

Prison work

A guide to regulated and rehabilitative-based approaches –
informed by lived experience



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Cover photo: Livestock farming serves as a rehabilitation programme at Khao Prik Agricultural Industrial Institution in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. Through hands-on training, inmates acquire practical vocational skills that support sustainable livelihoods and facilitate successful reintegration into society upon release. Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020.

Graphic design by Alex Valy.

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Introduction

When this Guide was published there were an estimated 11.7 million people in prison, representing a 25–27 percent increase in the global prison population since 2000.¹ Alarming levels of overcrowding in many facilities have dire consequences for the human rights of people living in prison and the situation of prison staff, including in relation to prison work programmes.

The provision of appropriate work² and vocational training for people in prison can be extremely positive, but is currently severely compromised by overcrowding, violence, corruption, organised crime and systematic failures in prison governance globally.

People in prison should have the opportunity to undertake work and training in line with their individual treatment needs, but this rarely happens in practice. While many do participate in some form of work, most work is informal and unregulated.

Work in prison is often unpaid or compensated at a fraction of the respective country's minimum wage, and fails to cover even the most basic necessities. Given that a large number of people in prison are disproportionately affected by poverty before imprisonment – and that poverty itself is often criminalised through discriminatory laws and practices – these conditions not only exacerbate existing inequalities but also place a significant economic burden on families, and highlight the urgent need to align prison work with fair pay and human rights standards.

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While many people in prison participate in some form of work, most work is informal and unregulated.

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Where work programmes are formalised, there is a great variation in the relevant policy and legal frameworks as well as the type of work available and how it is allocated. People in prison have far fewer protections than workers in the community, with widespread abusive working conditions reported.

This Guide takes a human rights-based approach to prison work, looking at considerations that can impede successful work programmes, protections that need to be in place, potential violations, and how useful prison work is for rehabilitation and social reintegration. It has been developed amid increasing calls for greater protections and clearer safeguards for prison workers, including recommendations for a more detailed and coherent set of international standards for prison work.³ Such developments would contribute to improved regulation and oversight of both public and private sector involvement, and help to ensure that prison work is genuinely rehabilitative.

1. For more information on prison population trends see, PRI and Thailand Institute of Justice, *Global Prison Trends 2026*, May 2026, <https://www.penalreform.org/resource/global-prison-trends-2026>.

2. In this Guide, the terms 'prison labour', 'prison work' and 'prison workers' are used interchangeably to denote labour performed by people in prison.

3. See, for example: Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research (ICJR), *Labouring behind bars: Assessing international law on working prisoners*, November 2023, www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/labouring_behind_bars.pdf; UN Human Rights Council, Contemporary forms of slavery as affecting currently and formerly incarcerated people. Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, A/HRC/57/46, July 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5746-contemporary-forms-slavery-affecting-currently-and-formerly.

Lived experience

This Guide draws on the insights and expertise of people with lived experience of imprisonment, recognising that it is essential to learn directly from those with first-hand experience in order to fully understand the impacts of prison work programmes, whether positive or negative. People with lived experience can provide insights and expertise on the benefits and risks of prison work from a different perspective to that of prison staff, for example, and they are uniquely placed to advocate for reform, giving a richer understanding of what can be done better – not least to protect human rights.

This approach guided our exploration of the gulf between the rehabilitative ideal and the reality of prison labour, with a focus on who really benefits from prison labour programmes. We interviewed 20 people (9 men and 11 women) who were previously in prison and who had experience of participating in different types of prison work. Participants came from different regions and countries with varied work models and represented diverse backgrounds to ensure a balanced overview of prison work globally. While at least one interviewee was detained in a facility for children for part of their time in detention, the focus of the interviews was on adult prisons.

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The insights and expertise of people with lived experience of imprisonment guided our exploration of the gulf between the rehabilitative ideal and the reality of prison labour, with a focus on who really benefits from prison labour programmes.

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The interviews were accompanied by desk-based research and consultations with an interdisciplinary expert group, providing detailed insight into how work is organised and allocated globally, as well as individual motivations and experiences of prison work. The research followed Penal Reform International's (PRI) guidelines on involving people with lived experience in criminal justice reform – as set out in our 10-point plan on this topic – including securing informed consent and taking a gender-sensitive, trauma-informed approach, and giving options for anonymity and confidentiality.⁴

4. PRI, 10-point plan: Involving people with lived experience in criminal justice reform. A focus on fragile and conflicted-affected settings, 2024, www.penalreform.org/resource/involving-people-with-lived-experience-in-criminal-justice.

Context

Across a range of jurisdictions, the absence of comprehensive and comparable data on prison labour remains a persistent challenge. Experts and practitioners consulted by PRI in February 2026 emphasised that even the most basic indicators – such as the number of people in prison engaged in work – are often difficult to obtain. While some countries provide partial insights, these tend to be fragmented and uneven. In the US, for example, certain states publish data on participation in prison industries, including both privately operated schemes and state-run enterprises, with some jurisdictions mandating annual reporting on employment figures, wages and profits. However, such programmes account for only a marginal proportion of the prison population, sometimes as little as one percent. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of people in prison who work are engaged in institutional support roles – such as cleaning, catering or maintenance – yet systematic data on this form of labour is far less accessible. In other contexts, information is available through official reports, national human rights bodies and parliamentary oversight, though detailed figures on outputs and revenues remain limited, often due to administrative or security constraints.

PRI's research highlighted inconsistencies in how prison labour is defined and recorded, which compound existing data gaps. In some systems, institutional support roles are not formally recognised as 'work', on the basis that they do not generate direct financial returns – despite their significant contribution to the functioning and cost-efficiency of prison systems. As a result, large numbers of people in prison engaged in routine, and in some cases unpaid, labour remain statistically underrepresented. Attempts to obtain clearer data through access-to-information mechanisms have yielded mixed results, reflecting both ambiguities in definitions and limitations in record-keeping practices. In jurisdictions with established internal monitoring systems, such as the Netherlands, data collection may prioritise payroll and administrative needs over analytical clarity, with broad categorisations that obscure the nature and scale of different types of work. Taken together, these factors point to a systemic lack of transparency and standardisation, hindering efforts to assess the scope, conditions and impacts of prison labour globally.

This lack of clarity in data and definitions also has implications for understanding the diversity of prison work itself. Prison work covers a wide variety of scenarios, from forced prison labour to genuinely positive and rehabilitative work opportunities. The understanding of what constitutes work, working conditions, pay and models of employment vary greatly around the world. There are also many factors that can impact the effectiveness and sustainability of any work programme, including a failure to protect human rights. Where opportunities are limited, favouritism and discrimination may feature in the allocation of jobs, with some groups of people in prison more affected than others.

Increasingly, many prisons are in fragile and conflict-affected settings or in locations that are vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis and natural hazards. At least 100 jurisdictions have overcrowded prisons, with many exceeding double their intended limits.⁵ Effective rehabilitation continues to be hindered by under-resourcing, inadequate staffing and persistent violence, and many facilities do not have the physical space, appropriate infrastructure or necessary funding to implement successful work and training programmes.

There are many potential human rights violations associated with prison labour, including the risk of corruption – particularly where the work generates significant profit – as well as concern over workers' physical health and safety and the potential for abuse, including of vulnerable groups. Prison work may also amount to contemporary forms of slavery, with links to colonial practices in some countries.

Despite the potential benefits of rehabilitative imprisonment, globally many authorities continue to favour more punitive styles of prison management. In such environments prison work, where it exists, is more likely to be forced, afflictive or of a functional nature, with little consideration given to how the work might assist individuals to reintegrate into society and find appropriate work after their release. Even in prisons that have moved towards integrating rehabilitative approaches, punitive measures may still take precedence in terms of resourcing and time management, leading to a shortage of positive work and other rehabilitation opportunities.

5. PRI and Thailand Institute of Justice, *Global Prison Trends 2026*, May 2026.

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The guards punished me by making me fetch six drums of water, that's 20 litres of water per drum. The guards would just laugh at me as I struggled. The worst job was when they made me dispose of soiled sanitary pads. They only gave me one protective glove. I felt that I would so easily get sick, and I received nothing in return. I think they made me do this work just to humiliate and punish me. Prison work should be rehabilitative, and people should be paid for it, but the prison work here isn't good for anyone.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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The opportunity to work in prison should be a positive experience, providing meaningful activities for those detained, supporting their rehabilitation and assisting them in finding work opportunities after release – therefore also helping society. Prison work can also benefit prison administrations, helping to maintain order, reduce violence, improve mental health and support basic prison functioning.

However, the reality is that the vast majority of people in prison globally have no access to meaningful work opportunities and many of those that do have little choice over what they do, with many potential associated human rights violations, few protections, and little or no pay. For those who do have positive work opportunities, the rehabilitative potential of this work is difficult to determine.

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People in prison can work here and they do work, but the problem is they don't do meaningful work. Prison work should be meaningful, and it should be relational, including consideration of what people in prison want out of it.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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The learnings from this Guide must help shape future prison work to ensure that opportunities are truly rehabilitative and should take into account changing labour markets, including emerging technologies, the

increasing involvement of the private sector and the growth of public-private partnerships. The learnings must also inform considerations around the climate crisis and the need for greener prisons.⁶

Overcrowding and conditions of detention

Overcrowding and poor conditions of detention are among the biggest challenges in the provision of prison work. Prison overcrowding leads to inhuman and degrading treatment, impacts all aspects of running prisons, and has been found to undermine the provision of purposeful work.⁷ The prison environment itself is often not conducive to positive work experiences or effective rehabilitation, particularly when people are isolated, badly treated and held in harsh conditions.

Overcrowded prisons are also typically under-resourced and under-staffed, meaning there is not enough money, space or staffing capacity to run and manage effective work programmes alongside other competing priorities. When prisons are overcrowded, people tend to have reduced out-of-cell time and work may also be limited due to security concerns. High staff turnover linked to overcrowding also impacts work opportunities.

Prison work and other rehabilitation programmes are not effective in abusive environments, and basic human rights must be fulfilled for people to be able to work without adverse consequences. This includes ensuring physical safety, decent living conditions, and having access to nutritious food, safe water, good healthcare, and regular contact with family and friends.

In many facilities there are simply not enough official work opportunities to match the number of people detained and only a small minority have access to meaningful work. In severely overcrowded prisons with poor detention conditions and high rates of diseases, life in prison can be a matter of day-to-day survival, with rehabilitation and meaningful work opportunities a low priority.

Even in countries that typically have good work opportunities, periods of overcrowding can seriously affect the continuity and effectiveness of programmes, and this can impact particular groups of people in prison disproportionately. One woman who had been in prison shared with PRI how the prison she was detained in with a capacity of less than 150 was unable to offer work to even half of those detained when operating at normal capacity, and when the population rose to over 200, work opportunities were even harder to come by.

6. PRI and UNICRI, *Green prisons: A guide to creating environmentally sustainable prisons*, 2025.

7. Council of Europe, *Anti-torture committee warns of serious prison overcrowding and informal prison hierarchies*, 24 April 2025, www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/council-of-europe-anti-torture-committee-warns-about-serious-prison-overcrowding-and-informal-prisoner-hierarchies-in-europe.

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Everyone wants to work but there are just not enough work opportunities because of massive overcrowding. In one men's prison there are 2,000 held in a prison which has capacity for 800. There are about 10 jobs for every 50 people. This means that older people or people with disabilities are unlikely to be prioritised for work opportunities.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Understaffing and lack of resources

A lack of resources also undermines the provision of purposeful work, as our research found in several European countries. For example, in Hungary, limited resources and overcrowding were found to have affected prisons adversely, with pre-trial and high-security prisoners in particular having no or limited access to work, education or other out-of-cell activities.⁸ In Norway, where the majority of people in prison do have access to work and education, our research found that cost-cutting and staffing shortages 'led to irregular work schedules and disruptions in programmes, undermining the meaningfulness of work regimes and negatively impacting rehabilitation'.⁹ In England and Wales it was found that despite pockets of effective provision delivered by dedicated and creative staff, too many people in prison spend their days locked in their cells, with overcrowding, a lack of workshop space and instructors, equipment failures and ageing infrastructure compounding the situation.¹⁰

A lack of budget for infrastructure and materials can also severely impact the availability of work programmes. One interviewee explained that a lack of resources means that work opportunities are simply not a priority. In many countries, authorities also struggle to offer work opportunities because infrastructure is dilapidated and in need of investment.¹¹

Economic climate

The economic climate can affect the work situation for people in prison in the same way it impacts people outside prison. Economic downturns affect prison industry because of the reduced demand for goods

and services, leading to fewer work opportunities and limited availability of working hours. Local businesses may also be less likely to consider prison partnerships during economic downturns.

Budget cuts can also affect funding for vocational training programmes, including those run by external providers. Conversely, a strong economy is likely to lead to enhanced work and training opportunities for people in prison, with a higher likelihood of post-release work opportunities. Interviewees also noted that cost-of-living increases impact prices of goods in prisons, with wages rarely increased to reflect this.

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The cost-of-living increases outside prison have really impacted prices in prison. Things have doubled or tripled in price but there haven't been any changes in how much people get paid. There can't be real rehabilitation unless people can save money for their release.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Prisons in lower-income countries are likely to find it harder to implement effective rehabilitative work programmes, but it is still possible. PRI has previously reported that there are successful programmes in even the most difficult situations, noting that facilities that prioritise rehabilitation are also easier to manage and cheaper to run in the long term.¹² In Jordan, despite constrained resources, prison facilities provide a range of rehabilitation initiatives, including vocational workshops in carpentry, metalwork and handicrafts and broader vocational training, as well as educational and literacy programmes. The effectiveness of these interventions is underpinned by collaborations with vocational institutions, professional oversight, and the alignment of training with employment prospects upon release.¹³

Where there are more resources available, austerity policies nevertheless directly impact the availability of activities, access to work and time outside of cells, with fewer staff to accompany and supervise prisoner movements – leading to more lockdowns and people spending more time shut in cells, missing activity

8. CPT, *Report to the Hungarian Government on the visit to Hungary carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2024) 36, 2024.

9. CPT, *Report to the Norwegian Government on the visit to Norway carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2025) 03, 2025.

10. HM Inspectorate of Prisons, *Major cuts threaten to derail already poor provision of work and training in prisons*, 13 October 2025, hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/major-cuts-threaten-to-derail-already-poor-provision-of-work-and-training-in-prisons.

11. With regards to Serbia, see for example: CPT, *Report to the Serbian Government on the periodic visit to Serbia carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2022) 03, 2022.

12. PRI and Thailand Institute of Justice, *The rehabilitation and social reintegration of women prisoners. Implementation of the Bangkok Rules*, May 2019.

13. Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

slots or work.¹⁴ For example, in England and Wales, opportunities for paid work in open prisons have been adversely affected by the economic climate, with the Inspectorate of Probation also finding that opportunities for paid work for those on temporary leave (release from prison for a certain period) were particularly sparse in rural communities.¹⁵

Violence and security

Authorities in insecure and violent prisons may struggle to provide appropriate work opportunities in prisons, with security considerations taking precedence over rehabilitation, health and well-being. The imposition of restrictive regimes, combined with long periods of confinement in cells, means that people are unable to participate in work or other rehabilitation activities. Lockdowns can also interrupt the continuity of work and training programmes.

Enhanced security measures can also make it difficult for people to progress to lower-security or enhanced regimes (where there is more freedoms and privileges in exchange for good behaviour), where more or better working opportunities are available; this might particularly affect those held in high-security regimes for long periods. In many countries, people who are held in higher-security facilities have less opportunities to work, or sometimes none at all.

Authorities must make efforts to prioritise rehabilitation in all circumstances, including for those held at higher-security levels. This has longer-term benefits for broader security, as rehabilitative environments are known to reduce violence, enhance prisoner-staff relations and improve safety.

Interviewees reported that those held in lower-security regimes were usually prioritised for work opportunities, especially where such opportunities were limited. Where people in prison are held in separate or specialised housing, including ostensibly for their own safety and security or that of others, this may also impact their employment opportunities. One interviewee noted that people detained for radicalisation or extremist beliefs were isolated and barred from work, even in cases where individuals showed genuine willingness to change.

Health, natural hazards and climate emergencies

Disease outbreaks and other health emergencies also impact the availability and continuity of work programmes. Globally, this was most acutely observed during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdowns, coupled with social distancing requirements and low staff numbers, meant that people were locked up for extended periods with severely restricted opportunities to participate in work and other opportunities.¹⁶ The lack of continuity of employment and training heavily impacted individual rehabilitation, and some programmes were slow to return or were discontinued entirely.¹⁷ Authorities should have contingency plans in place for how rehabilitation and work programmes may continue where possible, or alternatives put in place, as part of emergency planning – including considerations of the needs of particular groups of people in prison.

There are many innovative examples where authorities made efforts to ensure the continuity of rehabilitation as much as possible during the pandemic, including by involving people in prison in COVID relief efforts and the introduction of online rehabilitation programmes and work opportunities.

In Ireland, a well-established programme involving people detained working as Red Cross volunteers in prisons was adapted to support the COVID-19 response. Through peer-led activities, volunteers promoted mental health awareness, infection prevention, and access to education, while also distributing health information, learning materials, and guidance on safety measures throughout the pandemic.¹⁸

In Northern Ireland, people in prison were engaged in efforts to provide support to local health service staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹ Other facilities introduced in-cell work opportunities, including needlework to make cushions and quilts.²⁰ Work such as horticulture and other activities, which allowed for social distancing, often continued without interruption and, in some cases, these programmes expanded. Other work, including work to keep facilities functioning such as cooking and cleaning, often continued out of necessity.

14. CPT, *30th General Report of the CPT*, CPT/Inf(2021)5-part, 2020.

15. HM Inspectorates of Probation and Prisons, *A joint inspection of Life sentence prisoners*, September 2013, hmiprison.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/a-joint-inspection-of-life-sentence-prisoners.

