

# GLOBAL PRISON TRENDS 2026



## Global Prison Trends 2026

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Cover photo: A guard at a Ukrainian Penal Institution in the country's south walks through a gate during an inspection. The facility is often under air alerts as drones and missiles often traverse the airspace above on their way to interior targets. September 2023. Cory Wright.

Graphic design by Alex Valy.

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A man detained at Kingston's Collins Bay Institution in Canada moves through an old out building once part of the prison's farm programme looking for salvageable equipment as the programme prepared to restart. 2019. Cory Wright.

**On any given day, more than 11.5 million people are held in prisons. However, the number of people moving in and out of prisons each year is far higher.**

# Introduction

**by Olivia Rope**

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Prisons do not operate in a vacuum. They are shaped by the robustness of the rule of law, the quality of governance, and the broader social, economic and political context. Where the rule of law is undermined, the consequences are often felt most sharply in places of detention: people may be imprisoned unnecessarily, for prolonged periods, or for political reasons, with limited access to remedies or oversight.

In contexts of fragility, conflict and instability, which have increased over the past year, prison systems frequently come under additional strain – with shrinking budgets, rising populations and deteriorating conditions. In such environments, people detained in prison bear the heaviest burden.

This report brings together data and analysis from around the world to provide an evidence base and a snapshot of the state of prisons globally.

On any given day, 11.7 million people are held in prisons worldwide. This figure, however, captures only part of the picture. The number of people moving in and out of prisons each year is far higher, and the ripple effects extend to prison staff, families and communities. Prisons are therefore not a marginal issue affecting a small group, but a central component of justice systems with wide social impacts.

We launch this report in a crucial year, marked by the convening of the Fifteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice – the largest global forum on these topics. This year's *Global Prison Trends* is a call to keep prisons firmly on the international agenda and grounded in international human rights standards. The challenges facing prison systems are well documented, including in this report: chronic overcrowding, the influence of

organised crime, insufficient rehabilitative opportunities, and persistent human rights violations.

Yet solutions exist. Evidence-based policies and practices have shown that it is possible to reduce prison populations, improve safety and conditions, and strengthen rehabilitation and reintegration into society. The task ahead is to invest in these solutions and scale them up, so that prison systems in every country contribute to justice, safety and human dignity, rather than undermining them.

# Key facts & figures

## Global prison population

**11.7** million people  
IMPRISONED WORLDWIDE  
AS OF 2023\*

Equivalent to the population of  
**BELGIUM**  
**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**  
**JORDAN**

93%  
MEN

7%  
WOMEN

est. 19,000 CHILDREN living in prison with a primary caregiver

1.4 million CHILDREN have a mother in prison

### LONG-TERM UPWARD TREND

**AMERICAS**  
Very high imprisonment rates  
Widespread overcrowding

**EUROPE**  
Mixed picture: some sustained reductions alongside rising pre-trial detention

**AFRICA**  
Rapid prison population growth in several countries  
High overcrowding levels

**ASIA**  
Largest absolute prison population  
Sharp national differences

## Pre-trial detention

**3+** million people  
IN PRE-TRIAL DETENTION



1 in 3 persons in prison are awaiting trial, presumed innocent

OVERALL INCREASE  
↗ 39+%  
SINCE 2000\*

Inefficient justice systems and the use of prison as a default response to criminal offending are driving numbers up.

### GLOBAL PRE-TRIAL DETENTION TRENDS SINCE 2000†

**EUROPE**  
↘ 7%

**RUSSIA**  
↘ 52%

**KAZAKHSTAN**  
↘ 57%

**Women**  
at greater risk of pre-trial detention in  
**AFRICA & OCEANIA**

**AMERICAS**  
↗ 59%

**AFRICA**  
↗ 24%

**ASIA**  
↗ 74%

**OCEANIA**  
↗ 313%

\*Source: UNODC, Prison Matters 2025: 2nd edition. † Since about the year 2000. Source: World Prison Brief, World Pre-trial/Remand Imprisonment List, 2025.

# Key facts & figures

## Prison overcrowding



DRIVERS



POPULAR MEASURES to reduce prison population, while not always effective or human rights-compliant.



### SOCIAL ISSUES

Failure to tackle social problems in the community



### PUNITIVE POLICIES

"Tough on crime" punitive criminal policies



### PRE-TRIAL

Excessive use of pre-trial detention



### SHORT SENTENCES

Use of many short sentences creating a revolving door



### LIFE SENTENCES

Increase in long and life sentences



### COMMUNITY

Community-based alternatives



### PROBATION

Probation, electronic monitoring, bail for pre-trial



### PARDONS

Pardons and amnesties



### MORE CAPACITY

Building extra infrastructure



### TRANSFERS

Extra-territorial prison transfer agreements



## Rehabilitation in prisons



CHALLENGES



OPPORTUNITIES



### DISCRIMINATION

Stigma and discrimination, fragmented service provision



### EXCLUSION

of those most affected from programme design



### RESOURCES

Strained budgets, limited resources, understaffing, overcrowding



### HEALTH

Healthcare and mental healthcare provision is patchy



### NEW UN STANDARD

UN Kyoto Model Strategies to Reduce Reoffending (2025) prioritising rehabilitative systems



### LIVED EXPERIENCE

Initiatives centring people with lived experience of imprisonment



### CIVIL SOCIETY

Resilient CSO-led work further embedded, filling gaps or complementing state-provided programmes



### INNOVATION

New approaches: through housing, employment, health, autonomy and social participation

# Key messages

01

**Global prison population at 11.7 million as overcrowding and excessive pre-trial detention remains**

Since 2000, the number of people in prison worldwide has risen by 25–27 percent, with regional increases in the Americas, Africa, Oceania and parts of Asia. Expanding pre-trial detention is one growth driver, while overcrowding affects prisons in over 100 countries, undermining dignity, healthcare and rehabilitation.

02

**Persistent weaknesses in criminal justice and prison systems amid a strain on rule of law**

Rule of law is under growing strain, with criminal justice and prison systems performing particularly poorly. Weak correctional outcomes, high imprisonment rates, and corruption undermine public trust, while stronger rule of law environments rely more on non-custodial measures and achieve better rehabilitation and justice outcomes.

03

**Shifting towards people-centred language in criminal justice is gaining momentum in several regions**

Advocacy, often led by people with lived experience of imprisonment and civil society is challenging the use of dehumanising labels and promoting more people-centred terminology in the justice sector. Progress continues to lag behind advances seen in other sectors such as disability rights, HIV responses and drug policy.

04

**Armed conflict seriously impacts justice systems, and prisons, with high risks of violence and basic needs often going unmet**

In 2025, around 831 million people lived in conflict-affected settings, yet prisons remain largely overlooked in humanitarian responses. Across several regions, armed violence has damaged facilities, disrupted justice systems and heightened risks of overcrowding, abuse and sexual violence, leaving many people in prison without adequate protection during conflict.

05

**Non-custodial sanctions are expanding globally albeit unevenly and challenges remain**

Efforts to reduce prison populations in the global south increasingly include probation and community sanctions. However, imprisonment often remains dominant and reforms either risk widening criminal justice control or fail to be properly resourced to ensure effectiveness.

06

**People continue to be criminalised for poverty, their gender or status, amid marginalisation and inequality**

Laws and practices see people being criminalised for poverty, homelessness, informal work, drug use, HIV status, sex work, and consensual same sex conduct. Women, LGBTQI+ individuals, racialised people, and economically marginalised groups are disproportionately impacted, perpetuating inequality and systemic injustice.

07

**Prison violence remains widespread and is closely linked to overcrowding, organised crime and systemic instability**

Violence continues to shape prison life globally, harming the most vulnerable people, undermining rehabilitation and placing strain on prison staff. Evidence shows overcrowding significantly increases the risk of violent incidents, while deaths linked to organised crime, unrest and weak oversight continues in a number of countries.

08

**Organised crime networks are strengthening their influence within prisons worldwide**

In many jurisdictions, organised crime groups are consolidating power inside prisons, using overcrowded, under-resourced and poorly supervised systems to recruit members and coordinate criminal activity. From Latin America to Europe and the Pacific, authorities warn prisons are becoming operational hubs for gangs, prompting increasingly securitised responses, amid ongoing human rights concerns and risks to staff safety.

- 09** **Global abolition of the death penalty progresses, but executions rise sharply in retentionist states**
- While 113 countries have fully abolished the death penalty and 54 are abolitionist in practice, executions surged in 2024–2025 in countries still using capital punishment. People convicted for drug offences, women, and foreign nationals remain disproportionately affected.
- 10** **Life imprisonment is expanding globally, but reliable data remain scarce**
- Available data indicate a substantial increase in people under life sentences worldwide, with notable rises in India, South Africa, parts of Europe, and the US. Research highlights the critical role of hope, parole opportunities, and compassionate release in mitigating the profound long-term harm on people serving life sentences.
- 11** **Around a quarter million children are in detention, with marginalised groups disproportionately affected**
- Global estimates show 259,000 children aged 5–17 in detention in 2024, a decline since 2018, yet data gaps may obscure the full scale. Racialised children remain overrepresented, and some countries are lowering minimum ages of criminal responsibility.
- 12** **Prison healthcare remains chronically under-resourced, putting the health of millions worldwide at risk**
- Prisons face increasing staff shortages, overcrowding, and weak health systems. Poor conditions have been connected to deaths and severe illness, while TB, hepatitis C, and other diseases spread rapidly. Innovative technologies and NGO-led initiatives show promise, yet systemic underfunding and weak integration with public health limit widespread improvements.
- 13** **Prisons are increasingly holding people with severe mental health needs, yet care remains critically insufficient**
- Globally, at least one in seven people in prison lives with severe mental illness, with high rates of depression, psychosis and suicide. Chronic understaffing, inadequate services, and gaps in community care drive this crisis. Promising interventions, including peer support, trauma-informed approaches, telepsychiatry, and civil society partnerships, show impact, but systemic change is missing in many parts of the world.
- 14** **Drug use and dependence are common in prisons, yet harm reduction services remain scarce and patchy worldwide**
- About four in ten people entering prison have drug dependence and use often continues inside, increasing risks of overdose, self-harm, mental ill-health and infection. Yet evidence-based harm reduction – including opioid agonist therapy, needle exchange programmes and naloxone – remains unavailable in many prisons.
- 15** **Prison systems face mounting staff shortages, safety risks and well-being challenges**
- Across regions, prison authorities report growing difficulties recruiting and retaining staff amid overcrowding, unsafe conditions and limited resources. New initiatives to support staff well-being and professional development have been prompted by violence against staff, high vacancy rates and widespread stress and burnout documented worldwide.
- 16** **Rehabilitation and reintegration aims are central to prison policy, yet systemic barriers in implementation remain**
- New UN strategies were adopted to reduce reoffending and evidence shows that programmes supporting education, connection, housing and health reduces recidivism, but stigma and insufficient investment leave many people unsupported.
- 17** **Rapid expansion of prison technologies raises opportunities, provided ethical and human rights-based approaches are safeguarded**
- Prisons worldwide are adopting advanced technologies for security, healthcare, management and rehabilitation, often in partnership with private companies. While tools such as AI, robotics and telemedicine may improve safety, efficiency and health outcomes, their rapid expansion has outpaced safeguards, prompting concerns.

## PART ONE

# The use of imprisonment

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## Prison populations and overcrowding

The latest global data published in July 2025 but UNODC estimated that there are about 11.7 million people in prison on any given day.<sup>1</sup> This represents an increase of around 25–27 percent in the global prison population since 2000, which is slightly less than the increase in the world's population.

Examining regional trends reveals striking variations in prison population growth, each driven by different factors. In Africa and Oceania (primarily Australia and New Zealand), rising rates of pre-trial detention have contributed to very large increases of 53 percent and 85 percent respectively. New data issued by World Prison Brief in November 2025 on pre-trial detention shows that in about half of all countries across Africa, people in pre-trial detention constitute more than 40 percent of the prison population.<sup>2</sup>

In the Americas, there has been a dramatic surge in the number of people imprisoned in recent years, largely because of the continuation of punitive approaches to drug-related

offences – even though these approaches have proven ineffective in tackling the underlying problems. The South American prison population has more than tripled since 2000. In El Salvador, a policy of mass imprisonment has seen the country's prison population grow to an estimated 118,000 detainees, constituting almost 2 percent of El Salvador's population.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the total number of people in prison in Asia has steadily increased, with a rise of about 43 percent in the past two decades, mostly due to growth in South East Asia and the Middle East. The doubling of the prison population in India, as a populous country, also contributes significantly to the regional rise. As of January 2025, more than half a million people were imprisoned in India, with two-thirds in pre-trial detention.<sup>4</sup>

While Europe is the only region to record an overall decline in prison numbers since 2000, this trend is largely driven by Russia – where a 59 percent reduction is due to various factors, including

sentencing reforms and the release and recruitment of prisoners for military service in Ukraine. Excluding Russia, the rest of Europe has seen a 12 percent increase in its prison population over the past 25 years, highlighting that prison growth remains a global concern.

