September 2019).

Systematic monitoring and evaluation help to better understand and guide changes in prison environment

The NSW's initiative's focus on evidence-based practice has seen it undertake extensive monitoring, evaluation, and learning work which has fed back into the planning cycle.

> *"We've really changed our approach to measuring things and we do measure [a lot] now."*
> (Interview #3, Senior manager, NSW, June 2025)

One example lies in its adoption of a prison officer training approach known as Five Minute Interventions (FMIs). This was first developed in England and Wales[106] as a means of improving officers' rehabilitative orientation and skill set and was progressively rolled out in NSW as evaluation evidence revealed its benefits. To date, seven evaluations have been undertaken in NSW to understand the FMI approach through both qualitative and quantitative lenses. The rationale behind the approach is that officers should utilise moments that arise in everyday prison life to assist prisoners in gaining fundamental skills such as around decision making, planning, and taking the perspective of others. The training aims to equip officers with the skills to become effective agents of rehabilitation as they utilise these five-minute moments for good purpose: creating five-minute interventions.

Evaluation data revealed that FMI training was able to significantly improve the rehabilitative orientation of staff in NSW, most substantially for front line officers including security officers and prison industries supervisors.[107] While prisons have long relied on improving prisoner-officer relationships to achieve dynamic security, within a rehabilitative prison environment positive prisoner-officer are focused not on the ends of security but on the ends of prisoners' rehabilitation and desistance, with support for development of a non-offending identity ("identity desistance")[108] being one goal. However, a quasi-experimental evaluation of FMI in 13 prisons found that in the wake of FMI training proven cases of violence also progressively reduced, reflecting the safety and security impacts of the more holistic rehabilitative approach.[109]

Still, the NSW experience showed that bringing in change was not simple and that active monitoring and progress assessment was critical. In the case of five-minute interventions, for example, insights from evaluations and work on prison climates led to a more nuanced understanding of rehabilitative processes. FMI's impact on frontline officers' rehabilitative attitudes and skills (aspects of rehabilitative culture) impacted positively on the prison climate, which creates supportive conditions for prisoners to contemplate new identities, new futures, and change.

> *"I think we're talking about [frontline] staff acting to support the preconditions for inmates to be ready to engage in processes of change, [they're] supporting an environment that then provides a foundation for people to engage in change."*
> (Interview #6, Evaluation specialist, NSW, June 2025)

Another example was the mapping of "delivery chains" which involved identifying all the steps that each actor needed to take to move reform forward. The method presumed that reforms stall or fail

[106] Hayley Tate, Nicholas Blagden and Ruth Mann, *Prisoners' Perceptions of Care and Rehabilitation from Prison Officers Trained as Five Minute Interventionists* (Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, 2017).
[107] Mark Howard et al., *How Does the Role of Custodial Staff Influence Their Perceptions of Offender Rehabilitation and Responses to Five Minute Interventions (FMI) Training?*, 5, Corrective Services NSW Research Briefs (Corrective Services NSW, 2021).
[108] Nugent and Schinkel, 'The Pains of Desistance'.
[109] Chee Seng Chong et al., *Assessing the Impact of Five Minute Interventions (FMI) Training on Behavioural Indicators of Correctional Centre Safety and Order: An Interrupted Time Series Analysis*, Research brief 12, Corrective Services NSW Research Briefs (Corrective Services NSW, 2023).

due to breaks in the delivery chain, so identifying the failure point would be crucial and in NSW this was undertaken through on the ground fieldwork.

> *"The intent of fieldwork is to go out to the frontline and see whether you do have a break in your delivery chain and test whether what you're delivering at the frontline is really having the impact and working as you anticipated, or even better than, and that that field work would be done with independent partners outside of our organisation, so they would come with us. There's no hiding from that frontline experience and the input that people are very brave to share with us but it gave some incredible insights."* (Interview #2, Senior manager, NSW, June 2025)

UNODC's research on NSW as it moves toward implementing a rehabilitative prison environment provides some important insights into the reform process and a learning case for reform minded penal authorities elsewhere. Central to these reforms was the de-centring of rehabilitation programmes as the main pillar of offender rehabilitation. The next section considers the changing evidence base for rehabilitation programming, illustrating promising practices that might fit into a wider, desistance focused and holistic prison management strategy.

The effectiveness of psychological intervention programmes in prison settings depends on context and circumstances

In New South Wales (NSW), a strategic evidence assessment of prison rehabilitation suggested that psychological intervention programmes should form just one element of the rehabilitative prison environments that the state was setting out to create.[110] This is in line with a growing body of evidence (discussed below) which has sharpened understanding of what intervention programmes can and cannot be expected to achieve. It has also, as will be shown below, pointed to the need for redoubled efforts to ensure the highest standards of programme integrity and fidelity to treatment principles.

One of the major developments in understanding about what works and what doesn't in prison has been the increased rigor of methods utilised by researchers. Thus, research using robust methodologies has helped to clarify, among other things, the relationship between imprisonment and reoffending. These studies indicate that, in general, a custodial sentence does not significantly change the likelihood of someone reoffending once released.[111] [112] [113] However, when prisons adopt structured approaches that emphasise rehabilitation, there is some evidence from high income countries of modest reductions in recidivism.[114] [115] [116]

Psychological intervention programmes in prisons vary widely in their design, target populations, and delivery. While there is some variation in the evidence of their effectiveness, reliable research still points to the value of well-designed interventions, especially when combined with other forms

[110] UNODC, 'UNODC Research on Prisons in New South Wales, Australia'.

[111] Daniel S. Nagin, Francis T. Cullen, and Cheryl Lero Jonson, 'Imprisonment and Reoffending', *Crime and Justice* 38, no. 1 (January 2009): 115–200.

[112] Charles E. Loeffler and Daniel S. Nagin, 'The Impact of Incarceration on Recidivism', *Annual Review of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (13 January 2022): 133–52.

[113] Enes Al Weswasi et al., 'Does Sentence Length Affect the Risk for Criminal Recidivism? A Quasi-Experimental Study of Three Policy Reforms in Sweden', *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 19, no. 4 (December 2023): 971–99.

[114] Hanneke E. Creemers et al., 'Ramping Up Detention of Young Serious Offenders: A Safer Future?', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 24, no. 4 (October 2023): 2863–81.

[115] Synøve N. Andersen and Kjetil Telle, 'Better out than in? The Effect on Recidivism of Replacing Incarceration with Electronic Monitoring in Norway', *European Journal of Criminology* 19, no. 1 (2022): 55–76.

[116] Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), UK Parliament et al., *The Use of Short Prison Sentences in England and Wales* (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, UK Parliament, 2023).

of post-release support and care.[117] These programmes are most effective when tailored to individual needs and delivered as part of a broader, integrated approach to rehabilitation. Their success also depends on factors such as staff training, consistent implementation, and post-release continuity of care. Among the various approaches used, some have been more consistently aligned with these success factors than others.[118] [119]

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), often viewed as a foundational component of prisoner rehabilitation, has been widely implemented in prison settings. However, recent research suggests that CBT and similar psychological programmes, when offered in prisons, do not always lead to lower reoffending rates.[120] Some studies have observed small effects, particularly when programmes are integrated with post-release support or delivered within structured therapeutic settings.[121] [122] This suggests that programme effectiveness may depend not only on content, but also on how and where interventions are delivered.