16. See, for example: Samaritans, *Coronavirus and people in prison*, www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/research-policy/coronavirus-and-suicide/one-year-on-data-on-covid-19/coronavirus-and-people-in-prison.

17. HM Inspectorate of Prisons, *Prisons still failing to support rehabilitation*, Chief Inspector warns, 5 July 2023, hmiprison.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/prisons-still-failing-to-support-rehabilitation-chief-inspector-warns.

18. Irish Red Cross, *Irish Red Cross (IRC): Community Based Health and First Aid (CBHFA) Prison Program: IRC Inmate Volunteers Response to COVID-19 in Irish Prisons*, February 2021, www.redcross.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CBHFA-Volunteer-Response-to-COVID-19.pdf.

19. 'Hydebank Wood inmates bake up some treats for NHS heroes', *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 April 2020, www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/hydebank-wood-inmates-bake-up-some-treats-for-nhs-heroes/a/113781103.html.

20. Prison Reform Trust, *A CAPPTIVE snapshot of life under Covid*, 16 March 2021, prisonreformtrust.org.uk/a-capptive-snapshot-of-life-under-covid.

In **Kazakhstan**, people in prison who were usually employed in the production of building materials, metal structures, and wood and plastic products and in food processing were instead engaged in the manufacture of reusable masks, protective suits, screens and disinfection corridors during the pandemic. This served the dual purpose of tackling the acute shortage of personal protection equipment (PPE) in the country, while also providing people in prison with purposeful work at a time when other activities were reduced or suspended.²¹

In **Jordan**, PRI worked with authorities to establish a vocational training programme in prisons to produce sanitation machines for police stations throughout the country.²²

The changing global climate is already having a significant impact on prisoner rehabilitation, including opportunities to work. While in some instances people in prison are engaged in climate-related disaster response, in other locations the impacts of the climate crisis have severely disrupted or curtailed work and other

rehabilitation opportunities. In 2019, Cyclone Idai caused severe damage to multiple prisons in Mozambique, necessitating the relocation of hundreds of people in prison, while at Buzi prison approximately 40 detainees and staff were left stranded on a rooftop without access to food or water. In Texas in the US, the relocation of some people due to extreme heat has affected the continuity of work and training programmes.²³ Some people in prison have also reported the impacts of working long hours in extreme temperatures – a growing problem with the changing climate – with no access to water, rest or toilet facilities, with only some outdoor work restricted when extreme temperatures are reached.²⁴ Staffing shortages linked to extreme heat can also limit access to work.

Disruptions to work opportunities also occur where infrastructure has been damaged or where people have had to be evacuated due to natural hazards such as floods, wildfires or earthquakes, with temporary facilities unable to provide for rehabilitation needs due to overcrowding and staff shortages.

21. PRI, *Good governance for prisons. Putting good governance into action during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic*, March 2022.

22. PRI, *Prisons in Crises: Involvement of prison populations during times of crisis*, 2021, www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2021/special-focus-2021-prisons-in-crises/involvement-of-prison-populations-during-times-of-crisis.

23. PRI, *Natural hazards and prisons: Protecting human rights of people in prison in disaster prevention, response and recovery*, December 2021.

24. ACLU, *ACLU Report Finds Incarcerated Workers Earn Between \$0.02 and \$0.40 Per Hour in Louisiana*, 22 June 2022, www.aclu.org/press-releases/aclu-report-finds-incarcerated-workers-earn-between-002-and-040-hour-louisiana.

What is prison work

While this Guide is focused mainly on official prison work programmes and schemes, it is important to consider the many and varied forms of work carried out by people in prison. This includes work that is voluntary, incentivised or mandatory, paid or unpaid, formal or informal, and organised by prison authorities, prisoners or other entities.

Most prison work programmes have the potential to be rehabilitative if well planned and implemented.

There are many different models and types of prison work around the world, including in facilities where prison work placements are mandatory or where a significant proportion of the prison population are offered work, to locations where there are very few official work opportunities. Prison work can sometimes be purely to support prison operations, while in other contexts there are a whole range of prison industries available. Unofficial work is also common; PRI's research found that in many locations, the vast majority of people in prison have no access to official work opportunities but are engaged in other types of work. (See Work in informal economies)

Vital services and prison maintenance

Many prisoners are employed to carry out daily prison functions, including in response to budgetary constraints or as part of efforts to reduce prison expenditure. This work might be paid or otherwise rewarded, or is sometimes performed with no pay or other recognition.²⁵ Essentially this type of work fulfils functions that prison authorities might otherwise have to employ in-house staff or outside agencies to perform. It could include cleaning duties, laundry, cooking, gardening, or general maintenance and repairs.

This work is not usually designed to be specifically rehabilitative and might be carried out under duress, or people might choose to do it simply to keep themselves occupied. On the other hand, if organised effectively –

including with decent remuneration and other benefits – this type of work can provide individuals with valuable skills and experience.

Prison infrastructure

People detained sometimes participate in larger-scale prison building and renovation work. This can provide useful skills and experience and can be part of a specific rehabilitation programme.

For example in **England**, where a group of people on temporary leave from prison were involved in the construction of a new prison, providing them with on-site training and support to transition into future employment in the construction industry.²⁶

In the **Netherlands**, people in prison may assist with minor building refurbishments, predominantly painting interior walls, typically as a component of a broader painting training programme.²⁷

This type of work can also lead to exploitative prison labour and dangerous working conditions in scenarios where people in prison are carrying out work with the sole purpose of reducing costs for prison authorities. In Cambodia, people in prison were found to be building a new prison through a private company under questionable conditions, including a lack of health and safety precautions and with very little pay.²⁸

Additional prison services

Some people detained also become professionally involved in additional prison services including those working as librarians, tutors, peer counsellors, mentors or healthcare assistants.

²⁵ For example, in Hungary the Prison Act specifies that people in prisons may take part in the cleaning, maintenance and care of prisons and that this is without remuneration. CPT, *Report to the Hungarian Government on the visit to Hungary carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2024) 36, 2024, rm.coe.int/1680b29ebd.

²⁶ Constructing Excellence, *HMP Five Wells*, constructingexcellence.org.uk/hmp-five-wells.

²⁷ Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

²⁸ 'Amid Overcrowding, Inmates Build New Prison', *The Cambodia Daily*, 26 August 2014, english.cambodiadaily.com/2014/08/26/amid-overcrowding-inmates-build-new-prison.

In one women's prison in **Japan**, where the number of elderly people in prison continues to expand, women in prison who have nursing qualifications are asked to provide voluntary nursing care for elderly prisoners.²⁹

Peer support and counselling in prison is another source of useful engagement for people who are imprisoned. Though often voluntary, these opportunities not only provide valuable services within prisons but can also be extremely beneficial for those engaged in the programmes. Peer-led programmes have documented positive results, including in HIV/AIDS and broader health education, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide and violence prevention.

In **Canada** it was noted that peer-based counselling can help mitigate the logistical problems of providing 24-hour access to healthcare staff, with peer counsellors also reporting that they increased their own sense of self-worth and confidence and learnt valuable skills.³⁰

In **Turkey**, peer mentors play a crucial role in facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration, because their first-hand experience creates more effective connections than traditional service providers and they are regarded as more credible role models, fostering trust and motivation.³¹

Small- and large-scale farming

Many prisons have small-scale food production projects, including agriculture and cattle, that often produce food for people in prison, especially in situations of food insecurity. In the Central African Republic³² and South Sudan³³ for example, where prisons frequently face acute food insecurity, several prisons have turned to farming to supplement food supplies and offer more nutritious meals while also providing useful skills to workers. These skills can prove to be particularly valuable upon release, especially in situations of food insecurity.

Prisons, forced labour and contemporary forms of slavery

Core labour rights include protection from forced labour, fair remuneration, and the rights to organise and strike. Assertions that justify the exclusion of people in prison who work from these core rights require careful scrutiny, particularly in light of prevailing arguments that frame prison work as inherently punitive. Such blanket exclusions, often grounded in notions of punishment, risk reinforcing the erosion of prisoners' identities and exposing them to exploitation, and are in conflict with contemporary legal and moral standards that affirm that imprisonment does not entail the loss of all rights. A rights-based approach to prison labour – extending protections comparable to those of other workers – would better support rehabilitation and social reintegration by preserving social ties, fostering transferable skills, and enabling financial stability upon release.³⁴

The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery has noted that while prison work is not forced labour in itself under international human rights and labour standards (see International standards), it may amount to contemporary forms of slavery and to other human rights violations if the necessary safeguards are not in place.³⁵ The Special Rapporteur also warned of the risks of formerly imprisoned people being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery after their release, particularly because they are often unable to find employment, lack access to education or training, and often do not have any form of social security.³⁶

Contemporary forms of slavery can take many forms, including traditional slavery, forced labour, bonded labour, human trafficking, sexual slavery and child labour, and often involve hidden populations who are isolated – including people in prison. The people who are most affected are often the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society. Slavery is also more prevalent in violent or politically unstable countries.³⁷

The Council of Europe's Anti-Torture Committee (CPT) has also noted that the situation of people in prison who belong to the lowest caste of the informal prisoner hierarchy could amount to modern slavery in the form of forced labour, and could be considered to constitute a continuing violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits all forms of degrading treatment and obliges state authorities to take appropriate measures to prevent such treatment.³⁸

29. 'Japan's elderly are lonely and struggling. Some women choose to go to jail instead', CNN World, 18 January 2025, edition.cnn.com/2025/01/18/asia/japan-elderly-largest-womens-prison-intl-hnk-dst.

30. Grant J. Devilly et al., 'Prison-based peer-education schemes', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Volume 10, 2005, www.devilly.org/Publications/Peer_Counselling.pdf.

31. ICPA, *Empowering Change Through Lived Experience: A Comprehensive Analysis of Peer Support in Correctional Services*, 17 June 2025, icpa.org/resource/empowering-change-through-lived-experience-a-comprehensive-analysis-of-peer-support-in-correctional-services.html.

32. See, for example: United Nations, *CAR / Berberati Prison Nutrition*, media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d240/d2407604.

33. See, for example: United Nations Peacekeeping, *Tonj North prison farm transforms lives of inmates and community members alike*, 19 December 2024.

34. Virginia Mantouvalou, 'Work in prison: Reintegration or exclusion and exploitation?', *European Labour Law Journal*, Volume 15, Issue 30, 2024, pp. 409–425.

35. Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Purpose of the mandate, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-slavery.

36. UN Human Rights Council, *Contemporary forms of slavery as affecting currently and formerly incarcerated people. Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*, A/HRC/57/46, July 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5746-contemporary-forms-slavery-affecting-currently-and-formerly.

37. Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Purpose of the mandate, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-slavery.

38. CPT, *34th General Report. Activities 2024, 2025*, rm.coe.int/1680b57a68.

Some countries also incorporate large-scale commercial farming into their prison work programmes, on prison land or in nearby areas. Examples include banana plantations in prisons in the Philippines,³⁹ cotton plantations in the US,⁴⁰ dairy farming in Wales,⁴¹ and meat production in broiler farming in South Africa.⁴² Some of these projects are linked to private for-profit corporations and the production of goods for export.

Industrial manufacturing work and other large-scale production

Work programmes often involve repairing goods, factory assembly or making goods for sale. They can be small-scale programmes for in-prison use, but are often run on a larger scale and in partnership with external businesses for supply and retail. The programmes might also be entirely organised and run by external businesses. Examples include furniture production, metalwork, and the manufacture of electronics and clothing. In some countries prison workers are involved in large-scale food processing⁴³ or external laundry services.⁴⁴

There are many examples of private companies or public institutions outsourcing work to prisons or using the prison workforce in their business model – including in industry and manufacturing – in order to benefit from cheaper prison labour or to assist in rehabilitation and skills development. Examples include outsourced call centre work,⁴⁵ AI data labelling,⁴⁶ printing work,⁴⁷ recycling and waste management,⁴⁸ repackaging in-flight headsets for airlines⁴⁹ and making military parts.⁵⁰

Work in informal economies

As in all societies, there is a huge amount of work carried out in prison as part of the informal economy – including to ensure physical integrity and personal survival – as well as work driven by organised crime groups and other sub-cultures, which is closely linked to

corruption within prisons. This might include carrying out informal work for other people in prison or prison staff in return for protection from violence, to pay debts, or to earn enough money to buy food. It could also include informal working arrangements that enable people to send money home to their family for basic living costs. Others might work in the informal economy due to alcohol or drug dependency.

Much of the informal work in prisons results from the lack of opportunities to earn sufficient money through legitimate means. Where official work is not available, this type of work can be an important source of income for some and is likely to continue as long as official work is lacking and is poorly remunerated. Informal work can include trade in permitted or banned items such as food, toiletries, tobacco, alcohol, drugs and mobile phones. It can also include forced labour, especially when driven by organised crime groups. Vulnerable groups of people in prison might be particularly at risk of labour abuse as part of the informal economy and measures need to be in place to protect them.

People in prison with particular skills or qualifications may also carry out work as part of the informal economy and some prisons rely on informal work for their basic functioning, with individuals exchanging or charging for their services. Examples could include the work of barbers, interpreters, accountants, writers, lawyers, fitness trainers and tattoo artists. Some people might also prepare meals, clean cells or do laundry for others in exchange for money, food, other goods or protection.

Sex work

Sex work is common in both male and female facilities, between men and women and between people of the same gender, and might involve prison staff. Documented levels of sexual abuse within some prison settings⁵¹ suggest that sex work accounts for a significant amount of both informal transactional work and forced work in prisons, with a fine line between the two.

39. Republic of the Philippines, Bureau of Corrections, *Work and Livelihood*, bucor.gov.ph/?page_id=362.

40. Worth Rises, *Prison Farms: Former Plantations, Dangerous Conditions, and No Pay*, 18 June 2025, worthrises.org/blogpost/2025/6/18/prison-labor-in-agriculture-people-in-prison-are-picking-cotton-on-former-plantations-in-dangerous-conditions-for-no-pay.

41. WalesOnline, *This prison in Wales has a working farm where inmates milk cows*, 18 April 2024, www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/prison-wales-working-farm-inmates-29011408.

42. Republic of South Africa Department of Correctional Services, *Agriculture in the Department of Correctional Services*, www.dcs.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agriculture-Leaflet_DL_NEW-2.pdf.

43. 'An "inside" look at food: Industrial-scale production in Washington's prison system', *The Spokesman-Review*, 15 July 2018, www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/jul/15/an-inside-look-at-food-industrial-scale-production.

44. Corrective Services New South Wales, Australia, *It all comes out in the wash*, 10 September 2025.

45. ICPA, *Women in Corrections Conference. Chonburi Women's Correctional Institution*, February 2025, icpa.org/events/past-events/women-in-corrections-conference/facility-visits.html.

46. 'Prisoners in Finland are being employed as data labellers to improve accuracy of AI models', *Euronews*, 22 September 2024, www.euronews.com/next/2024/09/22/prison-inmates-in-finland-are-being-employed-as-data-labellers-to-improve-accuracy-of-ai-m; 'Metroc secures €2 million in new funding', *Metroc*, metroc.ai/en/materials/metroc-secures-e2-million-in-new-funding; 'Long hours and low wages: the human labour powering AI's development', *The-14*, 16 November 2023, the-14.com/long-hours-and-low-wages-the-human-labour-powering-ais-development.

47. 'Britain's secret workforce', *The Manufacturer*, 10 July 2012, www.themanufacturer.com/articles/britains-secret-workforce.

48. 'Left to rot: how a prisoner cleaned up Panama's dirtiest jail – and its inmates', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2024, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/mar/07/la-joyita-jail-panama-prisoners-gangs-squalor-waste-recycling-ecosolidos-geozul.

49. 'Inside the sell blocks', *The Guardian*, 9 September 2009, www.theguardian.com/society/2009/sep/09/prisoners-cheap-labour-major-companies.

50. 'Prisoners Help Build Patriot Missiles', *WIRED*, 8 March 2011, www.wired.com/2011/03/prisoners-help-build-patriot-missiles.

51. Just Detention International, *Sexual Abuse in Prison: A Global Human Rights Crisis*, justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/International_Summary_English.pdf.

Transactional sex might be traded for food, drugs, services, protection or the promise of favourable treatment, while some people might carry out sex work as a continuation of their previous work or they might be forced into sex work through coercion or threats. A third party such as prison staff or other prisoners often profit by making these arrangements.

Women in prison are often subjected to sexual violence and forced labour, often while serving sentences for petty crimes, including in El Salvador, Kenya, the US, Argentina and Iran. In India there are cases documented where women are ‘supplied’ to male prisoners, sexual abuse is commonplace, and many children are born in prison as a result.⁵² Gay and transgender individuals⁵³ are also particularly vulnerable to coercive sex, as are younger people and those who have arrived in prison for the first time.⁵⁴ People with pre-existing vulnerabilities are also more susceptible to being sexually exploited when they arrive in prison, including those with existing mental health problems and drug dependence.⁵⁵

In many places sex in prison is linked to organised criminal groups, with victims ‘sold’ among gangs or forced into prostitution.⁵⁶ Coercive sex work, including forced sexual slavery, is also a significant problem in fragile and conflict-affected settings, including instances where women have been sexually abused and taken out of prison at night to be prostituted.⁵⁷ Sex traffickers inside prison, as well as those on the outside, are also known to recruit and groom people in prison for sex work during imprisonment and after their release. In the US, sex traffickers have been known to bail women out of prison and then force them to work as prostitutes on their release.⁵⁸

“

It was really expensive in the prison... we even had to pay for water and electricity. [Because the women didn't have job opportunities] I relied on money from my family, but some had boyfriends in the men's prison and they would get money from them. Those who didn't have access to money would also turn to drug dealing. You can't survive without money. The guards would also organise for women to have sex with the male prisoners for money. The guards would always take a cut of this.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Community work programmes

Some prisons partner with local authorities to carry out supervised work programmes that provide tangible benefits for the local community. This can include removing graffiti, clearing public green spaces, renovating public facilities, litter picking and tree planting. Such work might be voluntary or unpaid, and is sometimes imposed as part of a sentence. Increasingly, people involved in prison work are also included in jobs in the local green economy, such as conservation efforts,⁵⁹ agroforestry⁶⁰ and community wastewater treatment.⁶¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some authorities also involved people in prison in their crisis response efforts, including the production of facemasks, other PPE and hygiene supplies.⁶² This led to concerns around forced labour and poor working conditions in some countries,⁶³ but in many cases these initiatives were beneficial to both people in prisons and communities.