Millions of people in prison are held in overcrowded facilities, and over 100 countries have occupancy levels of more than 110 percent in their prisons.<sup>5</sup> It is not uncommon for detention conditions in overcrowded facilities to meet the threshold of inhumanity under international standards. Documented impacts, noted by UN experts, include a lack of basic healthcare, sanitation and food, a serious lack of safety, and limited access to any meaningful or purposeful activity or to rehabilitation programmes. For people who are vulnerable, such as women, people with disabilities, people who use drugs or children, the harms of overcrowding are usually exacerbated.

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## Rule of law and prisons

Global evidence indicates that rule of law performance is under mounting strain. The Rule of Law Index 2025 by the World Justice Project reports that 68% of countries experienced declines in rule of law performance between 2024 and 2025, marking

the eighth consecutive year in which more countries saw deterioration than improvement.<sup>6</sup>

Prison systems and imprisonment levels offer an important indicator of how effectively countries uphold the rule of law. The World Justice Project

Rule of Law Index, which measures adherence to core principles such as accountability, fairness and the protection of fundamental rights, includes criminal justice as one of its eight dimensions. Globally, this dimension has consistently received the lowest scores in the Index. On a

scale from 0 to 1—where 1 represents the strongest adherence to the rule of law and 0 the weakest—the criminal justice score declined slightly from 0.49 in 2015 to 0.47 in 2025. Within this dimension, the performance of correctional systems in reducing criminal behaviour has scored even lower, suggesting persistent challenges in rehabilitation and reintegration across many countries.

Overall, countries such as Norway, Germany and the Netherlands where there is lower imprisonment rates tend to perform more strongly across

rule-of-law measures, including due process and the effectiveness of criminal justice and correctional systems. By contrast, jurisdictions with higher imprisonment rates often show more mixed outcomes, including the US and Türkiye.

Where prison systems struggle to effectively reduce criminal behaviour and support rehabilitation, public trust in justice institutions can weaken, impacting respect of the rule of law. Conversely, stronger rule of law environments tends to rely less on imprisonment and more on non-custodial options which

are proven to be more effective in preventing reoffending. (See [Reducing prison populations](#))

Weak justice systems also create opportunities for corruption in prisons, which remains a pervasive issue, further erodes institutional and undermines the rule of law. Over the past year there have been some high-profile cases of corrupt practices in prisons for example in India and the US, and the issue is consistently documented by monitoring mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

## Reducing prison populations

In response to overcrowding and its human and financial costs, efforts to reduce prison populations continue globally. Probation and other non-custodial measures remain a priority where established and functioning, and are attracting renewed attention where alternatives are less developed – including parts of the Middle East.

Globally, an estimated 12.5 million people are under non-custodial measures or sanctions, although prison are still used more than community sanctions in South America, Africa and Asia.<sup>8</sup>

In Europe, 2025 statistics show probation is now the main form of sanction in many jurisdictions. In the countries that provided data, an estimated 1.4 million people are on probation compared to 1 million in prison. At least 27 countries now have probation rates exceeding prison rates,<sup>9</sup> with authorities warning that both services are under increasing pressure to manage people safely.<sup>10</sup> Prison administrations in Europe are also deploying a range of shorter-term measures to manage overcrowding, according to a 2025 report. These include shared cells, emergency transfers and temporary capacity increases. Longer-term strategies include ten-year capacity

and staffing forecasts, infrastructure planning, and active engagement in policy debate.<sup>11</sup>

Research conducted by Penal Reform International (PRI) in 2026 across 20 countries in Africa, found barriers including financial constraints, limited institutional capacity, and social stigma towards people who have committed offences. However, efforts across the region include introducing or expanding community service, probation measures, and new sentencing guidelines to address the overuse of imprisonment at the pre-trial and sentencing stage.<sup>12</sup> In Senegal, the Ministry of Justice plans to reduce prison overcrowding by appointing more magistrates, expediting judicial proceedings, limiting prolonged pre-trial detention and strengthening sentence reduction mechanisms.<sup>13</sup>

There are greater efforts to use or introduce non-custodial measures in some countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. In Kuwait, measures to ease prison populations, as part of broader criminal justice reforms, include non-custodial options for certain traffic misdemeanours.<sup>14</sup> In Jordan, community sanctions expanded in 2025, with the Ministry of Justice stating that previous measures kept 14,000 people out of prison,

predominantly those who had committed their first offence.<sup>15</sup> A new sentencing law in Morocco from September 2025 boosts the use of non-custodial measures for minor offences punishable by up to five years' imprisonment to ease pressure on the prison system.

In South and South East Asia, there is a growing but uneven movement to develop community sanctions in response to prison overcrowding. Efforts in South America to expand such sanctions continue, but face opposition due to dominant security concerns and tough-on-crime approaches in some countries.<sup>16</sup>

In the Caribbean, a recent survey highlights potential to expand alternatives and reduce pre-trial detention, alongside efforts to address delays in case management and strengthen the role of probation services in pre-sentence reports and parole advice.<sup>17</sup>

Concerns remain over net-widening, where reforms intended to divert people from prison expand the reach of criminal justice systems, with more people under supervision.<sup>18</sup> This is seen in North America, Europe and Australia. The US is the most stark example, with new research showing nearly 3 million people on probation, 800,000 on parole, and nearly 2 million

Rolled mattresses stored overhead within a cell during the day at Gerardo Rodríguez Echeverría prison, San Rafael, Costa Rica. 2024. National Preventive Mechanism (NPM), Costa Rica.

**Examining regional trends reveals striking variations in prison population growth, each driven by different factors.**

still held in prisons and jails.<sup>11</sup> This has been described as a ‘parole and probation to prison pipeline’, with up to 40 percent of prison admissions composed of people who were on community supervision at the time of their arrest.<sup>19</sup>

In Europe also, 11 countries simultaneously increasing both their non-custodial and prison populations.<sup>20</sup> For example, data from France shows that, since the expansion of community sanctions, the number of people both on probation and in prison has increased by 3 percent and 10 percent respectively.<sup>21</sup> According to the most recent statistics, Moldova, Türkiye, Georgia and Poland rank particularly high in Europe in both prison and probation population rates. Their patterns suggest that in these jurisdictions, community sanctions and probation are not always operating primarily as substitutes for imprisonment, but in some contexts these may be used in addition to prison sentences, rather than replacing them.<sup>22</sup>

The UN Kyoto Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending were adopted in December 2025 by the UN General Assembly, reiterating a renewed commitment and call for promoting non-custodial options. They are linked to evidence that such sanctions are associated with lower reoffending rates.<sup>23</sup> In Malaysia, for example, 2025 data showed recidivism rates among those participating in community-based rehabilitation programmes of only 0.125 percent, compared to the national average of 11.8 percent.<sup>24</sup>

While there is an ever-growing consensus among practitioners and experts that the growth in the number of women going to prison needs to be addressed, translating this into action is slow.<sup>25</sup> In Ireland, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women noted the persistent overrepresentation of traveller women in the prison system, and called on authorities to address the root causes of this and to expand the

use of non-custodial alternatives.<sup>26</sup> The increase in the number of women in prison in Brazil has also been attributed to a lack of effort to develop suitable alternatives.<sup>27</sup>

Regional evidence from Latin America and the Caribbean also illustrates specific gender dynamics within prison populations. According to data compiled by the ILANUD Prison Population Information Bank, women represent approximately 6.83% of the prison population across 14 participating countries, a proportion broadly consistent with global averages but accompanied by a higher reliance on pre-trial detention among women than men. Within the same dataset, 43.34% of women in custody were held in pre-trial detention compared with 37.15% of men, indicating structural gendered disparities in the use of remand detention across the region.<sup>28</sup>

Costa Rica now provides non-custodial options for women in vulnerable situations who have committed minor drug offences, seeking to prioritise rehabilitation, social reintegration, and the reduction of recidivism through a restorative and gender-sensitive approach. In 2024, Costa Rica’s Judiciary developed a protocol to guide the use of restorative justice for women charged under article 77 bis of Law No. 8204, adapting existing mechanisms in adult criminal proceedings to better address gender-specific vulnerabilities. This follows a similar law from Colombia, which has had mixed results. A lack of awareness was observed regarding the scope and requirements of the Public Utility Law of 2023, with many women uncertain about their eligibility, unclear on how to substantiate the status of “woman head of household,” or how to link marginalisation to the commission of an offence, without clear guidance on the application process. This knowledge gap represents an initial and significant barrier to the effective implementation of the Law.<sup>29</sup>

There are many other approaches employed in efforts to reduce prison numbers, including crime prevention, decriminalisation of certain offences and diversion from criminal justice processes. Diversion is increasingly recognised as beneficial for people with mental health issues or for people who use drugs.<sup>30</sup> Abolishing or limiting the use of short prison sentences is an approach that is gaining traction in a range of countries including Scotland, Latvia, Belgium, and England and Wales.

Pardons and amnesties are also used to reduce prison populations, though resulting reductions in prisoner numbers are often short-lived. Over 5,000 people were released by authorities in the United Arab Emirates in November 2025, and at the beginning of 2026 the President of Burkina Faso pardoned nearly 1,200 people.<sup>31</sup> Over 20,000 people were also part of national amnesties during 2025.<sup>32</sup>

Efforts to reduce prison populations are often focused on sentenced prisoners but it is equally important to reduce numbers held in pre-trial detention, especially where the numbers are high. Morocco has recently achieved a significant reduction in its pre-trial detention rate, which is attributed to improved coordination between the judicial bodies tasked with monitoring pre-trial detention.<sup>33</sup> In Brazil, between 2014 and 2025, out of the more than 2 million people who were seen by a judge in a custody hearing (held within the first 24 hours after arrest), 41 percent were released.<sup>34</sup>

Electronic monitoring is being adopted more widely as a population management tool within criminal justice systems, though its success and human rights credentials have been called into question, including in relation to net-widening. In 2025, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern that, if improperly implemented, electronic monitoring can replicate the harms of detention and that undue surveillance can amount to human rights violations, disproportionately

impacting marginalised groups.<sup>35</sup> A 2025 study from Thailand found that there was no gender sensitivity in the application of electronic monitoring, with other questions raised over its effectiveness in relation to rehabilitation.<sup>36</sup>

The increased global uptake of electronic monitoring is driven by more advanced technologies and public-private partnerships, with South Korea and other Asian countries leading the development of advanced monitoring.<sup>37</sup> Latvia introduced electronic monitoring

in July 2025 using radio-frequency technology, with plans to move to GPS systems in the future.<sup>38</sup> Moves towards electronic monitoring in Mongolia have been found to reduce state expenditure and facilitate rehabilitation, though concerns about privacy, data security and human rights remain.<sup>39</sup> In Africa, Algeria has implemented electronic monitoring but has not published statistical information about its use. Algeria also has capabilities to use GPS tracking as part of a sentence, which is often accompanied with

conditions that involve skills-building such as poultry farming or reforestation.<sup>40</sup>

Governments are increasingly looking to extra-territorial prison transfer agreements to create capacity or alleviate overcrowding, often with foreign nationals in mind for transfer. Denmark's agreement with Kosovo is expected to become operational in 2027, and Sweden plans to take up space in Estonia later in 2026. Such arrangements pose significant jurisdictional challenges and give rise to many human rights concerns.<sup>41</sup>

## Criminalisation of poverty, social status and drug use

Across the world, people continue to be imprisoned for behaviour that falls under criminal laws but which frequently originates from colonial-era frameworks, such as vagrancy, loitering, begging or informal trade.<sup>42</sup> The enforcement of these laws typically targets those living in poverty, specific ethnic groups, and people facing multiple and intersecting layers of vulnerability. A recent study in Malawi found that courts routinely jail people living in poverty for failing to pay fines they cannot afford, creating a de facto system of debtors' prisons that disproportionately punishes poverty.<sup>43</sup>

In addressing socio-economic challenges, the default response is often criminalisation, frequently in the absence of supporting evidence. The criminalisation of homelessness remains a persistent feature of legal systems worldwide. In the absence of adequate social protection, many people depend on public spaces as sites for survival, using them both as places to live and as spaces in which to work. A new report published by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) and Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF) found that several European countries maintain

laws that criminalise homelessness, through provisions prohibiting 'sleeping rough', begging or the creation of informal shelters.<sup>44</sup>

In Hungary, using a public space as a permanent residence is punishable by fines or community service, with non-compliance convertible into imprisonment.<sup>45</sup> In France, certain forms of begging remain punishable by imprisonment,<sup>46</sup> and in Malta, custodial sentences have been imposed on people experiencing homelessness for offences directly linked to their lack of shelter.<sup>47</sup>