Effectiveness also appears to vary by offence type. For individuals convicted of sexual offences, who generally have low rates of recidivism, the evidence is mixed and findings from several studies suggest that programmes' outcomes are more favourable when interventions are overseen by trained psychologists.[123] [124] For programmes addressing violence, including anger management, studies have found small positive effects on post-release outcomes, particularly when the programmes are intensive and use more than one therapeutic approach.[125] [126] In contrast, evaluations of custodial domestic violence programmes have not consistently demonstrated reductions in reoffending, although some evidence points to greater potential in community-based settings.[127] [128] [129]

In many countries, drug use is higher among prisoners than among the general population,[130] [131] leading some of them to mainstream substance use treatment in prison settings.[132] [133] Studies comparing pharmacological and psychosocial approaches indicate that pharmacological

[117] Marie Claire Van Hout et al., 'What Is Optimal Integrated Multi-Agency Throughcare? A Global e-Delphi Consensus Study Defining Core Components of Effective Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programming', *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice* (Bingley, United Kingdom) 9, no. 3/4 (2023): 237–57.

[118] Devon L.L. Polaschek, 'Many Sizes Fit All: A Preliminary Framework for Conceptualizing the Development and Provision of Cognitive–Behavioral Rehabilitation Programs for Offenders', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 16, no. 1 (2011): 20–35, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2010.10.002.

[119] Tony Ward et al., 'Urgent Issues and Prospects in Correctional Rehabilitation Practice and Research', *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 27, no. 2 (2022): 103–28.

[120] Gabrielle Beaudry et al., 'Effectiveness of Psychological Interventions in Prison to Reduce Recidivism: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials', *The Lancet. Psychiatry* 8, no. 9 (2021): 759–73.

[121] Jamie S. Walton and Ian A. Elliott, 'A Review of General Cognitive-Behavioral Programs in English and Welsh Prisons and Probation Services: Three Decades of Quasi-Experimental Evaluations.', *American Psychologist*, ahead of print, 21 October 2024.

[122] Richard Summers et al., 'Examining the Effectiveness of Interventions for Criminal Justice-Involved Women: A Meta-Analytic Review', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 52, no. 5 (2025): 690–715.

[123] Lisa Holper et al., 'Moderators of Sexual Recidivism as Indicator of Treatment Effectiveness in Persons With Sexual Offense Histories: An Updated Meta-Analysis', *Sexual Abuse* 36, no. 3 (2024): 255–91.

[124] Martin Schmucker and Friedrich Lösel, 'Sexual Offender Treatment for Reducing Recidivism among Convicted Sex Offenders: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis', *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 13, no. 1 (2017): 1–75.

[125] Crystal J Giesbrecht, 'A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Violence Intervention Programs on General and Violent Recidivism', *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* 8, no. 2 (2023): 99–106.

[126] Nina Papalia et al., 'A Meta-Analytic Review of the Efficacy of Psychological Treatments for Violent Offenders in Correctional and Forensic Mental Health Settings', *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 26, no. 2 (2019).

[127] James M Byrne, *About the First Step Act Independent Review Committee*, 84, no. 1 (2020).

[128] Theresa A. Gannon et al., 'Does Specialized Psychological Treatment for Offending Reduce Recidivism? A Meta-Analysis Examining Staff and Program Variables as Predictors of Treatment Effectiveness', *Clinical Psychology Review* 73 (November 2019): 1017-52.

[129] Geir Smedslund et al., 'Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Men Who Physically Abuse Their Female Partner', *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 7, no. 1 (2011): 1–25.

[130] Aaron A. Duke et al., 'Alcohol, Drugs, and Violence: A Meta-Meta-Analysis.', *Psychology of Violence* 8, no. 2 (2018): 238–49.

[131] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2019* (United Nations publication, 2019).

[132] Ibid.

[133] Monica Malta et al., 'Opioid-Related Treatment, Interventions, and Outcomes among Incarcerated Persons: A Systematic Review', *PLOS Medicine* 16, no. 12 (2019): e1003002.

treatments are somewhat more likely to influence post-release outcomes.[134] [135] Across both areas, dedicated prison units that provide intensive and holistic treatment[136] are associated with more consistent findings. When the work of these units is combined with transitional support, studies have found meaningful reductions in reoffending.[137] [138] [139]

A key factor across all programme types is the quality of delivery. Research indicates that well-designed programmes may have limited impact if implementation is inconsistent or staff lack the necessary training.[140] [141] Delivery by trained professionals, particularly forensic psychologists, appears to be associated with stronger outcomes.[142] In response, some systems have adopted tiered models of delivery that align the intensity of programming and the complexity of offender needs with the qualifications of the staff.[143] [144]

The format in which programmes are delivered may also influence their impact. Group-based formats are widely used and are generally found to be effective.[145] In some contexts, combining group-based sessions with individual support appears to enhance outcomes, particularly for individuals convicted of sexual or violent offences.[146] [147] Again, therapeutic communities provide a structured setting in which this blended delivery model can be implemented. These communities often reduce traditional barriers between staff and prisoners, creating more collaborative and participatory settings that may support engagement and motivation.[148]

For women in prison, evidence supports the use of tailored approaches. Gender-responsive programming considers the different pathways that women may take into the justice system, including experiences of trauma, caregiving responsibilities, and socio-economic disadvantage. Standardised risk assessment tools, originally developed on the basis of male populations, may overestimate risk or overlook needs when applied to women.[149] [150] Studies have found that programmes specifically designed to address women's needs are associated with lower reoffending rates compared to gender-neutral programmes; one recent review found a 42% relative

[134] Amanda Perry et al., 'Are Non-Pharmacological Interventions Effective in Reducing Drug Use and Criminality? A Systematic and Meta-Analytical Review with an Economic Appraisal of These Interventions', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13, no. 10 (2016): 966.

[135] Katy R. Holloway and Trevor H. Bennett, 'Drug Interventions', in *What Works in Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation*, ed. David Weisburd et al., Springer Series on Evidence-Based Crime Policy (Springer New York, 2016).

[136] Such units in prison have been called "therapeutic communities" in some jurisdictions, although the term may refer to other drug treatment options outside prison.

[137] Papalia et al., 'A Meta-Analytic Review of the Efficacy of Psychological Treatments for Violent Offenders in Correctional and Forensic Mental Health Settings'.

[138] Beaudry et al., 'Effectiveness of Psychological Interventions in Prison to Reduce Recidivism'.

[139] Amanda L. Wiese et al., '25-Year Evaluation of an In-Person Therapeutic Community Program in the Southwest United States between 1994 and 2019', *The Prison Journal* 104, no. 4 (2024): 428–48.