52. ‘Experts warn of “global crisis” as number of women in prison nears one million’, *The Guardian*, 27 November 2025, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/nov/27/women-in-prison-rising-global-crisis-sexual-violence-forced-labour.

53. See, for example: Howard League for Penal Reform, *Commission on Sex in Prison. Coercive sex in prison*, 2016, howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Coercive-sex-in-prison.pdf.

54. See, for example: Nancy Wolff et al., ‘Sexual Violence Inside Prisons: Rates of Victimization’, *Journal of Urban Health*, Volume 83, May 2006, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2438589.

55. Marie E. Karlsson and Melissa J. Zielinski, ‘Sexual Victimization and Mental Illness Prevalence Rates Among Incarcerated Women: A Literature Review’, *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, Volume 21, Issue 2, pp. 326–349, 2018, doi.org/10.1177/1524838018767933.

56. Just Detention International, *Sexual Abuse in Prison: A Global Human Rights Crisis*, justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/International_Summary_English.pdf.

57. ‘Experts warn of “global crisis” as number of women in prison nears one million’, *The Guardian*, 27 November 2025, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/nov/27/women-in-prison-rising-global-crisis-sexual-violence-forced-labour.

58. ‘Revealed: how US sex traffickers recruit jailed women for prostitution’, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2018, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jun/29/revealed-how-us-sex-traffickers-recruit-jailed-women-for-prostitution-the-trap.

59. See, for example: Republic of the Philippines, *Biodiversity Conservation Program for the Iwahig Prison and Penal Farm*, 20 April 2016, pcsd.gov.ph/biodiversity-conservation-program-for-the-iwahig-prison-and-penal-farm.

60. Nixon Kamanyire, *The potential of agroforestry in Uganda prison farms: a case study of Isimba farm, Masindi district*, Makerere University, 29 April 2023, makir.mak.ac.ug/handle/10570/13245.

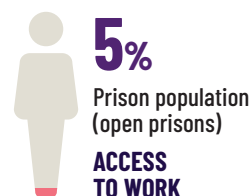
61. ‘Nyarugenge Prison Gets Waste Treatment Plant’, *KT Press*, 7 December 2017, www.ktpress.rw/2017/12/nyarugenge-prison-gets-waste-treatment-plant.

62. ‘Morocco prisoners make masks for fellow inmates’, *Arab News*, 23 May 2020, www.arabnews.com/node/1678601/middle-east.

63. See, for example: ‘Vulnerable prisoners “exploited” to make coronavirus masks and hand gel’, *The Guardian*, 12 March 2020, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/mar/12/vulnerable-prisoners-exploited-to-make-coronavirus-masks-and-hand-gel.

DATA SNAPSHOTS

Snapshots of prison labour data from around the world demonstrate that opportunities for official work in prison are extremely limited. Jobs are rarely allocated fairly, with corruption, favouritism and discrimination playing a major role in work allocation.

BRAZIL⁶⁴TÜRKİYE⁶⁷ARMENIA⁶⁸RUSSIA^{65 *}FRANCE⁶⁶ENGLAND & WALES⁹⁵

*The high prison unemployment rate has been linked to a weak economy and high unemployment in the country more broadly.

Disaster management and response

There are also cases of people in prison being involved in local disaster relief programmes including firefighting, flood response, clearing debris and rebuilding after natural disasters. In the US, some minimum-security prison facilities are now designed specifically to provide training to prisoners to assist in responding to emergencies such as fires and floods.⁷⁰

Such programmes have been criticised, including due to dangerous working conditions and forced labour concerns, but if well implemented they can help people feel empowered as active members of a collective community with responsibility to respond to disasters, while also assisting in their rehabilitation through training and work experience. People who are detained can also lead on disaster relief.

For example, in the aftermath of the 2018 earthquake that hit the island of Sulawesi in **Indonesia**, prisoners organised themselves into volunteer teams to support their local community.⁷¹

In **New Zealand**, people in prison were involved in providing relief and rebuilding houses following the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch.⁷²

Apprenticeships and work placements outside of prison

Some prison work programmes are designed as apprenticeships, providing people with skills for particular jobs, linking them with specific employers,

64. João de Deus Quirino Filho et al., 'Incarcerated people in prisons: A public health priority in resource-poor settings', *Forensic Science International: Mind and Law*, Volume 1, November 2020, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666353819300074#abs0010.

65. The BEARR Trust, *Why most Russian prisoners do not have jobs*, 16 May 2019, bearr.org/regional-news/why-most-russian-prisoners-do-not-have-jobs.

66. Prison Insider, *France*, www.prison-insider.com/en/countryprofile/france-2025.

67. ECOPRIS, *Prison Work Models Critical Review*, November 2015, www.euopris.org/wp-content/uploads/ECOPRIS_01_PrisonWorkFramework_final.pdf.

68. Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

69. ICPR, *Working prisoners in the UK: laws, policies, and practical realities*, July 2024, www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/working_prisoners_in_the_uk_final.pdf.

70. Prison Insider, *USA: disaster in prison*, 16 May 2023, www.prison-insider.com/en/articles/usa-disaster-in-prison.

71. 'Palu quake provides a shot at redemption for Indonesian prisoners', *Channel Asia News*, 28 September 2019.

72. 'Prisoners shoring up Christchurch relief efforts', *The New Zealand Herald*, 14 March 2011, www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/prisoners-shoring-up-christchurch-relief-efforts/KSETUSWELG34IWJEUFGQLYDTE.

or providing them with a means to earn money while in prison. For example, this might include motorbike repair, making local handicraft products for sale, or catering services. People in prison may also take part in placements with approved external work providers, where they are allowed to leave the prison for day work release.⁷³ This type of work is most commonly offered to people who are nearing their release date.

For example, in Louisiana in the **US**, some prison departments operate programmes where people with particular qualifications are given the opportunity to live in Transitional Work Facilities six months to four years prior to their release, with the aim to facilitate the transition back into the workforce. They work in jobs in the community and return to the facility when not working. One such programme reports that between 10 to 20 percent remain with their employer upon release.⁷⁴

73. See, for example: Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections, *Reentry Initiatives & Transitional Work Programs*, doc.la.gov/imprisoned-person-programs-resources/transition-reentry.

74. West Baton Rouge Parish, *Transitional Work Facility*, www.wbrparish.org/641/Transitional-Work-Facility.

At Khao Prik Agriculture Industrial Institution in Nakhon Sri Thammarat province, the barista training program equips justice-involved individuals with the practical skills and confidence needed to build a brighter, more stable future. Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020



People imprisoned should have the opportunity to undertake work and training in line with their individual treatment needs, but this rarely happens in practice.

Key elements of work in prison

Key international standards⁷⁵

Universal international standards

International standards, such as the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**⁷⁶ and the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**,⁷⁷ include the right of everyone to just and favourable conditions of work and the right to equal pay for equal work. The ICESCR specifies that, in particular, women should be guaranteed conditions of work that are not inferior to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal work.

International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 29 forbids signatory states to employ forced labour but makes a specific exemption for prison labour, so long as it is performed by ‘people who have been convicted in a court of law’ and ‘carried out under the supervision and control of a public authority and the said person is not hired to or placed at the disposal of private individuals, companies or associations’.⁷⁸ Certain conditions must be met for this exemption to be valid however, including that it must be supervised by a public authority. Similar exemptions are included in the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**⁷⁹ and regional human rights instruments.⁸⁰

The Nelson Mandela Rules

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) outline a number of standards relevant to prison work, including the overarching principle that prison administrations should provide vocational training and work in line with individual treatment needs and which are designed to ensure their reintegration upon release.

The Nelson Mandela Rules also cover:

- Physical conditions in work spaces;

- The involvement of physicians or other healthcare professionals in determining physical and mental fitness to work;
- The requirement to provide sufficient work of a useful nature;
- Protections against afflictive labour, slavery or servitude and working for the personal or private benefit of prison staff;
- How prison work should resemble, as closely as possible, similar work outside of prisons;
- How making a financial profit from an industry in prison should not be prioritised over the interests of people in prisons;
- The involvement of the private sector;
- Health and safety considerations, including working hours;
- Remuneration, saving and spending;
- Working opportunities for people in pre-trial detention.

UN Model strategies on reducing reoffending⁸¹

These Model Strategies highlight how remunerated work can be useful in enhancing the positive self-identity of people in prison, increasing their employability following their release and fostering positive links with the community. They provide that:

- Vocational training and work should be responsive to individual needs and enable people in prison to maintain their community and family ties;
- Authorities should recognise that not all work-related programmes are effective in reducing reoffending, and that all rehabilitation programmes and other interventions should understand and take into consideration individual criminogenic needs and the root causes of offending;

⁷⁵ For an assessment of international standards on prison work, see: ICPR, *Labouring behind bars: Assessing international law on working prisoners*, November 2023, www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/labouring_behind_bars_web_final.pdf.

⁷⁶ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 23, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

⁷⁷ United Nations, *ICESCR Article 7*, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights.

⁷⁸ International Labour Organization, *ILO Convention No. 29, Article 2(2)(c)*.

⁷⁹ United Nations, *ICCPR, Article 8, 3(c)(i)*.

⁸⁰ Council of Europe, *European Convention on Human Rights (Article 4(3)(a))*; Organization of American States, *American Convention on Human Rights (Article 6(3)(a))*.

⁸¹ Add in GA reference, adopted December 2025.

- There should be proper research on marketable skills, assessments of partner companies in the community, and strict safeguards to avoid exploitative or otherwise afflictive work schemes and to ensure fair remuneration for work performed;
- That the provision of accredited qualifications to promote employability should be similar to those issued in the community; and the provision of training and work opportunities should not differentiate between women and men due to gender stereotyping.

The **UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** has stated that the obligation to respect the right to work requires states to refrain from denying or limiting access to decent work for all people, including people in prison.⁸² The **ILO** notes that the principles for decent work include fair wages, dignity, equality and safe working conditions.⁸³

Policy and legal frameworks

Prison work should be regulated in national laws and policies, drawing on international standards, though people in prison are generally not classified as employees and are usually exempt from the labour rights that protect people in the community. For example, in Australia, where prisoners are excluded from most forms of labour law.⁸⁴ Most legal systems permit the state to require people in prison to work, sometimes for no or very little pay.⁸⁵ Some countries base their legal frameworks regarding prison work on international and regional standards (including the European Prison Rules) though the lack of oversight of prison labour can make it difficult to assess implementation against those.

Prison work is well regulated in Brazil, including a federal requirement that work opportunities should respect fundamental rights and take into account personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, age and disability.⁸⁶ Brazil has a full national policy framework for prison work, which aims to expand opportunities for prison work, assesses all prison workers to establish their professional profile, and actively encourages private companies to hire both people in prison and those who have been released. Federal law also requires that people working in prison are paid at least three-quarters of the statutory minimum wage. However, it has been reported that implementation is difficult due to a challenging operational context and the law around wages is not

well implemented.⁸⁷ Prison work in France is regulated by the Code of Criminal Procedure, and a December 2021 law established a prison employment contract that provides a framework for the conditions of employment, wages and deductions; wages are still below the national minimum however, and the availability of work and health and safety standards has been criticised.⁸⁸

Work allocation

Where formal work is available in prisons, it is important to consider what types of jobs are allocated to which people, how this process is managed, how suitability for work is assessed, and the extent to which people can choose the type of work they do, including where private entities are involved.

The Nelson Mandela Rules clearly state that work opportunities should be subject to a determination of physical and mental fitness by a physician and other qualified healthcare professionals,⁸⁹ and that where possible and within limits, people in prison should be able to choose the type of work they wish to perform.⁹⁰ People should never be expected to carry out work that they are unable to do, physically or mentally. Authorities should also make efforts to include work that can be adapted so that everyone has an opportunity to be meaningfully engaged.

Unfortunately, given the scarcity of jobs available in most prison systems, there is little element of choice in job allocation. Most people reported that they would do any work available just to keep themselves busy and get out of their cells, but assessments on suitability or relevance were rarely carried out.

Successful work programming is difficult to achieve in the absence of effective systems for proper allocation, classification and categorisation linked to individual assessments. There can be particularly detrimental impacts on certain groups of people in prison when these procedures are lacking.

People in prison face a broad range of barriers to successful rehabilitation beyond their physical conditions of detention, and these can relate to their individual circumstances and personal histories. This might include physical and mental health issues, histories of drug and alcohol dependency, and physical or sexual abuse. Low self-esteem and negative experiences and attitudes towards formal education and work are also important factors.

82. UN Economic and Social Council, *General comment No. 18 (2005)*, para. 23.

83. ILO, *What is Decent Work?*, 26 September 2015, www.ilo.org/resource/what-decent-work.

84. Colin Fenwick, *Regulating Prisoners' Labour in Australia: A Preliminary View*, University of Melbourne, 2004, ssrn.com/abstract=556681.

85. ICPR, *Labouring behind bars: Assessing international law on working prisoners*, November 2023, www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/labouring_behind_bars.pdf.

86. Interministerial Ordinance No. 210 of 2014

87. ICPR, *Working Prisoners in Brazil: Laws, Policies, and Practical Realities*, May 2025, www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/working_prisoners_in_brazil.pdf.

88. Prison Insider, *France*, www.prison-insider.com/en/countryprofile/france-2025.

89. United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rule 96(1), 2015, docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175.

90. United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rule 98(3), 2015, docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175.

Appropriate and successful work programmes are therefore contingent on the delivery of programmes and services that tackle these underlying issues. In turn, these are dependent on good allocation and classification procedures and a system of thorough and regularly updated risk and needs assessments and sentence planning. People need to be allocated to facilities that can provide suitable work opportunities.

In the **Netherlands**, upon arrival at a prison, people undergo an intake interview to assess their work aspirations, prior experience and educational background. They are initially assigned to an entry-level workroom to earn a certificate demonstrating fundamental workplace skills, such as following instructions and punctuality. Opportunities for more advanced work are subsequently considered through a multidisciplinary review, based on the person's expressed interest and readiness.⁹¹

Available work needs to align with the security classification of prisoners while ensuring that everyone is offered a range of work and training opportunities that equip them with marketable skills. It is important that any limits on work opportunities are proportionate to the actual risks posed by an individual, rather than their security classification alone. This is because security allocations might be assigned as part of a blanket policy or based on other considerations such as overcrowding rather than individual assessments. A person's risks and needs may also change during their imprisonment but their security allocation might not change accordingly, particularly where decisions on their placement have been made by judicial authorities during sentencing without an opportunity for review.

There are big variations in how work is allocated in different prison systems, and often there are no set criteria on how this is managed. A common theme from PRI's findings was that favouritism and discrimination play a large part in who is offered which type of work.

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Interviewees noted that the allocation of prison work was commonly based on 'who you know, not what you know' and depended on whether the prison officers 'like you or not'. Some prisons operate a system where people are required to submit formal requests for specific jobs, though it is reported that favouritism is still often present in the selection process. In other places, for example in Chile, people who are serving the last third of their sentence are prioritised for work programmes.

In Bremen, **Germany**, prison work programmes are well established, though demand exceeds available placements. Authorities have explored flexible scheduling, such as splitting a traditional six-hour shift into two three-hour shifts, to expand access, reflecting innovation in workforce planning and operational management.

Discrimination in the allocation of prison work runs counter to international standards, including the Nelson Mandela Rules, which clearly state that all rules should be applied impartially and without discrimination.⁹² The principle of non-discrimination also requires consideration of individual needs and vulnerabilities and taking measures to protect and promote the rights of certain groups. Systems to monitor the allocation of work can help to identify potential discrimination and the measures needed to counter this.

Discrimination may be active but also unintentional, or may be a reflection of systematic disadvantage or a lack of inclusive policies. It becomes particularly significant in relation to prison work when access to opportunities, including those requiring greater skills, can help lead to favourable parole decisions, transfer to lower-security facilities, or moves to enhanced regimes with more privileges.

In some contexts, race can be a determining factor in the allocation of work. This is borne out by a report by the prison inspectorate of England and Wales, which found that Black and minority ethnic prisoners felt less encouraged and supported to take up education, work and vocational training opportunities.⁹³

Most interviewees stated that a person's status within the prison hierarchy is prevalent in work organisation and allocation, with unofficial social structures and power dynamics leading to people being given jobs based on their social or financial status or on their crime and sentence length. Some interviewees reported that it is possible to pay money to prison staff to be allocated a more favoured role. As the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) notes, while it is foreseeable that bribery may be used to buy access to employment

91. Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

92. United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rule 2, 2015, docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175.

93. HM Inspectorate of Prisons, *Minority ethnic prisoners' experiences of rehabilitation and release planning. A thematic review*, October 2020.

opportunities within prisons and to consequent wages, or to buy the right of absence from obligatory labour, this form of corruption often has relatively low visibility.⁹⁴

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Some people get jobs because they pay. Some people get jobs because they agree to spy for the guards. I was offered a job as a librarian, but my husband was told, if I want the job, he would have to pay USD\$500.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Membership in organised crime groups can also play a significant role in work allocation in some prison systems,⁹⁵ particularly where prison administrations have less effective control over the facility and where levels of corruption are high. In other contexts, it has been noted that being in a gang may, in practice, limit work opportunities.⁹⁶

With a few exceptions, even when prison authorities are obliged to find work for people in prison there is not enough work to go around, especially when prisons are operating over capacity. This increases the demand for jobs – particularly the more popular jobs – and means that people who are less able to work are unlikely to be given any opportunities.

Interviewees in some countries thought that, despite an element of favouritism, work was allocated fairly and based on risk and needs assessments, ability and readiness to work, and individual conduct and attitudes. In Chile, work within prison is often regarded as a reward, providing access to improved material conditions, reduced exposure to violence, better sleeping arrangements, increased time out of cells and relief from overcrowding. Even when wages are low, prisoners frequently opt to work to access these benefits.⁹⁷ In Guernsey, UK, it is reported that all eligible prisoners are allocated work, with over 95 percent of the prison population attending work every day. People are allocated a job within the first week of

arriving to prison, with the allocated job primarily based on individually assessed need, capacity and capability, as well as risk assessments.⁹⁸

Rehabilitative value of prison work

The main purpose of prison work should always be rehabilitation. International standards are clear on this, stating that prison work programmes should be delivered in line with individual treatment needs⁹⁹ and that they should be offered as part of efforts to ensure rehabilitation, with a view to maintaining or increasing people's ability to gain work after release.¹⁰⁰ The UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules) call for women's sentence plans to include rehabilitative programmes and services that match their gender-specific needs.¹⁰¹ All staff working in prisons should also receive training on the importance of appropriate rehabilitation, including gender-specific needs.

While comparative data on post-release employment outcomes is limited globally,¹⁰² available research demonstrates that there is a positive association between participation in work in prison and post-release employment prospects. For example, participating in job training in prisons in Norway was shown to increase employment for people who were unemployed prior to prison.¹⁰³ Research in Spain found that the opportunity to work in prison gave people a greater chance of finding work after release.¹⁰⁴

There are also many secondary benefits to prison work, all of which can contribute to effective rehabilitation. These can include supporting basic prison functions, developing constructive relations between people in prison and staff, allowing people to earn money, keeping them physically and mentally active, reducing violence and tensions, and maintaining links with the community. Unfortunately, in reality prison work is far from rehabilitative in many countries, and it is important to remember that other benefits stemming from prison work, including financial motivation, should not be prioritised over the goal of rehabilitation.

Where prison work is available, it is crucial to understand how effective it is in rehabilitation and why it may sometimes fail to meet rehabilitative goals.

94. UNODC, *Handbook on Anti-Corruption Measures in Prisons*, 2017, www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/17-06140_HB_anti-corr_prisons_eBook.pdf.

95. *Prison Subculture and Prison Gang Influence*, us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/50421_ch_10.pdf.

96. ICPR, *Working Prisoners in Brazil: Laws, Policies, and Practical Realities*, May 2025.

97. Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

98. Guernsey Prison, *Annual Report 2021*.

99. United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rule 4 (20), 2015.

100. United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rules 4 and 98, 2015.

101. United Nations, *Bangkok Rules*, Rule 41, 2010.

102. UNODC, *2025 Prison Matters. Global prison population and trends: A focus on rehabilitative environments*, July 2025.

103. Manudeep Bhuller et al., 'Incarceration, Recidivism, and Employment', *Journal of Political Economy*, Volume 128, Issue 4, pp. 1269–1324, 2010, doi.org/10.1086/705330.

104. Ramon Alós et al., 'Effects of prison work programmes on the employability of ex-prisoners', *European Journal of Criminology*, Volume 12, 2014; see also: UK Ministry of Justice, *The impact of experience in prison on the employment status of longer-sentenced prisoners after release: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*, 2014.

This includes gaining an understanding of how prison work functions, as well as carrying out research into post-release outcomes.

The rehabilitative function of prisons can be severely compromised when there are not enough opportunities for those who want to work or when people are denied the chance to work, potentially leading to increased mental health problems, unrest within facilities, poor prisoner-staff relations or the development of criminal sub-cultures within prisons.

Interviewees reported that much of the work available in prisons is of an operational nature, to aid the prison administration or to keep people in prison from being idle or from causing trouble. With a few exceptions, most of those interviewed did not believe the work on offer helped their rehabilitation or post-release employability, including some people who were placed in more favourable jobs. This was largely because the sole aim of the work was to carry out functions within the prison, the work was not relevant to their future work aspirations or the local job market, or because no training, certification or references were available.

People who had previously been in prison interviewed by PRI reported that despite harsh working conditions, there were still positives aspects to the work – including its rehabilitative value.

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The tasks were monotonous and offered little sense of purpose or personal value.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

Despite the harsh conditions, the work provided some structure, skill-building opportunities, and in some cases, positive relationships with supervisors.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Under prison reforms in **Japan**, prison work is no longer mandatory; it was recognised that under the previous system people were burdened with compulsory work, leaving insufficient time for rehabilitation. The new framework is reported to be tailored towards individual rehabilitation needs.¹⁰⁵

In Canada, the Correctional Investigator has noted that remuneration is a significant factor in effective rehabilitation, stating that due to the payment system for prison workers, the prison work system in Canada is ‘so fundamentally flawed that it fails to substantively meet its primary legislative and policy objective, which is to encourage participation in programs, vocational and work opportunities behind bars’.¹⁰⁶

In other countries, the failure to rehabilitate people has been linked to the fact that they are trained for jobs that are not relevant or which are projected to decrease in the labour market. One study in Louisiana in the US found that one-third of people working in the state prison industries programme may not be learning job skills that could help them after release.¹⁰⁷ Research from England and Wales has found that ‘far too many prisoners were performing mundane tasks in workshops or underemployed as wing cleaners’, with people in prison noting that they wanted work that was stimulating and meaningful, including opportunities that might lead to qualifications and actual employment prospects.¹⁰⁸ In Brazil, over half of the jobs people in prison do are in the category of ‘prison services’, covering cleaning, maintenance and similar tasks, which has been found to do little to equip people in prison for employment in the formal economy on their release.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, there have been significant efforts in some countries to adapt prison work to changes in labour markets.

In regard to work in new technologies, people who are imprisoned in **Finland** can be employed in digital industries, training artificial intelligence to perform specific tasks by feeding it data.¹¹⁰

In the **US**, prison labour is increasingly linked to disaster mitigation and response and this is also reflected in the growth in green jobs in prisons.

Many interviewees recommended that opportunities to work in prison should be part of a broader rehabilitation and social reintegration package if they are to be truly effective in helping people find work upon release. They pointed out that this needs to include training in digital skills, social media and emerging technologies, as well as broader life skills training and the provision of psycho-social support.

105. ‘Japan’s prison reform focuses on rehabilitation’, *The Japan Times*, 5 June 2025, www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/06/05/japan/crime-legal/prison-reform.

106. Office of the Correctional Investigator, *Annual Report 2022–2023*, June 2023, oci-bec.gc.ca/en/content/office-correctional-investigator-annual-report-2022-2023.

107. ACLU, *ACLU Report Finds Incarcerated Workers Earn Between \$0.02 and \$0.40 Per Hour in Louisiana*, 22 June 2022, www.aclu.org/press-releases/aclu-report-finds-incarcerated-workers-earn-between-002-and-040-hour-louisiana.

108. Prison Reform Trust, *It Doesn’t Have To Be Like This. Prisoner Policy Network Perspectives on Future Prison Design*, December 2021, prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PPN-regimes-consultation-report.pdf.

109. ICPR, *Working Prisoners in Brazil: Laws, Policies, and Practical Realities*, May 2025.

110. ‘These Prisoners Are Training AI’, *WIRED*, 11 September 2023, www.wired.com/story/prisoners-training-ai-finland.

Interviewees noted that those preparing for release also need to be given practical support with writing skills for CVs and job applications and for preparation for job interviews. They recommended that people be paid decent remuneration for any work they carry out so that they can save for release and be better able to reintegrate into society. In Uganda, PRI has supported people in prison with pre-release programmes covering business skills, customer management, savings and marketing. A new initiative, will extend this support to include training in CV preparation and job application skills.

Since a prison reform strategy was adopted in **Algeria** in 2006 on reintegration and reducing recidivism, over 7,850 people have benefitted from employment assistance schemes when leaving prison. Algerian prison authorities have agreements with several microcredit agencies to help beneficiaries set up their own businesses after release.¹¹¹

The people PRI interviewed explained that their individual treatment needs were rarely taken into account in the development and allocation of work opportunities. One interviewee noted how she was forced to carry out hard manual labour soon after admission to prison, despite suffering from severe drug withdrawal at the time and being physically very weak.

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By the time I arrived at the correctional facility I had lost so much weight, I hadn't eaten for days, and I could barely stand. I had to work every day cleaning the toilets but I just wasn't strong enough. I received no pay. The guards would just tease me that I was too weak.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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The Nelson Mandela Rules make it clear that prison working hours should enable people to have at least one rest day per week and sufficient time for education and other activities as part of their rehabilitation.¹¹² However, some interviewees noted that if they were engaged in

prison work schemes, this effectively prevented them from participating in other activities or education and training opportunities because of scheduling clashes.

Studies from the US¹¹³ have also found that some people do not participate in education, treatment or other programmes due to clashes with work schedules. This can effectively worsen prospects of effective rehabilitation and reintegration, especially where work is mandatory or non-rehabilitative or where people have to work to earn money for basic survival. In some EU member states, people in prison are faced with losing income if they choose education over work,¹¹⁴ in contravention of the European Prison Rules which state that people in prison should not be disadvantaged financially or otherwise by taking part in education.¹¹⁵ Instead of being opposing priorities in prison, education, training and work opportunities should be planned and aligned so that they are complementary to each other.

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We worked in the kitchen six days a week but because of the schedule of the work, it meant we were not also able to attend educational courses. We would have to be cooking whilst the classes were taking place.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Pay and other formal benefits

Remuneration

There is no clear legal obligation under international human rights and labour laws to pay people in prison the same wages as people working in the community, although the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has made it clear that people in prison who agree to work should receive a fair wage.¹¹⁶

The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery has noted that for wages to be fair they should reflect, among other things, the quality of work performed, the level of education and skills of people doing the work, and the possible impact of the work on their health and safety. The Special Rapporteur has also stated that equal remuneration should be paid for equal work performed without discrimination of any

111. PRI and Thailand Institute of Justice, *The rehabilitation and social reintegration of women prisoners. Implementation of the Bangkok Rules*, May 2019, cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PRI-Rehabilitation-of-women-prisoners-WEb.pdf.

112. United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules, Rule 102 (2)*, 2015, docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175.

113. Kimberly A Kaiser et al., 'Barriers to inmate program participation in a private southern US prison', *Journal of Crime and Justice*, Volume 44, Issue 1, June 2020, www.researchgate.net/publication/342582171_Barriers_to_inmate_program_participation_in_a_private_southern_US_prison.

114. See: Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE).

115. Council of Europe, *European Prison Rules*, rm.coe.int/european-prison-rules-978-92-871-5982-3/16806ab9ae.

116. UN Economic and Social Council, *General comment No. 23 (2016) on the right to just and favourable conditions of work*, E/C.12/GC/23.

kind and that wages should be sufficient for workers to be able to enjoy other human rights, noting that the national minimum wage – which rises with inflation – is a reasonable starting point.¹¹⁷

The European Prison Rules also call for equitable remuneration, with the Rules' commentary noting that the principle of normalisation should inform the level of remuneration for people in prison, with their pay ideally related to those in society as a whole.¹¹⁸

Interviews with people with lived experience of imprisonment pointed to the fact that work was either not paid at all or very poorly paid, usually at a fraction of the country's minimum wage and barely meeting the cost of essential items in prison. This, combined with the cost of living in prison, is a crucial point to address, given the percentage of people in prison who come from situations of poverty.

In the Netherlands, the national minimum wage is €14.71 per hour, compared to a standard prison wage of €1.11 per hour; people in prison may earn up to 175 percent of this base rate for manual production and up to 200 percent for skilled trades, with additional remuneration linked to the nature of the work, required skills, and any qualifications obtained. There are no standard living costs within prisons, as detainees are provided with basic provisions and meals, and earnings from prison labour may be used to purchase supplementary groceries or to rent items such as televisions or radios.¹¹⁹

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The cost of living is extreme. The prices were outrageous. People become a burden to their families, and it is a real issue for people who don't have support networks. People have to get creative to find money. They cook food or make candy, but these are considered contraband and if caught, they get punished. They could be put in solitary confinement or have their visitation rights restricted.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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In some countries mandatory deductions of wages occur, especially for tax, prison-related costs or victim support funds. In Canada, deductions are made from prison wages for an 'Inmate Welfare Fund' for the purpose of contributing to the welfare of all people in prison collectively.¹²⁰ Systems of deductions have also been reported in Chile and Sri Lanka, with significant concerns over financial accountability for these deductions.¹²¹

For those who do receive wages there are different ways in which they are paid. Some are given cash, while some authorities operate a system where people are given credit to spend at the prison shop. Others operate accounts modelled on regular bank accounts that people can draw on, including upon their release. In Spain, an activity allowance is provided, and the state remaining the formal employer.¹²² In Lithuania and Sweden, a portion of earnings – typically around 10 percent – is made accessible to individuals upon release.¹²³ Where people in prison make goods for sale such as local handicrafts, the profit or a percentage of the profit may be given directly to those involved in the production.¹²⁴

The UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (the Havana Rules) specify that the interests of children in detention, and their vocational training, should not be subordinated to the purpose of making a profit for a third party. The rules also recommend that part of young people's earnings be set aside as a savings fund for their release, and the remainder can be used to purchase goods for their own use, to send to their family or to pay victim restitution.¹²⁵

Cost of living in prisons

The cost of living in prisons is high. In some cases, people need to contribute to TVs and prison-related costs, and have to buy food and sanitary items such as soap, toilet paper and sanitary pads for women. Goods available for purchase in prisons are often sold with a higher cost/ margin than in the community.

Where food quality and quantity are poor, a common feature of prison systems – particularly in low-income settings – is people relying on family and visitors to bring them additional food and other basic items. People in prison may also be required to pay child support or court fees and fines. In some cases, they are required to contribute (officially or unofficially) towards the cost

117. UN Human Rights Council, *Contemporary forms of slavery as affecting currently and formerly incarcerated people. Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*, A/HRC/57/46, July 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5746-contemporary-forms-slavery-affecting-currently-and-formerly.

118. Council of Europe, *European Prison Rules*, rm.coe.int/european-prison-rules-978-92-871-5982-3/16806ab9ae.

119. Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

120. Government of Canada, *Commissioner's Directive 860: Offender's money*, www.canada.ca/en/correctional-service/corporate/acts-regulations-policy/commissioners-directives/860.html.

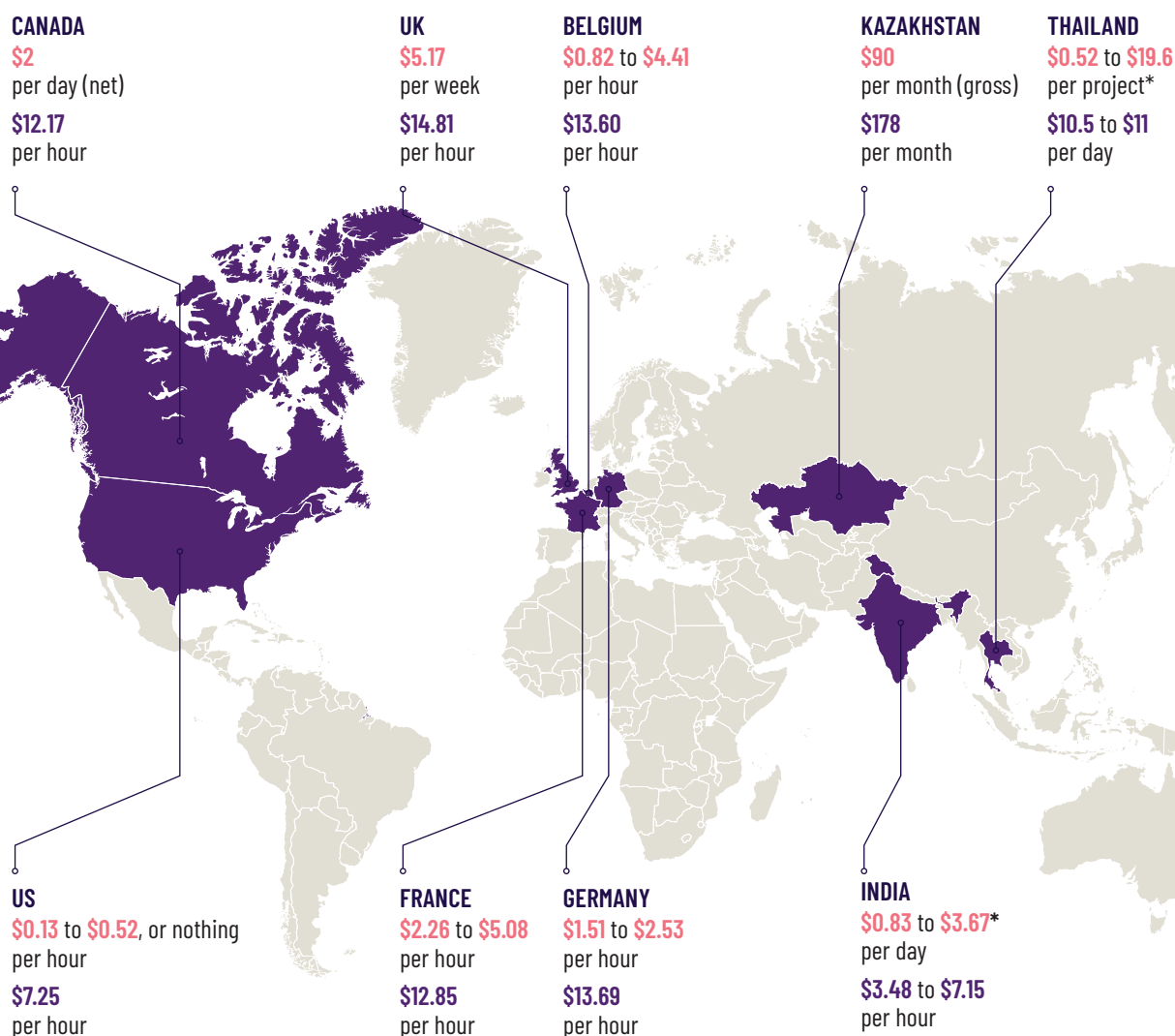
121. Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

122. *Ibid.*

123. *Ibid.*

124. See, for example: 'Made-in-prison products to be sold online in Tamil Nadu', *The Times of India*, 12 April 2023, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/made-in-prison-products-to-be-sold-online/articleshow/99421374.cms.

125. United Nations, *Havana Rules*, Rule 46, 1990.

A SNAPSHOT: PRISON LABOUR WAGES VS. NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGES, PER COUNTRY (IN US\$)¹²⁶

Key: **PRISON LABOUR WAGE** (in green) / **NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE** (in red) * projects can range from two days up to several weeks.

of their imprisonment,¹²⁷ food and clothing, and medical care. For example, it is reported that in Russia, people imprisoned must compensate the state for their food and clothing, with potentially up to 75 percent of their salary deducted for this purpose. Those who cannot work may be unable to support their families and pay their court-imposed fines.¹²⁸ In Southeast Asia, individuals are often caught in a cycle where

minor offences or the inability to pay fines lead to imprisonment. In prison, they are then frequently subjected to unpaid labour, reinforcing a system that criminalises poverty and perpetuates social and economic marginalisation.¹²⁹ In the US, 40 states as well as the federal prison system charge people in prison for medical expenses, as reported by the Prison Policy Initiative.¹³⁰

¹²⁶. Data on Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, the UK and the US is referenced in PRI, *Global Prison Trends 2024*, pp. 36–38. Data on India, Kazakhstan and Thailand was retrieved from: Abhinay Lakshman, 'Right to wages behind bars: prison wages are far below the minimum in nearly every State', *The Hindu*, 15 March 2024; UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *Arrested or detained in Kazakhstan*, March 2024; and FIDH, *Thailand Annual Prison Report 2023*, March 2023. Data on national minimum wages was taken from open sources.

¹²⁷. See, for example, 'pay-for-stay' programmes in the US: 'The US inmates charged per night in jail', *BBC News*, 9 November 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34705968.

¹²⁸. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *How the Gulag Lives On in Russia's Prison Economy*, 24 July 2017, carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/07/how-the-gulag-lives-on-in-russias-prison-economy?lang=en.

¹²⁹. Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

¹³⁰. Prison Policy Initiative, *New research links medical copays to reduced healthcare access in prisons*, 29 August 2024, www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/08/29/fees-limit-healthcare-access.

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People have to work to kill time. Then they can just pay to have a TV in their cell and buy small amounts of groceries. We would earn about €1 a day but would have to pay €2 per week for the TV. That left about €3 for groceries. The store in the prison is also much more expensive than outside.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

I was paid approximately US\$2.50 [in local currency]. This was probably just enough for a pack of noodles. The condition of the food was so bad that people had to buy extra food, especially if they have no family to support them. The prices in the prison shop are much more expensive than on the outside. Authorities only provided one toilet roll for two weeks in my cell, so we had to buy more. If women wanted sanitary pads, they would have to prove they were bleeding and even then would only be given two per day.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Remission schemes

Some countries operate systems in which people involved in work schemes can reduce their sentences. For example, in Bulgaria functional prison work, including kitchen work, is not paid but provides eligibility for sentence reduction.¹³¹ In Panama, the time spent working or studying can also be certified and taken into account to earn reduced sentences. This scheme has been credited with a significant reduction in the rate of reoffending among those released.¹³² In Brazil, where people can receive remission of one day for every three days of work or study, this entitlement is often the main incentive for people in prison to undertake work assignments.¹³³ Participation in prison work can also

contribute to positive determinations of good conduct as part of rewards systems that can lead to early release, including in Ireland,¹³⁴ South Africa,¹³⁵ Kazakhstan¹³⁶ and Australia.¹³⁷

Remission schemes can mean that certified work placements are in very high demand, with long waiting lists for some positions. These schemes can be extremely positive but are also open to abuse because the prospect of early release increases the importance of work allocation. Risks include elevated levels of discrimination and favouritism in the distribution of prison work, as well as the perpetuation of links between corruption and work opportunities. There are also other risks. For example, in Brazil it has been reported that many people work for remission but do not receive any remuneration, even though they are entitled to both; in December 2024 47 percent were receiving sentence remission only and no pay, amid significant regional variations.¹³⁸ There are also questions around eligibility for remission schemes in some countries; for example, lack of eligibility for foreign nationals.¹³⁹

Where remission for work schemes operate, it is important to ensure that selection processes for approved work schemes are consistent, follow transparent and agreed policies, and operate under principles of non-discrimination. It is equally important to ensure that there are clearly defined expectations around early release that are fairly applied in practice, and that information about the scheme, including rules and criteria, is easily accessible and understandable to all people in prison. There should be a system of independent oversight in place to guarantee consistency across facilities and to ensure that benefits are applied fairly and without discrimination.

Other benefits

People in prison can be recognised and rewarded for working in ways other than pay, including granting of additional family visits, extra recreation time, or access to better accommodation or more food. Any benefits must also be fairly planned and managed to avoid the potential for unfair application. Some interviewees also reported that prison staff were generally more responsive to people who engaged in prison work and treated them more kindly than those who didn't work. In prisons that operate incentivised regimes,

¹³¹ Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

¹³² 'Left to rot: how a prisoner cleaned up Panama's dirtiest jail – and its inmates', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2024, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/mar/07/la-joyita-jail-panama-prisoners-gangs-squalor-waste-recycling-ecosolidos-geoazul.

¹³³ ICPR, *Working Prisoners in Brazil: Laws, Policies, and Practical Realities*, May 2025.

¹³⁴ Irish Legal Blog, *Temp Release and Remission*, legalblog.ie/temp-release-remission/#Remission_and_Release.

¹³⁵ UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, *Information pack for British nationals arrested or detained in South Africa*, 15 July 2025, www.gov.uk/government/publications/south-africa-prisoner-pack/south-africa-prisoner-pack.

¹³⁶ Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *On judicial practice concerning parole, replacement of the unserved part of a sentence with a more lenient punishment, and reduction of the imposed sentence. Regulatory Resolution No. 6 of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 2 October 2015*, adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P150000006S.

¹³⁷ NSW State Parole Authority, *About parole in NSW*, paroleauthority.nsw.gov.au/parole-in-nsw/about-parole-in-nsw.html.

¹³⁸ ICPR, *Working Prisoners in Brazil: Laws, Policies, and Practical Realities*, May 2025.

¹³⁹ UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, *Information pack for British prisoners in Panama*, 18 July 2024, www.gov.uk/government/publications/panama-prisoner-pack/information-pack-for-british-prisoners-in-panama.

people at enhanced levels – which come with more benefits – may be required to participate in structured activities such as work in order to maintain their enhanced status.¹⁴⁰

Profits and savings from prison labour

When it comes to profits from prison work, there are many concerns and questions as to who benefits from the income generated through prison work, especially where people in prison were paid very little for their labour. Concerns were voiced about the profits made by private companies involved in prison labour by people who had lived experience of imprisonment that PRI interviewed.¹⁴¹

In the **Netherlands**, people in prison may retain their earnings for use upon release. Individual internal accounts are capped at €250, with any surplus automatically transferred to a restricted savings account that can be drawn upon once the balance falls below the permitted threshold.¹⁴²

Interviewees also raised questions about what happens to the savings made by prison authorities when people in prison carry out functions within the prison that authorities would otherwise have to pay for, including cooking, cleaning, gardening and general maintenance, or for work in the community that the state would normally finance. One example that received media attention is in the US state of California, where people imprisoned work as firefighters and are reported to make up 13 percent of the wildfire service, which previously saved authorities up to US\$100 million per year due to the low wages. A new law in California now requires authorities to pay people in prison who work as firefighters the federal minimum wage of US\$7.25 per hour, seven times more than their previous pay of around US\$1 per hour.¹⁴³

There have been several legal challenges in the US against the use of forced labour in prisons, including where work schemes generate significant profit. A case filed in Alabama in 2023 claims that the state practises ‘convict leasing’, amounting to a modern-day

form of slavery which disproportionately impacts Black people and which generates an estimated US\$450 million annually, yielding profits for public employers and private companies while workers receive little or no pay.¹⁴⁴

There can be discrepancies between wages given in different facilities, including whether they are privately operated. In Chile, people in privately operated prisons receive some of the lowest wages for prison labour, earning significantly less than those working in state-run facilities.¹⁴⁵

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People work really long hours, including those who go out to work on farms. We didn't know where the profit goes. Nobody dares even ask. People need to be able to save some money for when they're released but they just can't.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Individual prison managers and staff have also been implicated in making personal profit at the expense of exploited prison workers,¹⁴⁶ despite international guidance stating that people in prison should not be required to work for the personal or private benefit of any prison staff.¹⁴⁷ This includes the misappropriation of profits generated by prison labour or officials benefitting from procurement and tendering processes. In one prison in the Netherlands, a senior official – who had served as the deputy head of the prison's labour department – was dismissed for exploiting prison labour for personal benefit, instructing colleagues and a detained person to perform minor private tasks, including shaping metal plates and repairing a sail.¹⁴⁸

Corruption remains a pervasive and often overlooked issue, making independent oversight extremely difficult – particularly in the context of prison work.¹⁴⁹ All prison work-based operations must have robust and transparent processes in place to counter this, as well as efficient oversight.

¹⁴⁰ See, for example: Irish Prison Service, *Incentivised Regimes*, www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/Incentivised-Regimes-Policy.pdf.

¹⁴¹ See, for example: ‘Crossing Continents: Uganda's Prison Farms’, BBC Sounds Podcast, www.bbc.com/audio/play/b0bggmcp.

¹⁴² Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

¹⁴³ ICPR, *Landmark reform in California as incarcerated firefighters set to receive a living wage*, 16 October 2025, www.icpr.org.uk/news/2025/landmark-reform-california-incarcerated-firefighters-set-receive-living-wage.

¹⁴⁴ The United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama, *Case 2:23-cv-00712*, Filed 12/12/23, www.documentcloud.org/documents/24217214-1/?responsive=1&title=1with.

¹⁴⁵ Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

¹⁴⁶ For example, it is reported that in Russia, profits from sales of goods produced by prisoners are returned to the heads of correctional facilities through kickbacks from the companies that sell the produce. See: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *How the Gulag Lives On in Russia's Prison Economy*, 24 July 2017, carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/07/how-the-gulag-lives-on-in-russias-prison-economy?lang=en; ‘Crossing Continents: Uganda's Prison Farms’, BBC Sounds Podcast, www.bbc.com/audio/play/b0bggmcp.

¹⁴⁷ United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rule 97(3), 2015, docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175.

¹⁴⁸ ‘Leidinggevende gevangenis laat privéklusjes uitvoeren door gevangenen, baan kwijt’, RTL Z, 20 June 2025, www.rtl.nl/nieuws/economie/artikel/5514602/gevingenisbaas-laait-privéklusjes-uitvoeren-baan-kwijt.

¹⁴⁹ PRI and U4, *Corruption in prisons: a guide for detention monitors*, 2024.

Individual motivation to work

Due to the functional nature of work available in many prisons and the low pay, most interviewees noted that their motivation to work was predominantly to have something to do, rather than sitting in cells all day. Many also noted that keeping busy was better for their physical and mental health, rather than being in a state of forced inactivity.

According to the experiences of those interviewed, the majority of people in prison want to work. However, there are very few prison systems that can offer work to everyone. Interviewees reported that most people in prison are highly motivated to work, to learn and to improve their prospects after their release, but the lack of engaging and meaningful work means that they work simply to have something to do.

“

Some people are really motivated. They genuinely want to change, and they want more opportunities when they are released. Some are motivated by their families and children, especially the women. They want to upskill. They want to be in a better position to help their kids. They want to learn to read and write so they can help their kids with their studies.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Pay was a motivator for some of the interviewees, but as the money earned did not stretch far and it was not possible to save for release, this motivation was mainly linked to a desire to buy basic supplies such as hygiene items or to send some money to their families. One interviewee reported that some people are motivated to work so they can buy drugs, as this was their only way to cope with imprisonment. In systems that operate remission schemes or other benefits for working, there are significant incentives for people in prison to work.

Some types of work are more favoured due to better conditions and pay as well as other benefits, or because they are more interesting. For example, kitchen work is a popular role as it often offers other benefits such as additional food. Jobs that involve the opportunity to work in the fresh air or to work outside of the prison premises can also be in high demand.

Consequences of not working

For some, the main motivation to work was to avoid any negative consequences linked to choosing not to or refusing to work. Consequences can include having decreased access to out-of-cell time, being treated less favourably by prison staff, reduced privileges (such as access to recreation, the gym or TV) or – significantly – impacts on opportunities for early release.

“

Some people were given negative points because they couldn't work, even if it was because of physical disabilities or mental health problems. Sometimes it was because they just couldn't physically do the job. Exceptions are sometimes made for physical and mental health problems, but these are not applied systematically.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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In countries where prison work is widespread or mandatory, the consequences for not working can be grave, though punishments for refusing to work may not be implemented in facilities that are unable to provide sufficient work for all.¹⁵⁰ In the US it was reported that if people cannot work or decline to work, they can be subject to consequences such as solitary confinement, the loss of family visits and denials of sentence reductions.¹⁵¹ It was also reported that in Viet Nam, people imprisoned who do not meet work quotas can be beaten or placed in isolation.¹⁵²

“

Those who refuse to work are punished by having their privileges dropped, so for example they can't spend money at the canteen, they have less association hours [socialising time], their TV might be taken away and then they also face bad attitudes from officers. So, while work isn't supposed to be compulsory it definitely isn't voluntary because of these consequences.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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¹⁵⁰. See, for example: ICPR, *Working Prisoners in Brazil: Laws, Policies, and Practical Realities*, May 2025.

¹⁵¹. 'US prison workers produce \$11bn worth of goods and services a year for pittance', *The Guardian*, 15 June 2022, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jun/15/us-prison-workers-low-wages-exploited.

¹⁵². ACAT et al., *Torture in Vietnam 2018: A Joint NGO Report to the UN Committee Against Torture*, November 2018, www.stoptorture-vn.org/reports-torture-in-vietnam.html.

Working conditions and health and safety

Where prison work is available, there are high risks of injury and other health consequences linked to poor working conditions and a lack of health and safety provision. As prisons are generally unregulated workplaces, people are usually excluded from protections that apply to workers in the community. Furthermore, because prisons are closed from public view, a lack of oversight also means that any protections that do exist may not be properly enforced. People in prison may also be reluctant to complain about working conditions and other issues in the workplace. They are usually excluded from labour law protections and the right to unionise.

In a few countries, prison labour is strictly regulated to ensure the health, safety and proper working conditions of people in prison.

In **Taiwan**, prison authorities are required to provide appropriate safety equipment and training in accordance with occupational standards.¹⁵³

In **Malta**, prison work is required – as far as practicable – to replicate conditions outside the prison, with prison directors responsible for ensuring adequate health and safety precautions.¹⁵⁴

However, in many countries national health and safety regulations do not apply to imprisoned workers.¹⁵⁵ Sometimes people in prison are expected to work in dangerous conditions or with toxic substances, with little experience or training and without the protective equipment that is used in the community. Workplace accidents in prison have included chemical burns, lacerations and other serious injuries, and even fatalities.¹⁵⁶

In France, people in prison who work are covered by a special insurance scheme that provides all medical care and rehabilitation within the prison. However, they are not eligible for daily sickness allowances during detention, even for conditions that arose

before imprisonment. Compensation is restricted to a permanent disability pension if an illness or injury causes lasting impairment.¹⁵⁷

Interviewees with lived experience of working in prisons discussed the long hours, difficult working conditions and the shortage of training and other measures to protect health and safety, with some mentioning dangerous infrastructure, a lack of protective equipment and other risk exposures. In some countries, health and safety measures in the prison workplace did mirror those in the community, with one interviewee noting how he had been able to obtain a certificate in industrial safety and first aid as part of his work placement.

The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery has also pointed to 'long working hours without food and water, guaranteed breaks or rest days or holidays, and hazardous working conditions'.¹⁵⁸

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I worked as a cleaner, but I wasn't given any protective gloves or masks. I had to use harsh chemicals and they really affected my skin. We had to ask our families to bring protective gear for us. There really was no consideration for our health and safety at all.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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While there is a lack of global data on workplace injuries in prisons, there were 600 reported injuries among prison workers in California over a four-year period, many of which could have reportedly been prevented with correct training, appropriate safety measures and PPE.¹⁵⁹ Statements from people who were in prison in Cuba have also revealed a concerning lack of safety measures in place, with the vast majority of people indicating that they worked without adequate tools, gloves, boots, masks or other minimum safety equipment.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵³. Ministry of Justice, Taiwan, *The Regulations Governing Labor by Prisoners*, Promulgated on October 11, 1947, mojlaw.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawContentE.aspx?LSID=FL010340.

¹⁵⁴. Government of Malta, *Prisons Regulations*, Subsidiary Legislation 260.03, 1 October 1995.

¹⁵⁵. The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery has pointed out that many incarcerated individuals who work in prisons are covered by labour and social security legislation, including in Morocco, Mozambique and Turkey, and enjoy the same entitlements with regard to occupational health and safety protection as other individuals. UN Human Rights Council, *Contemporary forms of slavery as affecting currently and formerly incarcerated people. Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*, A/HRC/57/46, July 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5746-contemporary-forms-slavery-affecting-currently-and-formerly.

¹⁵⁶. ACLU, *ACLU Report Finds Incarcerated Workers Earn Between \$0.02 and \$0.40 Per Hour in Louisiana*, 22 June 2022, www.iaaclu.org/press-releases/aclu-report-finds-incarcerated-workers-earn-between-002-and-040-hour-louisiana.

¹⁵⁷. Observatoire International Des Prisons, Section Française, *Connaître ses droits, Le travail*, oip.org/fiche-droits/travail-accidents-du-travail-et-maladies-professionnelles.

¹⁵⁸. UN Human Rights Council, *Contemporary forms of slavery as affecting currently and formerly incarcerated people. Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*, A/HRC/57/46, July 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5746-contemporary-forms-slavery-affecting-currently-and-formerly.

¹⁵⁹. ACLU and GHRC, *Captive Labor: Exploitation of Incarcerated Workers*, 2022, assets.aclu.org/live/uploads/publications/2022-06-15-captivelaborresearchreport.pdf.

¹⁶⁰. Prison Defenders, *Cuba's prison business: 60,000 prisoners are used as slave labor*, September 2025, drive.google.com/file/d/1yglY-iDd3CRHv1L6wTGvLizL2UDOF70b/view.

Health and safety risks in prison work can be compounded by a lack of decent healthcare available in the event of an injury or other work-related health issues. Workplace injuries often go unreported for fear of retaliation or other consequences,¹⁶¹ or because people know there will be no action taken.

The prison workplace can also lead to other human rights violations, including the potential risk of sexual and gender-based violence,¹⁶² as well as violence between people in prison. This may be a particular concern where work is organised by private companies or where it takes place outside the prison premises or away from any form of independent monitoring or other oversight.¹⁶³ The lack of effective remedy in case of abuse in the workplace is also a serious consideration. Oversight of prison industries must remain genuinely independent, ensuring that those involved in their operation do not conduct monitoring of prison workplaces, thereby safeguarding impartiality.¹⁶⁴

In line with emerging practice, people in prison should be systematically included in emergency preparedness frameworks, and receive structured training comparable to what is provided to prison staff. This is particularly important where states incorporate prison labour into disaster response activities such as sandbagging, debris clearance and fighting wildfire, exposing people to hazardous conditions without providing them with adequate training, equipment or safeguards.

When people who are imprisoned are involved in emergency response and disaster relief efforts, there may be increased risks of injury or even death, especially where they are given less training and protective equipment than those working in the community. For example, it has been reported that since 1989 there have been 10 deaths of prisoners working as firefighters in the US state of California.¹⁶⁵ It is important to note that serious injuries and deaths ‘in custody’ of people in prison include injuries and deaths of people who, as part of their imprisonment, were working outside the confines of the prison. These must be subject to the same independent investigations into the circumstances and causes of death or injury as those that occur inside prisons.¹⁶⁶

The role of the private sector

The ILO Convention No. 29 forbids signatory states to employ forced labour, but makes a specific exemption for prison labour so long as it is performed by people in prison who are convicted (not in pre-trial detention) and ‘carried out under the supervision and control of a public authority and the said person is not hired to or placed at the disposal of private individuals, companies or associations’.¹⁶⁷

The ILO Committee of Experts has elaborated that the Convention contains two separate requirements – ‘public supervision’ and a ban on placing people in prison at the disposal of private entities: ‘The fact that the prisoner remains at all times under the supervision and control of a public authority does not in itself dispense the government from fulfilling the second condition, namely as explained above, that the person is not hired to or placed at the disposal of private individuals, companies or associations.’¹⁶⁸

The ILO Convention does not prohibit people in prison from working for private enterprises voluntarily but, as prisoners usually work under some form of compulsion, this is complex. As the ILO itself has noted, ‘[E]xcept in a few rare cases the prisoner works under compulsion. He cannot choose his employment as the free worker does, but must usually do whatever work is assigned to him.’¹⁶⁹

For this reason, the ILO Committee of Experts has required that there are objective and verifiable indicators that people in prison who work for private entities do so voluntarily and ‘only where prisoners worked in conditions approximating a free employment relationship’,¹⁷⁰ and that ‘circumstances in which the prison labor is performed should not be so disproportionately lower than the free market that it could be characterized as exploitative’.¹⁷¹

There is a broad range of private interests involved in prisons that might have implications for prison labour. This varies from country to country and from fully privately run prisons to prisons where some functions – such as communications, catering or maintenance – are operated by private companies. There are also huge differences between the types of work schemes run by private entities, the motivation behind private companies’ decision to employ prison labour, and their association with potential human rights violations.

¹⁶¹ Gerber & Elkins, *Inside America's Prison Labor Crisis: Dangerous Jobs, No Protections*, 30 December 2024, www.gerberholderlaw.com/blog/workers-compensation/inmate-work-injuries/.

¹⁶² OSCE, *Integrating the Issue of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Detention Monitoring. A Guidance Note for Oversight Mechanisms*, 2021, www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/report/auto-draft/OSCE_SGBVinDetention.pdf.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

¹⁶⁵ ‘US prisoners are being assigned dangerous jobs. But what happens if they are hurt or killed?’, *The Independent*, 16 May 2024, www.independent.co.uk/news/ap-prisoners-california-arizona-american-civil-liberties-union-b2546113.html.

¹⁶⁶ PRI, *Deaths in prison. Examining causes, responses, and prevention of deaths in prison worldwide*, December 2022.

¹⁶⁷ International Labour Organization, *ILO Convention No. 29, Article 2(2)(c)*.

¹⁶⁸ International Labour Organization, *General Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations*, 2001, paras. 86 and 119.

¹⁶⁹ International Labour Organization, ‘ILO Memorandum on Prison Labour’, *International Labour Review*, Volume 25, 1932, pp. 313–314.

¹⁷⁰ International Labour Organization, *2007 Report on Eradication of Forced Labour: Chapter II. Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)*, para. 116.

¹⁷¹ International Labour Organization, *General Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations*, 2001, para. 143.

ILO indicators of a free employment relationship include:

- Prisoners' formal consent to work, in writing, with the consent form indicating wages and conditions of work.
- Conditions of work that are similar to work outside the prison, namely:
 - Wages comparable to those of free workers with similar skills and experience in a relevant industry or occupation, taking into account factors such as productivity levels and any costs the enterprise incurs for prison security supervision of workers.
 - Wages paid directly to workers. Workers should receive clear and detailed wage slips showing hours worked, wages earned, and any deductions authorised by law for food and lodging.
 - Daily working hours in accordance with the law.
 - Safety and health measures that respect the law.
- Workers are included in a social security scheme (if applicable) for accident and health coverage.
- Workers obtain benefits such as learning new skills and the opportunity to work cooperatively in a controlled environment, enabling them to develop team skills.
- Workers have the possibility of continuing work of the same type upon release.
- The ability to withdraw their consent to work at any time, subject only to reasonable notice requirements.¹⁷²

This position has led to some dispute, including between the ILO and the UK government and other states, with regards to the ILO's interpretation of provisions relating to the involvement of non-public entities in running prisons and providing work to people in prison.¹⁷³ This includes how to define and regulate labour performed in privately operated prisons, with some arguing that the ILO's interpretation is outdated and that the strict interpretation leads to significant limitations on private and voluntary sector entities involved in providing work opportunities in prison, including those that could provide prisoners with potentially rehabilitating work opportunities.¹⁷⁴

The experiences and views of the interviewees concerning privately run work schemes varied according to the type of private entity involved and the nature of their involvement. Some stated that wages tended to be marginally better in schemes run by private companies; others, however, reported worse conditions and increased risk of abuse and harassment from private

sector representatives, and a lack of transparency regarding the contracts and profits made by private companies.

“

10 years ago, I would have said that private companies only wanted to get involved with prisons because these offered cheap labour and they don't have to pay rent, but now I would say that companies are more increasingly doing this because they want to be more socially responsible. It's not widespread but it is a positive move.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

There are no private companies involved in prison work schemes here, but I think public-private partnerships would be a positive thing, especially where prisoners could get internships with private companies through skills matching.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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In the Netherlands, a privately owned prison-based coffee roaster provides work opportunities for people in prison and upon release, in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and Security.¹⁷⁵

Export of goods

There are no global regulations on the export of goods made using prison labour. There are, however, many national and regional regulations prohibiting or regulating the import or export of such goods, with rules varying depending on whether the labour is thought to be forced or voluntary or whether it is organised by the state or by private companies.

The US¹⁷⁶ and New Zealand¹⁷⁷ specifically prohibit the import of goods made using prison labour or forced labour. An EU regulation prohibits goods made using forced labour from being sold or imported into the EU, but, in accordance with ILO Conventions, there

¹⁷² International Labour Organization, 2007 Report on Eradication of Forced Labour: Chapter II. Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), paras. 113–20; International Labour Organization, Q&As on Business and Forced Labour. Use of Prison Labour, 2012, www.ilo.org/resource/qas-business-and-forced-labour-0.

¹⁷³ ICPR, *Labouring behind bars: Assessing international law on working prisoners*, November 2023, www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/labouring_behind_bars.pdf.

¹⁷⁴ ICPR, *Labouring behind bars: Assessing international law on working prisoners*. Appendix, November 2023, www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/labouring_behind_bars_appendix_web_final.pdf.

¹⁷⁵ See: Zuivere Koffie, *Reducing recidivism, one sip at a time*, zuiverekoffie.co/why.

¹⁷⁶ United States Congress, *Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930* (19 U.S.C. § 1307).

¹⁷⁷ New Zealand Government, *New Zealand's Customs and Excise Act 1996* (Section 54).

is an exception for goods made in prison under public authority supervision.¹⁷⁸ In 2012, Cambodian authorities made an inter-ministerial decision to ban the use of prison labour for the production of goods intended for export.¹⁷⁹

Due to a lack of supply chain transparency, it is very difficult to trace whether products have been produced wholly or in part using prison labour, even where their import or export is prohibited. The distinction between forced prison labour and voluntary prison labour, and private sector involvement, is also hard to establish when these factors are being taken into account in legislation. The effective enforcement of such laws has also been brought into question.

In the absence of clear, regulated rules, robust oversight, and transparent monitoring of prison work programmes, the export of goods produced within prisons should not be allowed. Guidance from international human rights and labour standards suggests that without explicit safeguards to ensure that labour is voluntary, fairly compensated and free from coercion, any commercial use of prison work for external markets risks exploitation and violates principles of ethical trade. Accordingly, states and companies should prohibit exports unless these conditions are demonstrably met.

Concerns continue to be raised about the exploitation of prison workers who make goods for export. Criticism has been levelled at the US, which bans the import of such items but does not prohibit their export.¹⁸⁰ Companies in Cambodia have been accused of using prison labour to manufacture goods for export to the US, despite regulations on import and export in both countries.¹⁸¹ Reports have also emerged of the export of goods made under exploitative forced labour conditions in prisons in China.¹⁸²

Prisoner-run businesses and self-employment

Authorities in some countries allow – and enable – people in prison to set up their own businesses, either nationally or at the local level, with some facilities actively encouraging this option. This can have significant benefits, providing people with a sense

of responsibility, autonomy, self-worth and confidence, and allowing them to gain valuable skills relevant to the job market, from business planning to marketing and accountancy. Self-employment can also offer a viable alternative after release, addressing barriers to traditional employment for people who have been in prison.

Such programmes can be extremely effective if operated fairly and without discrimination, and providing there are protections in place against coercion and exploitation – such as more powerful individuals coercing others into working for them for little or no pay. Prison authorities must retain overall oversight of any prisoner-run programme.

In one prison in **Uruguay**, people are encouraged to set up businesses with the option of borrowing money from a fund run by people in prison for businesses to get established. It is reported that 10 percent of the profits are reinvested in that fund, another 10 percent goes to the government for use of the facilities and a further 10 percent is allocated to an association of victims of crime – with the remaining profits directed to an account set up for the prisoners, which they can fully access when they are released.¹⁸³

In **Colombia**, legislation includes the option of independent employment, allowing people in prison to acquire materials and carry out occupational activities by themselves.¹⁸⁴ Many people also engage in informal self-employment for services needed in prison, such as hairdressing and cooking, and one interviewee set up her own independent fitness classes.

In **Ethiopia**, under the Mekelle Prison Project, people imprisoned can form and manage their own working cooperatives to produce goods and services for the local area. Participants receive training on management and business development and can access financial services and small loans. The cooperatives can establish direct commercial links with the community so that people can buy directly from them. Those involved in the cooperatives can save money to use after they leave prison, and the scheme also allows them to continue working in the cooperatives after their release.¹⁸⁵

178. 'EU Parliament approves ban of products made with forced labour', *Reuters*, 23 April 2024, www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-parliament-approves-ban-products-made-with-forced-labour-2024-04-23.

179. LICADHO, *Inter-Ministerial Prakas on the Prohibition of Using Prison Labor for Producing Export Goods*, May 2012, www.licadho-cambodia.org/reports/files/166LICADHOBriefing-PrisonLabor%20Prakas2012-English.pdf.

180. Corporate Accountability Lab, *Human rights hypocrite: Prison-made goods can be exported from the US but not imported*, 5 June 2024, corpaccountabilitylab.org/calblog/2024/6/5/human-rights-hypocrite-prison-made-goods-can-be-exported-from-the-us-but-not-imported.

181. Due Diligence Design, *Alleged use of prison labour in Cambodia in the manufacture of garment and textile goods meant for export to US*, 20 July 2023, duediligence.design/alleged-use-of-prison-labour-in-cambodia-in-the-manufacture-of-garment-and-textile-goods-meant-for-export-to-us.

182. 'How inmates in Chinese prisons are forced to make the world's Christmas decorations', *The Independent*, 22 December 2018, www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/china-prisons-christmas-decorations-supply-chain-forced-labour-torture-a8692776.html.

183. 'Uruguay Prison Turns Inmates Into Entrepreneurs', *Associated Press*, 12 June 2019, www.impomag.com/training-development/news/13251986/uruguay-prison-turns-inmates-into-entrepreneurs.

184. 'Ministerio del Trabajo firmó resolución para modificar actividades laborales de los presos en cárceles', *Infobae*, 26 December 2023, www.infobae.com/colombia/2023/12/26/ministerio-del-trabajo-firmo-resolucion-para-modificar-actividades-laborales-de-los-presos-en-carceles.

185. International Labour Organization, *The Mekelle Prison Project. Creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for women and youth*, www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/Mekelle%20Prison.pdf.

A person wearing a white beekeeping suit and a mesh veil is holding a wooden frame covered in bees. The background is a clear blue sky. The image is overlaid with a teal and white geometric pattern in the top left corner.

Prisoners participating in the Kingston Prison Farm program monitor beehives during a bi-weekly check of the hives kept on the prison grounds. August 2019. Kingston, Ontario Canada.

The private sector's involvement requires strict public supervision and voluntariness, while prisoner-run businesses and self-employment can foster autonomy and rehabilitation when safeguarded.

Particular groups of people in prison

Some groups of people in prison are particularly affected by the lack or poor quality of prison work opportunities, either because they are less likely to be offered work, the work available is not appropriate for them, or they are offered the least desirable work available. For example, in its report from a 2023 visit to Ukraine, the CPT noted that people in prison at the bottom of the informal hierarchy (sub-cultures) were frequently compelled to perform 'dirty' work such as cleaning toilets and collecting rubbish, for which they were not paid.¹⁸⁶ It was also reported by interviewees that people convicted of certain crimes, including cases involving child abuse, were unlikely to be offered the best jobs or any jobs at all, and were sometimes given the least desirable jobs.

Where people in prison fall into different vulnerable groups, such as elderly foreign nationals in pre-trial detention or women serving short sentences, the barriers to decent prison work – including discrimination and structural inequalities – can be manifold. The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery has addressed this, noting that intersecting forms of discrimination must be tackled more effectively, with women, members of minority groups, Indigenous people, migrants, young and older people, and people with disabilities experiencing additional discrimination and stigmatisation in accessing services within and outside of correctional facilities.¹⁸⁷

There are also some groups of people who may be less inclined to participate in work programmes for different reasons. This could be due to the accessibility of information about these opportunities, fear of discrimination, or because they feel that the opportunities are not relevant to them. For example, it has been noted that in Ireland, members of the travelling

community are less likely to take part in vocational training and more efforts are needed to encourage them to participate.¹⁸⁸

Some countries do consider the individual needs of the prison population in the design and allocation of prison work and some groups might be prioritised for work opportunities. In Portugal for example, special needs of young people, women and the elderly are assessed and taken into consideration, including their existing labour skills, within individual treatment plans.¹⁸⁹ In the Netherlands, workplace adjustments may be available for neurodivergent individuals or people with disabilities.¹⁹⁰

People in pre-trial detention

The Nelson Mandela Rules are clear that while people in prison awaiting trial should not be required to work, they should always be offered the opportunity to carry out paid work.¹⁹¹ However, in reality, many pre-trial detainees have no access to work or rehabilitation opportunities. Several interviewees noted that work opportunities were not available at all for those held in pre-trial detention. This is particularly problematic in countries where people can be held for prolonged periods of time – sometimes years – in pre-trial detention, where they make up a large percentage of the prison population and where pre-trial facilities are overcrowded.

In addition, people in pre-trial detention often lose their jobs due to prolonged absence, employer policies on unexplained or extended leave, and practical barriers to maintaining work, especially in roles requiring a physical presence. Frequently, job loss while in pre-trial detention is inevitable without legal protections or employer flexibility, with significant impacts on a person's family and community.

¹⁸⁶ CPT, *Report to the Ukrainian Government on the visit to Ukraine carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2024) 20, 2024.

¹⁸⁷ UN Human Rights Council, *Contemporary forms of slavery as affecting currently and formerly incarcerated people. Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences*, A/HRC/57/46, July 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5746-contemporary-forms-slavery-affecting-currently-and-formerly.

¹⁸⁸ Denis C. Bracken, 'Interactions with the Traveller Community by Prison and Probation Staff', *Irish Probation Journal*, Volume 17, October 2020, [www.probation.ie/EN/PB/0/3CDB16EB640F47818025862C00597FA0/\\$File/Denis%20C.%20Bracken.pdf](https://www.probation.ie/EN/PB/0/3CDB16EB640F47818025862C00597FA0/$File/Denis%20C.%20Bracken.pdf).

¹⁸⁹ Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ United Nations, Nelson Mandela Rules, Rule 116, 2015, docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175.

In its 2023 report on Ukraine, the CPT expressed concern about the lack of out-of-cell activities for pre-trial detainees, including women, who remain confined to their cells for up to 23 hours a day with minimal opportunity for engagement beyond this.¹⁹² In Portugal, pre-trial detainees are reportedly excluded from work programmes,¹⁹³ while women in Hungary in pre-trial detention are largely limited to cleaning or other basic maintenance tasks.¹⁹⁴ In Bolivia, the Ombudsperson has identified three critical shortcomings: the excessive use of pre-trial detention, pervasive overcrowding, and severely restricted access to education and work opportunities.¹⁹⁵

Women

The Bangkok Rules¹⁹⁶ require that prison staff be trained to enable them to 'address the specific social reintegration requirements of women prisoners and manage safe and rehabilitative facilities' and that classification methods be gender specific 'to ensure appropriate and individualised planning and implementation towards those prisoners' early rehabilitation, treatment and reintegration into society'.¹⁹⁷ The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences has also recommended that states ensure access for all women to marketable skills for reintegration.¹⁹⁸

As a minority group in prisons, women are often excluded from work and other rehabilitative activities, have less opportunities than men, or find that the programmes offered to them are not relevant for their rehabilitation and are often heavily gender stereotyped, equipping them for the most low-paid jobs in the economy.¹⁹⁹

In South Africa, it was reported that rehabilitation programmes for women are limited to mostly domestic skills, while men have a much broader range of programmes which increases their chances of finding employment after release and reduces the likelihood

of reoffending. Most of the rehabilitation programmes for women centred on home life, including knitting, sewing, laundry and taking care of the sick.²⁰⁰ In Belgium, the lack of opportunities for women – often limited to jobs like cleaning, packaging and sewing – are attributed to reinforcing women's exclusion from prison life and making them more financially vulnerable.²⁰¹ The UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls observed that women in Kyrgyz prisons are predominantly assigned stereotypical tasks, such as baking and sewing, and urged the introduction of a broader range of vocational opportunities to enhance their economic prospects.²⁰²

Increasingly, efforts are being made to improve access to truly rehabilitative work opportunities for women in prison. In Thailand, women receive training to become baristas;²⁰³ and in Botswana, there is an innovative aquaponics programme for women.²⁰⁴ There are also several programmes training women in computer science. In Kenya, the Change Hub is a technology-focused rehabilitation programme that teaches women coding, web design and computer repair.²⁰⁵ PRI has also implemented small business training for women in prison, including in Uganda and Georgia.

As women's prisons tend to be smaller, there are often fewer financial resources and less physical space available to run prison work programmes. Where women are housed in separate blocks of male prisons, they may be unfairly excluded from work opportunities due to security considerations. The CPT has noted that access to work for women is particularly dire in some facilities in Hungary, with one prison holding 130 people and offering work to only six to eight women in the laundry room.²⁰⁶

Pregnant women or those with children living with them are often excluded from prison work programmes, either because there are no suitable programmes or because they are unable to participate due to a lack of childcare arrangements.

192. CPT, *Report to the Ukrainian Government on the visit to Ukraine carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2024) 20, 2024.

193. European Prison Observatory, *Prisons in Europe. 2019 report on European prisons and penitentiary systems*, www.prisonobservatory.org/upload/Prisons%20in%20Europe.%202019%20report.pdf.

194. CFR, *Women in Prison: Hungary. Analysis from the National Preventive Mechanism*, July 2024, www.apr.ch/sites/default/files/2024-12/hungary_country_report.pdf.

195. Defensoria del Pueblo del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, *Defensor del Pueblo insta al estado a revisar el uso de la detención preventiva y garantizar derechos de jóvenes privados de libertad*, 8 September 2025, www.defensoria.gob.bo/noticias/defensor-del-pueblo-insta-al-estado-a-revisar-el-uso-de-la-detencion-preventiva-y-garantizar-derechos-de-jovenes-privados-de-libertad.

196. Available here: www.penalreform.org/issues/women/bangkok-rules.

197. United Nations, *Bangkok Rules, Rules 29 and 40*, 2010.

198. UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences*, Rashida Manjoo, A/HRC/17/26, 2011.

199. PRI and Thailand Institute of Justice, *The rehabilitation and social reintegration of women prisoners. Implementation of the Bangkok Rules*, May 2019.

200. 'Rehab for South Africa's female inmates focuses on domestic chores – instead of finding good work', *The Conversation*, 13 September 2023, theconversation.com/rehab-for-south-africas-female-inmates-focuses-on-domestic-chores-instead-of-finding-good-work-210391.

201. I.Care, *Parle avec elles. Quand des femmes détenues se racontent en prison*, July 2023, www.i-careasbl.be/_files/ugd/a3c73e_020bd1e7f6aa4603ab1668e79392744f.pdf.

202. UN Human Rights Council, *Visit to Kyrgyzstan. Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls*, A/HRC/53/39/Add.1, 8 May 2023, para. 80.

203. UNODC and Thailand Institute of Justice, *Report on the Global Webinar Series on "Gender-Responsive Criminal Justice and Prison Reform"*, www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Report_on_the_Global_Webinar_Series_on_Gender-Responsive_Criminal_Justice_and_Prison_Reform.pdf.

204. Horti Daily, *Aquaponics project presents skill building and rehabilitation for Botswana women's prison*, 18 December 2023, www.hortidaily.com/article/9586108/aquaponics-project-presents-skillbuilding-and-rehabilitation-for-botswanawomens-prison.

205. 'Can coding give Kenya's women prisoners a second chance?', *BBC News*, 8 October 2018, www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-44852497.

206. CPT, *Report to the Hungarian Government on the visit to Hungary carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2024) 36, 2024.

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There was a huge disparity between the work available for men and the work available for women. Everything was clearly designed with men in mind. For women the only work available was sewing, laundry and being a tea lady.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

Pregnant women, and women with disabilities or illnesses, are not denied opportunities to work, but there just isn't really any suitable work for them and they can often sit idle all day.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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In some countries, the smaller numbers of women in prison might make it easier for them to be offered work opportunities but the work may be less favourable. According to data from the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2016 women were more likely to be given work assignments in prison than men.²⁰⁷ In Brazil, it is also reported that women generally have more access to work opportunities, but these are mostly low-paid and low-skilled domestic jobs that are heavily gendered.²⁰⁸

Older people

The number of older people in prison is increasing in many countries but prison systems are often not set up for their physical and other needs, including a lack of work and rehabilitation opportunities that would be suitable for them.²⁰⁹ For example, the Council of Europe noted that in one prison in Hungary, age, health and security status impacted access to work opportunities.²¹⁰

Several interviewees noted that older people tended to be assigned less desirable jobs in prisons:

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Elderly women were frequently assigned the lowest-paying roles.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Elderly people in prison were required to work standing for long periods, and many were subject to harassment by the private contractor managing the workshops.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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While many older people may not be looking for work after their release – and some will not be expecting to be released – suitable opportunities must be designed for them, to ensure they are engaged in activities they want to do and that are useful to them, including adapting programmes to their age- and health-related needs.

People with physical and/or mental health problems

Physical and mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependence, and experiences of trauma, violence and abuse can all impact participation and success in work programmes, either because appropriate work is not available or because individuals face barriers to participation, including discrimination and stigmatisation. Several interviewees drew attention to these obstacles, emphasising their significance in shaping experiences within the prison system.

Prison work should take into account the physical and mental capacity of all people in prison to perform particular types of work in accordance with individualised assessments. These assessments need to be updated to reflect any changes in health and ability to undertake allocated work functions. There have been reports of people being expected to continue their allocated work despite developing health problems.²¹¹

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Those who have mental health problems or physical disabilities tend to just go on the lowest pay grade. They are just given the jobs that anybody could do.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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²⁰⁷ US Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Survey of Prison Inmates, United States, 2016*, www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/studies/37692/datadocumentation.

²⁰⁸ Yuri Fedrigo Dutra, 'The Influence of Capitalism in the Labor Force Logic of the Female Prison System and the Effectiveness of Work Programs for Reintegration', *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 11, 2021, iiste.org/Journals/index.php/RHSS/article/view/56699.

²⁰⁹ PRI, *Old age behind bars: how can prisons adapt to the needs of increasingly elderly populations?*, 25 September 2014, www.penalreform.org/blog/age-bars-prisons-adapt-increasingly-elderly-populations.

²¹⁰ CPT, *Report to the Hungarian Government on the visit to Hungary carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2024) 36, 2024.

²¹¹ 'Crossing Continents: Uganda's Prison Farms', *BBC Sounds Podcast*, www.bbc.com/audio/play/b0bggmcp.

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Those with physical disabilities were effectively sidelined.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Neurodiversity

Prison work and other rehabilitation programmes must take into account the needs of neurodivergent people. There is increasing recognition that they are significantly overrepresented in criminal justice systems worldwide and that prisons need to better address and support their needs.²¹² Currently, there are very few prison systems that properly consider neurodiversity within prisons more generally, and even fewer that take it into consideration when developing prison work programmes. Some of the areas that need to be taken into consideration to embed neuro-affirmative approaches in prison work programming include staff training, the sensory environment, unpredictable scheduling, communication needs and relationships, and suitability and access to work programmes. Adaptations can and should be made for enhanced access to suitable work placements and should be informed by neurodivergent people's experiences of prisons and prison work.

Foreign nationals

While foreign nationals should have the same access to work, vocational training and remuneration in prison as nationals, this is often not the case in practice – and opportunities available to them can be extremely limited. This may be because of their legal status, language limitations or discrimination, or because authorities have determined that the opportunities available have no relevance for them, especially if they are expected to be deported after their release.

Many foreign nationals do not benefit from the positive aspects of prison work, including potential remuneration, and may have very little to keep them occupied during the day. This is of particular concern, as they are often already very isolated in prison. This can lead to people serving very long sentences with no work or other rehabilitation opportunities at all. One interviewee who was imprisoned in the US described how anyone under a deportation order is specifically excluded from working in the Federal Prison Industries

(FPI) programme.²¹³ In Thailand, it is reported that there are generally no official paid work options available for foreign nationals in prison, leading to them being more likely to undertake unofficial work²¹⁴ or to work as a volunteer 'trustee', assisting prison staff in day-to-day activities such as cooking, cleaning or teaching.

The Council of Europe calls for foreign nationals to have a balanced programme of activities, noting that authorities may need to take specific measures to counter any difficulties they may face, and making it clear that their access to activities should not be restricted because they may be transferred, extradited or expelled.²¹⁵ In practice, regulations may prevent foreign nationals from undertaking certain activities, including work outside the prison premises.

Crucially, even if foreign nationals are allowed and able to work in prison, they may have different motivations and face different barriers than nationals. For example, many people undertake work in prison to send money home to their family members, and this may not be possible for foreign nationals. Others want to engage in work programmes to gain training and certificates to help them find work after their release, but this may not be relevant or useful for people who will go to another country when they leave prison.

To counter some of these concerns, the Council of Europe recommends that prison authorities take into account the individual needs and aspirations of foreign nationals in prison, including enabling them to work towards qualifications that are recognised and can be continued in the country they are likely to reside in after their release.

The Council of Europe has also recommended that foreign nationals be able to transfer at least part of their earnings to family members abroad, and that those who work and contribute to the social security system of the state in which they are imprisoned should be allowed, where possible, to transfer the benefits of such contributions to their state of nationality or another state.²¹⁶ However, much of this is difficult to implement in practice. One study of prison work for foreign nationals in Kongsvinger prison in Norway found that staff simply did not have the resources to develop relevant knowledge about the work and welfare systems of foreign nationals' home countries.²¹⁷

²¹² PRI, *Understanding and supporting the needs of neurodivergent people in prisons is a human rights issue*, 30 July 2024, www.penalreform.org/blog/understanding-and-supporting-the-needs-of-neurodivergent-people.

²¹³ UNICOR, *About the Federal Prison Industries Program*, www.unicor.gov/about_fpi_programs.aspx.

²¹⁴ UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, *Information pack for British nationals arrested or detained in Thailand*, 9 August 2023, www.gov.uk/government/publications/thailand-prisoner-pack/information-pack-for-british-nationals-arrested-or-detained-in-thailand.

²¹⁵ Council of Europe, *Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member States concerning foreign prisoners*, 2012.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Róisín Mulgrew, 'The role of oversight in foreign-national only prisons: counteracting the disapplication of rehabilitation', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, Volume 70, pp. 77–92, 2018, doi.org/10.1007/s10611-017-9720-4.

People with long, indeterminate or life sentences

Many people serving long, indefinite or life sentences, as well as those sentenced to death, have no opportunity to work in prison. This may be due to the seriousness of their crime and security status, or because authorities have determined there is little point in offering them rehabilitation opportunities, including work placements, if they are not expected to be released. In a number of countries, life-sentenced prisoners are excluded from work opportunities because they are generally kept apart from others and are subject to strict security regimes.²¹⁸

In other cases, people serving life and long sentences are not a priority for work opportunities. A 2021 report detailing experiences of life without parole (LWOP) in the US notes that LWOP prisoners are often the last to be picked for work opportunities because priority is given to those eligible for parole, with one former prisoner noting that ‘LWOPS are pretty much deprived of “good” jobs. The last for pretty much everything’.²¹⁹ In California, for example, people serving LWOP are only eligible for work under the prison industry authority if there are not enough other people to carry out the work.²²⁰

In Serbia, it was found that people serving long sentences were restricted from accessing work and other rehabilitation opportunities because they were unable to progress to a less restrictive regime due to the nature of their crimes.²²¹ Attention has also been drawn to the situation of life-sentenced prisoners in Slovakia, who were only offered in-cell work (glueing envelopes and folding cardboard boxes) and were not allowed to work with other prisoners at all.²²² Life-sentenced prisoners in Asia are reported to have been excluded from work opportunities or rehabilitation programmes as an additional punishment.²²³

Some countries have made proactive efforts to ensure that people with long, indefinite or life sentences do have access to work and other rehabilitation opportunities. A project in Gldani prison in Georgia, which engages people in prison to grow their own food, is available to those serving life sentences;²²⁴ and people serving long sentences in Norway may be

offered work opportunities.²²⁵ The CPT has noted that in many countries across Europe, life-sentenced prisoners benefit from the same work opportunities as others.²²⁶

It is important that people serving life and long sentences are offered work and other activities. These are vital for rehabilitation, but may also facilitate progression to lower-security regimes and access to more privileges. Work programmes also keep people occupied, and this can be particularly crucial as people with long or life sentences are known to have high rates of mental healthcare needs. The CPT has called for people serving long sentences in particular to be able to ‘exercise a degree of choice over the manner in which their time is spent, thus fostering a sense of autonomy and personal responsibility’.²²⁷

People held in high-security facilities

Those convicted of violent offences are also often excluded from work opportunities, which is commonly linked to security considerations as they are separated from others, often have very limited time out of their cells, and are barred from certain types of work because of security concerns.

Reluctance of authorities to find suitable work opportunities for those in high-security facilities can also be problematic when people are overclassified as high security – but may pose no threat in practice.

It is important that everyone in prison has access to some type of work opportunity that is appropriate for their security status. This extends to high-risk prisoners, who should not be barred from access to work based on their security classification. Authorities can facilitate access to and participation in work for them by taking steps to minimise identified risks through suitable security measures.²²⁸

People with short sentences

Opportunities for people serving short sentences are frequently limited or entirely absent. This may reflect a perception among prison authorities that allocating time and resources to this group is not worthwhile, or a recognition that developing programmes for those serving short sentences can present practical and

218. Including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Latvia, Moldova, Romania, the Russian Federation, Turkey (prisoners sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment only) and Ukraine. See: CPT, *Situation of life-sentenced prisoners*, 2016, rm.coe.int/16806cc447.

219. Marion Vannier, ‘Chapter 4: Prisoners’ Experiences of LWOP’, in *Normalizing Extreme Imprisonment: The Case of Life Without Parole in California*, Oxford University Press, 2021, doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198827825.003.0005.

220. Cornell Law School, *Cal. Code Regs. Tit. 15, § 8004 - Participation*, www.law.cornell.edu/regulations/california/15-CCR-8004.

221. CPT, *Report to the Serbian Government on the periodic visit to Serbia carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, CPT/Inf (2022) 03, 2022, rm.coe.int/1680a5c8a4.

222. CPT, *Slovak Republic: Visit 2018*, CPT/Inf (2019) 20, hudoc.cpt.coe.int/eng?i=p-svk-20180319-en-17.

223. Dirk van Zyl Smit, Catherine Appleton and Giao Vucong (eds), *Life Imprisonment in Asia*, Palgrave Advances in Criminology and Criminal Justice in Asia (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2022).

224. CCI Francaise En Georgie, *Harvest in the penitentiary of Gldani*, 19 September 2019, www.ccifg.ge/news/n/news/harvest-in-the-penitentiary-of-gldani.html.

225. ‘How Norway turns criminals into good neighbours’, BBC News, 6 July 2019, www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-48885846.

226. CPT, *Situation of life-sentenced prisoners*, 2016, rm.coe.int/16806cc447.

227. CPT, *The CPT standards. “Substantive” sections of the CPT’s General Reports*, 2003, rm.coe.int/0900000168097c735.

228. UNODC, *Handbook on the Management of High-Risk Prisoners*, 2016.

administrative challenges. In many instances, available work opportunities are not compatible with the duration of the sentence. Additionally, some individuals serving short sentences may lack motivation to participate in work or rehabilitation programmes. Women are particularly affected by these dynamics, as they are disproportionately given short sentences, often for minor, non-violent offences.²²⁹

Providing access to work and other rehabilitative programmes for people serving short sentences is of particular importance. This group is known to have comparatively high rates of reoffending and, in many jurisdictions, constitutes a substantial proportion of the prison population.²³⁰ There are also numerous approaches to designing work programmes that accommodate short custodial durations, thereby enhancing prospects for sustainable employment and successful reintegration following release.²³¹

Indigenous communities and other minority groups

People in prison from Indigenous communities and other minority groups may experience discrimination in the allocation of work opportunities, either through being denied access to employment altogether or being assigned less favourable or menial tasks. These groups may also have specific needs in relation to work placements, reflecting the social, cultural and economic marginalisation they face both within and beyond the prison system.

There are some positive initiatives and trends, however, where specific strategies and work programmes have been put in place for Indigenous communities and other racialised groups imprisoned.

For example in **Canada**, authorities are making efforts to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in prisons with a specific Indigenous Offenders Employment Initiative set up to enhance employment-related training and services for Indigenous people in prison.²³² In 2024, amendments were made to prison rules in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu to prevent discrimination in the allocation of work in prisons based on caste, by requiring that a person's caste should not be kept in prison records.²³³

In **Australia**, research has shown that programmes designed and led by Aboriginal people tend to improve participant engagement and retention. Examples include a programme that combines employment training with elder mentorship, and another that offers work-release programmes combined with holistic support.

In **Chile**, one proposal for social reintegration focuses on spiritual healing, cultural identity and community-based support for Mapuche prisoners.²³⁴

A dedicated programme enables Indigenous people in **Mexican** prisons, who speak languages such as Mazahua, Mixteco and Náhuatl, to engage in vocational training and craft production, fostering skills and providing economic benefits to their families.²³⁵

LGBTQI+ people in prison

LGBTQI+ people in prison continue to face discrimination and abuse in many prison systems globally, which frequently extends into prison work environments. One interviewee reported that LGBTQI+ individuals were explicitly excluded from employment opportunities because they were housed in separate, isolated units for their own protection.

This exclusion from work not only limits access to meaningful daily activity and skill development but can also exacerbate social isolation and hinder rehabilitation and social reintegration. Without opportunities to participate in structured work programmes, LGBTQI+ people in prison may face additional barriers to employment and reintegration upon release, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation and vulnerability.

Children

UNICEF estimated that approximately 259,000 children aged 5 to 17 were in detention globally in 2024. This figure may significantly underestimate the true scale, as many countries do not systematically record all forms of child detention or disaggregate data by age. Children from marginalised backgrounds are often disproportionately represented in detention systems worldwide, including racialised children, Indigenous

²²⁹ See, for example: Prison Reform Trust, *Too many women sent to prison on short sentences for non-violent offences*, 20 July 2021.

²³⁰ Sentencing Academy, *Who's in Prison and What's the Purpose of Imprisonment? A Survey of Public Knowledge and Attitudes*, November 2024, www.sentencingacademy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Who-is-in-Prison-and-What-is-the-Purpose-of-Imprisonment.pdf.

²³¹ See, for example: PRI and Thailand Institute of Justice, *The rehabilitation and social reintegration of women prisoners. Implementation of the Bangkok Rules*, May 2019.

²³² Indigenous Works, *Rehabilitation and Reintegration for Reconciliation*.

²³³ 'Tamil Nadu government amends rules to prohibit caste discrimination in prisons', *The Hindu*, 21 May 2025, www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tamil-nadu-government-amends-rules-to-prohibit-caste-discrimination-in-prisons/article69598374.ece.

²³⁴ Input from PRI's online Expert Group Meeting on Prison Work, held on 18 February 2026.

²³⁵ 'Personas indígenas en prisión realizan actividades productivas y capacitación laboral', *MVS Noticias*, 26 February 2025, mvsnoticias.com/nacional/policiaca/2025/2/26/personas-indigenas-en-prision-realizan-actividades-productivas-capacitacion-laboral-680434.html.

children, and those from economically disadvantaged households. Many are held in facilities that fall short of international minimum standards.²³⁶

The ILO's Minimum Age Convention²³⁷ sets 15 years as the general minimum age for admission to work, rising to 18 for hazardous work – a threshold that applies during detention. Whilst not designed specifically for detention settings, these standards are relevant to any work involving children and should be applied as a minimum safeguard in custodial settings.

The UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (the Havana Rules)²³⁸ provide that the best interests of the child and their vocational training must never be subordinated to the purpose of generating profit for third parties. The Rules further establish that education and vocational training must take clear priority over any work undertaken within individual programmes. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment No. 24 (2019), has affirmed that any work carried out by children in detention must be part of an educational or vocational programme and must not be exploitative or punitive in nature. In addition, the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that the best interests of the child be a primary consideration in all decisions taken by public authorities, including those relating to work and vocational activity in detention.

Children in detention are rarely the subject of specific work allocation policies. As a result, patterns of discrimination documented in adult prison populations – including assignment to the most menial or undesirable tasks, as well as risks to abuse and sexual exploitation²³⁹ – are exacerbated in the case of children. These risks are compounded by age-related vulnerability, limited legal capacity, and restricted access to advocates, complaint mechanisms or independent oversight, despite the latter being required under international law. Detention authorities bear both the legal obligation and the logistical capacity to close this gap; their failure to do so is therefore not a neutral omission, but an active exposure of the children in their care to foreseeable harm.²⁴⁰

The applicable standards are clear; what is required is their effective implementation. Every child in detention remains, first and foremost, a child, whose development, dignity, and future remain the responsibility of the detaining authorities. Where detention authorities design work programmes for children, they bear a direct obligation to ensure that such programmes are voluntary, free from any form of coercion or duress, and genuinely subordinated to educational and vocational objectives. Work must not serve institutional or economic interests at the expense of a child's rehabilitation. It should be age-appropriate, provide demonstrable skills-building value, and be accompanied by fair remuneration, a portion of which should be preserved as savings accessible upon release, in accordance with the child's best interests. These are not aspirational benchmarks, but binding obligations under applicable standards. Independent oversight of any work programme involving children in detention is therefore not optional, but the means through which compliance with those obligations is secured.

²³⁶ PRI/TIJ, *Global Prison Trends 2026*, www.penalreform.org/resource/global-prison-trends-2026.

²³⁷ International Labour Organization, *Minimum Age Convention*, 1973 (No. 138).

²³⁸ United Nations, *Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (the Havana Rules)*, 1990, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/united-nations-rules-protection-juveniles-deprived-their-liberty.

²³⁹ Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, A/HRC/57/46, July 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5746-contemporary-forms-slavery-affecting-currently-and-formerly.

²⁴⁰ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 24, CRC/C/GC/24, 2019, paras. 95–96.

Beyond prison

Positive work opportunities and experiences of work in prison can be a decisive factor in whether people can find and retain work after their release from prison, and this also needs to include pre-release support to help people find employment. Steady post-release employment has also been shown to be one of the most important factors in reducing reoffending. However, there are many factors that can prevent people from finding and retaining work, including stigma and discrimination in the community.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has noted that successful reintegration requires a holistic approach and a framework that addresses key components such as employment, housing, healthcare and support networks, along with sustained support and continuity of care as needed – from before people leave prison to after release.²⁴¹ Such support should also include training on technological developments and practical skills to navigate community life.

“

The stigma of prison makes it really difficult for anyone to get a job after prison. People have to hide the fact they were in prison otherwise they will never get work.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Some interviewees noted that continued stigma around imprisonment meant that, even if they had been offered better and more rehabilitative work and training opportunities, it would still have been difficult to find work. With regards to this, the Nelson Mandela Rules clearly state that after release, people should be provided with efficient aftercare directed at lessening prejudice and promoting social rehabilitation.²⁴²

One interviewee reported that the main problem she faced was not the lack of opportunities in prison, but her inability to find work after her release and the stigma and ostracisation she and her family have faced since her release.

“

Offering us work in prison isn't enough because it is so difficult to find work and be accepted into society on release. There needs also to be a change in societal attitudes towards people who have been in prison.

A person with lived experience of imprisonment

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Employers can be reluctant to hire people who have been in prison, and, in some countries, there are also administrative barriers to people finding work and restrictions resulting from criminal records.²⁴³ These need to be tackled as part of broader efforts to improve the rehabilitative prospects of people released from prison.

There are many promising examples of programmes that connect people with employers before or after their release and which equip people with skills for specific jobs. Some employers run programmes that actively employ people who have been in prison, with positive outcomes reported.²⁴⁴ Others recruit in prisons, with jobs fairs in prison becoming increasingly popular. There are also schemes in place that provide companies with financial incentives to employ former prisoners.²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ UN Human Rights Council, *Human rights and the social reintegration of persons released from detention and persons subjected to non-custodial measures. Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, A/HRC/60/55, August 2025.

²⁴² United Nations, *Nelson Mandela Rules, Rule 90*, 2015, docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175.

²⁴³ CIPD, People Management, *Businesses less willing to hire people with convictions than in 2013*, www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1933846/businesses-less-willing-hire-people-convictions-2013.

²⁴⁴ Virgin, *The case for employing ex-offenders*, 11 December 2018, www.virgin.com/about-virgin/latest/case-employing-ex-offenders.

²⁴⁵ Lincolnshire Action Trust, *Proposed Tax Breaks for Businesses Employing Ex-Offenders*, 6 February 2017, latcharity.org.uk/news/proposed-tax-breaks-for-businesses-employing-ex-offenders.

In the **UK**, the Timpson Foundation invests over £1 million annually in supporting the employment of people with convictions. Since first hiring from a local prison in 2002, it has become one of the UK's largest employers of formerly imprisoned people (who make up more than 12 percent of Timpson's workforce). Prison Training Academies equip people in prison with practical in-store skills and integrate them into teams, helping restore confidence and prepare them for work. Through Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), people in prison who are near the end of a long sentence can also gain day-release experience before full reintegration. Around 75 percent of formerly imprisoned people recruited by Timpson remain working for the company long term, demonstrating the programme's role in reducing reoffending and supporting lasting employment.²⁴⁶

In **Kenya**, in efforts to upscale private-public rehabilitation and reintegration projects, authorities have committed to providing insurance to companies to safeguard against any issues arising from the conduct of people who have been released from prison, as well as tax exemptions for companies employing people upon release. Authorities have also initiated an advocacy campaign to sensitise the private and public sectors to employing people when they leave prison.

The role of NGOs, other community organisations and local businesses is crucial in providing pre- and post-release employment support, including the development of programmes that create links between individuals and potential employers. These programmes can also be integral in breaking down the stigma of imprisonment and improving community awareness of life in prison and the barriers people face after their release.

²⁴⁶ See Timpson Foundation: www.timpson-group.co.uk/about/timpson-foundation.

A 10-point plan to regulated and rehabilitative-based approach to prison work

The people who participated in the research underpinning this Guide, and its recommendations, who have lived experience of imprisonment overwhelmingly agreed that prison work can and should be positive, should contribute to rehabilitation and reintegration, and have the potential to improve people's experiences in prison as well as their physical and mental health. However, they also made it clear that this ideal is rarely achieved for many different reasons, ranging from overcrowding and poor conditions of detention to attitudes of prison staff and discrimination.

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In all countries where prison work is available there were certain commonalities in people's experiences. This included the dominance of the prison hierarchy and favouritism in work allocation, no or low wages, and the question of the relevance of work programmes for effective rehabilitation. Many queried who the main beneficiaries of prison work programmes are, including where private entities are involved.

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As debate around the future of prison work progresses and calls for reform of human rights protections continue, it is absolutely crucial to take into account the views and experiences of people who have participated in such programmes, as well as the views of those who organise and run them. Rights-based approaches to prison work must take precedence over productivity or profit, and any work-related abuses must be eradicated.

PRI also calls on prison monitors to include prison work in their ongoing monitoring activities.

Prison work programmes can only be truly effective when they are rooted in respect for human rights and have rehabilitative aims. They should prioritise the dignity, safety and development of those detained, while also supporting staff welfare and broader societal reintegration goals. The following 10-point plan provides a framework for humane, transparent and sustainable prison work programmes drawing on the findings of this accompanying guide.

01

Ground prison work programmes in human rights

Prison work programmes should be grounded firmly in human rights principles, with the rehabilitation and reintegration of people in detention as their foremost objective. Such programmes are most effective in prisons that uphold the rights of those detained and provide decent working conditions for staff in prison facilities. Work must be meaningful, never imposed as a form of punishment or humiliation, implemented without economic exploitation, and safeguarded by robust oversight, transparent reporting and access for independent external monitors. Non-discrimination should govern all aspects of work, including allocation, conditions and remuneration, and measures must protect individuals from abuses in both official and informal prison economies. Any decision that leads to non-participation must comply with human rights standards, with clear records maintained of their application.

02

Regulate all prison work

Prison work should be conducted under conditions that are regulated by human rights standards, encompassing labour rights, fair remuneration, health and safety protections, and robust oversight mechanisms. The employment relationship between the person imprisoned and the employer must be clearly defined and all human rights safeguards must apply equally, whether work is organised by prison authorities or private entities, with all programmes remaining under the supervision and control of a public authority.

Specific regulations should address the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of different groups. For women, regulations should ensure that work opportunities are gender-responsive. For children in detention, they must be grounded in a child rights framework, with education and vocational training prioritised over any work assignment. For all other groups, including older people, persons with disabilities and foreign nationals, work allocation should be based on individual assessment and be free from discrimination.

03

Tailor prison work to the individual

Prison work programmes should be tailored to the individual treatment needs of people in prison, taking into account their physical and mental capacity to perform tasks, and informed by regularly reviewed risk and needs assessments. Such programmes must be part of comprehensive, personalised sentence plans that integrate education, vocational training, practical pre-release life skills and holistic psycho-social support. Access to work should extend beyond security classifications, with any restrictions proportionate to actual risks posed by individuals.

04

Engage many stakeholders in design of prison work programmes

Prison work programmes should be developed with the input of people with lived experience of imprisonment, including those who have been released, to ensure their needs and post-release challenges are understood. Community members and local businesses should also be consulted in the design, delivery and regulation of programmes. Programmes must be informed by labour market research to create clear pathways to sustainable employment, recognising that some groups may face additional barriers. Continuous feedback from participants should be gathered to monitor implementation and identify opportunities for improvement.

05

Ensure fair pay and benefits

Prison work programmes should ensure equal pay for equal work, in line with international standards, applied fairly and without discrimination. Wages must reflect the cost of living within prisons, be regularly reviewed, and indexed to inflation, allowing people to save for their release. Systems should provide individuals with a choice over how to use their earnings, including supporting family members or building personal savings. All additional benefits, such as remission or sentence reductions, must also be administered fairly and without discrimination.

06

Maintain transparency

Prison work programmes should operate with full transparency regarding pay, contracts, tenders, the use of profits – including when private sector involvement or export of goods is concerned – and the value of goods and services produced. Detailed information should be collected and published on available work, programme objectives, allocation procedures, participation numbers disaggregated by gender and other relevant factors, and, where possible, associated reoffending rates. Transparent procedures must govern the fair allocation of work, and robust systems should be in place to monitor and evaluate all programmes, with clear indicators to assess effectiveness and outcomes.

07

Protect health and safety

Prison work programmes must uphold health and safety standards at least equivalent to those in the wider community, covering training, working hours, conditions and provision of protective equipment. Transparent regulations should govern occupational safety, including clear details of accident insurance policies and procedures. Robust systems must be established to respond to workplace injuries and deaths, including incidents occurring outside of prison premises or under the supervision of private entities.

08

Provide adequate resources

Prison work programmes should be supported by adequate and safe physical spaces, including facilities for outdoor work, and sufficient staffing to maintain continuity even during security incidents or other disruptions, such as climate disasters. Financial resources must be secured to ensure long-term, sustainable access to work for everyone who wishes to participate. Programmes should be integrated within broader rehabilitation and social reintegration plans, encompassing education, counselling, life skills and other support, with schedules designed to avoid conflicts and enable full participation in complementary rehabilitative activities.

09

Train staff appropriately

All prison staff engaged in work and rehabilitation programmes should receive training in rehabilitative approaches to prison work. Training should equip staff not only to supervise work activities safely and effectively, but also to support prisoners' personal development, employability, wellbeing, and reintegration into society.

10

Support post-release transitions

Efforts should be made to reduce stigma and remove practical and administrative barriers that hinder people in securing employment after release from prison. Collaboration with relevant agencies, including social services and probation departments, is essential to provide effective post-release support and access to sustainable employment opportunities. This should be extended to housing providers, employment agencies, community and civil society networks, industry partners, healthcare services (to ensure continuity of care), and education providers, in order to deliver coordinated and comprehensive support that addresses the full range of reintegration needs..

About Penal Reform International

Penal Reform International (PRI) is a non-governmental organisation working globally to promote criminal justice systems that uphold human rights for all and do no harm. We work to make criminal justice systems non-discriminatory and protect the rights of disadvantaged people. We run practical human rights programmes and support reforms that make criminal justice fair and effective.

Registered in The Netherlands (registration no 40025979), PRI operates globally with offices in multiple locations.

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