The right to work in public spaces has become increasingly contested.<sup>48</sup> Women, who constitute the majority of informal workers in public spaces, are frequently subjected to discrimination based on their poverty and perceived social status, both by the general public and by law enforcement authorities.<sup>49</sup> Women are often targeted because they are perceived as less likely to physically resist law enforcement officials, making them more vulnerable to abuse and victimisation.<sup>50</sup> Sanctions imposed on women traders take multiple forms, including formal penalties such as fines, confiscation of goods, arrest and detention, as

well as informal practices such as the solicitation of bribes and other forms of coercion.<sup>51</sup>

In Africa, research by the Dullah Omar Institute documents the persistence of colonial-era penal provisions criminalising vaguely defined threats to 'public order' in Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire and Mozambique.<sup>52</sup> Such provisions allow for broad interpretation and arbitrary enforcement, resulting in the criminalisation of begging, sex work, public indecency and adultery, and disproportionately affecting poor and economically marginalised groups.<sup>53</sup>

As of 2025, consensual same-sex sexual acts remain criminalised in 63 countries globally, with a further two criminalising them in practice, though not formally in law.<sup>54</sup> Positive reforms have occurred, including the High Court of Saint Lucia striking down sodomy provisions in July 2025.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, there is a broader trend of continued or expanded criminalisation in some regions, including in parts of Africa, although legal approaches are not uniform across the continent. Burkina Faso passed a law in 2025 making same-sex conduct a criminal

offence, punishable by fines and imprisonment ranging from two to five years.<sup>56</sup>

In May 2025, the Swedish Parliament adopted legislation extending the criminalisation of sex work to the online procurement of sexual services. This move drew sustained opposition from sex workers, civil society and academics, who warned that it would exacerbate stigma, surveillance and economic insecurity for sex workers, while extending the punitive reach of the law into digital spaces.<sup>57</sup> By contrast, in February 2026, the Scottish Parliament rejected a Bill that sought to criminalise the procurement of sexual services while decriminalising those selling sex, amid concerns regarding enforceability and the potential for increased marginalisation and harm.<sup>58</sup> In South Africa, civil society and sex worker activists have launched constitutional litigation against sex work offences, prompting the National Director of Public Prosecutions to impose a moratorium on prosecutions until the case, which is expected to reach the Constitutional Court, is resolved.<sup>59</sup>

Drug use and related activities continue to be criminalised in most jurisdictions, resulting in imprisonment for possession or personal use. Women, LGBTQI+ people, specific ethnic groups,

people living in poverty and other marginalised communities are disproportionately affected.<sup>60</sup> New figures indicate that in 2023, 6.1 million individuals came into contact with the criminal justice system for drug-related offences, of whom 4 million were implicated solely for personal possession. Of these, up to 1.6 million faced prosecution, and 850,000 were convicted exclusively for drug possession or use.<sup>61</sup>

In recognition of the harms caused by the so-called ‘war on drugs’, many jurisdictions are looking to decriminalise drug use. Drug use and related activities are now decriminalised in some form in at least 69 jurisdictions across 39 countries. Decriminalisation policies vary greatly, encompassing a wide range of models – from health-oriented approaches to narrow administrative regimes that retain severe sanctions and stigma.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, in 36 countries, drug offences can attract the death penalty. (See [Death penalty](#)) These divergences reflect enduring tensions between punitive drug control and public health and human rights-based frameworks.

In the meantime, the international debate on drug policy reform is gaining momentum. An independent review of the international drug control system was mandated by the

UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs after years of documentation of the harms of strict drug policies.<sup>63</sup> On 2025 World Drugs Day, 22 human rights experts from the United Nations called for a shift from punitive drug control to harm reduction measures, including the decriminalisation of minor offences.<sup>64</sup>

There has been a rise in reported cases of people being criminalised for being HIV positive.<sup>65</sup> This is a result of intensified enforcement in a small number of countries, rather than wider global expansion. Of the 112 cases documented across 27 countries, most were concentrated in highly punitive jurisdictions, particularly Uzbekistan.<sup>66</sup> Prosecutions continue to focus on non-disclosure and exposure without transmission, with marginalised groups disproportionately affected – including gay men, sex workers, trans people, and people already in detention.<sup>67</sup> Successful reform efforts continue: for example, in Ukraine, legislative steps are currently underway towards removing HIV criminalisation from the Criminal Code.<sup>68</sup> In October 2025, the Congress of Baja California in Mexico removed the provision on the ‘danger of contagion’ from its criminal code.<sup>69</sup>

## Death penalty

Global abolition of the death penalty continues to advance. A total of 113 states have abolished the death penalty for all crimes, while 54 retain it for ordinary offences (such as murder) but are considered abolitionist in practice, as they are not believed to implement executions.<sup>70</sup> However, among the minority of countries that still use the death penalty, the number of

people executed per year has risen steadily after historic lows during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amnesty International recorded that 1,518 people were executed across 15 countries in 2024, a 32 percent increase from 2023 and the highest level recorded since 2015. In the first nine months of 2025, execution totals in some states had already exceeded or doubled those recorded in 2024 – amid broader contexts of political instability, armed conflict,

economic insecurity and the erosion of the rule of law in several retentionist countries.<sup>71</sup>

By September 2025, Iran carried out more than 1,000 executions,<sup>72</sup> while in 2026 Saudi Arabia is predicted to surpass the 356 recorded in 2025.<sup>73</sup> In the US, 47 executions were carried out in 2025, a rise of 88% from the previous year and the highest annual total in more than a decade.<sup>74</sup> Increases were also observed in Kuwait and Singapore, while Japan,

Taiwan and the United Arab Emirates resumed executions following periods of hiatus. In Somalia, the first execution of a woman under a retaliatory sentence in Puntland in more than 10 years was confirmed by the authorities.<sup>75</sup> China, North Korea and Viet Nam continue to execute individuals in secrecy, with China alone believed to carry out thousands of executions annually.<sup>76</sup>

Beyond rising execution rates, there are worrying signs of regression. In Burkina Faso, the military junta approved a bill in December 2025 to reintroduce the death penalty for offences including terrorism and high treason, nearly a decade after abolition. This move runs counter to repeated calls by the UN General Assembly and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights for moratoria and progressive restriction with a view to abolition.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, in December 2025 the Parliament of the Maldives approved amendments to introduce the death penalty for drug trafficking.<sup>78</sup> Civil society organisations have strongly opposed the proposal.<sup>79</sup>

Recent reporting from Sudan indicates that two separate adultery cases resulted in death sentences by stoning against two women, raising serious concerns about the continued use of cruel punishments and due process violations within the criminal justice system. Reports indicate fair trial concerns in both cases, including reliance on contested or retracted confessions. At least one sentence was later overturned on appeal and remanded for retrial.<sup>80</sup>

Drug offences remain a major driver of the global use of the death penalty. According to Harm Reduction International, at the end of 2025 36 countries retained capital punishment for drug-related crimes, and at least 1,212 people were executed for drug offences in 2025 (excluding figures from China, North Korea and Viet Nam), representing a 97 percent increase from 2024. Iran alone was responsible for 79 percent of known drug-related executions, while Saudi Arabia recorded a 97 percent increase compared to 2024. Overall, women and foreign nationals were disproportionately affected, and figures are widely considered underestimates.<sup>81</sup>

International scrutiny of these regressive trends has intensified, including by the UN Human Rights Council which adopted a resolution on the death penalty in October 2025 with cross-regional support. It covered issues such as the disproportionate impact of capital punishment on certain groups including by discrimination affecting persons from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, persons belonging to national, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities and foreign nationals, as well as women and girls.<sup>82</sup>

At the same time, a number of states took steps that point towards a gradual strengthening of restrictions on the use of capital punishment, reflecting the continued influence of international human rights standards at the national level.<sup>83</sup> Vietnam narrowed the scope of the death penalty by reducing the number of

offences it may be imposed for.<sup>84</sup> Pakistan took steps to limit its use by removing two non-lethal capital offences, although a substantial number remain in law.<sup>85</sup> Kenya formed a Parliamentary Task Force to initiate a legislative review of its capital punishment framework.<sup>86</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, the Constitutional Court strengthened existing safeguards by reaffirming the constitutional ban on the death penalty and declaring a proposed reintroduction to be unconstitutional.<sup>87</sup>

Civil society organisations and the voices of those with lived experience continue to play a crucial role in the global movement to abolish the death penalty. Within the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, coordinated action by a rising number of member organisations from all regions of the world is advancing reforms. Organisations like Witness to Innocence in the US use the testimony of exonerated death row survivors, turning personal experience into advocacy that reveals the human cost of capital punishment.

A new report published by PRI and Life Imprisonment Worldwide in early 2026 sets out the options for alternatives when the death penalty is abolished.<sup>88</sup> With the rise in life imprisonment and the imposition of parole in some jurisdictions, there is a need to ensure that the replacement of capital punishment is in line with international standards. (See [Life imprisonment](#))

## Life imprisonment

There is currently no up-to-date global figure for the number of people serving life sentences worldwide, including both formal and informal life sentences.<sup>89</sup> The most recent global estimate, based on available national data from 2014, suggested that around half a million people were serving formal

life sentences.<sup>90</sup> Since then, prison populations have grown in several jurisdictions that extensively use life imprisonment, and new forms of life or irreducible sentences have been introduced or expanded.

Where data is available, it indicates that the number of people serving life sentences has increased

substantially over recent decades, albeit with significant disparities across countries and regions.

Reliable and disaggregated data on life-sentenced prison populations remains limited or entirely unavailable in many jurisdictions. Countries like China, Singapore and Viet Nam appear to have

official policies that prohibit the publication of data on life sentences. In some jurisdictions, data on people serving life sentences is not publicly available and can only be obtained through media reports or public requests made via unclear or burdensome procedures.

By contrast, a number of countries – such as Japan, India, Canada, Australia, South Africa, the US, most countries in Europe and, more recently, Malaysia – provide publicly accessible data on life-sentenced populations with varying levels of detail.<sup>91</sup> India, for example, publishes annual figures on the number of people serving life sentences; however, this data is not disaggregated by sentence type, such as whether parole is possible or not.<sup>92</sup> The variation in data availability and transparency surrounding life sentencing makes it difficult to assess the scale and use of life imprisonment in practice.

In Europe, the number of life-sentenced individuals nearly doubled between 2000 and 2020, from 15,149 to 28,813; this was mostly due to growth in the UK and Türkiye, which together accounted for more than half of the regional total in 2020.<sup>93</sup> In South Africa, the life-sentenced prison population rose from fewer than 700 people in 1995 to more than 18,500 by 2022, an increase that has far outpaced overall prison population growth.<sup>94</sup> India has also seen a significant surge in the number of people serving life sentences, rising from 31,632 in 2000 to 75,040 in 2023 – an increase of 137 percent. In 2023, the most recent year for which data is available, people serving life sentences in India accounted for more than half – 55.3 percent – of all convicted people in prison.<sup>95</sup>

Life imprisonment with the possibility of parole is the most common form of life sentence globally and exists in at least 144 countries.<sup>96</sup> Yet the length of time a person must spend in prison before having any prospect of release differs greatly.

Life imprisonment without the possibility of parole (LWOP), by contrast, remains concentrated in a small number of jurisdictions, and is overwhelmingly a phenomenon in the US – where in 2024, almost 200,000 people in prison were serving a form of life sentence. Over 56,000 of these people were serving LWOP. ‘Virtual’ or de facto life sentences (50 years or more) and other types of informal life sentences have continued to expand. In 2024, more than 41,000 people were serving virtual life sentences in prisons across the US.<sup>97</sup> Although not as widespread as in the US, LWOP is a developing phenomenon in India, and appellate courts are commuting death sentences to LWOP with greater frequency. Since 2020, High Courts have imposed LWOP in at least 50 percent of commutations.<sup>98</sup>

In Europe, most countries have abolished irreducible life sentences, but notable exceptions remain. In England and Wales, courts may impose whole life orders for specific categories of murder and are encouraged by law to do so. As of March 2025, around 70 individuals were subject to such orders.<sup>99</sup> In addition, more than 2,600 people remained imprisoned under the abolished indeterminate Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence, which allowed people convicted of certain offences to be detained indefinitely after serving their initial term.<sup>100</sup>

Over the past year there have been reforms in a small number of jurisdictions. In Ukraine, following judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), a new system for reviewing whole life sentences was established. In 2025, it was found to function effectively, even amid ongoing conflict.<sup>101</sup>

Pressure from courts, such as the ECtHR, to reform life sentence regimes recognises the growing wealth of research consistently highlighting the profound and long-term impacts of life imprisonment on the people who are subjected to it. Research demonstrates impacts such as psychological distress, loss of hope and identity, and difficulty maintaining family and social ties.