[140] Friedrich Lösel et al., 'On the Effectiveness of Sexual Offender Treatment in Prisons: A Comparison of Two Different Evaluation Designs in Routine Practice', *Sexual Abuse* 32, no. 4 (2020): 452–75.

[141] Aidan Mews et al., *Impact Evaluation of the Prison-Based Core Sex Offender Treatment Programme*, Ministry of Justice Analytical Series (Ministry of Justice, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2017).

[142] Gannon et al., 'Does Specialized Psychological Treatment for Offending Reduce Recidivism?'

[143] Polaschek, 'Many Sizes Fit All'.

[144] Ward et al., 'Urgent Issues and Prospects in Correctional Rehabilitation Practice and Research'.

[145] Jason Davies, 'An Examination of Individual Versus Group Treatment in Correctional Settings', in *The Wiley International Handbook of Correctional Psychology* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2019).

[146] Schmucker and Lösel, 'Sexual Offender Treatment for Reducing Recidivism among Convicted Sex Offenders'.

[147] Papalia et al., 'A Meta-Analytic Review of the Efficacy of Psychological Treatments for Violent Offenders in Correctional and Forensic Mental Health Settings'.

[148] Nicholas Blagden et al., '"They Treat Us Like Human Beings"—Experiencing a Therapeutic Sex Offenders Prison: Impact on Prisoners and Staff and Implications for Treatment', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 60, no. 4 (2016): 371–96.

[149] Nena P. Messina and Patricia Esparza, 'Poking the Bear: The Inapplicability of the RNR Principles for Justice-Involved Women', *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 140 (September 2022).

[150] Kelly Struthers Montford and Kelly Hannah-Moffat, 'The Promises and Perils of Gender-Responsivity: Risk, Incarceration, and Rehabilitation', in *The Routledge Companion to Rehabilitative Work in Criminal Justice* (Routledge, 2019).

reduction in recidivism among participants in gender-responsive programmes.[151] [152] Interventions that include a mix of individual and group work, delivered in therapeutic communities, appear particularly promising.[153] Despite these findings, many jurisdictions continue to rely on gender-neutral tools and approaches.[154] Some systems have attempted to adapt male-based tools through scoring modifications or supplementary assessments, but these efforts have shown mixed success in adequately reflecting women's distinctive risk and need profiles. The development and application of tools that explicitly address women's pathways into and out of crime remains an area for further exploration, particularly in lower- and middle-income countries where less data on gendered pathways is typically available.[155]

Another area that has received increasing attention is the question of how much intervention is needed to reduce reoffending. Evidence suggests that the intensity or "dose" of a rehabilitation programme may influence its impact, particularly for individuals assessed as high-risk. Guidelines in some jurisdictions recommend 200 to 300 hours of structured, face-to-face intervention for such groups, delivered by qualified professionals such as psychologists or trained therapists.[156] [157] However, the relationship between dose and outcome is not always straightforward. A large study from Australia, for example, found that a single 40-hour programme was associated with a 24% reduction in serious reoffending one year after release, while attending two programmes did not result in additional benefits.[158] [159] This suggests that effectiveness may depend not only on the number of hours but also on the relevance of the programme to an individual's needs and the quality with which it is delivered. In practice, determining the appropriate level of programming often involves balancing available resources, individual risk levels, and institutional capacity.

While there is no single model for effective prison-based rehabilitation programming, research highlights several factors that are often linked to more positive outcomes. These include strong programme delivery, appropriate staff training, alignment with individual needs, and implementation within structured settings such as therapeutic communities. Evidence also indicates that adapting programmes to the characteristics of specific populations, including women and people with complex support needs, may enhance effectiveness. However, while psychological intervention programmes show varying degrees of success in tackling reoffending and improving social reintegration, they are not sufficient on their own to reduce recidivism. Accordingly, such programmes are more effective when paired with broader organisational features—such as institutional culture, leadership approaches, and staff-prisoner dynamics—which can influence how well rehabilitation efforts are carried out in practice. As such, the prison is now recognised less as the *setting* in which rehabilitation takes place (via programmes) than a place where programmes are one element in a wider rehabilitative prison environment.

[151] Menna Gower et al., 'Gender Responsivity in the Assessment and Treatment of Offenders', *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 31, no. 4 (2024): 587–611.
[152] Summers et al., 'Examining the Effectiveness of Interventions for Criminal Justice-Involved Women'.
[153] Emily J. Salisbury et al., 'Gender-Responsive Risk and Need Assessment: Implications for the Treatment of Justice-Involved Women', in *Handbook on Risk and Need Assessment* (Routledge, 2016).
[154] Summers et al., 'Examining the Effectiveness of Interventions for Criminal Justice-Involved Women'.
[155] Ntasha Bhardwaj and Jody Miller, 'Women's Pathways to Incarceration in India and Sri Lanka: Insights From an Intersectional Narrative Analysis', *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 41, no. 3 (2025): 466–81.
[156] David J. Simourd and Mark Olver, 'Prescribed Correctional Treatment Dosage: Cautions, Commentary, and Future Directions', *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 58, no. 2 (2019): 75–91.
[157] Day, 'At a Crossroads?'
[158] Marlee Bower et al., 'The Efficacy of "Modular Dosage" in Prison-Based Psychological Interventions to Reduce Recidivism: A State-Wide Naturalistic Study of Convicted People in Australian Prisons', *Journal of Criminal Justice* 95 (November 2024).
[159] Salisbury et al., 'Gender-Responsive Risk and Need Assessment'.

The evidence on the impact of vocational training on recidivism is mixed

Across prison systems worldwide, discussions with prisoners highlight the importance of vocational training and work.[160] In these conversations, prisoners raise concerns about the relevance and quality of available programmes, the adequacy of remuneration, the formal recognition of skills through certification, and the credibility of these qualifications in the labour market after release. Such concerns highlight the pivotal role that vocational training and work play—not only in shaping prisoners' daily experiences but also in their aspirations for rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society.

UNODC's research on prisons in Albania, Czechia and Thailand highlights prisoners' strong desire for high-quality, market-relevant vocational training that leads to recognised certification and supports meaningful employment after release.[161] Across these multiple contexts, prisoners question the value of programmes that fall short of these standards or fail to provide formal qualifications. Challenges also arise when certification is withheld or discloses incarceration status, undermining efforts at rehabilitation.

> *"There are many good programmes in prison, but it is up to us to take advantage. Building skills, furniture skills, electronic skills are all good. Shoe making, detergent making are not good, because the certificate is from the Corrections Department."*
> (Focus group #1, male prisoner, Thailand, January 2020)

> *"If you show the certificate, no one cares. It doesn't have any value. It has the village name on it and there is nothing here but the prison."*
> (Focus group #8, male prisoner, Czechia, January 2020)

Beyond programme design, broader institutional and legal barriers—such as criminal background checks or blanket bans on hiring individuals with convictions—are seen as fundamentally inconsistent with governments' stated goals of prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration.[162] [163]

> *"If you go for, look for a job with your CV, they ask you for a record. Now if you lie, they ask mostly for this. Police declaration"*
> (Focus group #3, male prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

Gender disparities further complicate access to meaningful work, with women that may mean being offered fewer and more traditionally gendered opportunities. Women in Albanian prisons, for example, reported vocational opportunities focused only on stereotypical activities such as tailoring, embroidery, painting, and lacework.[164] In Namibia as well, women in prisons highlighted their limited access to vocational training opportunities in their facility, noting the absence of workshops on skilled trades and the gendered restrictions that prevent women from joining such programmes, which are available to men at the same facility.

> *"That's the only thing, because you don't get to enrol for plumbing, electrician, those type of things that some people want to do, they can't because there's no workshops here. And you can't join the males."*
> *(Focus group #6, female prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)*

[160] UNODC, *Prison Research: A Pilot Study on the Causes of Recidivism in Albania, Czechia and Thailand* (2022).
[161] Ibid.
[162] Samuel K. Baier, 'Reducing Employment Barriers for People with Criminal Records.', *Journal of Corporation Law* 46, no. 1 (2020): 219–46.
[163] UNODC, 'Pilot Study on Ghana's Penal System', 2024.
[164] UNODC, *Prison Research: A Pilot Study on the Causes of Recidivism in Albania, Czechia and Thailand*.

Yet the value of prison work extends beyond employability. Many prisoners described how engaging in purposeful work helps maintain their sense of dignity and self-worth. Nonetheless, significant obstacles persist; in some cases, remuneration is so minimal that it fails to cover basic necessities, such as personal hygiene items.

> *"We need some small money to buy basics [like shampoo].*
> *(Focus group, female prisoner, Albania, December 2019)"*

Prison-based vocational training and work opportunities are widely recognised as important components of rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. Many penal systems include such programmes to help individuals develop skills and prepare for life after release. However, the current evidence on whether these programmes consistently reduce reoffending or improve long-term employment outcomes remains limited and, in many cases, inconclusive.

A major review of the scientific literature on the subject matter found that while hundreds of studies have examined vocational training in prison, only a small number meet basic standards for methodological quality.[165] Many studies do not adequately account for differences between people who participate in these programmes and those who do not.[166] Accordingly, it is often difficult to know whether positive outcomes are due to the programmes themselves or to other factors—such as individuals' motivation or previous work experience.

However, recent studies have helped clarify some of these challenges. For example, one study found that although vocational training appeared to be linked with improved employment and reduced reoffending, these effects diminished once the analysis accounted for background differences between participants and non-participants.[167] Only one employment outcome—higher hourly wages—remained significant. Another comprehensive review of high-quality studies found no clear evidence that prison-based training or work programmes consistently influence post-release outcomes based on measures of post-release employment and different measures of recidivism.[168]

These findings are consistent with trends observed in other areas of prison rehabilitation research, where stronger research designs often reveal smaller or less consistent impacts. One possible explanation comes from a large study in the Netherlands, which found that pre-prison employment history is a key factor in determining post-release labour market success.[169] Individuals with a stronger work history were more likely both to participate in training while in prison and to find work after release. However, most studies in this field tend to focus on offending-related risk factors and do not consider people's labour market background.

At the same time, there is strong demand among prisoners for more effective preparation for the labour market for their post-release. Many express a clear interest in gaining skills, qualifications, and opportunities for meaningful work that can provide them with conditions for social reintegration. Even if current evidence does not show consistent reductions in reoffending, vocational training and work programmes may still offer valuable benefits—such as improved

[165] Danielle Newton et al., 'The Impact of Vocational Education and Training Programs on Recidivism: A Systematic Review of Current Experimental Evidence', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 62, no. 1 (January 2018): 187–207.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Susan McNeeley, 'The Effects of Vocational Education on Recidivism and Employment Among Individuals Released Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 67, no. 15 (November 2023): 1547–64.

[168] Alexandra V. Nur and Holly Nguyen, 'Prison Work and Vocational Programs: A Systematic Review and Analysis of Moderators of Program Success', *Justice Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2 January 2023): 129–58.

[169] Anke Ramakers et al., 'Down Before They Go In: A Study On Pre-Prison Labour Market Attachment', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 21, no. 1 (March 2015): 65–82.

confidence, a sense of structure, and a stronger connection to future goals, all of which can be parts of a larger, holistic, approach to creating a more rehabilitative prison environment.

Vocational training and work are also important forms of meaningful activity that contribute to a structured workday. Prisoners comment on the toll taken by empty days, including how it affects their capacity to engage with meaningful activities if they later come to be offered

> *"In spite of the small programs that you can attend, most of the time, all you do is just sleep… So, sleeping does not improve my life. It will not change anything, if I just sleep and sleep and sleep. Even when you come and give me tomorrow to do something, I will be very lazy to do what you want me to do, because I'm used to sleeping, I want to sleep."*
> (Focus group #12, male prisoner, Namibia, March 2025)

Such feeling converges with more systematic evidence on time use in prison, something that only recently has come to be examined. For example, in a recent study in the United States of more than 77,000 prisoners, researchers examined total time engaged in meaningful activities (programmes, training, work… etc), rather than looking at the individual impacts of each. Examining the association of overall time use with post-release employment, recidivism and mortality, they found small but statistically significant impacts on all three outcomes.[170] However, they also found that almost one fifth of prisoners were largely idle during their sentence, engaging in no programming, training or work. If they had spent around half their time in meaningful activity (about the average among others), the researchers calculated the odds of finding a job would have been increased by 15 per cent, while the odds of reoffending would have decreased by about 5 per cent. These findings converge with evidence from NSW, Australia, that combining activities may be more effective than a sole focus on therapeutic rehabilitation programmes alone.

> *"We've found that combining intensive programming plus education [and] vocational training seems to have a better effect size than putting all your eggs into a single intensive programming basket."*
> (Interview #6, Evaluation specialist, NSW, June 2025)

Others have argued that focusing simply on employment and recidivism fails to show how prison-based engagement produces more subtle yet still meaningful impacts. For example, a recent quasi-experimental study of more than 57,000 Israeli prisoners released over more than a decade showed, among other things, that while vocational training had no impact on recidivism, it did improve engagement with employment, tax paying, and welfare services.[171] These findings accord with a recent meta-analysis of 12 randomised controlled trials of more than 2,800 prisoners which measured post-prison employment, rather than recidivism.[172] Vocational training appeared to help released prisoners gain work initially, but many failed to maintain employment, suggesting that such programmes primarily benefit job seeking and gaining initial employment following release, which remain important to processes in desistance from crime. However, they were much less effective at creating lasting improvements in employment outcomes or labour market participation, as measured at the end of a longer follow-up period.[173]

[170] Grant Duwe et al., 'When Prison Becomes the Devil's Workshop: The Association Between Idleness and Post-Release Employment, Recidivism, and Mortality', *Crime & Delinquency* 71, no. 5 (2025): 1359–87.
[171] Efrat Shoham and Noam Haviv, '"There Is More to It than Recidivism" – Outcome Scores among Released Prisoners Who Participated in Prison-Based "Employment World" Programmes', *International Annals of Criminology* 62, no. 1 (2024): 79–103.
[172] C. Connell et al., 'Effectiveness of Interventions to Improve Employment for People Released from Prison: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *Health Justice* (England) 11, no. 1 (2023).
[173] Ibid.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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The 2025 edition of Prison Matters reveals that prison populations worldwide continue to increase, with a growing proportion held in pre-trial detention—a category that includes a disproportionate number of women in some jurisdictions. It also shows that prison overcrowding remains a systemic and widespread challenge, placing significant pressure on prison infrastructure, conditions and services, while the persistence of preventable deaths in custody underscores urgent gaps in safety and prison oversight.