For example, findings from a recent study in Taiwan showed particularly high levels of mental health problems among people serving life sentences, with prison staff reporting challenges in delivering meaningful education or rehabilitation in the context of perceived permanent exclusion from society.<sup>102</sup>

Life and long-term sentences also contribute to rapidly aging prison populations, carrying related healthcare challenges. A recent study in the State of California in the US, based on extensive interviews with older people living with chronic illness in prison and with their medical providers (more than 190 participants), found that patients and medical staff agreed on the necessity of dignity in care, peer support, more specialised geriatric and palliative care units, and standardised older adult care policies and practices. Overall, the study underscored the importance of compassionate release for people in prison who are older, chronically ill, and who pose little to no safety risk.<sup>103</sup>

Further research in 2025 examined the role of hope among people serving life or long-term prison sentences. A study in England and Wales, involving the voices of 123 people serving long-term imprisonment, found that hope of release acted as a ‘lifeline’, encouraging positive behaviour, engagement in education and the maintenance of family connections. In contrast, the absence of hope was associated with experiences of ‘dead time’, institutionalisation and a loss of self-worth.<sup>104</sup> Other research has included an exploration of how hope is imagined, experienced and transformed in the context of life imprisonment, linking it to participation in meaningful activities and feelings of safety,<sup>105</sup> and how hope for people serving life at an advanced age transcends the usual and rather reductive hope/no hope binary.<sup>106</sup> In Lithuania, a small-scale study examining the recently implemented release system found that restrictive regimes and isolation during the life sentence undermined hope and prospects for release and reintegration.<sup>107</sup>

PART TWO

# Prison populations

For references see endnote 108.

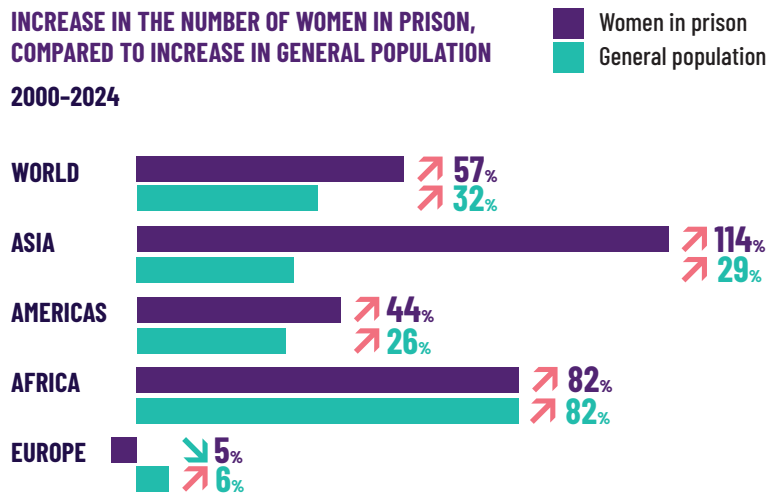
## Women

The number of women (around 733,000) going to prison has seen an upward trend over the last two decades, with many being criminalised for non-violent offences relating to experiences of violence or poverty.

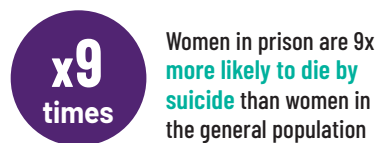
THERE ARE  
**733,000**  
WOMEN IMPRISONED WORLDWIDE



**INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF WOMEN IN PRISON, COMPARED TO INCREASE IN GENERAL POPULATION 2000-2024**



**SNAPSHOT DATA: SUICIDE RATES**



**SNAPSHOT DATA: INCREASE OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS**



**KEY DRIVERS FOR INCREASE IN WOMEN'S IMPRISONMENT**

<p><b>CRIMINALISATION OF SURVIVAL</b> Petty theft, begging, street vending and informal work</p>	<p><b>PUNITIVE DRUG POLICIES</b> Harsh drug laws, particularly in Latin America and Asia</p>	<p><b>DISCRIMINATORY LAWS</b> Laws on "morality", dress codes, consensual sex, and abortion</p>	<p><b>UNADDRESSED VIOLENCE</b> Justice systems punishing, rather than protecting</p>	<p><b>MENTAL HEALTH NEGLECTED</b> Driving women into criminal justice systems, rather than providing care</p>	<p><b>REVOLVING DOOR</b> Needs on release often unmet: housing, education, healthcare, economic empowerment</p>
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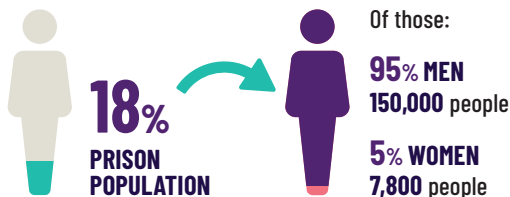
## Older persons

A 'greying' of prison populations is a trend observed across regions, one that is driven by long sentences and limited release. Challenges include healthcare gaps, chronic illness, disability and end-of-life care.

### SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF OLDER PEOPLE IN PRISON

#### THE 46 MEMBER STATES OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Aged 50+



#### ENGLAND AND WALES

Aged 50+



#### UNITED STATES

Aged 55+



#### THAILAND

Aged 60+



## People with disabilities

From data available the number of people with disabilities in prison is proportionally far higher than in the general population, but prisons are not designed for disability. Challenges include physical barriers, limited support and unmet health needs as well as discriminatory treatment.

### SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF PEOPLE IN PRISON WITH DISABILITIES

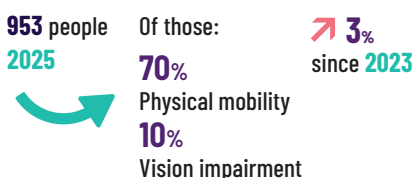
#### UNITED STATES



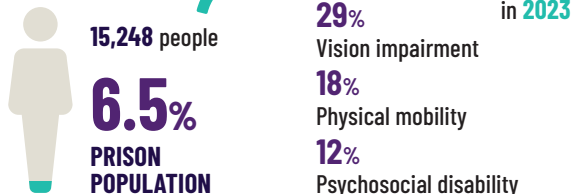
#### ENGLAND AND WALES



#### THAILAND



#### MEXICO



# Ethnic and racialised groups

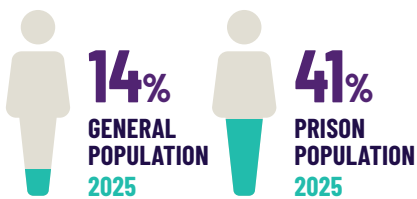
Ethnic and racialised groups remain persistently over-represented in prisons across regions, with imprisonment rates far exceeding their share of the population.

They face disparities at multiple stages of the criminal justice process including policing, prosecution and sentencing. This is often compounded by colonial and structural legacies, as well as intersections with gender and age. Ethnic and racialised groups are more likely to experience longer custody, pre-trial detention, greater proportions of sentences served, and barriers to a fair trial, including language, legal aid, and cultural discrimination.

## SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF ETHNIC AND RACIALISED PEOPLE IN PRISON

### UNITED STATES

#### Black people

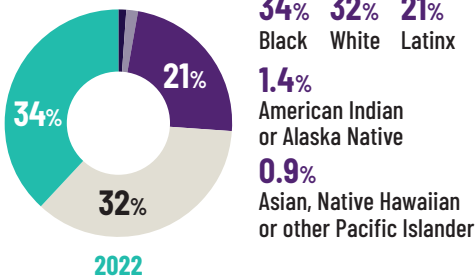


### ENGLAND AND WALES

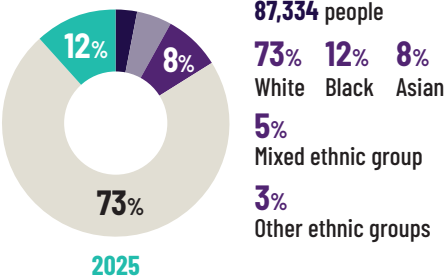
#### Foreign national women



### US State prisons



### England & Wales prisons



### Black people

serve more of their original determinate sentence in custody



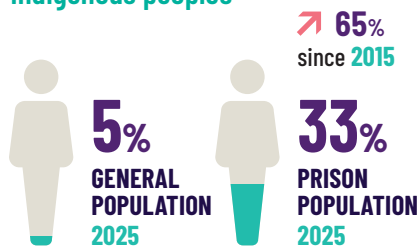
### AUSTRALIA

#### Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders



### CANADA

#### Indigenous peoples



### MEXICO

#### Indigenous peoples



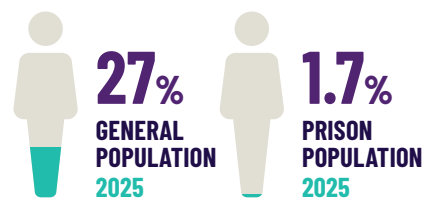
### IRELAND

#### Irish Travellers



### PERU

#### Indigenous peoples



## LGBTQI+ persons

Owing to stigma and criminalisation of gender diversity, there is limited and uneven data on the number of LGBTQI+ persons in prison, with sexual orientation and gender identity often under-recorded.

Challenges remain for LGBTQI+ persons in prison including a lack of access to appropriate healthcare, gender-affirming care and mental health treatment.

### SNAPSHOT DATA: NUMBER OF LGBTQI+ PERSONS IN PRISON

#### UNITED STATES

**130,000**  
identifying as LGBTQI+

**6,000**  
identifying as trans

#### US: FEDERAL SYSTEM

**124,000**  
identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual  
2020

**2,198**  
transgender people in custody  
2025

**6,000+**  
identifying as trans  
2020

**99%**  
**TRANS WOMEN IN PRISON**  
held in men's facilities

**1** Trans man in a men's prison

**2** Trans women in women's prisons

#### ENGLAND AND WALES

**97%**  
**PRISON POPULATION**  
heterosexual  
2020

**20%**  
**WOMEN IN PRISON**  
identify as gay/lesbian or bisexual

**339** Transgender people  
plus **9** with Gender Recognition Certificate

Of those:  
**73%** Trans women  
**19%** Trans men  
**5%** Non-binary

#### MEXICO

Santa Martha Acatitla women's prison  
**16%**  
of the **1,526** women identify as LGBTQI+

## Children

See 'Spotlight' overleaf. Challenges include: limited and uneven data, lack of support for children with learning disabilities and neurodiversity exposure to violence, lack of oversight.

**259,000**

**CHILDREN IN DETENTION GLOBALLY (est.)**  
2024



### SNAPSHOT DATA:

#### SOUTH ASIA

**111,000**  
Children in detention  
2024

#### AUSTRALIA

**65%**  
**CHILDREN IN PRISON**  
First Nations children

**80%**  
**CHILDREN IN PRISON**  
on pre-trial, nationwide

#### MEXICO

**1,313**  
Children in prison  
Of those: **92** are girls

#### EL SALVADOR

**3,000**  
Children have been prosecuted since **2022** (state of exception)

#### SOMALIA

**291**  
Children detained on national security-related charges

**67%**  
**CHILDREN IN PRISON**  
have already been through the system

**2 in 3**

**Spotlight on:****Children in detention**

About a quarter of a million children are in detention “alleged as, accused of or convicted of having committed a criminal offence”. UNICEF estimated that 259,000 children (aged 5 to 17 years) were in detention in 2024 – a decrease of approximately 67,000 children since 2018, with declines in East Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America. This estimate was based on data gathered between 2021 and 2024 for a subset of 120 countries (where 50 percent of the global population of children aged 5 to 17 years live).<sup>109</sup>

Accurate and disaggregated data on children in detention remains extremely limited, making it difficult to understand the true scale of detention of children and the impact on them. Many countries do not systematically record all forms of detention and lack disaggregation. Therefore, global estimates – such as UNICEF’s – may only capture part of the picture.

In June 2025, the Global Declaration on Advancing Child-Centred Justice was adopted at the 5th World Congress on Justice with Children, a major gathering of over 7,000 participants from 160 countries convened by PRI, Terres des Hommes and others under the Justice with Children Initiative.<sup>110</sup> The Declaration highlighted the urgent need to protect children deprived of liberty, ensure access to fair and timely justice, improve data on their numbers and needs, and promote cross-sector cooperation, reaffirming a global commitment to rights-based, child-centred justice systems.<sup>111</sup>

Marginalised children continue to be disproportionately represented in child justice systems and prison populations. A recent report on the Ibero-American region documented

how the recruitment of young people by criminal groups for high-risk tasks (such as contract killings or micro-trafficking) is reinforcing a cycle of victimisation and criminalisation with no restorative solution. It also found that Indigenous children in the region continue to face specific vulnerabilities when they come into contact with justice systems, including high rates of detention and a lack of specialised support.<sup>112</sup> In the US, racial disparities have worsened among Black and Indigenous children,<sup>113</sup> and in the UK a higher proportion of young people in prison are from minority ethnic groups.<sup>114</sup> In Australia, official data shows that First Nations young people aged 10–17 are 21 times more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to be held in detention.<sup>115</sup>

Although there is wide agreement among child justice practitioners and a wealth of evidence highlighting the need for stronger child-centred approaches, some backsliding has been evident recently.