Addressing the complex issues of growing prison populations and prison overcrowding besides other global prison challenges is fundamental to introducing, maintaining or advancing rehabilitative prison environments. For a prison to be truly rehabilitative, every function must be conducive to rehabilitation and social reintegration prospects; prisoners must have access to tailored programmes, constructive activities and care; and positive dynamics between prison personnel and prisoners must be fostered.

Addressing the root causes of prison overcrowding and fostering the use of non-custodial measures in appropriate cases

Prison overcrowding continues to constitute an acute human rights violation, health and security crisis and stands out as the greatest contributor to violations of international minimum standards in prisons. Operating significantly over the intended capacity of prisons is not only an issue of lack of space, but it also gravely affects the quality of nutrition, sanitation and hygiene, health services, rates of transmission of infectious diseases, the provision of care to vulnerable groups, and the physical and mental health of prisoners, as well as their access to constructive activities and programmes. Overcrowding generates conflicts, fuels violence, erodes prison infrastructure and poses immense security and management challenges. In summary, the impact of overcrowding multiplies the challenges faced by prison services in preserving the integrity of prison management, ensuring the health, safety and well-being of prisoners, maintaining a rehabilitative prison regime and preserving prison security.

In this regard, the potential for non-custodial measures in line with the United Nations Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) has not been fully realized in many Member States. For various categories of offences and offenders, non-custodial measures can be more effective in reducing the risk of reoffending, as they can support rehabilitation in the community. Given the significant cost of imprisonment, even in low-resourced prison settings, non-custodial measures tend to be more cost-effective, enabling resources to be invested in social, welfare and health services with long-term benefits for communities at large. As they prevent the unnecessary exposure to the harmful impact of incarceration, alternatives are also a more proportionate and humane criminal justice response in appropriate cases.

Reducing an excessive resort to, or duration of pre-trial detention in support of equal access to justice

Access to justice is a fundamental aspect of the rule of law, which is at the core of the Agenda for Sustainable Development. In its absence, people are denied fair, transparent, effective, non-discriminatory and accountable services to exercise their legal rights. While pretrial detention should be limited to instances where there is an established risk that an alleged offender may

abscond, commit a further criminal offence or interfere with the course of justice, its use and duration in many countries can be excessive. This jeopardises the principle of proportionality in criminal justice decision-making as well as a person's right to a fair trial. More specifically, in the absence of respective safeguards, it can heighten the risk of coercion and prevent suspects from mounting a proper defence, especially for those who are poor and lack access to legal counsel or support to gather evidence in their favour.

A disproportionate use of pre-trial detention has also been found to be a major contributor to prison overcrowding and the associated deterioration of prison conditions in many countries. While pretrial detainees should be presumed innocent until proven guilty by a court of law, and treated accordingly, the prison regime and conditions in pre-trial detention are often found to be worse or more restrictive than those applicable to sentenced prisoners. Consequently, monitoring the number of unsentenced detainees is vital in assessing timely access to justice and, generally, the rule of law. A disproportionate resort to pre-trial detention, as much as to incarceration more broadly, comes with significant socioeconomic costs for the person detained, their family and communities, as well as to the state itself.

Ensuring a gender-responsive approach to prison management and the treatment of offenders

Gender-responsive prison and offender management lies at the heart of the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), which supplement the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). Women prisoners face challenges that stem from the fact that with 7 per cent of the global prison population, they typically constitute a minority in prison settings. Prison designs, policies and practices generally remain male-centric and often fail to address the gender-specific needs of incarcerated women, while criminal justice policies often do not provide sufficient entry-points for non-custodial measures for women offenders that would reflect the circumstances of their offences and their typically lower security risk profile.

Prison authorities around the world also struggle with offering access to gender-responsive rehabilitation opportunities. Compared to men, incarcerated women generally enter prison with more complex personal circumstances and histories of trauma and suffer from higher levels of mental health issues, including drug use disorders, which prisons seldom properly address and which imprisonment itself exacerbates. As a result of relatively short sentences in many cases, women prisoners frequently have less access to the sorts of programmes that can tackle such deep-seated needs, or to critical pre-release preparation and transitional arrangements.

Advancing rehabilitation, social reintegration and recidivism prevention through the practical application of United Nations standards and norms

The United Nations standards and norms developed under the auspices of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal justice, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules) and the United Nations Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) provide for a powerful troika of universally recognized normative guidance on prison management and the treatment of offenders that puts human dignity centre stage. In 2025, the 10th, 15th and 35th anniversaries of their adoption by the General Assembly, respectively, provide for a renewed momentum to invest

in their practical application worldwide and to overcome both persisting and emerging prison challenges.

Importantly, the finalization of the United Nations Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies), which will be adopted by the General Assembly in December 2025 constitute the most recent and landmark addition to the above set of standards, with a particular focus on the individualized treatment of offenders; the effective use of non-custodial measures; rehabilitative prison environments; efforts to address root causes of offending; multi-stakeholders partnerships and community engagement; as well as research and evaluation. Importantly, the Kyoto Model Strategies intrinsically link efforts to reduce recidivism with rehabilitation and social reintegration support in custodial settings and in the community and call for the mobilization and involvement of multiple governmental and non-governmental actors in this regard.

The prison environment warrants increased attention as it is a key agent of rehabilitation

Converging evidence from the scientific literature and UNODC's field research illustrates the potential of prison environments to generate rehabilitative effects of their own and to support and amplify the impacts of therapeutic and skills-based programmes, representing an important additional focus for prison policy, planning and management. It augments the longstanding focus of prison management, captured in the United Nations standards and norms (i.e., the Nelson Mandela Rules, and the Bangkok Rules), on ensuring prisoners' inherent dignity and value, and aligning prison management with the pursuits of the protection of society from crime and reduced recidivism through a focus on rehabilitation and social reintegration .[174] [175] It engages the Nelson Mandela Rules' recognition that the field of prison management is constantly developing and that beyond minimum conditions for adequate prisons may lay new evidence-based insights to support more effective rehabilitation and social reintegration of prisoners.[176] [177]

Applying a social ecological approach to the prison as comprised of distinct microsystems, each exerting specific effects, provides an evidence-based model upon which more advanced thinking about rehabilitation, processes of crime desistance and social reintegration may be grounded.[178] This approach to prison, through the prism of rehabilitative prison environments, reshapes the way recidivism risk may be understood. An example of such an approach is the rehabilitation index developed in the jurisdiction of New South Wales in Australia.[179]The implementation of such an index can support analysis of how various aspects of the prison environment relate to recidivism and improve rehabilitation outcomes.

For instance, it can facilitate the examination of interactions between prisoners and their surroundings, providing a basis for exploring whether certain environmental features correspond with higher or lower risks of reoffending. This may include factors such as facility design or operational practices that do not involve direct behavioural interventions with prisoners. The index also allows for the study of how institutional management strategies—such as those aimed at reducing prisoner turnover—may relate to system-wide patterns of recidivism. Additionally, by

[174] UNODC, 'The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)', 2015.
[175] UNODC, 'United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules) with Their Commentary', 2011.
[176] UNODC, 'The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)', para. Preliminary Observation 2.
[177] Ibid., para. Preliminary Observation 1.
[178] Galouzis et al., 'Designing a Rehabilitative Prison Environment'.
[179] Corrective Services NSW, 'Interview #7', June 2025.

generating data at the level of individual facilities, the index provides a means of comparing rehabilitative outcomes across institutions, potentially informing further inquiry into differences in practice. More broadly, it demonstrates how routinely collected administrative data can be aggregated to support statistical analysis of the relationship between operational variables and post-release outcomes. These insights into the independent influence of the prison environment expand the scope of risk analysis beyond individual-level assessments—such as those used in risk-need assessment systems—to include risks associated with the prison setting itself. This broader perspective opens space for considering how institutional environments may contribute to, or mitigate, systemic risk. Doing so offers additional insights into how to improve rehabilitation, social reintegration and community safety.

Making prison rehabilitation programming more successful requires aligning with contemporary evidence for effectiveness

Recent evidence-based insights point to the importance of the institutional contexts in shaping the effectiveness of intervention programmes. While the presence of trained professionals is essential, other factors—such as prison climate and culture, the availability of therapeutic space, staff stability, and levels of institutional support—also influence how programmes are implemented and sustained.[180] [181] [182] [183] [184] A programme that appears effective in one setting may not yield the same results in another if institutional conditions differ. This highlights the importance of aligning programme goals with broader prison management and staff practices, especially where prisons face resource constraints or operate under significant population pressure.

Expanding rehabilitative programming across penal systems may present operational challenges, especially in resource-limited contexts. Capacity constraints, overcrowding, and competing institutional priorities can limit what is feasible. Further, despite the global relevance of prisoner rehabilitation, the evidence base on post-release outcomes—whether in terms of successful social reintegration or recidivism—remains heavily concentrated in studies from North America, Western and Northern Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Nonetheless, some jurisdictions have adapted interventions to local conditions. These adaptations suggest that even in resource constrained settings, there may be opportunities to apply core principles—such as tailoring interventions to needs, ensuring respectful treatment, and promoting continuity between custody and community.

The contemporary evidence base highlights a range of priorities for policymaking in prison programming. A central focus is the promotion of high-integrity programme delivery by increasing investment in the training and retention of specialised staff, especially clinical psychologists.[185] [186] At the same time, ensuring that risk assessment tools are responsive to gender is critical; for women in particular, this implies recognising distinct pathways into and out of crime and matching needs with appropriately designed interventions.[187] Additionally, not all types of programming are supported by evidence of impacts on recidivism. Domestic violence programmes, for example, have not been found to show consistent measurable post-release impacts on such violence,[188]

[180] Polaschek, 'Many Sizes Fit All'.
[181] Gannon et al., 'Does Specialized Psychological Treatment for Offending Reduce Recidivism?'
[182] Walton and Elliott, 'A Review of General Cognitive-Behavioral Programs in English and Welsh Prisons and Probation Services'.
[183] Katherine M. Auty and Alison Liebling, 'Exploring the Relationship between Prison Social Climate and Reoffending', *Justice Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2020): 358–81.
[184] Ruth E. Mann, 'Rehabilitative Culture Part 2: An Update on Evidence and Practice', *Prison Service Journal*, no. 244 (July 2019).
[185] Day, 'At a Crossroads?'
[186] Gannon et al., 'Does Specialized Psychological Treatment for Offending Reduce Recidivism?'
[187] Summers et al., 'Examining the Effectiveness of Interventions for Criminal Justice-Involved Women'.
[188] Byrne, *About the First Step Act Independent Review Committee*.

suggesting the need to prioritise funding for those with stronger empirical support, such as multimodal approaches to general violence-reduction,[189] or drug treatment programmes based on therapeutic community models.[190] There is strong evidence of the need to establish and constantly monitor and evaluate programme integrity, including treatment fidelity, staff qualifications, and participant engagement.[191] Finally, aligning programming with the goals of a prison environment conducive to rehabilitation means embedding programming within broader prison culture by fostering safe, supportive environments that align with principles of therapeutic engagement and human dignity.[192]

Supporting prisoners to think about themselves differently promotes pathways out of crime

Evidence from UNODC research in two jurisdictions with quite different resource and capacity profiles converges with an emerging body of empirical evidence for the capacity of prison staff to support key desistance processes.[193] In Namibia, research illustrated the powerful impact of officers of all classes – from frontline security, through case management, skills and therapeutic specialists – to promote meaningful change in prisoners' self-identity and vision for a pro-social future. Desistance, the transition away from offending over time,[194] involves not only addressing the sorts of behavioural or skills related needs that individualised assessment and prison programming[195] attends to. It requires also a fundamental change in the individual's outlook and imagination of what a positive future might hold for them.[196] Many of the efforts to effect such fundamental changes occur outside planned programmatic activities. Assisted desistance reflects efforts to align the focus of prison staff of all grades, from frontline officers to managers, with the empirically established turning points offenders' pathways out of crime.[197] In many places, this happens naturally when things are working well. In Namibia, for example, both prisoners and officers described situations when officers were working as a team to support their rehabilitation and how both motivation and self-confidence that change was possible flowed from that. Conversely, though, when officer behaviour was fragmented and directed toward different priorities, prisoners felt their rehabilitative motivation and progress was undermined.