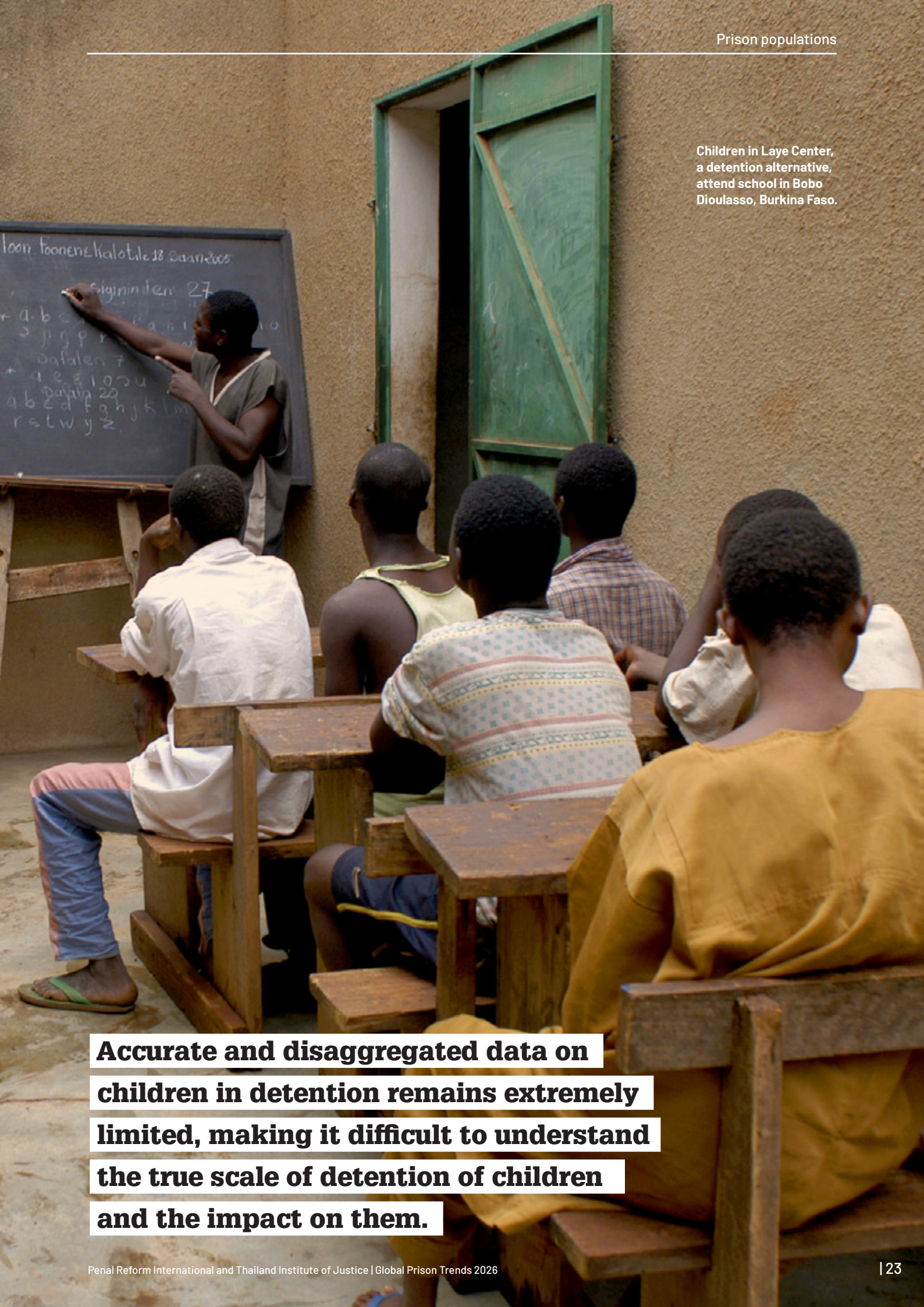
Several countries are considering or implementing lower minimum ages of criminal responsibility for serious offences. Sweden plans to reduce it from 15 to 13 years, the Northern Territory in Australia lowered it to 10 in late 2024, and Argentina’s Senate approved a drop from 16 to 14 in February 2026. In 2025, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted concerns in several countries, including Norway, where children aged 15 to 18 can sometimes be treated as adults, and Iraq, which sets the national minimum at age 9.<sup>116</sup> By contrast, Qatar’s draft Children’s Rights law includes provisions to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility, signalling a move towards stronger child protection.<sup>117</sup>

Civil society efforts continue to push back on regressions in child rights in justice systems. For example, proposed laws in Türkiye would have seen children aged 15 to 18 being sentenced as adults or even receiving life without parole;<sup>118</sup> these laws were removed from the adopted legislation, after significant pressure from civil society.<sup>119</sup> Civil society also provides essential support to children who are in detention. For example, at Kwale Prison in Kenya, a youth-led initiative equips young people with creative skills, mentorship and psychosocial support.<sup>120</sup>

One of the key strategies in reducing the number of children in detention is through diversion. Several jurisdictions expanded or strengthened pre-charge and community-based diversion programmes, including nationwide rollouts in Ireland,<sup>121</sup> broader eligibility in parts of the US,<sup>122</sup> a 2024 law in Viet Nam requiring specific diversion measures for children, and calls for an expansion to meet greater needs in the child diversion programme in Jamaica.<sup>123</sup>

The nature and scope of how children’s rights are violated in detention vary widely, documented often by civil society and oversight or UN bodies.<sup>124</sup> It is not uncommon in low-resource or fragile contexts, like South Sudan for instance, for children to be detained alongside adults.<sup>125</sup> A similar situation exists in Nigeria, where an assessment of conditions for children and young people in detention revealed high rates of violence. Eighty-three percent of children and young people who had taken part in the study said they had experienced physical abuse such as beating, slapping and punching.<sup>126</sup>

Children in Laye Center, a detention alternative, attend school in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.



**Accurate and disaggregated data on children in detention remains extremely limited, making it difficult to understand the true scale of detention of children and the impact on them.**

## PART THREE

# Health in prison

## Health in prison

Prisons around the world continue to struggle to provide adequate, accessible and appropriate healthcare to their populations. Persistent shortages of healthcare staff remain a major challenge, alongside gaps in professional competencies. These challenges are further compounded by chronic overcrowding, under-resourced prison health services, and weak system coordination. In many countries, prison health budgets remain low and disconnected from national public health systems, undermining continuity of care, early diagnosis and effective treatment, particularly for people with complex or long-term health needs.

In some contexts, the consequences of these systemic failures are extreme. The UN Human Rights Office monitored 75 people detained in Venezuela who were suffering from serious health conditions, including people with disabilities, and documented three deaths following deteriorating health reportedly linked to a lack of timely and adequate healthcare.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea has described detention conditions as dire, with detainees held in overcrowded and unsanitary facilities lacking basic amenities such as beds, toilets, water, sanitation and access to healthcare, with accounts of confinement in metal shipping containers and underground cells,

inadequate ventilation, minimal food and resulting malnutrition, and related health problems.<sup>128</sup>

In contrast, some prison systems are beginning to adopt more coordinated and innovative approaches to health with developments in technology and prison health continuing at pace. Artificial intelligence (AI) is now being used in some countries for predictive modelling of health risks, to assist diagnostic assessments and support mental healthcare as well as to deliver therapeutic interventions through virtual reality and chatbot tools.<sup>129</sup> Researchers in the US have also tested AI models to improve disease control strategies between prisons and nearby communities.<sup>130</sup>

Increased investment in prison health is driven by the growing recognition that prison and public health are inseparable. In prisons in Latin America, tuberculosis (TB) rates are between 50 and 100 times higher than the general population, and hepatitis C is up to 19 times more prevalent than in the community.<sup>131</sup> An estimated one-third of national TB cases in Latin America are now believed to originate from prison environments,<sup>132</sup> with new research also documenting how prison staff act as vectors of disease from prison to the community.<sup>133</sup> In Europe, new research substantiates the community gain from testing and treating hepatitis infections in prisons, including increased

survival rates, improvement in quality of life and reduction in infection transmission.<sup>134</sup>

There are also effective ways to improve healthcare in prisons that do not require significant resources or modern technology. These include improving behavioural healthcare focusing on prevention, diagnosis and lifestyle adjustments. An expert panel on health in prisons in Sub-Saharan Africa also found that involving people with lived experience is central to reducing health risks, defining health priorities and improving health behaviours.<sup>135</sup>

Civil society organisations continue to plug the gap in healthcare provision in prisons, despite often facing significant challenges in doing so. In Portugal, access to prisons, bureaucratic procedures and funding limitations have been identified as significant barriers for NGOs when seeking to establish harm reduction programmes in prisons.<sup>136</sup> In Moldova, where civil society organisations fill many gaps in prison healthcare, the lack of funding and the sheer demand on services have been found to be the biggest challenges.<sup>137</sup>

There are many instances where NGOs provide healthcare services, including in the most difficult situations. In Ukraine, the NGO FREE ZONE initiative operates in 56 prisons to deliver healthcare and harm reduction services, including through a digital app.<sup>138</sup>

In Togo, the organisation Collectif des Associations Contre l'Impunité provides consultations and medication for hundreds of people in prison. Cases of civil society supporting individuals in seeking

redress for violations to the right to health are also common. For instance, Justice Project Pakistan secured a court order to transfer its client for urgent psychiatric care, in a ruling that set a precedent

that continued imprisonment without access to specialised mental healthcare was incompatible with the human rights of people in prison.<sup>139</sup>

### Spotlight on:

## Harm reduction and drug use in prison

Drug use is widespread in prisons worldwide. It remains a major public health issue and an equally serious human rights concern. Recent data indicates that around four in 10 people entering prison have a drug dependence,<sup>140</sup> with higher prevalence among women than men. Drug use frequently continues during imprisonment and is linked to elevated risks of self-harm, mental ill-health and infectious disease, compounded by pre-existing unmet health needs and poor conditions of detention. Vulnerability is particularly acute on entry to prison and following release, when the risk of overdose increases significantly.<sup>141</sup> Despite this, there is often a lack of continuity of care or access to evidence-based treatment and harm reduction, both in prison settings and upon release.

Research has repeatedly shown that improving access to harm reduction and other health treatment in prison has wider public health and safety benefits, including better post-release outcomes in the community.<sup>142</sup> The UN has consistently recognised harm reduction as an integral element of the right to health for people who use drugs.<sup>143</sup> Availability, accessibility and quality of harm reduction services in prisons remain woefully insufficient and uneven, however. The real threat of punishment, loss of privileges, breaches of confidentiality, and stigma from staff or peers pushes people away from accessing services.<sup>144</sup>

Globally, Harm Reduction International reports that as of 2025, 61 countries have implemented opioid agonist therapy (OAT) in at least one prison (compared to 95 in the community), whereas 11 have needle and syringe programmes (NSPs) in at least one prison (compared to 93 in the community).<sup>145</sup> Naloxone is reported to be made available on release in at least one prison in 11 countries, mostly in Europe and North America, with one scheme in Oceania (Australia). In addition, only one country (Canada) has implemented prison-based drug consumption rooms (DCR), with three operational DCRs, which have recorded no overdose deaths in their facilities since their inception.<sup>146</sup>

In the Middle East and North Africa, harm reduction coverage in prisons remains limited, with only one country (Iran) offering NSP in at least one prison and 6 countries providing OAT in at least one prison. Recent assessments highlight how cultural, socio-political and religious opposition (alongside restrictive drug laws and chronic underfunding) continue to limit implementation, even in countries where harm reduction is formally acknowledged in strategies.

There are some positive developments to expand specific harm reduction measures. In England and Wales, the increasing availability of drugs in prisons has been accompanied by a significant scale-up of naloxone provision. By 2024, nasal naloxone was

available in nine out of 10 prisons, with approximately 8,000 staff trained to administer it, although carrying it remains voluntary and dependent on staff participation.<sup>147</sup> Uruguay illustrates a trend towards more coordinated and strategic approaches, with a national plan to address drug dependence among people in prison. In Catalonia, Spain, the distribution of aluminium foil in one prison encouraged a shift from injecting to inhalation, reduced harms associated with unsafe equipment, and increased awareness of safer consumption practices.<sup>148</sup> A 2025 study also reiterated that harm reduction-focused vending machines for discreetly distributing supplies such as syringes, naloxone, condoms and drug-checking kits improve access to services for people in prison.<sup>149</sup>

When available, harm reduction services in prisons are predominantly designed for men and do not address the fact that women who use drugs experience heightened stigma and discrimination, both in custody and in the community.<sup>150</sup> For example, in Chile, women in prison are reported to experience higher levels of mental health problems and drug dependence, yet many facilities lack regular, gender-responsive services.<sup>151</sup> A few positive examples include OAT provision in women's prisons in Iran and post-release support initiatives for women in Indonesia and Kenya, but coverage remains limited.<sup>152</sup>

A pharmacist prepares the daily treatments that will be distributed to the detainees. Fleury Merogis Prison, France, 2009.

**Too many people with mental health conditions end up in prison because of gaps in community mental health services. This is a global concern across regions and income levels.**

## Mental health

Many prison systems worldwide are reporting a steady rise in the number of people in custody with complex and serious mental health needs, pointing to a deepening and systemic challenge. Prisons are increasingly functioning as de facto mental health institutions, often without the resources or specialist capacity required to provide appropriate care. A 2025 review covering 43 countries underscores the scale of unmet needs in prisons, identifying high prevalence of depression, psychosis, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and estimating that at least one in seven people in prison globally is living with a severe mental illness.<sup>153</sup>

National data paints an equally stark picture. In Eastern Ethiopia, 61 percent of people in prison are reported to have depression,<sup>154</sup> while experts in India caution that although official figures already indicate a serious mental health crisis, the true scale is likely far greater.<sup>155</sup> In France, people entering prison have rates of psychiatric disorders around three times higher than the general population.<sup>156</sup>

Rising numbers of people in prison with serious mental health conditions are also reported in China, Togo and Viet Nam.<sup>157</sup> In Fiji, mounting mental health needs in prisons have been linked to increased drug use, while in Finland people in prison are reported to experience exceptionally high levels of psychiatric disorders, psychoses and suicidal tendencies.<sup>158</sup>

The shortage of mental health staff and services compounds the already high burden of mental health needs of people in prisons. In Latin American countries, the provision of mental health services within prison systems remains critically insufficient.<sup>159</sup> In the State of Tamaulipas, Mexico, just 13 psychologists are tasked with supporting over 4,000 people in prison.<sup>160</sup> Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, 27 psychologists and 10

psychiatrists are distributed across 44 facilities, representing roughly one psychologist per 925 prisoners.<sup>161</sup> In Bolivia, 22 psychologists and three psychiatrists are assigned to a national prison population exceeding 33,000.<sup>162</sup>

A study involving 97 participants from 23 countries across Sub-Saharan Africa identified 38 priority challenges for improving mental health in prisons. Several of these relate to strengthening both the clinical and non-clinical workforce, confirming that staffing shortages are a common challenge across the region.<sup>163</sup> In South East Asia, prison mental health services are reported to be negligible, and the prevalence of serious psychiatric conditions remains strikingly high in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka.<sup>164</sup> In parts of Europe, the situation is similarly concerning. In Hungary, typical prisons have only two to five psychologists for every 600 prisoners, while in Romania there is reportedly just a single psychiatrist covering the entire prison system.<sup>165</sup> In Spain, a single psychologist may be responsible for more than 200 people in prison, and, following an assault on a prison psychologist in July 2025, the Spanish Association of Prison Psychology advocated for the implementation of a National Security Plan to protect specialist prison staff.<sup>166</sup>

Deaths by suicide and incidents of self-harm in prisons continue at alarming rates, often exacerbated by under-reporting and insufficient mental health support. In India, suicides now account for 80 percent of all so-called 'unnatural deaths' in prisons.<sup>167</sup> In England and Wales, there were 878 incidents of self-harm per 1,000 people in prison from 2024 to 2025, with levels of self-harm in women's prisons more than eight times higher than in men's prisons.<sup>168</sup> In France, people in prison are 10

times more likely to die by suicide than the general population,<sup>169</sup> and the risk of suicide is 20 times higher in disciplinary units compared to the broader prison population.<sup>170</sup>

Evidence also points to particularly high mental health risks among specific groups within prison populations. In Italy, a study of self-harm among people in pre-trial detention found that nearly 90 percent of incidents involved people from North Africa.<sup>171</sup> Similarly, research from Berlin, Germany, shows that self-harm rates are higher among non-citizens.<sup>172</sup>

The pattern of disproportionately high self-harm in women's prisons, observed in England and Wales, is echoed in prison systems around the world. In Australia, the NGO Sisters Inside has documented how risk frameworks used in prisons frequently misinterpret trauma and survival strategies as non-compliance, prolonging imprisonment and undermining reintegration. These challenges disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. A 2026 report by Penal Reform International in three women's prisons in Uganda found that 54.7% of women suffered from mental disorders, with 56% of those convicted through a plea bargain.<sup>173</sup>

Too many people with mental health conditions end up in prison because of gaps in specialised mental health services in the community. This is a global concern, cutting across regions and income levels. In Kenya, the lack of early mental health intervention programmes has been linked to high imprisonment rates.<sup>174</sup> In Malawi, people with mental health problems are often held in prison for lengthy periods while awaiting mental health assessments.<sup>175</sup> In Europe, there are also several recent examples of people being sent to prison due to a lack of appropriate healthcare facilities, such as in

France and Italy.<sup>176</sup> Prisons continue being used to detain people with severe mental health problems due to chronic underfunding of mental health programmes including in South Sudan<sup>177</sup> and South Africa.<sup>178</sup>

Recent trends in responding to mental health concerns in prison include the growth of low-cost peer support programmes, which have proven to be successful in different regions. In Uganda, a small group talk therapy model facilitated by prison peers had positive results in tackling depression, reducing suicide rates and improving behaviour.<sup>179</sup> In Los Angeles, a programme in which people in prison are trained as mental health assistants has become a national model for prison mental healthcare.<sup>180</sup> In England, new research found that trauma-informed approaches to mental healthcare in prisons, including peer support, have led to young people feeling more resilient and empowered, with increased self-esteem.<sup>181</sup> The involvement of family members is gaining recognition as a valuable tool, including in relation to suicide prevention.<sup>182</sup>

Another significant and ongoing development in the intersection of mental health and prisons is the surge in the use of technology, including AI. These tools are used to predict suicidal behaviour, diagnose and treat mental health problems, and provide virtual reality training, often as a response to the lack of specialised mental healthcare available in prisons.<sup>183</sup> Trauma-informed AI therapy in prison continues to be rolled out across facilities in the US, with research findings showing positive results among those participating,<sup>184</sup> including reductions in behavioural infractions.<sup>185</sup>

In prisons in Finland, compassion-focused therapy has been combined with virtual reality training among young adults in prison, also showing positive results.<sup>186</sup> Virtual counselling such as telepsychiatry also continues to play a crucial role in mental health support in prisons in Asia, to bridge the gap in prison-based mental health services – including in India where telepsychiatry has been trialled in some facilities.<sup>187</sup> A lived

experience review of telepsychiatry services in Greece highlighted positive experiences of the service.<sup>188</sup>

Involving people with lived experience as co-researchers is an emerging trend in prison mental health research given the value of this approach in understanding and improving care, including in Sub-Saharan Africa. This approach has also been incorporated in studies in England and Wales, for example on self-harm.<sup>189</sup>

Civil society involvement in mental healthcare provision remains crucial for filling the gaps in care and treatment and provides much-needed expertise. For instance, in Nigeria authorities have partnered with civil society to work towards mental health reform in prisons,<sup>190</sup> while a new collaboration between authorities and civil society in Cambodia aims for greater support for young people with mental health problems, including those in prison.<sup>191</sup>

## PART FOUR

# Prison management

## Security and violence

Violence dominates prison life to varying extents, with serious consequences for people in prison as well as prison staff. Prison violence continues to not only threaten physical and psychological health but is also detrimental to effective rehabilitation and reintegration and to prison management more generally.

New official figures from England and Wales have confirmed a direct link between overcrowding and levels of prison violence, with overcrowded facilities increasing the likelihood of an individual being involved in a violent incident by 19 percent.<sup>192</sup> Prison overcrowding is also linked to higher rates of violence in other prison systems, including in French Guiana and Guadeloupe,<sup>193</sup> Belgium,<sup>194</sup> Ireland<sup>195</sup> and Australia.<sup>196</sup>

Deaths due to prison violence, often related to organised crime (See [Spotlight: Organised crime](#)) are widespread in some countries. In Ecuador, with violence levels in prisons surging, at least 663 people have died in incidents since 2020. In August 2025, at least seven people were reported to have died following riots in a prison in the Mexican State of Veracruz. Several people were also killed during an attempted escape from a prison in Tajikistan in early 2025.<sup>197</sup>

Prison violence was also increasingly linked to broader societal unrest and conflict over the past year. In Mozambique in December 2024, at least 33 people were killed in a prison riot and more than 1,500

people also escaped amid protests over disputed elections. At least three people died in prison and more than 15,000 escaped when anti-government protests broke out in Nepal in September 2025.<sup>198</sup> In Haiti, the escapes of thousands of people from prisons during 2025 has been linked to the rise in armed gangs in the country, as well as corruption and overcrowding within the prison system.<sup>199</sup>

There have also been continued reports of inter-prisoner violence associated with prison hierarchies, including where authorities lack effective control over prison security. Concerns have been raised about levels of violence in Cyprus, where a shortage of prison staff has led to informal systems of control.<sup>200</sup> In Moldova, people in prison have reported an atmosphere of intimidation and violence used by some members of the prison population to impose rules on others.<sup>201</sup>

There is more recognition that taking different approaches can decrease levels of violence. This has included involving those with lived experience in future strategies and centring their experiences in research.<sup>202</sup> Other initiatives to reduce prison violence involve engaging the expertise of civil society organisations. The NGO Chicago Beyond helps to improve safety in jails and prisons in Chicago, by using its Holistic Safety Framework to collaborate with people in prison and staff members to improve the emotional well-being of both groups.

Civil society continues to play a critical role in the fight against solitary confinement and torture. The Mapping Solitary Confinement resource offers comprehensive insights from 47 jurisdictions, detailing the circumstances, duration and conditions under which individuals are placed in solitary, as well as the realities of their daily lives. In 2025, the World Organisation Against Torture, together with over 80 civil society partners, launched the Global Torture Index – a landmark initiative that evaluates the risk of torture worldwide.

Solitary confinement can amount to torture and other ill-treatment in some circumstances, and it also creates a very high-risk situation for physical abuse, yet many countries still resort to it – including to respond to prison violence and insecurity. In some cases, it is still used as a tool to target specific groups of people in prison. A new report from Australia has found that solitary confinement in youth detention centres causes severe harm, perpetuates cycles of trauma and disadvantage, and disproportionately affects First Nations children and children with disabilities.<sup>203</sup> In the US, where it is estimated that at least 75,000 to 80,000 people are held in solitary confinement on any given day, findings demonstrate that its use 'worsens the problem of violence, both within prisons and in the public.'<sup>204</sup>

Officers inspect a prison cell, Batang, Central Java, Indonesia, 2019.



**Authorities are increasingly recognising that prisons are a critical frontline in the fight against organised crime.**

**Spotlight on:**

## Organised crime

The power and influence of organised crime within prisons has become a major concern, with networks continuing to thrive and gangs establishing control, recruiting new members and running criminal activities – including transnational crime – from behind prison walls. Prisons often serve as safe havens for criminal leaders to operate from and recruit new members.<sup>205</sup>

The growth of criminal networks within prisons is closely linked to overcrowding, under-resourcing, staff corruption and weak oversight.<sup>206</sup> On the other hand, heightened resilience to organised crime has been demonstrated in contexts with strong judicial and detention systems.<sup>207</sup>

Violence linked to criminal gangs continues to be particularly prevalent in prisons in Latin America, where many prisons are hubs of organised crime and act as command centres for some of the region's drug cartels.<sup>208</sup> In July 2025, authorities in Ecuador announced they would withdraw the military from prisons following an 18-month deployment to tackle organised crime. Many of the prison deaths in the country during 2025 – at least 72 – were linked to gang violence.

In Brazil, there are a reported 600,000 people in prison for offences related to organised crime, and weak oversight is reported to have enabled prisoners to effectively run facilities<sup>209</sup> – with smuggling drugs, phones and weapons into prisons a major source of income for organised crime groups.<sup>210</sup> Prison deaths in Mexico are often linked to organised crime, including seven people who were killed in August 2025 during riots over extortion and abuse by organised crime members.

In Venezuela, gang leaders who operate from prisons, can often freely coordinate their criminal networks throughout the country amid dire detention conditions and corruption.

Gangs are also expanding their influence in prisons in other regions, including in Europe, with mounting concern among authorities about the implications for broader security and the need for improved prevention measures and international cooperation.<sup>211</sup> In April 2025, multiple French prisons were violently attacked—with vehicles set on fire and automatic weapons fired at facilities—in what government Ministers publicly described as a likely response to the government's intensified crackdown on drug trafficking and organised crime.

In England and Wales, watchdogs have expressed concern that gangs are taking control of prisons by targeting and corrupting inexperienced staff members.<sup>212</sup> South African prisons were reported to have been infiltrated by organised crime syndicates over the past year,<sup>213</sup> and in New Zealand up to a third of the prison population is said to be linked to gangs, with their expanding presence fundamentally impacting prison culture and levels of violence.<sup>214</sup> In Trinidad and Tobago, a second state of emergency was declared in July 2025 amid serious concerns regarding a coordinated threat from organised crime gangs, both inside and outside of the country's prisons.<sup>215</sup>

Prison staff are at significant risk from organised crime in prison through threats, coercive corruption, direct violence and hostage taking. (See [Prison staff](#))

Gangs are known to actively recruit staff by targeting personal vulnerabilities and by exploiting low pay and low morale within prison services and poor vetting in recruitment procedures. In January 2026, dozens of prison staff were held hostage in prisons in Guatemala, linked to a reported uprising over decisions to remove privileges from imprisoned gang leaders.<sup>216</sup> The April 2025 attacks on prisons in France included threats on prison staff at home and attacks on staff vehicles.<sup>217</sup>

Authorities are increasingly recognising that prisons are a critical frontline in the fight against organised crime. In the Pacific Islands, where the threat is believed to be escalating rapidly,<sup>218</sup> commentators have noted that prison agencies must be more involved in actions against transnational and organised crime, including in supporting the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes.<sup>219</sup>

Some countries have turned to high-security facilities and militarisation in response to organised crime, including in El Salvador's 'mega-prison', where many people accused of being members of organised gangs – including people deported from the US during the year – are now held.<sup>220</sup> In January 2026, authorities in Guatemala declared a 30-day state of emergency to address gang violence in the country, including uprisings and staff-hostage taking in prisons.<sup>221</sup>

A new maximum-security prison, built with the support of El Salvador, was inaugurated in Costa Rica in January 2026 as part of a crackdown on organised crime.<sup>222</sup> The construction of a

mega-prison in Argentina was also announced during the year and is expected to open during 2026.<sup>223</sup>

French authorities revealed plans to build a mega-prison in French Guiana in an attempt to isolate drug traffickers from gangs.<sup>224</sup>

Serious human rights concerns continue to emerge regarding high security-based responses, including reports that people have been held in incommunicado detention, systematically and severely

beaten, and sexually abused in the 'CECOT' maximum-security prison in Venezuela.<sup>225</sup>

The use of technology by gangs in prisons is on the rise and is also at the forefront of measures to control their influence. In Cyprus, authorities have announced plans to block mobile phone signals as part of efforts to curb organised crime inside prisons.<sup>226</sup> In England and Wales, anti-drone technology is employed as part

of efforts to control the use of drones to smuggle drugs and other contraband into prisons.<sup>227</sup>

In the Netherlands, new legislation adopted in November 2025 to counter prison-based organised crime, includes limiting contact with the outside world, increased monitoring of communications and enhanced surveillance.<sup>228</sup>

## Prisons in war

In 2025, an estimated 831 million people – roughly one in six of the global population – were exposed to conflict, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED).<sup>229</sup> As more people live in conflict zones and societal pressures intensify, prisons remain largely overlooked by humanitarian actors and are often absent from strategies for peace and post-conflict recovery.

Although there has been growing attention to the plight of political prisoners, the experiences of those held under ordinary criminal justice systems are frequently neglected. People in detention – whether for criminal or conflict-related reasons – continue to face violence, overcrowding, and limited access to justice during armed conflicts.

Prisons have been directly affected by armed conflict in multiple regions. In Tehran, Israeli airstrikes on Evin prison in June 2025 killed at least 80 people and injured many more.<sup>230</sup> As the conflict between the US and Israel with Iran intensified after March 2025, the situation inside some Iranian prisons reportedly became critical. According to the UN Human Rights Offices, wards were locked and detainees faced

acute shortages of food and medical care, while a telecommunications shutdown heightened the risk of serious human rights violations. They also stated that there was a "potential for a sharp rise in executions and the prosecution of individuals on national security grounds, including espionage charges targeting those perceived as having foreign connections or who have spoken out against the State."<sup>231</sup>

In Ukraine, at least 10 detention facilities have been occupied by Russia since 2022, with over 5,000 people evacuated from 12 facilities. The shelling of Bilenkivska prison in Ukraine in July 2025 resulted in 17 deaths and 36 injuries among people detained, as well as the deaths of six staff members.

Beyond direct attacks, armed conflict continues to disrupt judicial and prison systems. In Lebanon, the destruction of a courthouse in the south of the country, coupled with lockdowns at other facilities, further delayed trials and exacerbated pre-existing challenges in accessing justice. In response, authorities in Lebanon's largest prison established an onsite courtroom, bringing judges, clerks and lawyers directly to detainees. In Ethiopia, the

destruction of the main courthouse and police station severely impacted prisoner transport, trials, and the administration of justice.

Amid escalating armed violence and limited state control in Haiti, the storming of a prison in Mirebalais by gangs – which resulted in the release of approximately 500 detainees – underscores how prison systems are rendered incapable of safeguarding detainees or maintaining lawful custody during conflict.<sup>232</sup> In Mogadishu, an attack by al-Shabaab in October 2025 on a major prison also resulted in detainees being freed by the armed group.<sup>233</sup>

Sexual violence remains a pervasive and deliberate instrument of control in situations of armed conflict, with devastating consequences for those in prison. Independent investigations of the UN Human Rights Council have reported that Russian authorities and personnel in occupied territories systematically subjected detained women to rape, sexual violence, and forced nudity, amounting to torture, including humiliating examinations and repeated acts of degradation in the presence of male guards.<sup>234</sup> Sexual and gender-based violence has also been perpetrated against men and women in prison across

more than ten military and Israel Prison Service facilities, notably Negev Prison and Sde Teiman Camp for men, and Damon and Hasharon Prisons for women.<sup>235</sup>

Civil society plays a vital role in safeguarding the rights of people in prison through independent monitoring, direct service provision, and justice system reform, as illustrated in Palestine, where Defence for Children Palestine conduct regular visits to places of child detention to provide legal, social, and psychological support while documenting violations.<sup>236</sup>

In Sudan, 18 prisons have re-opened after being closed due to the conflict. These facilities are operating under severely degraded conditions, including poor infrastructure, limited or no access to clean water, and major gaps in basic services. In response, PRI has been supporting the Sudan Prison Department to improve conditions of detention, including by establishing and equipping medical clinics, drilling wells to secure access to clean water, and providing essential items to enhance day-to-day living conditions, such as mattresses. Alongside this, PRI addresses conflict-related gender-based violence and barriers

to justice through survivor-centred legal aid, psychosocial and referral services, the establishment of gender-sensitive legal aid in prisons, and the strengthening of rights-based, gender-responsive justice systems.

In Libya, despite ongoing threats and the complex operating environment created by the conflict, two official monitoring committees in Tripoli and Benghazi were established in 2025, who are mandated to oversee detention facilities, assess the legality of detention, and promote compliance with human rights and legal standard.<sup>237</sup>

## Prison staff

Across regions, prison leaders and administrations increasingly identify the recruitment, retention, well-being and safety of staff as among the most urgent challenges confronting overstretched prison systems. These pressures are intensifying year on year, fuelled by overcrowding, limited resources, and more complex and demanding working environments. Reflecting this global trend, prison staff issues are receiving heightened attention at the international level.

In 2025, experts from 10 European countries convened through EuroPris to exchange approaches to staff well-being and to advance the development of an interactive digital tool – a web-based resource that combines structured guidance on wellbeing topics with a self-assessment diagnostic component for prisons. Staff well-being was also elevated as a global priority by the International Corrections and Prisons Association, whose annual conference in 2025 focused on well-being across prison communities, including new strategies for staff support and professional development.

Data gaps regarding prison staff remain particularly significant in several regions. Evidence gathered through the ILANUD Prison Population Information Bank indicates that prison staff remain one of the least documented populations within prison statistical systems in Latin America and the Caribbean, limiting the ability of authorities to assess staffing needs, working conditions and institutional capacity.<sup>238</sup>

Violence against prison staff remains a persistent concern, particularly in facilities affected by overcrowding and unsafe institutional cultures, or where organised crime groups dominate. (See [Organised crime](#))

Evidence from Northern Ireland has shown a clear correlation between prison population growth and rising attacks on staff, with assaults reaching a four-year high.<sup>239</sup> In the Netherlands, research of 350 prison staff revealed that nearly all had experienced violence at work, and some reported receiving threats to their homes.<sup>240</sup> An incident in India in late 2025 left prison staff injured following a coordinated attack by people in prison using improvised weapons.<sup>241</sup> Meanwhile, in England and Wales, amid a combined

overcrowding and staffing crisis, more than 10,500 assaults on prison staff were recorded in the 12 months to March 2025.<sup>242</sup>

A related and compounding challenge is that the same pressures that drive stress and insecurity for staff also make prison work less attractive and harder to sustain as a profession. This is reflected in the fact that recruitment difficulties are now a common feature of many prison systems worldwide. In France, around 5,000 vacancies were reported in the prison system in 2025.<sup>243</sup> In Slovenia, 10 percent of prison posts were unfilled, and in the State of Virginia, US, there are staff vacancy rates of up to 50 percent. In the Dutch Caribbean, basic rehabilitation activities are reported to have been cancelled in prisons due to lack of staff.<sup>244</sup>

Prison authorities continue to adopt various measures to tackle staff shortages. Some US states have lowered the age of recruitment from 21 to 18.<sup>245</sup> In England and Wales, there is increasing reliance on overseas recruits to the prison service. Authorities in Antigua and Barbuda have been raising awareness of prison work within local media outlets in a bid to recruit more

people, and recruitment initiatives for medical prison staff in Western Australia have included partnerships with universities. Authorities in Belgium have been considering employing private security guards in overcrowded prisons to deal with acute staff shortages.

In New York, in early 2026 the mayor appointed the first formerly imprisoned individual to lead the Department of Corrections, bringing lived experience to the role.

Several recent reports point to mounting concern over the physical and psychological well-being of prison and probation staff, as systems grapple with stress, burnout and safety risks. In South Korea, nearly one in five prison officers consider themselves to be in a high-risk mental health category, and close to one in 10 report having attempted or considered suicide, with research highlighting the strain on those working closely with people who self-harm.<sup>246</sup> Surveys in Guyana and Chile reveal high levels of exhaustion, stress and suspected mental health concerns among staff.<sup>247</sup> In Togo, chronic understaffing and limited resources have reportedly resulted in extremely long shifts (up to 72 hours) with limited support in place, illustrating how resource gaps can intensify risks to staff well-being.<sup>248</sup>

At the policy and research level, the Confederation of European Probation has published the first cross-European study examining stress, burnout and morale among probation staff. It found, among other things, that staff well-being is deeply shaped by organisational infrastructures and institutional design, rather than individual resilience of probation practitioners.<sup>249</sup>

Concern about staff well-being is also rising in higher-income regions, where greater research and reporting are shedding light on the scale of the problem. Research from the US suggests that people working in prison settings have a higher suicide rate than workers in other public safety occupations.<sup>250</sup> In the UK, more than half of prison officers are reported to be suffering symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of witnessing suicides, self-harm and violence and receiving serious threats,<sup>251</sup> with experts calling for better preventive strategies and mental health support.<sup>252</sup> In Belgium, it was reported that the number of prison staff requesting psychological therapy at work is growing.<sup>253</sup> In the US, a study has found that the psychological burden is particularly acute for staff working with people on death row.<sup>254</sup>

Responses to these challenges vary. Authorities in Georgia have developed a roadmap to address staff well-being and burnout.<sup>255</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, programmes to boost the capacity of the prison system have focused on staff mental health and well-being,<sup>256</sup> and in Belgium authorities offer free therapy sessions to prison staff and provide peer training to encourage officers to talk to each other about their problems.<sup>257</sup> Prison authorities from Southern African countries met in February 2025 to discuss strategies around staff and prisoner well-being, including through promoting sports activities.<sup>258</sup> In California, officials are introducing updated training to highlight how staff can support one another in suicide awareness and prevention.<sup>259</sup>

The use of AI to replace some of the functions of prison staff is predicted to continue, with some commentators suggesting that allowing AI to handle hazardous and routine tasks will help to tackle staff shortages, enhance staff safety and cut costs, while enabling staff to focus on the more complex parts of the job.<sup>260</sup> Others continue to warn of ethical concerns, data privacy and bias in algorithms leading to unfair treatment of some groups.<sup>261</sup>

## Rehabilitation and reintegration

Rehabilitation and social reintegration are increasingly articulated as core objectives of most prison systems, reflecting a broader shift away from overtly punitive approaches. Effective rehabilitation requires a combination of personal, judicial, moral-political and social interventions: developing motivation and skills, restoring legal rights, fostering dialogue about harm and repair, and strengthening social connections.<sup>262</sup>

Chronic overcrowding, inadequate resources, deteriorating infrastructure, and insufficient medical and psychosocial care significantly constrain the ability of prisons to prepare individuals for life after release.

Many people leave prison with profound and enduring trauma. A 2025 study by the Prison Reform Trust on people released from long-term imprisonment highlights significant gaps in pre- and post-release support, persistent stigma,

difficulties adapting to social and technological change, and the psychological burden of lifelong licence conditions and probation supervision.<sup>263</sup> Evidence from Australia similarly shows that people with complex needs face high risks of reoffending, while intensive, flexible and community-based support models that prioritise housing, health and welfare can significantly reduce reoffending and generate substantial public savings.<sup>264</sup>

แดนเตรียมความพร้อมก่อนปล่อย  
PRE-RELEASE SECTION  
CHIANG MAI WOMEN'S CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION

Women in uniform walk along a corridor within the Pre-Release Section of Chiang Mai Women's Correctional Institution, Thailand, 2020, Thailand Institute of Justice.

**In some parts of the world there is a slow shift towards adopting more people-centred language when speaking about people who are in the criminal justice/legal system.**

These systemic deficits weaken access to education, employment preparation, healthcare and family contact – all of which are essential to reducing reoffending and supporting desistance.

A 2025 report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights identifies persistent barriers to reintegration. These include stigma and discrimination, fragmented service provision, and the exclusion of those most affected from programme design – people who are in prison. The report also highlighted promising practices such as the Yellow Ribbon Project in Singapore, which supports reintegration by reducing stigma and generating resources for assistance programmes through public awareness initiatives. Similar efforts are seen in Czechia, where the NGO, Rubikon Centrum combines direct support, employer engagement and advocacy to promote social inclusion and access to employment for people with criminal records.<sup>265</sup>

There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates how well-designed reintegration programmes can produce measurable benefits. A global review identified a number of programmes with positive outcomes in areas such as housing, employment, health, autonomy and social participation. Examples include women's resettlement programmes in the UK achieving high rates of stable housing and employment, housing-first re-entry pilots in the US associated with lower recidivism, and youth employment schemes in Europe linked to reduced reoffending and offence severity.<sup>266</sup> The Uganda Prisons Service, which has 269 facilities, runs programmes which include training on livestock and agriculture, carpentry, tailoring and shoemaking. The country reports a relatively low recidivism rate of 13.4 percent.<sup>267</sup>

Effective reintegration also depends on data, coordination and legal frameworks that enable continuity of support. In the Netherlands, digital monitoring systems allow authorities to track rehabilitation and reintegration progress and to share relevant information with municipalities and probation services.<sup>268</sup> By contrast, reductions in specialist reintegration staff can rapidly erode support. In France, the decline of specialised employment advisers working in prisons has raised concerns that people in custody are being deprived of assistance that is essential to accessing employment, social benefits and sentence adaptations, particularly in a context of record overcrowding.<sup>269</sup>

Regional data also demonstrate the limited reach of alternatives to imprisonment in some parts of the world. ILANUD's dataset covering 14 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean shows that alternative sanctions are applied to less than 1% of sentenced persons, with the notable exception of Costa Rica where such measures reach nearly 12% of cases.<sup>270</sup>

Maintaining family ties is widely recognised as a protective factor against reoffending and a fundamental human right. However, overcrowding and inadequate visiting facilities continue to restrict meaningful contact. In France, limited visiting spaces and complex booking systems have resulted in prolonged separation from families, undermining dignity and rehabilitation and imposing additional harm on relatives.<sup>271</sup> Conversely, family-centred approaches in the Philippines demonstrate how flexible visiting regimes, child-friendly spaces, livelihood programmes and targeted support for children of imprisoned parents can strengthen social bonds.<sup>272</sup>

Prison libraries are relatively low-resource initiatives that are proven to support learning, well-being and positive engagement when actively promoted through staff training, prisoner-led initiatives and partnerships with public libraries. A pilot project in two London prisons set up a collaborative approach, creating pathways into volunteering and employment for people upon release.<sup>273</sup> Higher education in prison is also expanding. In the US, the Yale Prison Education Initiative has enabled students in prison to earn accredited degrees, demonstrating strong academic outcomes.<sup>274</sup> Similar results are evident in Morocco, where a new university degree in filmmaking, scriptwriting and directing has been introduced within a high-security prison, as part of deradicalisation programmes with a focus on post-release reintegration.<sup>275</sup>

Targeted programmes for specific groups further illustrate effective practice. In Australia, fitness and mentoring initiatives led by staff with lived experience have reached a large number of young people in custody, supporting well-being, confidence and readiness for community reintegration.<sup>276</sup> In Belgium, small-scale detention houses represent a structural shift away from large custodial institutions and towards models that emphasise autonomy, responsibility and community engagement, with early indications of positive reintegration outcomes.<sup>277</sup> The private sector can also play a significant role: in the UK, employers actively recruiting people with criminal records, including directly from prison, report substantially lower reoffending rates among those in employment, showing the economic and social benefits of inclusive labour markets.<sup>278</sup>

**Spotlight on:**

## Terminology for people in prison

In some parts of the world there is a slow shift towards adopting more people-centred language when speaking about people who are in the criminal justice (or legal) system, although this trend lags behind other sectors seen for instance in HIV responses, disability rights and drug policy.

Advocacy around shifting language in justice systems is closely linked to addressing stigma and upholding human rights. Terms like “inmate”, “offender” or “felon”, once widely accepted as neutral, are increasingly challenged for reducing people to their crimes, often led by those with lived experience of imprisonment and other activists.

Organisations such as The Marshall Project, Vera Institute, FWD.us, Justice Reform Initiative in Australia and Sister’s Inside have published guidance on the topic, aimed at journalists, for example. A 2025 report by Perseus Strategies and partner organisations calls on the UN to eliminate stigmatising labels such as “prisoner” or “offender” from UN criminal justice discourse.<sup>279</sup>

There is also a growing body of academic literature examining how people-centred language can influence perceptions and foster positive change within and beyond prison, and also

arguments put forward for prison researchers to be intentional about their language.<sup>280</sup>

Some government bodies have actively shifted towards people-centred language. In 2016, the Washington State Department of Corrections issued a policy requiring that people imprisoned in its state prisons no longer be referred to as “offenders” and instead refer to people inside as ‘individuals’. More recently in early 2026, the UK Ministry of Justice issued guidance to avoid the terms ‘offender or ex-offender’ stating they are ‘not rehabilitative’.<sup>281</sup>

## PART FIVE

# Role and use of technologies

Technology remains at the forefront of developments in prisons in all areas of facility management, with authorities seeking closer collaboration with private companies to address ongoing challenges and to explore innovative approaches for the future design and operation of prisons. Security and surveillance remain central drivers of technological investment, but there is also a rise in tools being used for risk and needs assessments, healthcare and rehabilitation, and for streamlining other aspects of prison management. While some prison technology is provided by state-owned companies, much is delivered by private firms, whose experience with the prison environment varies and whose profit motives may not always align with the operational needs or legal responsibilities of correctional facilities.

Security-related technologies remain a primary focus. In response to emerging threats such as the use of drones to introduce contraband, prisons are deploying increasingly sophisticated detection systems, including radar, radiofrequency scanners, acoustic sensors and enhanced optical cameras. These are often combined with machine-learning software to improve accuracy and reduce false identifications, such as birds or other objects.<sup>282</sup> Peru's high-altitude Challapalca prison has installed a €4 million, AI-powered control centre to strengthen security and monitoring in one of the country's most remote maximum-security facilities, which houses less than 200 people.<sup>283</sup>

The most advanced technologies are in use in prisons in Asian countries, notably China, where extensive surveillance technology in 'smart' prisons is widely used to track prisoner movements and monitor behaviour.<sup>284</sup> Authorities in Fujian province have reported that they are using AI to construct a 'knowledge graph' of individuals to generate rehabilitation data, predict behaviour and develop control strategies.<sup>285</sup> Meanwhile, in Singapore, new technology has been trialled to detect emotional distress shown through facial movements during tele-visits as a potential early intervention tool. In Changi prison, smart sensors installed on the walls of medical wards can monitor breathing rates and detect abnormal heart rates.<sup>286</sup>

Authorities in other regions are also seeking to increase the use of new technologies. In England and Wales, authorities convened a meeting of large tech companies in July 2025 to discuss how the use of technology can help to tackle overcrowding and staff shortages, with ideas under discussion including the use of implanted tracking devices, robots to manage prisoners, biometric behaviour monitoring, driverless vehicles to transport prisoners, and the expansion of geolocation technology as a prison alternative.<sup>287</sup> Transdermal microchips have also been suggested as a potential means to prevent future prison escapes in US prisons.<sup>288</sup>

Observers continue to call for better safeguards and protections to be put in place to match the speed at which technological developments are being introduced in prisons,

amid concerns that AI and other technologies are leading to the development of more punitive systems, increasing ethical and human rights concerns.<sup>289</sup> For example, advocates have expressed concern over the use of video and phone calls from prisons in the US to train AI models in detecting criminal activity.<sup>290</sup> Other observers have warned that the growth of technology in prisons, including communications technologies, disproportionately benefits the financial interests of private companies at the expense of people in prison.<sup>291</sup>

Technology is used for a range of activities. In Japan and the Netherlands, robotic aides are used to deliver meals and medications to people in prison, and in the US robots are now used for perimeter patrols.<sup>292</sup> In other countries the use of technology remains limited and innovations are on a smaller scale, including in Punjab, India, where an online visitation booking system has recently been introduced to streamline the visiting process.<sup>293</sup> As part of a broader modernisation drive in Bangladesh, all prisons are now reported to be connected to the internet.<sup>294</sup>

Access to digital technologies by people in prison is mixed. In Catalonia, research found that while these tools play an important role in rehabilitation, access is limited and unequal, with some prisons operating with outdated equipment and some people in prison excluded altogether.<sup>295</sup> In response, the Catalan government has launched an initiative to provide basic digital skills training to up to 6,000 people in prison in the first half of 2026,



**In response to emerging threats such as the use of drones to introduce contraband in some countries, prisons are deploying increasingly sophisticated detection systems.**

Demonstration of AI-assisted, drone-catching robot by Czech Technical University in collaboration with Prison Services. Rapotice prison, Czech Republic, 2022.

aiming to reduce the digital divide and support reintegration despite restrictions on internet access in custodial settings.<sup>296</sup> Similar issues arise in England and Wales, where digital access is inconsistent due to security concerns and infrastructure limitations, causing delays or resistance in providing access.<sup>297</sup> In Brazil, the Ministry of Communications has delivered basic computer training to 50 people in the semi-open regime at Major César de Oliveira prison, showing how digital skills can serve as a pathway to employability.<sup>298</sup>

Healthcare is a key area for technological growth in prison, with rapid developments in predictive analytics and early warning for physical or mental health problems, alongside diagnostic and clinical support, as well as the use of telemedicine and online therapy. AI-supported tools have the potential to enhance early identification of health-related risks in prisons, provided their use is carefully balanced with human oversight to avoid undermining therapeutic relationships and care outcomes. In the US, several state prison systems now use a trauma-informed

AI therapy assistant which is available to people 24/7 via tablets. An eight-month study of the tool found that those who used it regularly experienced a 28 percent drop in behavioural infractions and a 48 percent increase in emotional self-awareness.<sup>299</sup> In England, one application designed for at-risk individuals monitors changes in routines to flag potential increases in isolation or self-harm.<sup>300</sup>

In Armenia, prisons have been linked with community hospitals, using telemedicine to bridge the gap between correctional and community healthcare.<sup>301</sup> In India, authorities have requested states to make telemedicine available to all people in prison in recognition that it can be a practical, efficient and cost-effective solution to healthcare delivery in prisons.<sup>302</sup>

AI has proven to be a particularly useful tool for remote health screening when countries lack healthcare resources. One pilot programme that introduced AI-based chest X-rays for automated TB screening, used in Haiti, the Central African Republic and Mozambique, successfully screened 15,000 people in prison, with around 1,500 people

identified as presumptive TB cases and isolated immediately.<sup>303</sup> In Peru, implementation of AI-assisted radiography for active TB case finding has led to a threefold increase in detection.<sup>304</sup>

The benefits of using virtual reality (VR) in prison continues to be explored, including for rehabilitation. In the US, one NGO has introduced VR for people in prison, including showing foreign nationals scenes of their home country to help them prepare to return home. VR is also used to help people recognise triggers from traumatic events and to support them to respond differently.<sup>305</sup> A VR training programme in New Zealand received an award in November 2025 for its efforts to help people in prison prepare for work prior to release, with data showing that over 70 percent of programme participants found secure employment after their release.<sup>306</sup> In Europe, the use of VR/augmented reality is becoming more common in prison staffing, with digital recruitment and training scenarios supporting more transparent and standardised selection processes and leadership and conflict de-escalation skills.<sup>307</sup>

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**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.

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