Embedding an assisted desistance approach is therefore a planned effort across the prison institution to ensure effective rehabilitation and desistance focused practice. Drawing on the evidence of experience in New South Wales, where such efforts had been made, and connecting this with the scientific evidence base suggests four key policy implications. First, the desistance model offers a simple and cogent explanation of how offenders give up offending that is organisationally inclusive, drawing all prison staff into a shared goal and vision. It breaks down the silos wherein rehabilitation can sometimes be viewed as the responsibility only of highly qualified programmes staff, supporting the building of effective teams. Second, assisted desistance is not itself a siloed activity and should be seen as part of a broader reappraisal of the prison environment

[189] Papalia et al., 'A Meta-Analytic Review of the Efficacy of Psychological Treatments for Violent Offenders in Correctional and Forensic Mental Health Settings'.
[190] Perry et al., 'Are Non-Pharmacological Interventions Effective in Reducing Drug Use and Criminality?'
[191] Alison J. Farringer et al., 'Adherence to "What Works": Examining Trends across 14 Years of Correctional Program Assessment', *Corrections* 6, no. 4 (2021): 269–87.
[192] Auty and Liebling, 'Exploring the Relationship between Prison Social Climate and Reoffending'.
[193] Villeneuve et al., 'Assisted Desistance in Formal Settings'.
[194] Shapland et al., Global Perspectives on Desistance.
[195] UNODC, 'Introductory Handbook on the Prevention of Recidivism and the Social Reintegration of Offenders'.
[196] Maruna and Toch, Making Good.
[197] Melissa De Vel-Palumbo et al., 'Assisted Desistance in Correctional Centers: From Theory to Practice', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 50, no. 11 (2023): 1623–42.

and the power of a rehabilitative environment to initiate and support prisoners' motivation to change, including fostering new pro-social identities. Third, assisted desistance is more than simply an idea, and existing measurement tools offer the possibility of gathering data on both prisoners and prison officers' perceptions of progress and support creation of assisted desistance practice frameworks.[198] Finally, tertiary, or relational desistance – the process of re-establishing oneself as a respected member of the pro-social community – encourages engagement between prisoners and the outside community, 'breaking down' the high walls often erected against civil society and other organisations wishing to support prisoners under sentence. These opportunities to support successful social reintegration thus begin long before prisoners' release and should be seen as crucial elements of a rehabilitative prison environment rather than optional and non-core aspects of prison management.

Prison-based rehabilitation should be supported by government-wide policies that are pro-rehabilitation

Converging evidence illustrates the importance of a whole of government approach to rehabilitation, meaning that prisons and prisoner rehabilitation are promoted as a priority and government policy across various strands of activity are aligned with this goal. In the scope of UNODC's research on rehabilitative prison environments, one senior prisons manager in New South Wales emphasised that giving rehabilitation political priority not only secured essential resources but also helped establish an authorising environment for change.[199] This was one dimension of a whole of government approach, seen from a planning perspective. Viewed from the grassroots perspective, prisoners in Namibia spoke repeatedly of the clash they experienced between prison-based vocational education and training efforts, as well as the challenges of gaining employment on release. These ranged from government policies barring former prisoners from holding government positions to labour laws entitling potential employers to demand evidence of a clean criminal record during recruitment for employment. Further, the evidence-based literature describes the considerable challenges faced by former prisoners in accessing suitable reintegration supports due to the challenges of coordination between government agencies and prisons.[200] [201]

Drawing this body of evidence together suggests first that, while prisoners' right to rehabilitation is long established in international instruments [202] and in some regions' human rights jurisprudence,[203] models of whole of government approaches to fulfilling that right are rare. The concept and practice of "throughcare" offers the closest approximation, referring to governments' efforts to coordinate all activities to promote eventual rehabilitation and reintegration as an individual moves through the criminal justice system and during release into the community.[204] [205] Throughcare allows governments to fulfil their positive obligation to rehabilitate in the context of a penal sentence, though as will be described next, it arguably demands more than simple coordination between governmental agencies, such as between prison and probation or aftercare

[198] Ibid.
[199] Corrective Services NSW, 'Interview #1', June 2025.
[200] Mike Maguire, 'The Resettlement of Ex-Prisoners', in *Handbook of Probation* (Willan, 2007).
[201] Ineke Pruin, 'Prisons, Probation and Aftercare Services: Actors, Responsibilities and Cooperation in Resettlement Processes', in *Prisoner Resettlement in Europe* (Routledge, 2018).
[202] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 10(3).
[203] Karlo Nikoleishvili, 'Prisoners' Right to Rehabilitation: Micro and Macro Level Indicators for the Assessment of the Fulfilment of States' Positive Obligation', *German Law Journal*, 16 May 2025, 1–15.
[204] Morag MacDonald et al., 'Throughcare for Prisoners with Problematic Drug Use: A European Perspective', *EuroVista* 2, no. 3 (2012).
[205] Margaret Malloch et al., *The Elements of Effective Through-Care Part 1: International Review*, Report (Universität Tübingen, 2013).

services, which is gaining recognition globally.[206] [207] Global norms for good practice in throughcare are also beginning to be established, including in the form of the United Nations Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies) and their focus on multi-stakeholder partnerships with relevant governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.[208] [209] Accordingly, a whole of government approach to supporting rehabilitation and social reintegration requires coordination of wider government policy, law and regulations. The UNODC research in Namibia revealed considerable discontent among prisoners regarding criminal record checks. Globally, there is evidence that such checks provide significant barriers to post-prison employment.[210] [211] [212] [213]

Bridging the gap between prison and community requires engaging key supports in the community. Yet the UNODC survey on rehabilitative prison environments undertaken in 2024 found that engaging with civil society to support prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration was the single lowest ranked priority among respondents: only three of 62 responding jurisdictions regarded it as a high priority activity.[214] Civil society support has proven effective in assisting prisoners find appropriate employment through providing brokerage services to ensure a durable match,[215] an important service given the evidence that while vocational training can increase post-prison job acquisition, in the longer term far fewer hold on to the.[216]

Finally, in Namibia, both prisoners and prison officers converged in their analysis that government could do more to cultivate community awareness and support for their return to community. Governments, for their part, might wonder about the receptiveness of communities to the idea of participating in offenders' reintegration. Yet there is strong empirical evidence globally that while the public support punishment of offenders they also support their rehabilitation both in prison[217] and on re-entry to community,[218] [219] [220] [221] and this support extends even to providing active support for the reintegration of serious offenders such as sex offenders.[222]

[206] December Mandlenkosi Mpanza et al., 'Aftercare Services to People with Substance Use Disorders: Analysis of South African Policy', *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 28, no. 2 (2021): 138–55.
[207] E. M. Ajala and A. E. Oguntuase, 'Effectiveness of After-Care-Services in the Reintegration and Supply of Labour after Incarceration in the Prisons: Lagos and Oyo States Prison Command Experience', *African Research Review* 5, no. 5 (2011): 5.
[208] Van Hout et al., 'What Is Optimal Integrated Multi-Agency Throughcare?'
[209] E/CN.15/2025/14
[210] Baier, 'Reducing Employment Barriers for People with Criminal Records.'
[211] Stacey Hannem and Chris Bruckert, *Stigma Revisited: Implications of the Mark* (University of Ottawa Press, 2012).
[212] Christopher Uggen et al., 'THE EDGE OF STIGMA: AN EXPERIMENTAL AUDIT OF THE EFFECTS OF LOW-LEVEL CRIMINAL RECORDS ON EMPLOYMENT', *Criminology* 52, no. 4 (2014): 627–54.
[213] Anita Grace, '"Get to Know Me, Not the Inmate": Women's Management of the Stigma of Criminal Records', *The British Journal of Criminology* 62, no. 1 (2022): 73–89.
[214] UNODC, *Prison Matters 2024: Global Prison Population and Trends; a Focus on Rehabilitation*.
[215] Ministry of Justice, *Justice Data Lab Analysis: Reoffending Behaviour after Support from Offploy*, Justice Data Lab (Ministry of Justice, 2024).
[216] Connell et al., 'Effectiveness of Interventions to Improve Employment for People Released from Prison'.
[217] Mateja Vuk et al., 'The Pragmatic Public? The Impact of Practical Concerns on Support for Punitive and Rehabilitative Prison Policies', *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45, no. 2 (2020): 273–92.
[218] Brett Garland et al., 'Measuring Public Support for Prisoner Reentry Options', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 60, no. 12 (2016): 1406–24.
[219] Carmelia Nathen et al., 'Singapore's Multi-Pronged Approach in the Rehabilitation of Persons Who Have Offended', in *Approaches to Offender Rehabilitation in Asian Jurisdictions* (Routledge, 2024).
[220] Tarela Juliet Ike et al., 'Public Perceptions and Attitudes towards Ex-Offenders and Their Reintegration in Nigeria: A Mixed-Method Study', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 13 July 2023.
[221] Efrat Shoham and Uri Timor, 'Once a Criminal, Always a Criminal? Attitudes Towards Reintegration of Released Prisoners Among Israeli Public', *Canadian Social Science* 10, no. 6 (2014): 6.
[222] Mechtild A Höing et al., 'Community Support for Sex Offender Rehabilitation in Europe', *European Journal of Criminology* 13, no. 4 (2016): 491–516.

ANNEXES

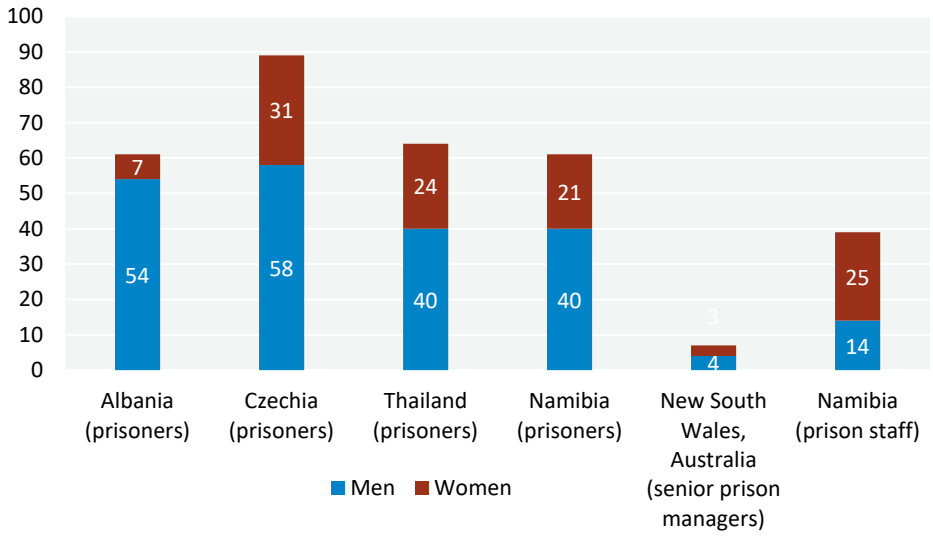
ANNEX I – METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF UNODC FIELD RESEARCH ON REHABILITATIVE PRISON ENVIRONMENTS

Between 2019 and 2025, UNODC conducted field studies in five countries across four global regions—Albania, Australia, Czechia, Namibia, and Thailand—with the aim of exploring causes of recidivism and how prison environments can support rehabilitation.

In Albania, Czechia, and Thailand, research focused on convicted prisoners who had served at least one prior prison sentence. These studies sought to understand how prisoners perceive the causes of their reoffending and the conditions that support or hinder personal change. In Namibia, the study adopted a strengths-based approach to examine what prisoners and prison staff identify as effective in fostering rehabilitation, including the sustainability and scalability of such practices. In Australia, the research centred on strategic-level insights, based on interviews with seven senior correctional managers from Corrective Services New South Wales (NSW) who are involved in the design and implementation of rehabilitative prison environments.

Focus groups were organized in Albania, Czechia, Thailand, and Namibia, with a total of 275 prisoners (192 men and 83 women) in 11 prisons and 41 staff members (16 men and 25 women) in 2 prisons in Namibia.

Figure 16: **Number of focus group and interview participants per country, by sex, 2019-2025**



Source: UNODC field studies in Albania, Czechia, Thailand, Namibia and New South Wales, Australia.

Note: 13 focus groups in three prisons in Albania; 10 focus groups in four prisons in Czechia; 8 focus groups in two prisons in Thailand; and 14 focus groups in Namibia (9 with prisoners and 5 with staff), and 7 interviews in Australia (New South Wales) with correctional services senior managers.

In Namibia and Australia, the field studies aimed to understand how prison environments can be made more conducive to rehabilitation. This approach aligns with the United Nations' commitment to equality, inclusion, and leaving no one behind, recognising that prisoners often come from some of the most marginalised segments of society. As such, a strengths-based methodology was used. Rather than evaluating deficits or barriers, the research identified what is working well and why. Interviews were guided by the technique of appreciative inquiry, which seeks to amplify positive practices and understand how effective change is experienced by those closest to it, such as strategic planners, policy experts, and frontline prison staff.

Importantly, all research activities adhered to ethical standards in line with UNODC research quality standards and ethical protocols. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was ensured, and participation was entirely voluntary. These safeguards were especially important given the sensitivity of the prison environment and the vulnerability of the populations involved.

Together, these field studies contribute to a growing body of evidence on how prison environments can actively support rehabilitation. By centring the voices of those with lived experience—both prisoners and prison staff—and combining them with strategic perspectives from senior officials, the research offers a nuanced understanding of what enables meaningful change within prison systems. The insights gathered serve not only to inform national reform efforts but also to support broader international dialogue on effective, human-rights-based approaches to incarceration. They highlight the value of inclusive, evidence-informed policy development and the potential for systemic transformation when rehabilitative goals are embedded in the everyday realities of prison life.

ANNEX 2 – REGIONAL GROUPINGS

Africa

Eastern Africa – Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Middle Africa – Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, Sao Tome and Principe

Northern Africa – Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia

Southern Africa – Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa

Western Africa – Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia (Republic of The), Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo

Americas

Caribbean – Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago

Central America – Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama

Northern America – Canada, United States of America

South America – Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)

Asia

Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

Eastern Asia – China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Republic of Korea

South-eastern Asia – Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Viet Nam

Southern Asia – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

Western Asia – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cyprus, Georgia, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, Türkiye, United Arab Emirates, Yemen

Europe

Eastern Europe – Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Ukraine

Northern Europe – Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Southern Europe – Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Portugal, San Marino, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain

Western Europe – Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Switzerland

Oceania

Australia and New Zealand – Australia, New Zealand

Melanesia – Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu

Micronesia – Kiribati, Micronesia (Federated States of), Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau

Polynesia – Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu