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United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



2024 PRISON
MATTERS

Global prison population and trends

A focus on rehabilitation



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INTRODUCTION

In its first edition, *Prison Matters* brings together a global overview of the latest estimates and trends on prison population and prison, building upon the 2021 and 2023 editions of *Data Matters* on prison, with this year a special insight on prison rehabilitation. Based on data collected annually through the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS), the first edition of *Prison Matters* examines prison population trends, including pre-trial detention, and looks into the state of overcrowding in prisons globally, while it also presents data on death in prison and prison personnel; these figures offer valuable insights into trends and conditions within prison systems worldwide.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is responsible for conducting the UN-CTS. This annual survey is sent to all Member States and collects comprehensive data on criminal justice system processes, including prison population statistics. To enhance the coverage of these data, UNODC also integrates information from other sources, aiming to provide the most accurate estimates of regional and global prison populations.

A consistent theme emerging from the global data presented in this analysis is the concerning high levels of imprisonment. Globally, imprisonment rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels following a COVID-19 induced dip, while aggregated data—such as global level figures—often mask very high levels of prison use in certain places. One factor driving imprisonment rates that seldom garners attention is repeat imprisonment. This occurs when prisons fail to rehabilitate an offender and to prepare them effectively for successful social reintegration into the community. According to the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, this purpose “can be achieved only if the period of imprisonment is used to ensure, so far as possible, the reintegration of [prisoners] into society upon release so that they can lead a law-abiding and self-supporting life.”¹

To better understand global progress toward this goal and reinforcing the theme of this year’s Nelson Mandela International Day, #PrisonersMatter, UNODC undertook a survey among Member States focused on rehabilitation. It aimed to identify the rehabilitation plans, strategies, and goals developed by jurisdictions, and the methods used to evaluate their effectiveness. It focused especially on efforts to create a rehabilitative prison environment, where all aspects of administration support rehabilitation, suitable programs are available to all prisoners, and a positive, supportive social climate exists among prisoners and staff. The survey results, which reveal widespread recognition of the importance of rehabilitation in prison, are presented in this first edition of *Prison Matters*.

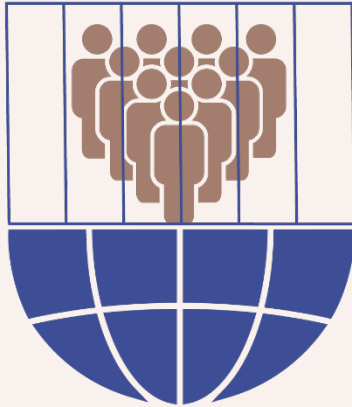
¹ UNODC, ‘The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)’, Rule 4, 2015.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

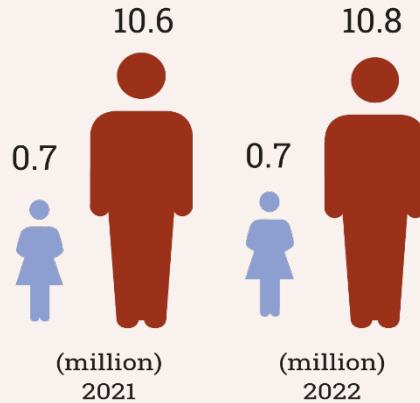


- ▶ World prison population on the increase, after a hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic
- ▶ Nearly a third of the global prison population remains in pre-trial detention, masking wide regional disparities
- ▶ In some regions women face a higher risk of pre-trial detention than men
- ▶ Prisons are overcrowded in more than 60 per cent of countries worldwide, sparking concerns about health and human rights of those detained in these prisons
- ▶ Enhanced efforts are required to prevent deaths in prison; more than 1 in 10 deaths occurring in prison is a suicide
- ▶ In some countries, prisons are under-staffed, reducing safety and undermining efforts to foster a rehabilitative prison environment
- ▶ Four in five prison administrations report having a dedicated prisoner rehabilitation strategy
- ▶ Almost half of jurisdictions with a rehabilitation strategy report the engagement of prisoners as stakeholders during planning
- ▶ Among practices that advance rehabilitative prison environments, general prison management practices are more frequently reported than those focusing on the offender and their social reintegration

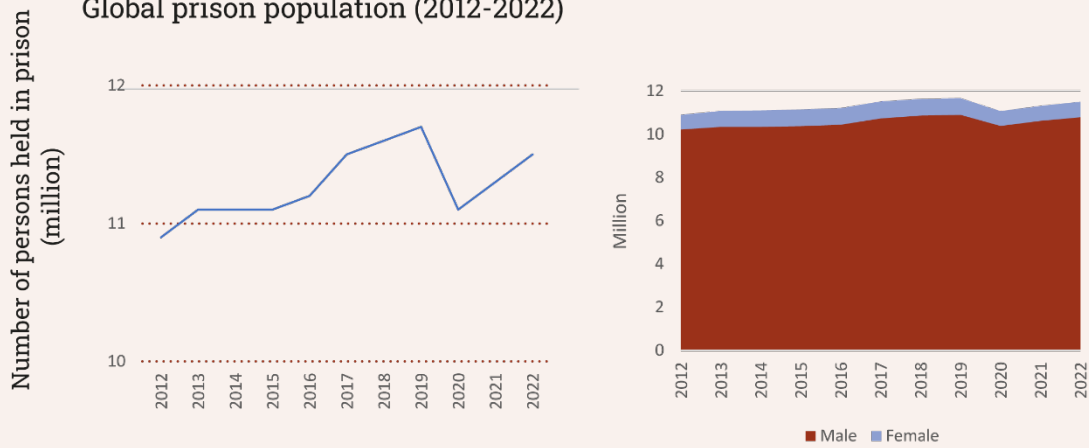
11.5 million



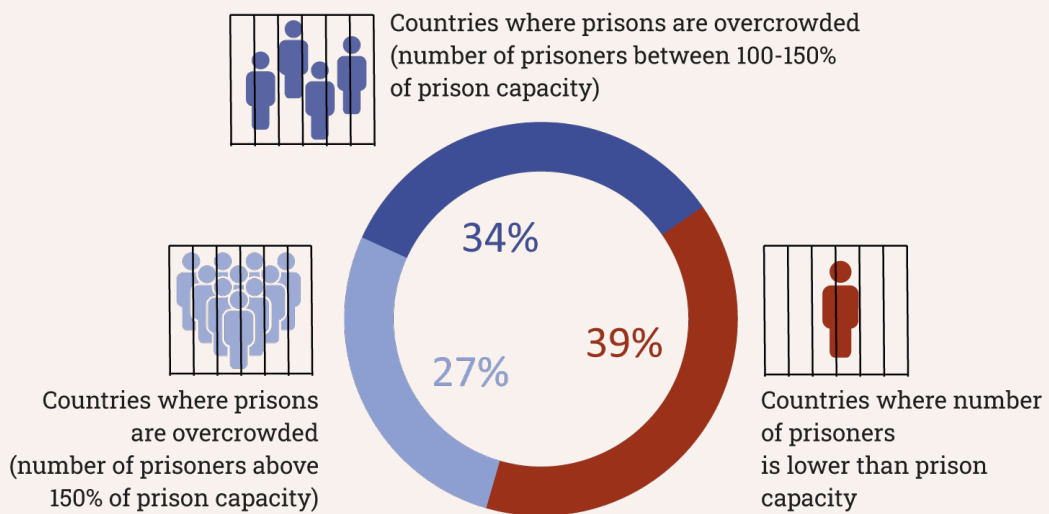
Global number of persons in prison at the end of 2022 (+1.6% since 2021)



Global prison population (2012-2022)



DISTRIBUTION OF COUNTRIES BY OVERCROWDING STATUS, LATEST AVAILABLE YEAR DURING 2015-2022 (N=161)



*Based on data from 161 countries (34 from Africa, 37 from the Americas, 31 from Asia, 47 from Europe and 12 from Oceania)

RATES OF HOMICIDE AND SUICIDE CAN BE HIGHER IN PRISON

34.2

prisoners out of every 100,000
prisoners committed suicide



12.2

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



* Based on data for 2022 or latest available year from 95 countries (5 from Africa, 33 from the Americas, 15 from Asia, 40 from Europe and 2 from Oceania)

4 in 5 prison administrations
report having a dedicated prisoner rehabilitation strategy

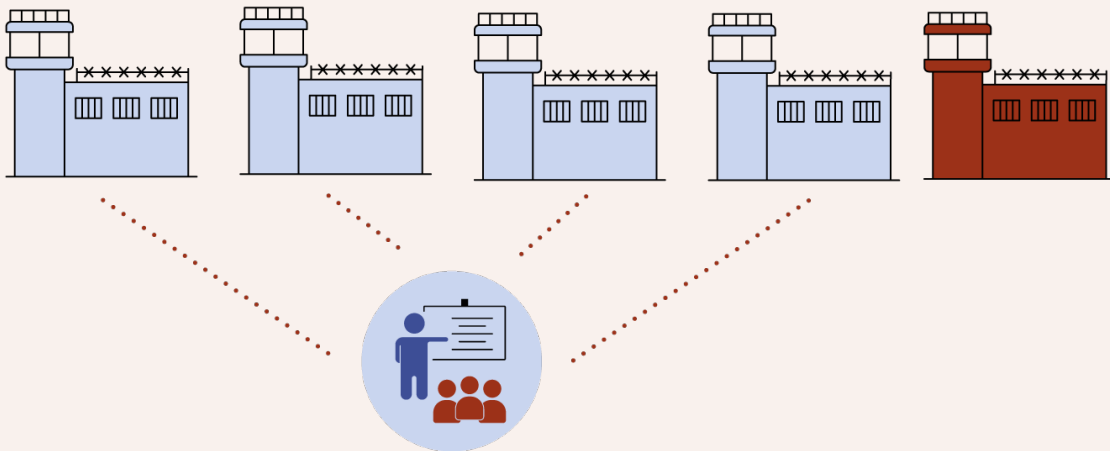
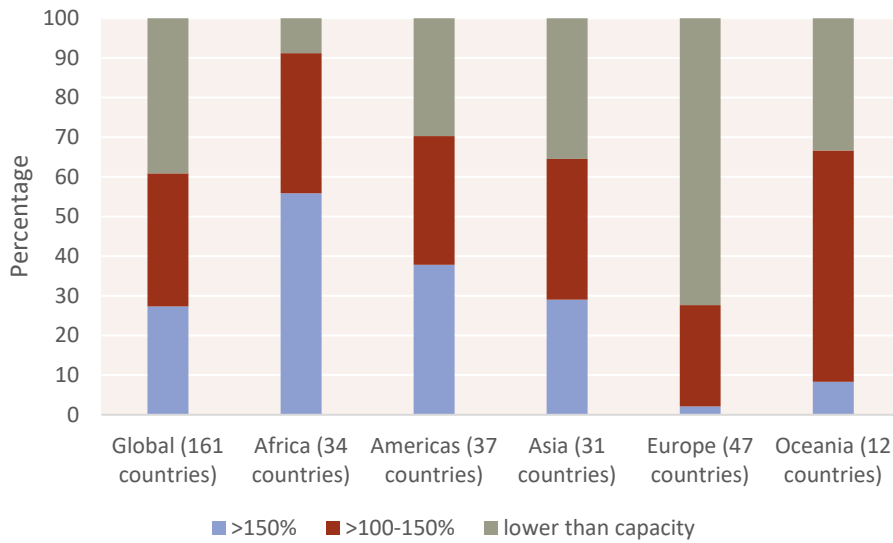
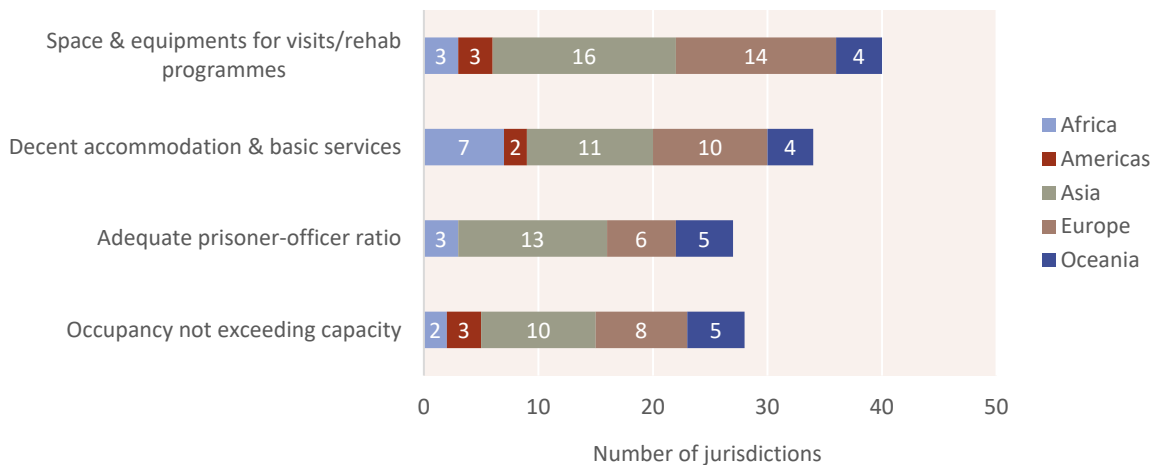


FIGURE 8: Distribution of countries by prison capacity, by region, 2022 or latest year available



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

FIGURE 9: Practices and factors to advance rehabilitative prison environments: prison capacity and conditions, by region, 2024



Note: 55 out of 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on prison capacity and conditions.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

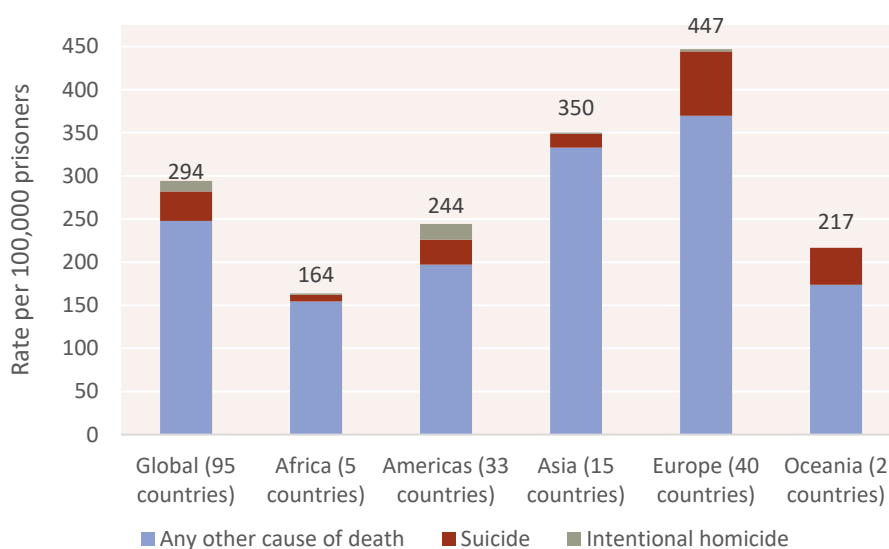
Enhanced efforts are required to prevent deaths in prison; more than 1 in 10 deaths occurring in prison is a suicide

The number and type of deaths occurring in prisons can provide insight into prison conditions and safety in prisons. While data on mortality in prison remain limited in Africa, Asia and Oceania, it is possible to produce a global average based on data from 95 countries. In these countries, 294 deaths in prison per 100,000 prisoners occurred in 2022 slightly less than 3 deaths per 1,000

prisoners. This is nearly three times lower than the crude death rate¹⁸ globally in 2022 (8.4 deaths per 1,000 people),¹⁹ reflecting the fact that people in prison are on average much younger than the general population.

Data reported to UNODC on deaths in prison fall into four different categories of deaths: deaths from natural causes (such as heart diseases or complications from virus infections); accidental deaths; deaths from suicide; and deaths from intentional homicide. The death rate for all causes of death combined was the highest in European countries with data, followed by Asian and American countries. However, countries in the Americas with data had a much higher number of intentional homicides per 100,000 prisoners than countries in other regions, at 18.3 victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 prisoners. This compares to 2.5 deaths by homicide per 100,000 prisoners in European countries with data, the region with the second highest homicide rate in prison.²⁰

FIGURE 10: Number suicides, intentional homicides and any other type of death per 100,000 prisoners, countries with available data by region, 2022 or latest available year



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

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

Focusing on countries that reported at least one intentional homicide in prison between 2018 and 2022 reveals that in almost all countries the rate of intentional homicide is higher among prisoners than in the general population (including prisoners).²¹ Ecuador, for example, which saw a rapid increase in the number of intentional homicides in the general population (including prisoners) in the last few years,²² also reported the highest rate of intentional homicide in prison between 2018 and 2022, with an average of 300 prisoners becoming victims of intentional homicide per year

¹⁸ The crude death rate indicates the number of deaths in a defined period (usually a calendar year) per 1,000 people. It corresponds to the mortality rate from all causes of death for a population.

¹⁹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision'.

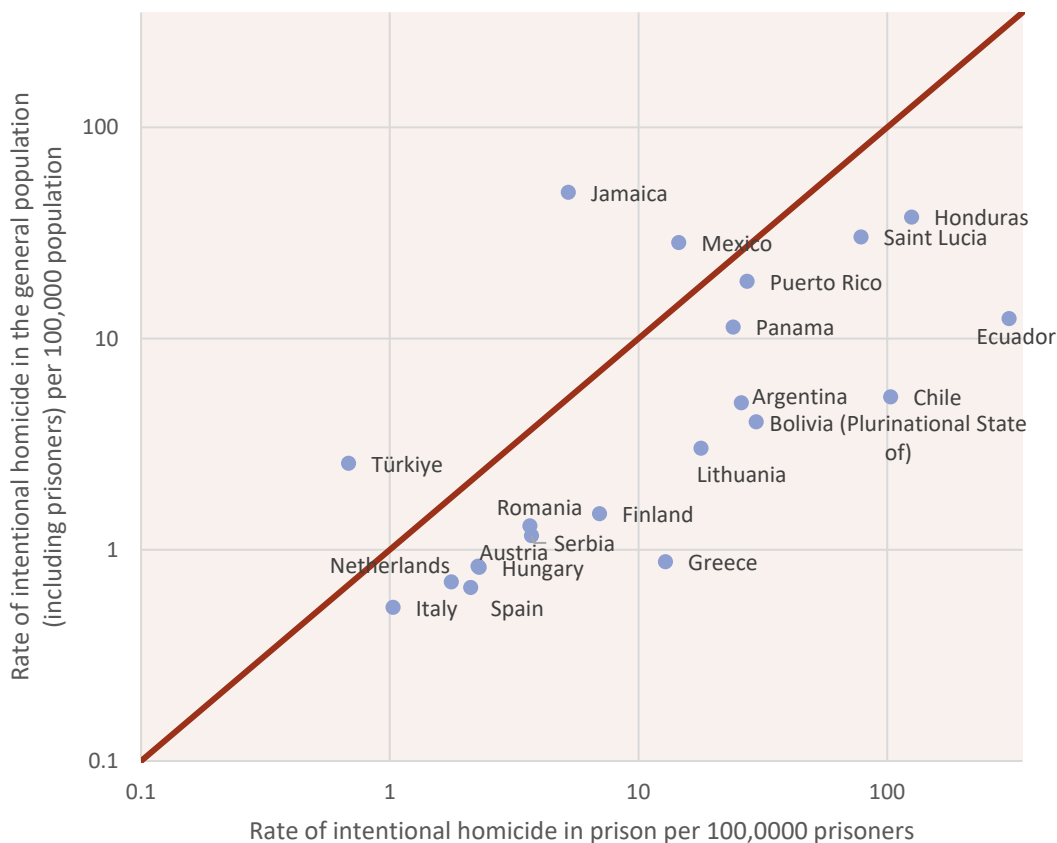
²⁰ UNODC, 'UN-CTS'.

²¹ Ibid.

²² UNODC, 'Intentional Homicide' (Data Portal, 2024).

during that period. Other countries in the Americas also report a high rate of intentional homicide in prison, reflecting in some countries the impact of organized crime in prison including rivalries amongst prison-based criminal organizations.

FIGURE 11: Homicides in prison per 100,000 prisoners and homicides in the country per 100,000 population, selected countries, 2018–2022



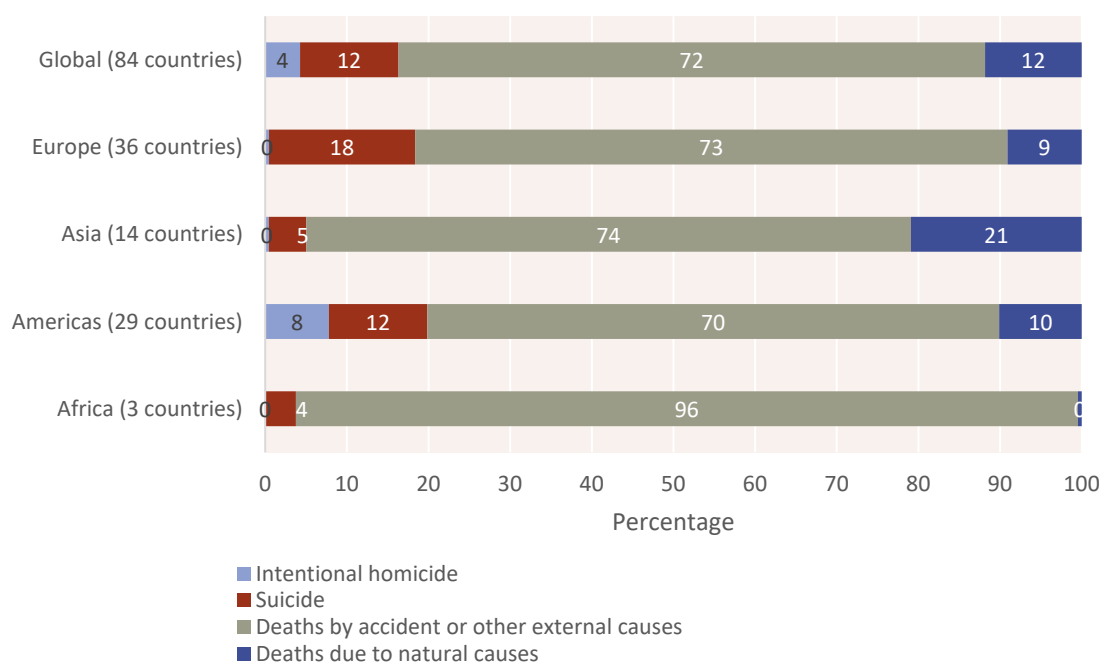
Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

Based on available data in 95 countries worldwide, in 2022, 34.2 prisoners out of every 100,000 prisoners committed suicide, a rate that is more than three times higher than the 2019 global crude suicide rate of 9.2 deaths per 100,000 general population.²³ The share of deaths due to suicide, among all deaths in prison, was the highest in Europe, at close to 18 per cent, followed by the Americas at 12 per cent. Suicide was, however, the reported cause of death for less than 5 per cent of the deaths of prisoners in countries of Asia and Africa with data.²⁴

²³ World Health Organisation, 'The Global Health Observatory, Suicide Rates', The World Health Organisation, 2024. Note that this comparison does not take into account the demographic structure of prisoners, which are in large majority male.

²⁴ UNODC, 'UN-CTS'.

FIGURE 12: Distribution of deaths in prison by cause, by region, 2022 or latest available year



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

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

In some countries, prisons are under-staffed, reducing safety and undermining efforts to foster a rehabilitative prison environment

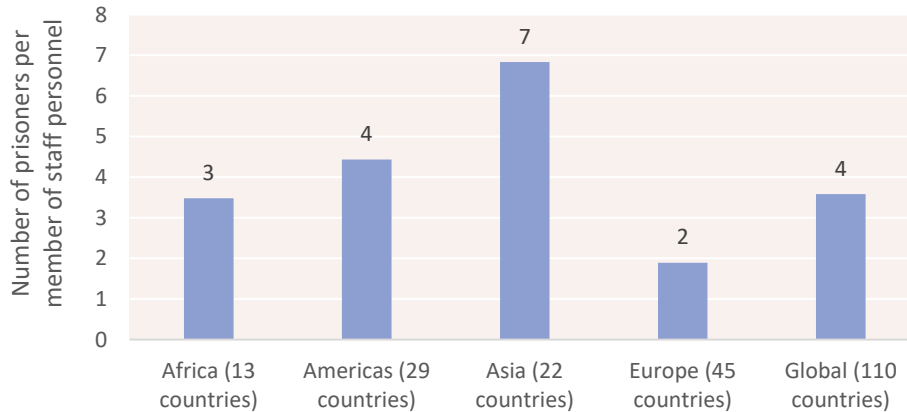
Significant differences exist in prison staffing between different regions of the world. Based on 110 countries with data, there were on average 3.6 prisoners per member of prison staff in 2022. Countries in Europe with data had about 1.9 persons detained for each member of prison staff in 2022. This number is much lower than in other regions, especially in Asia, where there were on average 6.8 persons detained for each member of prison staff in the 22 countries with data.²⁵ Although such wide differences exist, no international norms or guidance on ideal prisoner--staff ratios have been developed to date, partly reflecting the fact that different prison characteristics (such as the physical architecture, or security rating) demand different staffing numbers and profiles.

Countries with data in Europe reported on average a much higher number of prison staff compared to the size of their general population than countries in other regions in 2022, resulting in a low number of prisoners per member of prison staff. The situation is different in the countries of the Americas with data. In 2022, they had the second highest number of prison staff relative to their general population, at 52.9 prison staff per 100,000 population. However, they also had by far the highest rate of prisoners per 100,000 population. As a result, the number of prisoners to prison staff, at 4.4:1, was higher than the global average. Meanwhile, countries in Asia with data had the lowest

²⁵ Ibid.

number of prison staff relative to their general population, explaining the high ratio of prisoners to prison staff there.²⁶

FIGURE 13: Number of prisoners per member of prison staff, by region, 2022 or latest year available

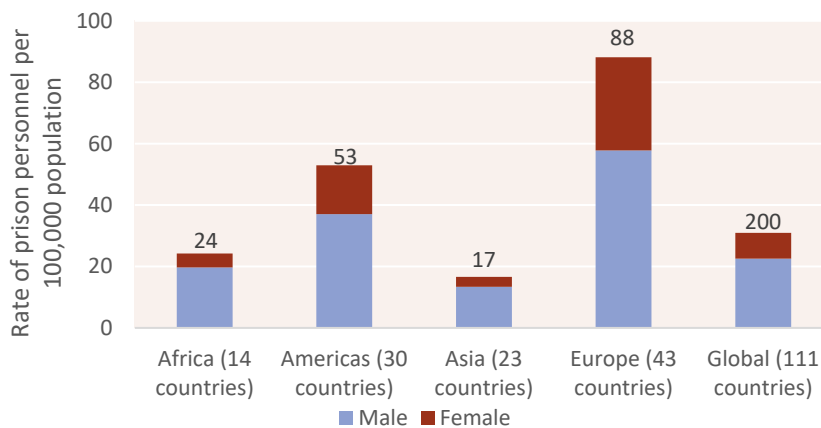


Notes: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their prison personnel. The global figure also includes one country from Oceania.

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

The share of women employed in prisons varies across regions with the highest share of women among all prison staff at 34.4 per cent in countries with data in Europe and the lowest at 18.7 per cent in countries with data in Africa.²⁷

FIGURE 14: Rate of prison personnel per 100,000 population, 2022 or latest year available



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

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

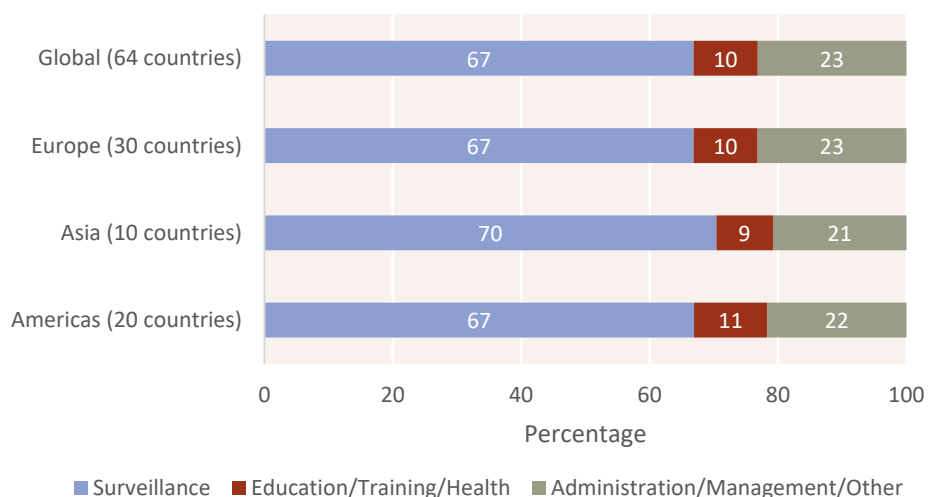
In contrast to the number of prisoners per member of prison staff, the distribution of prison staff members by function is similar between regions. Globally, nearly 7 out of 10 those working in prisons are responsible for the surveillance of prisoners, while slightly more than 2 out of 10 are part of the prison administration and 1 out of 10 are employed to support prisoner health (including

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

mental health) or the rehabilitation and social reintegration of prisoners, such as through education, training, or specialised programmes.²⁸

FIGURE 15: Distribution of prison personnel by function, 2022 or latest year available



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

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

Findings from the UNODC survey on prison rehabilitation undertaken in May 2024²⁹ indicate that only around half of the 55 responding jurisdictions (49 per cent) reported they currently had adequate prisoner-to-prison-officer staffing ratios, reflecting the acute capacity and resource pressures felt in many penal systems.³⁰

Four in five prison administrations report having a dedicated prisoner rehabilitation strategy

A large majority of the jurisdictions (74 per cent) that responded to the 2024 UNODC survey on prison rehabilitation³¹ report having in place some kind of dedicated strategy, model or regulatory framework to advance a rehabilitative approach to prison management, while the remainder indicated that work was underway. This positive finding is subject to interpretation given the broad nature of the question posed. A positive answer could potentially reflect that rehabilitation is being actively supported at an operational level, but it might equally reflect that rehabilitation is listed as one of the overall objectives of imprisonment, such as in penal legislation.³² All the same, looking at the regional breakdown, dedicated rehabilitation planning is reported to be underway in all regions.

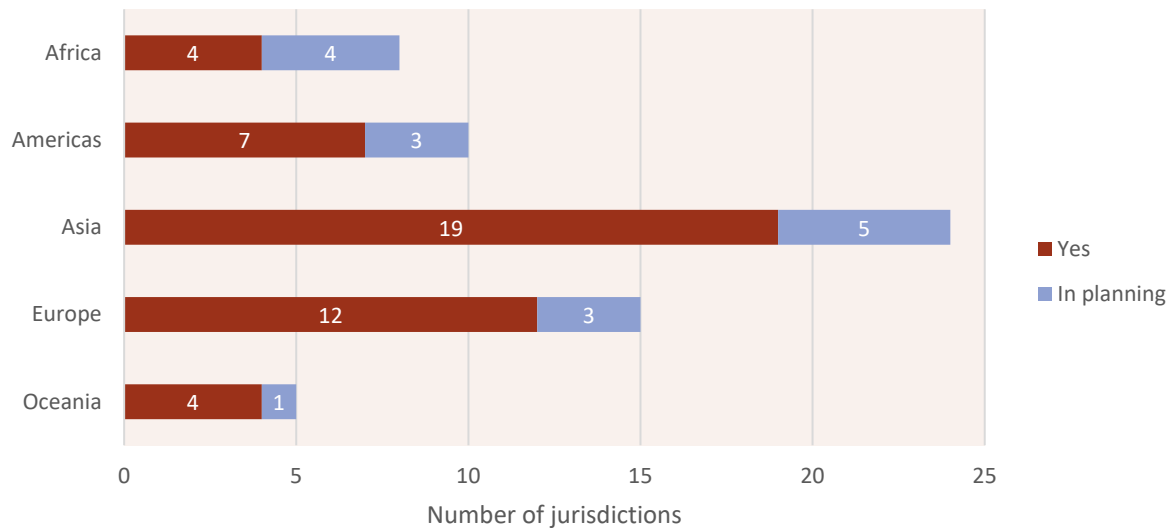
²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See Annex 1 for further details of the UNODC survey.

³⁰ UNODC, 'UNODC Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments'.

³¹ See Annex 1 for further details of the survey and extended reporting of its results.

³² UNODC, 'UNODC Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments'.

FIGURE 16: Jurisdictions reporting having a strategy on rehabilitation in prison, by region, 2024

Note: All 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions related to the existence of rehabilitations strategies under their control.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

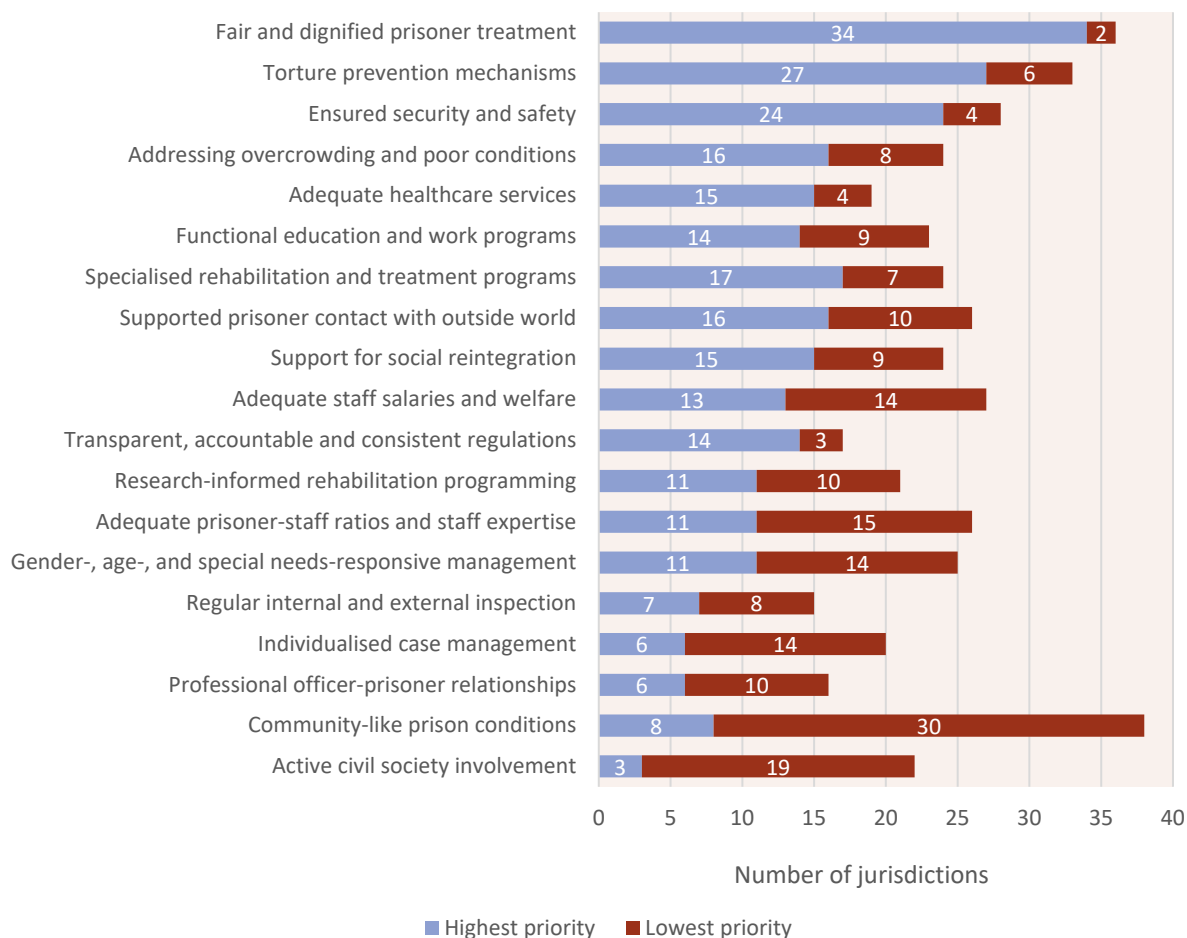
The UNODC survey also asked responding jurisdictions about the level of priority that they would assign to a number of goals to establish a prison environment conducive to rehabilitation.³³ All these goals, a number of respondents observed, are core goals for prison administration and the task of fostering a rehabilitative prison environment; therefore, caution is required when interpreting their relative priorities. Three goals were consistently ranked as high priority: fair and dignified prisoner treatment; torture prevention mechanisms; and safety and security.³⁴ These are the bedrocks of good prison management. Equally interesting, however, were two goals that respondents seldom ranked as important, or consistently ranked as low priority, which seem to reflect the continuously closed nature of prison settings and some hesitation to institutionalize linkages with the outside world. These goals included active civil society involvement (given high priority by only three of 62 respondents), reflecting efforts to support prisoners via partnerships with entities beyond the state and its agencies; and community-like prison conditions (given high priority by eight respondents, and low priority by 30), reflecting the so-called principle of “normalisation” and that prison conditions should resemble, as much as possible, those in the community.³⁵

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

FIGURE 17: Highest and lowest reported priorities for establishing an environment conducive to rehabilitation, 2024



Note: 61 out of 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on their priorities establishing an environment conducive to rehabilitation. Responding jurisdictions were asked to identify a maximum of five highest priorities and a maximum of five lowest priorities relative to their rehabilitation objectives.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

When asked to suggest additional goals, respondents made several suggestions, often fine tuning some of the goals that had already been presented. Respecting human rights and promoting it in decision making, for example, was noted as important. Two additional goals focused on directly supporting behaviour change also emerged. First, individualized case management for every prisoner, and second, high-quality inter-agency cooperation between custodial and post-release agencies, such as probation or parole services.³⁶

Almost half of jurisdictions with a rehabilitation strategy report the engagement of prisoners as stakeholders during planning

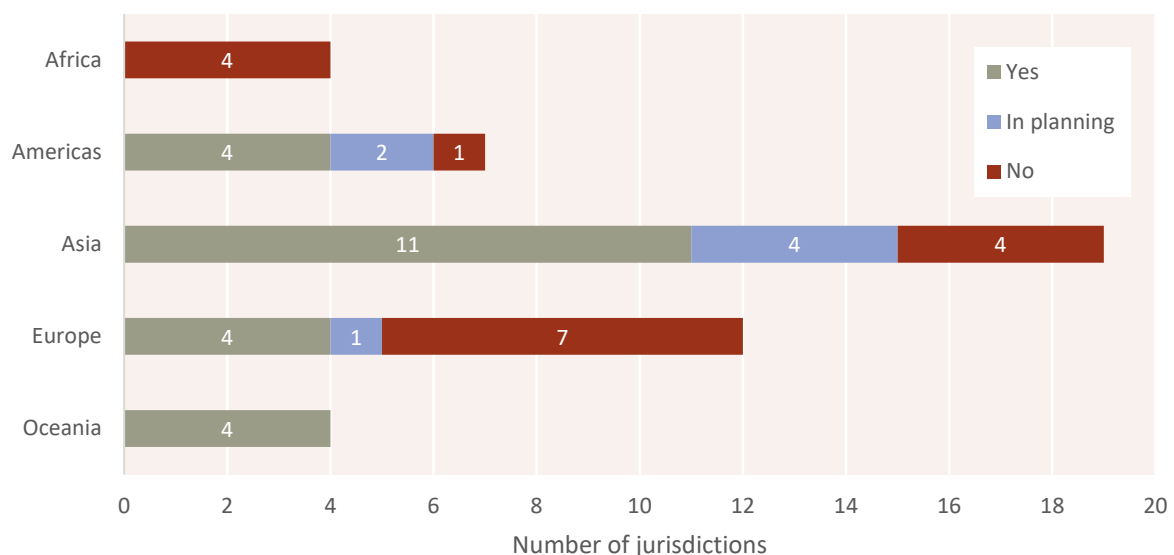
Many stakeholders can be involved in the development of rehabilitation strategies in prison, among which are prisoners and their families. While engagement with service users has not been a

³⁶ Ibid.

traditional feature of justice sector policy and planning, it is increasingly recognised by penal policy makers and prison managers as an element of best practice in prisons and offender management. Evidence from other areas where it is a more established practice, such as in healthcare, has shown it is associated with superior outcomes and satisfaction.³⁷

Among the 46 jurisdictions that answered the question, around half (49 per cent) reported that they had taken into account the views and experience of prisoners, former prisoners and/or their families, while a further 15 per cent indicated that such engagement processes were being planned. Together, approximately two thirds of responding jurisdictions had either engaged or were planning to engage prisoner and/or family voices to better understand their needs. Still, regional variations were apparent, with engagement with prisoners in developing rehabilitation policy and practice being far less common in the 12 reporting jurisdictions from Europe and not reported at all by any of the four responding jurisdictions from Africa.³⁸

FIGURE 18: Jurisdictions reporting including the views of those with lived experiences of prison and their families in their strategy on prison rehabilitation, by region, 2024



Note: 46 out of 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on whether their rehabilitation strategies include the views of those with lived experiences in prison and their families.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

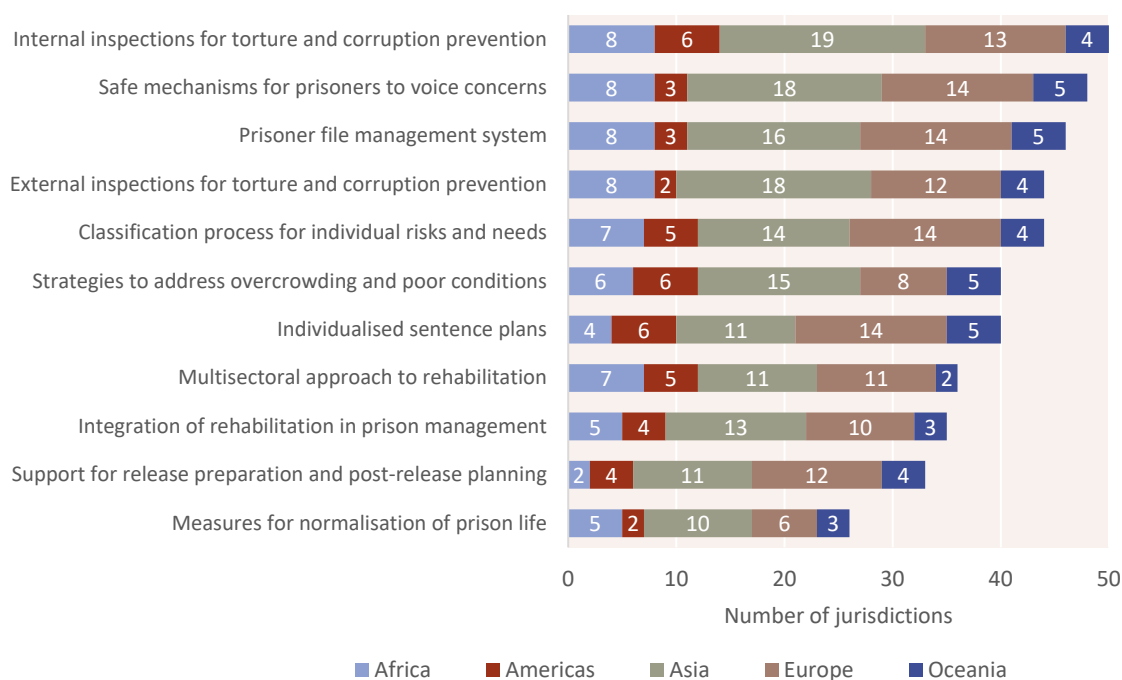
³⁷ Peter Beresford, 'The Role of Service User Research in Generating Knowledge-Based Health and Social Care: From Conflict to Contribution', *Evidence & Policy* 3, no. 3 (August 2007): 329–41.

³⁸ UNODC, 'UNODC Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments'.

Among practices that advance rehabilitative prison environments, general prison management practices are more frequently reported than those focusing on the offender and their social reintegration

Jurisdictions responding to the 2024 UNODC survey on rehabilitation in prison reported a number of activities that may advance prisoner rehabilitation. These can be divided into two sorts: those that focus on improving general prison management; and those that focus directly upon the prisoner. The former seeks to create a more rehabilitative environment through making the prison a better-run institution, such as via improved safety and security. The latter emphasizes practices that directly support behaviour change (rehabilitation, desistance) processes at the individual level. Both have been shown to be necessary and may advance in tandem. Responses, however, showed jurisdictions tending to favour reforms to institutional management practices, such as many of those described in the Nelson Mandela Rules.³⁹ Almost 82 per cent of responding jurisdictions, for example, reported having implemented measures to identify and respond to torture and corruption, with other essential processes and procedures, such as those concerning appropriate prisoner-complaints mechanisms and file management, similarly widely implemented.⁴⁰

FIGURE 19: Practices and factors to advance rehabilitative prison environments: prison management, by region, 2024



Note: 61 out of 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on prison management.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

³⁹ UNODC, 'The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)'.

⁴⁰ UNODC, 'UNODC Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments'.

Responding jurisdictions reported fewer activities supporting effective rehabilitation and social reintegration by involving a range of different stakeholders and as per community standards.⁴¹ The least reported of these, at 43 per cent, were measures to “normalise” prison life. These are measures to ensure prisoners have the same access to services, such as healthcare, as they would in the community, that the prison’s routines are designed to reduce institutionalisation as far as possible, and that a degree of normal contact, such as with family, is maintained while the prisoner is in custody.

Only slightly more common were comprehensive rehabilitation and pre-release preparation activities, and the implementation of multisectorial approaches. The latter involves the active cooperation and involvement of other government agencies and civil society organisations in activities such as prisoners’ preparation for release back into the community.⁴² Social reintegration support was ranked as a medium priority goal, which may also reflect what prison administrations consider to be their core tasks and a reluctance to go beyond the strict period of imprisonment, particularly in light of persisting resource constraints.

Looking regionally, no consistent pattern emerges beyond the common challenge of investing into the “normalisation” of prison life. Across regions, different implementation challenges appear to arise: in African jurisdictions, it was primarily individualized sentence plans as well as post-release planning that were least commonly implemented; in the Americas, it was the effective prevention of torture and other forms of ill-treatment as well as of corruption that featured less frequently; in Asia, efforts to develop a multisectorial approach to the rehabilitation and social reintegration of prisoners were not widely implemented; and Oceania seems to be confronted with the twin challenges of developing a multisectorial approach to rehabilitation and rendering rehabilitation a core feature of overall prison management.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.



**CONCLUSIONS AND
POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Reducing pre-trial detention

Access to justice is a fundamental aspect of the rule of law, which is at the core of the Agenda for Sustainable Development. In its absence, people are denied fair, transparent, effective, non-discriminatory and accountable services to exercise their legal rights.

While pretrial detention should be limited to instances where there is an established risk that an alleged offender may abscond, commit a further criminal offence or interfere with the course of justice, its use and duration in many countries can be excessive. This jeopardises the principle of proportionality in criminal justice decision-making as well as a person's right to a fair trial. More specifically, in the absence of respective safeguards, it can heighten the risk of coercion and prevent suspects from mounting a proper defence, especially for those who are poor and lack access to legal counsel or support to gather evidence in their favour.⁴⁴

A disproportionate use of pre-trial detention has also been found to be a major contributor to prison overcrowding and the associated deterioration of prison conditions in many countries. While pretrial detainees should be presumed innocent until proven guilty by a court of law, and treated accordingly, the prison regime and conditions in pre-trial detention are often found to be worse or more restrictive than those applicable to sentenced prisoners. Consequently, monitoring the number of unsentenced detainees is vital in assessing timely access to justice and, generally, the rule of law.

A disproportionate resort to pre-trial detention, as much as to incarceration more broadly, comes with significant socioeconomic costs for the person detained, their family and communities, as well as to the state itself. A considerable body of evidence, much of it from low- and middle-income countries, now illustrates the feasibility, sustainability and cost-benefits of reducing the use of pre-trial detention^{45 46 47} and of non-custodial measures. Next to efforts aimed at enhancing access to legal advisors and legal aid providers, this may include the use of paralegals. Estimates based on evidence from prisons in Malawi and Uganda, for example, suggest that effective paralegal programmes can be implemented for a cost of US\$20 per prisoner and produce savings of three times that.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Open Society Foundations and UNDP, 'The Socioeconomic Impact of Pretrial Detention: A Global Pretrial Justice Report', Open Society Justice Initiative (New York, NY, 2011).

⁴⁵ Justin Sandefur, Bilal Siddiqi, and Alaina Varvaloucas, 'Law Without Lawyers: Improving Access to Justice in Liberia and Sierra Leone' (London, United Kingdom: UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), 2012).

⁴⁶ The World Bank, 'A Tool for Justice: The Cost Benefit Analysis of Legal Aid' (Washington, District of Columbia: The World Bank, 2019).

⁴⁷ Eric Cadora, Clifford Msiska, and Adam Stapleton, 'Findings from Auditing Prisons in Malawi (Part 1): A Data-Driven Approach to SDG16.3.2', Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies (blog), 2023.

⁴⁸ Clare Manuel, Marcus Manuel, and Sheelagh Stewart, 'Advancing SDG 16.3.2 by Investing in Prison Paralegals to Cut the Number of Unsentenced Detainees in Low-Income Countries', 2022.

Reducing prison overcrowding

Prison overcrowding continues to constitute an acute human rights violation, health and security crisis and stands out as the greatest contributor to violations of international minimum standards in prisons. Operating significantly over the intended capacity of prisons is not only an issue of lack of space, but it also gravely affects the quality of nutrition, sanitation and hygiene, health services, rates of transmission of infectious diseases, the provision of care to vulnerable groups, and the physical and mental health of prisoners, as well as their access to constructive activities and programmes.

Overcrowding may generate conflicts, fuel violence, erode prison infrastructure and pose immense security and management challenges. In summary, the impact of overcrowding multiplies the challenges faced by prison services in preserving the integrity of prison management, ensuring the health, safety and well-being of prisoners, maintaining a rehabilitative prison regime and preserving prison security.⁴⁹

Research has extensively documented these pernicious effects of overcrowding. In a study in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, for example, prisoners reported that overcrowding created emotional as well as physical burdens, reducing not only the availability of appropriate programmes, but so too prisoners' capacity to engage effectively with them.⁵⁰ Another study in Pakistan has shown that the stresses of overcrowding can create an environment perceived by prisoners to be unsupportive of their rehabilitation needs, severely impacting the mental health and safety of prisoners, while at the same undermining prison security, including as regards to the detection of contraband.⁵¹

Research has consistently identified prisoners' perceptions of safety as critical to creating a positive climate conducive to rehabilitation,⁵² all of which is directly threatened and undermined by prison overcrowding. Evidence from Switzerland, for example, has shown a statistically significant increase in cases of serious prison violence in parallel to rising overcrowding levels.⁵³

Ensuring gender-responsive prisons

Gender-responsive prison and offender management lies at the heart of the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), which supplement the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

Women prisoners face challenges that stem from the fact that with 6 per cent of the global prison population, they typically constitute a minority in prison settings. Prison designs, policies and

⁴⁹ UNODC, 'Handbook on Strategies to Reduce Overcrowding in Prisons', Criminal Justice Handbook Series (New York, NY, 2013).

⁵⁰ Nozibusiso Nkosi and Vuyelwa Maweni, 'The Effects of Overcrowding on the Rehabilitation of Offenders: A Case Study of a Correctional Center, Durban (Westville), KwaZulu Natal', *The Oriental Anthropologist: A Bi-Annual International Journal of the Science of Man* 20, no. 2 (December 2020): 332–46.

⁵¹ Rais Gul, 'Overcrowding and Its Impacts on the Reintegration of Prisoners in Selected Jails of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan', *The Dialogue* XIII, no. 1 (October 2020): 41–52.

⁵² Norbert Schalast et al., 'EssenCES, a Short Questionnaire for Assessing the Social Climate of Forensic Psychiatric Wards', *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 18, no. 1 (February 2008): 49–58.

⁵³ Stéphanie Baggio et al., 'Do Overcrowding and Turnover Cause Violence in Prison?', *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (24 January 2020): 1015.

practices generally remain male-centric and often fail to address the gender-specific needs of incarcerated women,^{54 55} while criminal justice policies often do not provide sufficient entry-points for non-custodial measures for women offenders that would reflect the circumstances of their offences and their typically lower security risk profile.

Women's imprisonment also has important collateral and intergenerational consequences. A study in the United States, for example, has shown that almost 90 per cent of imprisoned fathers report that their female partner is taking care of their child. In comparison, only a little more than a third of imprisoned women can say the same of their child's father, while the rate of foster care placement was found to be five times higher for imprisoned women than men.⁵⁶ Children of incarcerated caregivers have also been found to suffer from higher rates of behavioural, emotional and cognitive problems, and to be more likely to become involved in a cycle of intergenerational risky behaviour and contact with the criminal justice system.⁵⁷

Prison authorities around the world also struggle with offering access to gender-responsive rehabilitation opportunities.^{58 59} Compared to men, incarcerated women generally enter prison with more complex personal circumstances and histories of trauma and suffer from higher levels of mental health issues, including drug use disorders, which prisons seldom properly address and which imprisonment itself exacerbates.⁶⁰ As a result of relatively short sentences in many cases, women prisoners frequently have less access to the sorts of programmes that can tackle such deep-seated needs, or to critical pre-release preparation and transitional arrangements.⁶¹

On a more positive note, some gender-responsive initiatives have seen widespread implementation. The availability of mother and child units, for example, has expanded rapidly in recent years, and more is now known about promising-practice design principles. A recent study found that 97 jurisdictions globally offer mother and baby or mother and child units.⁶² A systematic synthesis of evidence based on high quality studies in 16 countries showed considerable variability in how these gender and child responsive units operate, but also identified key guiding principles for effective practice, including around prison staff training and preparation for release.⁶³

⁵⁴ Ruth McCausland and Eileen Baldry, 'Understanding Women Offenders in Prison', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Forensic Psychology in Secure Settings*, Routledge International Handbooks (New York, NY, US: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 25–39.

⁵⁵ Lorana Bartels, Patricia Easteal, and Robyn Westgate, 'Understanding Women's Imprisonment in Australia', *Women & Criminal Justice* 30, no. 3 (3 May 2020): 204.

⁵⁶ Jane A. Siegel, 'Introduction: Journeying into the Worlds of Prisoners' Children', in *Introduction: Journeying into the Worlds of Prisoners' Children* (Rutgers University Press, 2011), 1–20.

⁵⁷ Eric Martin, 'Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children', *National Institute of Justice Journal*, no. 278 (May 2017).

⁵⁸ Jessica Leigh Thornton, 'A Link to Recidivism: Excluding Female Offenders Serving Short Sentences from Rehabilitation Programmes', *Anthropological Researches and Studies* 13, no. 1 (2023): 72–82.

⁵⁹ Bartels, Easteal, and Westgate, 'Understanding Women's Imprisonment in Australia'.

⁶⁰ Stephanie S. Covington and Barbara E. Bloom, 'Gender Responsive Treatment and Services in Correctional Settings', *Women & Therapy* 29, no. 3–4 (2007): 9–33.

⁶¹ Serena Wright, 'Narratives of Punishment and Frustrated Desistance in the Lives of Repeatedly Criminalised Women', in *New Perspectives on Desistance*, ed. Emily Luise Hart and Esther F.J.C. Van Ginneken (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017).

⁶² Marie Claire Van Hout et al., "'Children in the Prison Nursery': Global Progress in Adopting the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Alignment with United Nations Minimum Standards of Care in Prisons', *Child Abuse & Neglect* 134 (December 2022).

⁶³ Jo Taylor et al., 'A Rapid Review of the Evidence on Models of Service Delivery for Correctional Centre-Based Mothers and Children's Units: Does Our Approach Need to Change?', *BMJ Global Health* 9, no. 5 (May 2024).

Reducing preventable deaths in custody

Prisoner deaths in custody are largely preventable, and often reflect challenges that States face in exercising their heightened duty of care and obligation to protect prisoners' right to health as well as to safety and integrity of the person.^{64 65}

Prisoners are particularly vulnerable in the early stages of custody. In this regard, there is frequently a lack of proper risk and needs assessment to identify those at risk of self-harm or suicide. Normatively, the Nelson Mandela Rules prescribe the need for these aspects to be considered during medical examinations by a prison doctor or other qualified health-care professional as soon as possible upon admission (Rule 30) and referrals to specialist health-care professional staff if a risk of self-harm or suicide is detected (Rule 36).⁶⁶

Additionally, poor or unsafe prison conditions in general, as well as potential exposure to violence in the course of imprisonment, may have a particularly harsh impact on vulnerable groups of prisoners or those with special needs, including, but not limited to, women, youth, the elderly, persons with mental or physical disabilities, foreign nationals or persons belonging to minority groups.^{67 68}

Failure to address such risks may result in deaths by suicide in prison.⁶⁹ Deaths by suicide often reflect unmet mental health needs, personal despair, and stresses arising from overcrowded and unsafe prison conditions. Comorbidity can play a role too. A toxicology study of all deaths in Irish prisons between 2009-2014, for example, found that in 30 per cent of suicide cases in prisons the person tested positive for drugs at time of death, even though the immediate cause of death was usually hanging. In Canada, a similar study found half of all prisoners who died in custody had a history of mental health disorder and substance use, and that the combination of the two had a statistically significant relationship with death. A 20-country systematic review of prison suicide risk factors identified causes that were longstanding and chronic, including a prisoner's history of self-harm, but also numerous others that were acute and emerged directly from the impact of the prison sentence.⁷⁰ Based on a dataset of 19,882 individuals, these acute causes were found to include placement in isolation (i.e., solitary confinement or other very restrictive prison regimes with limited human contact), victimisation by other prisoners, and lack of social support and contact with the outside world.

Moreover, there is evidence that suicide prevention programmes in prison can be effective when properly designed and implemented. One systematic review of 38 high-quality suicide prevention studies from seven countries identified cognitive behavioural interventions as one of the most

⁶⁴ Róisín Mulgrew, 'Prisoner Lives Cut Short: The Need to Address Structural, Societal and Environmental Factors to Reduce Preventable Prisoner Deaths', *Human Rights Law Review* 23, no. 2 (1 June 2023): 1-25.

⁶⁵ Louis Favril, Jenny Shaw, and Seena Fazel, 'Prevalence and Risk Factors for Suicide Attempts in Prison', *Clinical Psychology Review* 97 (November 2022).

⁶⁶ UNODC, 'The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)'.

⁶⁷ World Health Organization. *Preventing Suicide in Jails and Prisons*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2007.

⁶⁸ Louis Favril, Jenny Shaw, and Seena Fazel, 'Prevalence and Risk Factors for Suicide Attempts in Prison', *Clinical Psychology Review* 97 (November 2022): 1021-90.

⁶⁹ Charlotte Gould, Tristan McGeorge, and Karen Slade, 'Suicide Screening Tools for Use in Incarcerated Offenders: A Systematic Review', *Archives of Suicide Research* 22, no. 3 (3 July 2018): 345-64.

⁷⁰ Favril, Shaw, and Fazel, 'Prevalence and Risk Factors for Suicide Attempts in Prison'.

promising approaches.⁷¹ Another systematic review of evidence also identified a need for more multilevel interventions, focusing not only on the mental health and psychosocial needs of the prisoner, but also on prison specific stressors, such as the risk factors associated with restrictive prison regimes noted above.⁷²

It is also for this reason that the Nelson Mandela Rules highlight that solitary confinement shall be used only in exceptional circumstances and for as short a time as possible, and never beyond 15 consecutive days (prolonged solitary confinement). Certain categories of prisoners should never be subject to solitary confinement.

Ensuring adequate prison staffing

For a long time, experts and practitioners have drawn attention to the most detrimental consequences of severe resource constraints in prisons, including when it comes to staffing, highlighting that staff constraints lead to less effective supervision, less time for activities that support successful reintegration into the community and a deterioration of prisoner-staff relations.⁷³

Today, many prisons remain under-staffed. In Europe, for example, significant differences exist both within and between subregions as far as prison staffing levels are concerned.⁷⁴ The burden of shortages appears to fall most heavily on specialised staff and health professionals, such as psychologists, nurses, and social workers. Improving both existing staff capacities and raising the number of specialist health professionals, as well as regular prison staff, should be a priority in most places. There are clear linkages between staffing capacity in this respect and states' duty of care for prisoner wellbeing and for reducing preventable deaths in custody, such as through suicide warning and prevention.

Evidence also suggests the problem of understaffing is likely more acute in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) compared to high-income countries (HICs). While global disaggregated data for regular prisons staff are not yet available, prison health researchers have extrapolated specialist prison staff numbers from national-level specialist staffing data. These suggest high levels of unmet need for specialist staff in LMIC country prisons.⁷⁵ At the same time, there is strong evidence that prisoners' poor mental health is also associated with increased recidivism risks.⁷⁶ For example, a cohort study of 43,326 Swedish prisoners followed for 10 years following release from prison

⁷¹ Annie Carter et al., 'Interventions to Reduce Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviours among People in Contact with the Criminal Justice System: A Global Systematic Review', *eClinicalMedicine* 44 (February 2022): 101266.

⁷² Favril, Shaw, and Fazel, 'Prevalence and Risk Factors for Suicide Attempts in Prison'.

⁷³ Brian Tkachuk and Roy Walmsley, 'World Prison Population: Facts, Trends and Solutions', 2001.

⁷⁴ Marcelo F Aebi, Edoardo Cocco, and Lorena Molnar, 'Prisons and Prisoners in Europe 2022: Key Findings of the SPACE I Report', Series UNILCRIM (Council of Europe and University of Lausanne, 2023).

⁷⁵ Kathryn Hill et al., 'Prevalence of Mental Health and Suicide Risk in Prisons in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Rapid Review', *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 33, no. 1 (2 January 2022): 37–52.

⁷⁶ Jennifer M. Reingle Gonzalez and Nadine M. Connell, 'Mental Health of Prisoners: Identifying Barriers to Mental Health Treatment and Medication Continuity', *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 12 (December 2014): 2328–33.

found that mental ill health increased violent recidivism by 20 per cent in men and 40 per cent in women after all other risk factors had been accounted for.⁷⁷

Fostering rehabilitation of prisoners

A key aspect of prison management is to foster the rehabilitation and social reintegration prospects of prisoners. The Nelson Mandela Rules highlight that the ultimate purposes of a sentence of imprisonment, namely, to protect society from crime and to reduce recidivism, can only be achieved if the period of imprisonment is used to ensure, so far as possible, the reintegration of such persons into society upon release so that they can lead law-abiding and self-supporting lives (Rule 4).⁷⁸

Efforts aimed at advancing more rehabilitative prison environments, including through respective programmes and services, are key from the very start of a prison sentence. This should continue throughout the period of incarceration and up to the preparation for release from custody. Some forms of prison programming ensure fundamental rights, such as educational programming,⁷⁹ while others, including vocational training and employment, provide experience in a key pathway out of crime, which is stable employment.

The main barrier to effective rehabilitation programming in prisons is increasingly recognised to lie in the nature of the prison environment itself.^{80 81 82} Where prison environments are purposefully designed and organised to support rehabilitation, rehabilitation effects have been shown to be strongest.⁸³ The key to effective prison-based rehabilitation lies therefore not only in rehabilitation programmes, but in creating effective rehabilitative prison environments in a much more holistic manner. Rehabilitative efforts should therefore not be limited to actual programming in prisons, but should be embedded in an overall prison environment that complies with the minimum conditions enshrined in the Nelson Mandela Rules and the Bangkok Rules.

One suggested approach to understanding and designing more rehabilitative prison environments has been to focus on the social climate of the prison, which can improve both desired outcomes (improved rehabilitation) and the wellbeing of prisoners.⁸⁴ Another is generating a rehabilitative prison culture (shared attitudes and values) within the prison,⁸⁵ as pioneered in England and Wales,

⁷⁷ Zheng Chang et al., 'Substance Use Disorders, Psychiatric Disorders, and Mortality after Release from Prison: A Nationwide Longitudinal Cohort Study', *The Lancet. Psychiatry* 2, no. 5 (May 2015): 422–30.

⁷⁸ UNODC, 'The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)'.

⁷⁹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26, establishes the right to education for all. See also the Nelson Mandela Rules, Rule 4(2), 104.

⁸⁰ Katherine M. Auty and Alison Liebling, 'Exploring the Relationship between Prison Social Climate and Reoffending', *Justice Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (23 February 2020): 358–81.

⁸¹ Rosemary Ricciardelli, Katharina Maier, and Kelly Hannah-Moffat, 'Strategic Masculinities: Vulnerabilities, Risk and the Production of Prison Masculinities', *Theoretical Criminology* 19, no. 4 (November 2015): 491–513.

⁸² Jennifer Galouzis et al., 'Designing a Rehabilitative Prison Environment', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Design*, ed. Dominique Moran et al., Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 385–410.

⁸³ Gabrielle Beaudry et al., 'Effectiveness of Psychological Interventions in Prison to Reduce Recidivism: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials', *The Lancet. Psychiatry* 8, no. 9 (September 2021): 759–73.

⁸⁴ Jayson Ware and Jennifer Galouzis, 'Impact of Prison Climate on Individuals with Sexual Convictions: Desistance and Rehabilitation', in *Sexual Crime and the Experience of Imprisonment*, ed. Nicholas Blagden et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 35–60.

⁸⁵ Ruth E. Mann, 'Rehabilitative Culture Part 2: An Update on Evidence and Practice', *Prison Service Journal*, no. 244 (July 2019).

United Kingdom.^{86 87} Research has also shown, however, that prison staff tend to rate a prison environment as more rehabilitative than prisoners rate their own experience of it.^{88 89} This points to the importance of understanding prisoner perspectives, given that they are “experts by experience” in the processes of personal change and desistance from crime.

At global level, there remains a wide gap in the access of prisoners to rehabilitation programmes and other constructive activities in support of their social reintegration prospects, with such access being severely limited in resource constrained environments in particular.

⁸⁶ Flora Fitzalan Howard and Helen Wakeling, ‘Evaluating the Impact of “Rehabilitative Adjudications” in Four English Prisons’, *Psychology, Crime & Law* 27, no. 10 (26 November 2021): 1010–31.

⁸⁷ For a number of case studies and empirical research on rehabilitative prison cultures in England and Wales, see the January 2018 issue of the *Prison Service Journal* (Issue 238).

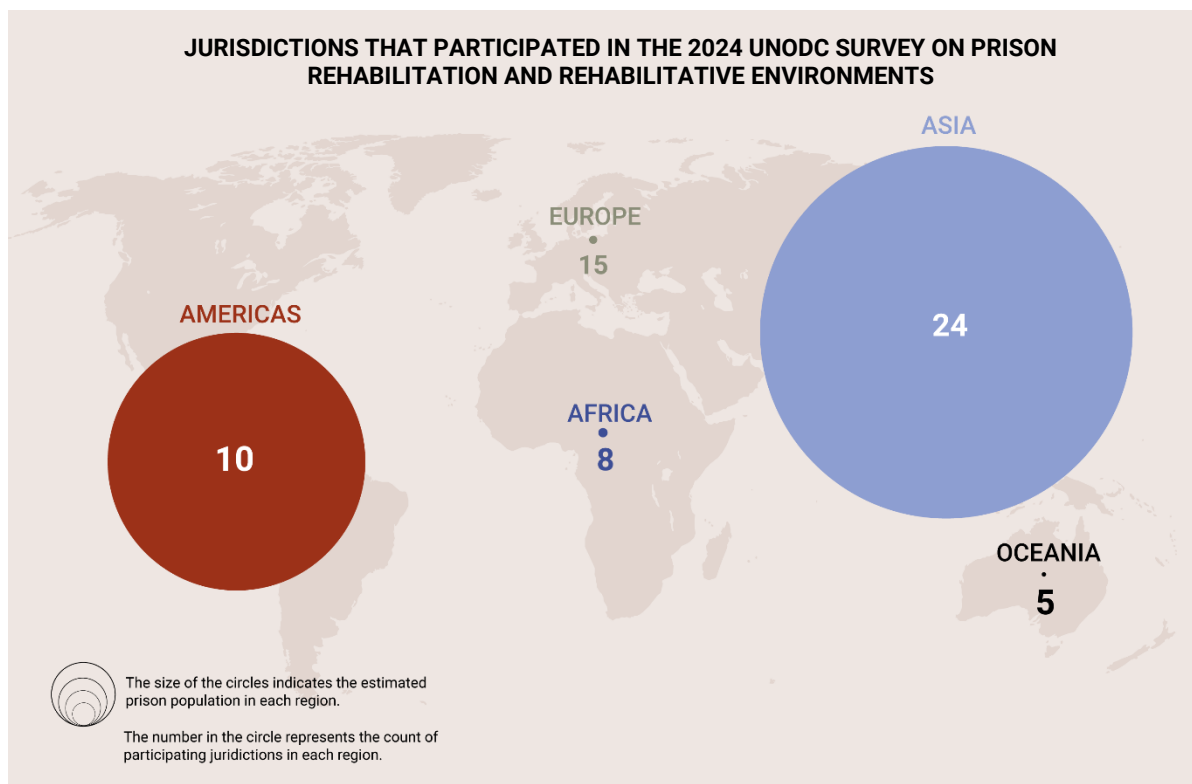
⁸⁸ Sarah Gibson, ‘Social Climate and Hope amongst Staff and Prisoners in a High Security Male Prison’, *The Journal of Forensic Practice* 23, no. 1 (25 February 2021).

⁸⁹ Lucy Reading and Gareth E. Ross, ‘Comparing Social Climate across Therapeutically Distinct Prison Wings’, *The Journal of Forensic Practice* 22, no. 3 (6 July 2020): 185–97.



ANNEXES

ANNEX I — 2024 UNODC SURVEY ON REHABILITATIVE PRISON ENVIRONMENTS: ADDITIONAL FINDINGS



In 2024, UNODC invited Member States' prison administrations and other relevant bodies, as identified by their respective governments, to participate in a survey on prison rehabilitation and rehabilitative environments. The survey aimed to explore Member States' approaches to prison rehabilitation, including the principles and conceptual frameworks guiding these efforts to enhance the conditions for effective social reintegration. The UNODC received responses from 62 national or subnational jurisdictions across 46 Member States: 8 from Africa, 10 from the Americas, 24 from Asia, 15 from Europe and, finally, 5 from Oceania.

The objective of the survey was to examine Member States' priorities, frameworks and practices of prison rehabilitation to understand how prison rehabilitative environments can be made possible. Accordingly, the survey was composed of six core questions that revolved around Member States' priorities in prison rehabilitation and their strategies or regulatory frameworks in advancing a rehabilitative approach to prison management. It also inquired into the existence of implementation plans to support prison administrators in executing such strategies, as well as whether the participating jurisdictions had monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the rehabilitative nature of their prison systems or carried research into the subject matter. The survey gathered data on factors and practices shaping rehabilitative prison environments across four categories: prison capacity and conditions; prison management; programmes and services; and staffing. Below are key findings of the survey.

Prison rehabilitation strategies

A key finding of this survey is the extent to which rehabilitation is recognised as a top priority for penal policy and penal administration and to which rehabilitation goals have become a focus of strategic planning.

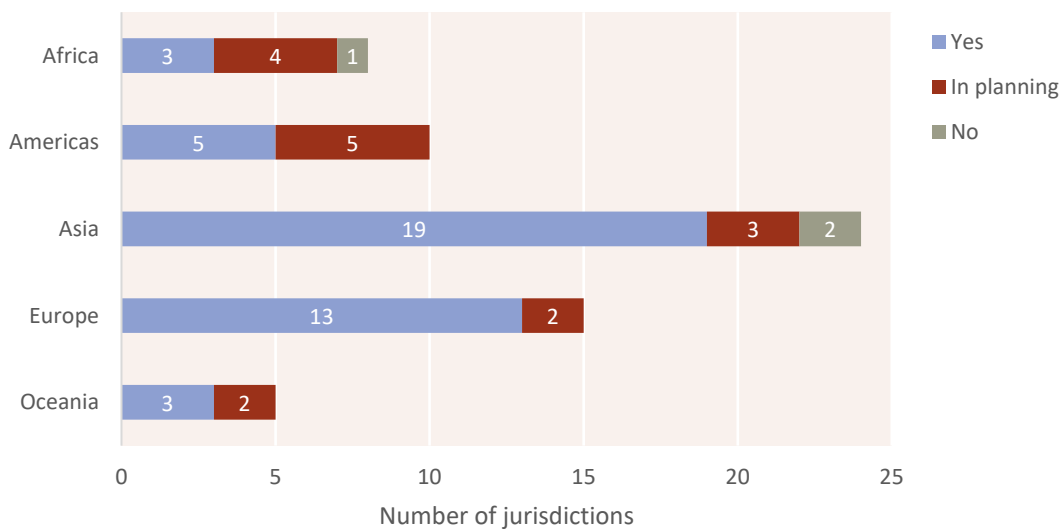
Twenty jurisdictions evidenced their engagement practices, reflecting consistent efforts across low-, middle- and high-income jurisdictions to take practical steps with distinctively rehabilitative goals in mind. Three illustrative examples of these practices include one country in Central Asia, where dedicated rehabilitation centres, separated from the general prison population are established under a special regulation to allow dedicated activity in support of rehabilitation and social reintegration; in a Southern Africa country, evidence-based practice principles developed in other countries were modified to meet national conditions and the needs of local prisoners, and the approach was then subject to mid-term evaluation to ensure a responsive and dynamic approach to implementation; in several state-jurisdictions in Australia, evidence based rehabilitation frameworks have been further refined with specialist strategies reaching beyond gender responsiveness to include frameworks for disability, indigenous background, mental health status, and specific heightened-risk profiles, with efforts made to draw rehabilitation policy closer to broader social policy.⁹⁰

An important theme arising in the evidence of work on rehabilitation is the importance of culturally appropriate, or suitably tailored, schemes, initiatives and tools. This was apparent not only in the importance of refining and ensuring the cultural appropriateness or adaptation of approaches developed in culturally different locations, but also evident in states or jurisdictions where indigenous citizens are frequently overrepresented in prisons and underserved by mainstream (culturally inappropriate) models, methods and tools. Another issue of a very similar sort was the recognised importance in some places of catering to the needs of specific minorities, including diaspora communities and foreign prisoners.⁹¹

⁹⁰ UNODC, 'UNODC Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments'.

⁹¹ Ibid.

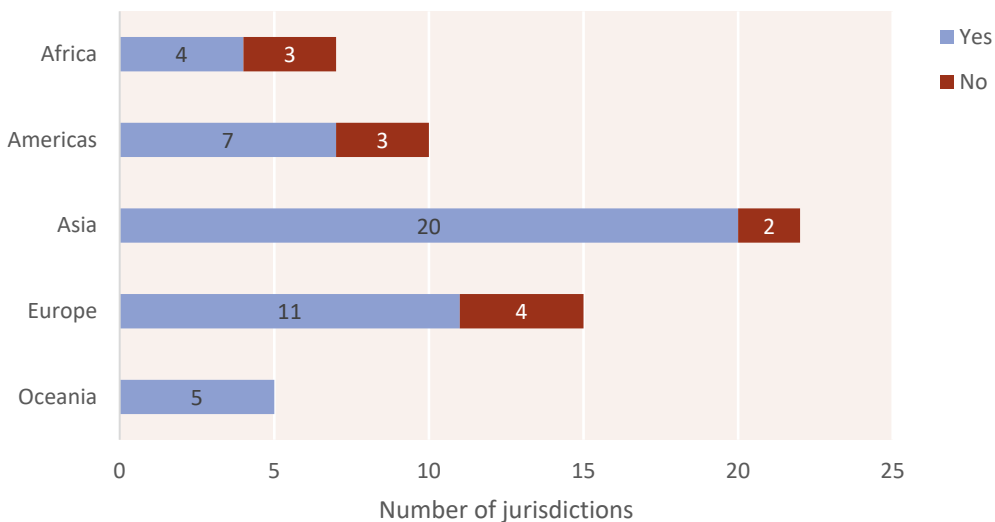
FIGURE 20: Jurisdictions reporting having an implementation plan on prison rehabilitation, by region, 2024



Note: All 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions related to implementation plans on prison rehabilitation.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

FIGURE 21: Jurisdictions reporting having an implementation plan on prison rehabilitation that includes continuous monitoring and evaluation, by region, 2024



Note: 59 of 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on whether their implementation plans on rehabilitation include continuous monitoring and evaluation.

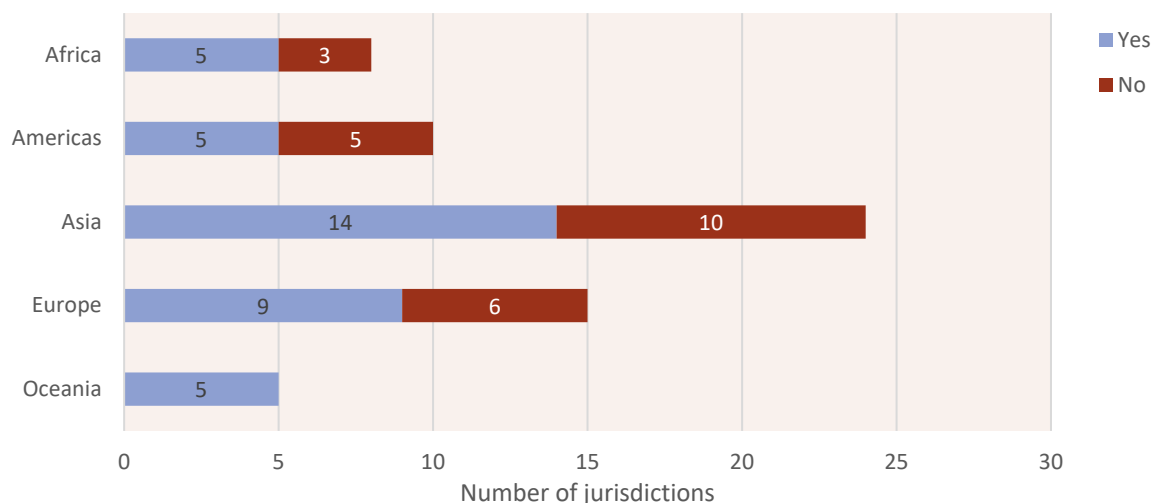
Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

In almost all cases, jurisdictions that had developed a rehabilitation strategy, model or framework also had in place some form of implementation arrangements. These ranged from implementation plans to practical guidance support, or standard operating procedures. A clear majority of jurisdictions with implementation arrangements (80 per cent) reported their jurisdiction also had in

place continuous monitoring and evaluation of rehabilitation programming. Supporting descriptions and documents showed that many of the higher income jurisdictions have dedicated research and evaluation capacities that publish extensively the results of their work. Other jurisdictions undertake research on specific topics, such as the effectiveness of prison-based education programmes, although the findings remain internal documents. Several jurisdictions reported having agreements with national research centres, universities or other suitable (sometimes third sector) organisations that allow access to prisons for the purposes of research. Still other jurisdictions draw together data from prisons and other justice sector agencies as part of a larger cycle of reporting and analysis of government activities.⁹²

In some jurisdictions, these monitoring and evaluation efforts are required to fulfil statutory obligations and in some cases the prison service has key performance indicators associated with rehabilitation-related goals. Prisons in some jurisdictions were also noted to fall under the purview of oversight mechanisms, including audit, ombudsmen’s and other external oversight mechanisms, including the National Preventive Mechanism under the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Torture (OPCAT), where applicable, all of which collate and review data bearing upon the treatment of prisoners. The evidence submitted strongly suggests opportunities for knowledge exchange and learning in this area, particularly in south-south exchanges of experience on developing evidence-based practices for rehabilitation planning, implementation, and evaluation in resource constrained environments.⁹³

FIGURE 22: Jurisdictions reporting having undertaken research on rehabilitative prison environments, by region, 2024



Note: All 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on whether they have undertaken research on rehabilitative prison environments or similar concepts.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

Two thirds of responding jurisdictions reported having undertaken dedicated research to better understand the prison environment and three approaches can be distinguished to illustrate efforts

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

to make the prison environment more conducive to rehabilitation. First, the importance of physical space and architecture to rehabilitation was noted by responding jurisdictions across the income/resource capacity spectrum. A common problem faced by penal administrations is the continuing need to utilise existing facilities that may be old and not well purposed to serve rehabilitation goals. Facing such constraints, research and evaluation have found that even well-planned efforts to create a more rehabilitative prison environment face a real challenge. However, a common strategy noted by penal administrations in this survey, regardless of whether built environments were felt to be suitable, was the progression of prisoners from their initial placement into a less restrictive prison regime.⁹⁴

A second approach responding jurisdictions identified to develop a more rehabilitative prison environment was work undertaken to improve the social climate of prisons and the relationship between prisoners and prison staff. In one of the Baltic states, dynamic security is emphasised as an important component not only of institutional safety and security but so too of effective rehabilitation and resocialisation. Dynamic security is a relationships-based approach to securing prison order, seeking to improve both order and rehabilitative goals not through hard security measures (lock and key style security) but through improved social climate within the institution. In this Baltic state, dynamic security in support of prisoners' rehabilitation is recognised as an institution-wide effort, drawing together staff ranging from custodial supervisors to administrative agents and resocialisation specialists to develop positive, consistent, professional and supportive relationships with prisoners. In a South-eastern Asia jurisdiction, a rehabilitative culture is being instilled across penal institutions through development in each prison of so-called "Civilised Humane Culture Development Centres". In these centres specialist trainers support prison officers to establish a whole of institution ethos supportive of rehabilitation and the prevention of recidivism. In one jurisdiction in Oceania, research is underway to better understand how positive prison climates can be generated and how they differ across types of penal institution. A rehabilitative index has been developed from this research, improving understanding of how prison environments influence different aspects.⁹⁵

Finally, efforts to understand how rehabilitation is best achieved and to apply the results of research to rethinking the prison itself are reflected in new prison models. In Europe, in a Nordic country, "Smart Prisons", have been developed to support prisoners' digital rights (that is, what are now regarded as elementary rights to participate in digital societies) and utilise digital access to improve rehabilitation. The approach utilises cutting edge digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, to support prison administration and more tailored support to prisoners, and provides prisoners with a range of digital learning tools aimed not only at reducing offence-related problems but also skilling the prisoner for work in the modern digital society on release.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ibid.

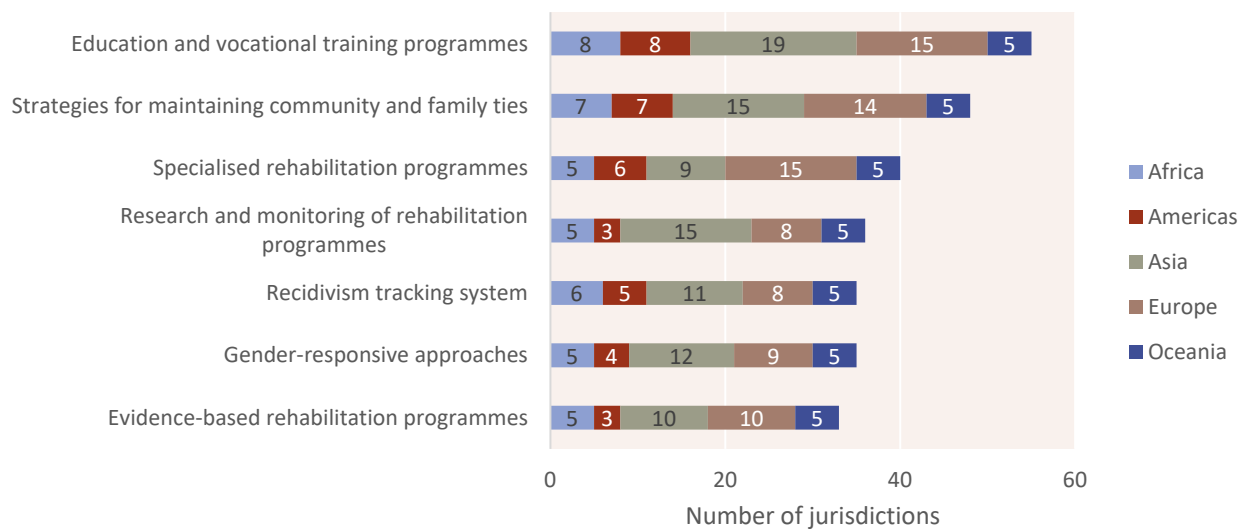
⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Education and vocational training programmes for prisoners are widely implemented, complemented by specialist rehabilitation programmes

Around three quarters (79 per cent) of responding jurisdictions reported implementing strategies for prisoners to maintain community and family ties,⁹⁷ which are important relationships underpinning successful social reintegration.⁹⁸

FIGURE 23: Practices and factors to advance rehabilitative prison environments: programmes and services, by region, 2024



Note: 61 out of 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on programmes and services in prison.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

In terms of programmatic work, three findings stand out. First, a large majority of jurisdictions (90 per cent) had implemented education and vocational training programmes. Second, more specialized rehabilitation programmes that target root causes of offending were implemented in around two thirds (68 per cent) of jurisdictions. However, it must be noted that this does not imply that rehabilitation programmes reported to be widely implemented are indeed available for all prisoners who may be interested in enrolling. Further, only about half of these jurisdictions (54 per cent) reported that programmes were developed on an evidence-based model or one that has a clear theory of change, and only slightly more (59 per cent) reported that these programmes were subject to regular monitoring and evaluation to inform improvements in practice. A similarly low number of jurisdictions (57 per cent) reported incorporating gender responsive approaches into their rehabilitation programming.⁹⁹

A third and final point emerging from the survey’s responses is that slightly more than half of reporting jurisdictions (57 per cent) had implemented a recidivism tracking system.¹⁰⁰ While this figure shows important gaps in coverage, it is still a positive sign given the chronic lack of recidivism

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Karen De Claire and Louise Dixon, ‘The Effects of Prison Visits From Family Members on Prisoners’ Well-Being, Prison Rule Breaking, and Recidivism: A Review of Research Since 1991’, *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 18, no. 2 (1 April 2017): 185–99.

⁹⁹ UNODC, ‘UNODC Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments’.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

data globally.¹⁰¹ Like programme monitoring and evaluation, it requires specialised processes and staff, and depending on the recidivism criterion will require inter-agency efforts that allow police, courts, and prison information management systems or databases to be connected and the criminal record of individuals to be traced over time.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the main evidence base for prison-based rehabilitation programming originates from research undertaken in a handful of high-income countries in North America, Europe and Oceania. Even there, questions have been raised about the relevance and impact of such “effective” practices for minority groups, including indigenous offenders.^{102 103} The available evidence base for what is an effective rehabilitation programme in prisons in other regional contexts remains slim. Furthermore, the provision of specialised rehabilitation programmes (such as anger management or cognitive behavioural therapy) is costly, since it relies on trained specialist staff who are often lacking. Investing more into gender-responsive programming adds additional costs and serves a much smaller population. Effectively monitoring and evaluating rehabilitation programmes equally is not cost-neutral and demands specialist staff.

Tailored prison officer training is widely reported in prison, though challenges in recruiting and retaining specialist staff remain

Prison administrations prioritise staff training delivered through a tailored curriculum that reflects international standards and norms, with role-appropriate training designed to support prisoner rehabilitation. Four fifths of jurisdictions (81 per cent) had implemented this kind of staff training. The apparent success of rehabilitative elements of this training is captured in the reports of around three quarters (76 per cent) of jurisdictions that they had achieved prison officer buy-in to rehabilitative objectives. These initiatives were reported to have included efforts to “modernise” the prison officer role via means such as building positive and prosocial relationships with prisoners. Further, in over half of jurisdictions (61 per cent) this was supported by a mechanism that monitors the capacity of prison officers and programme personnel to deliver, supervise or otherwise support prisoners’ rehabilitation and social reintegration prospects.¹⁰⁴

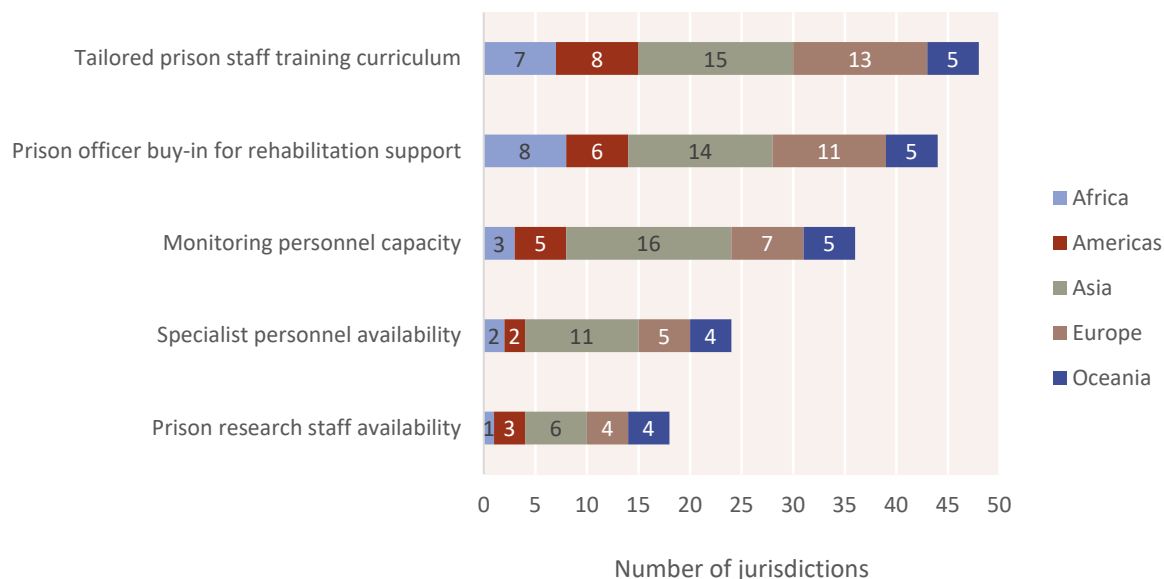
¹⁰¹ Denis Yukhnenko, Leen Farouki, and Seena Fazel, ‘Criminal Recidivism Rates Globally: A 6-Year Systematic Review Update’, *Journal of Criminal Justice* 88 (1 September 2023): 102–15.

¹⁰² Leticia Gutierrez, L. Maaike Helmus, and R. Karl Hanson, ‘What We Know and Don’t Know about Risk Assessment with Offenders of Indigenous Heritage’, *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 3, no. 2 (2016): 97–106.

¹⁰³ Stephane M. Shepherd et al., ‘Violence Risk Assessment in Australian Aboriginal Offender Populations: A Review of the Literature’, *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 20, no. 3 (2014): 281–93.

¹⁰⁴ UNODC, ‘UNODC Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments’.

FIGURE 24: Practices and factors to advance rehabilitative prison environments: staffing, by region, 2024



Note: 59 out of 62 responding jurisdictions answered questions on prison staffing.

Source: UNODC, responses to the 2024 Survey on Prison Rehabilitation and Rehabilitative Environments.

Overall, these findings support other efforts (described above) to change and improve prison climates and develop prison environments more conducive to rehabilitation. Where prison administrations faced greater difficulty was with specialist staff. Less than one in three jurisdictions (30 per cent) had some level of research staff capacity to support evidence-based learning and approaches. Specialist staff working with prisoners also appear to present a challenge, with fewer than half (41 per cent) of reporting jurisdictions having an adequate number of specialist personnel, including doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, instructors and educators.¹⁰⁵

Regional data indicated a broad trend toward more specialist staff and research capacity being available in higher income jurisdictions. Buy-in to rehabilitative goals and practices from prison officers, however, was common to all, as was the importance accorded to properly designed and tailored training curricula for prison officers.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

ANNEX II — REHABILITATION: CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation can broadly be defined as “processes and practices that aim at the successful reintegration of those who have offended.”¹⁰⁷ Since the 1990s, a dominant model of rehabilitation practice has emerged that focuses on a small set of programming targets (termed “criminogenic needs”) based on their empirically established relationship with reducing recidivism. These targets include addressing antisocial thoughts and attitudes, poor problem-solving skills and poor emotional management (e.g., anger control). Based on existing data, which flows primarily out of North America and Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Australia, rehabilitation practice prioritises interventions for offenders who have the highest risk of reoffending; focusing interventions on criminogenic needs, such as those noted above; and tailoring interventions to the different ways in which individual offenders respond, such as the way they learn most effectively. Termed the “risk-needs-responsivity model”, this has become the dominant but by no means exclusive approach to rehabilitation in high-income Anglophone countries,¹⁰⁸ and while it is widely adopted its empirical foundations have been subject to question.¹⁰⁹

The major alternative approach, known as the “good lives model”, moves focus away from offenders’ deficits (e.g., low anger control) and instead looks to support their strengths and assist them in devising a viable future focused on their wellbeing.¹¹⁰ The model’s processes and practices aim to support offenders in taking the steps necessary to bring that good life about.

SOCIAL REINTEGRATION

Social reintegration refers to an offender’s successful reabsorption back into society and is presumed to be accompanied by a cessation of offending.¹¹¹ The term in its general use refers to a set of processes commonly “labelled interchangeably as ‘social reintegration,’ ‘resettlement,’ ‘resocialisation,’ ‘restoration,’ or ‘relational rehabilitation’”.¹¹² Whichever term is chosen, social reintegration ultimately refers to an end-state (the successful reincorporation of an offender into society), while desistance is a term describing the often difficult process of getting to that pro-social place.

¹⁰⁷ Fergus McNeill and Hannah Graham, ‘Conceptualizing Rehabilitation: Four Forms, Two Models, One Process, and a Plethora of Challenges’, in *The Routledge Companion to Rehabilitative Work in Criminal Justice* (Routledge, 2019).

¹⁰⁸ James Bonta and D. A. Andrews, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, 7th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2023).

¹⁰⁹ Seena Fazel et al., ‘An Updated Evidence Synthesis on the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model: Umbrella Review and Commentary’, *Journal of Criminal Justice* 92 (1 May 2024): 1021-97.

¹¹⁰ Tony Ward and Mark Brown, ‘The Good Lives Model and Conceptual Issues in Offender Rehabilitation’, *Psychology, Crime & Law* 10, no. 3 (2004): 243–57.

¹¹¹ Federica Coppola and Adriano Martufi, ‘Introduction’, in *Social Rehabilitation and Criminal Justice*, by Federica Coppola and Adriano Martufi, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2023), 1–10.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

The concept of desistance emerged from empirical studies of how offenders actually stop offending, rather than expert views of how they should. This research has shown that rehabilitation programmes, far from providing a “cure” for the problem of criminal behaviour, instead contribute to a larger process of personal change, transformation, and “desistance” from crime. Desistance researchers identify three separate but overlapping processes an offender will undergo as they gradually cease offending. One is the cessation of offending itself, which may in practice be gradual and have some “bumps in the road”; another is the process by which an individual sheds their self-concept and identity as an offender and begins to think of themselves in pro-social terms; while a third process is the reciprocal interaction between the “new” person and those around them, such as when they are recognised by others to have changed and their social status is not burdened by their criminal past. This has been described as “act desistance”, “identity desistance”, and “relational desistance”.¹¹³

RECIDIVISM

The ultimate goal of rehabilitation and social reintegration is typically framed in terms of whether a prisoner reoffends, termed recidivism. Since studies of post-prison recidivism began in the 1920s, however, they have been plagued with problems of measurement. For a start, it is well known that most criminal behaviour never comes to official notice. Even when crimes do come to notice, few of those result in an offender being identified and brought before a court: in 2022/23 in England and Wales, for example, only 5.7 per cent of recorded crime resulted in a charge or summons.¹¹⁴ Different countries, furthermore, adopt different definitions of recidivism, making it difficult to compare rates even where an individual has been identified and proceeded against in some way. Re-arrest is used in some places but does not reflect proven reoffending and fundamentally conflicts with the presumption of innocence. Reconviction is another benchmark, as is reimprisonment. Countries also differ in the period over which they measure post-prison recidivism: one-year, two-year and five-year rates are most common. A systematic review of recidivism statistics concluded that “only 10 out of 50 countries with the largest prison populations reported recidivism statistics”, and most used slightly varying definitions.¹¹⁵ Two-year reconviction rates were the most common recidivism measure among the 33 countries globally that report post-prison reoffending, all but three of which are high-income economies. Two-year recidivism rates still varied markedly, from a low of 18 per cent in Norway to 55 per cent in Australia.¹¹⁶ The study concluded that available data are too diverse in nature to be directly comparable and reflect important differences in criminal justice system policies and practices.

¹¹³ Briegle Nugent and Marguerite Schinkel, ‘The Pains of Desistance’, *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 16, no. 5 (1 November 2016): 568–84.

¹¹⁴ The Home Office of the Government of the United Kingdom, ‘Crime Outcomes in England and Wales 2022 to 2023’, GOV.UK, 20 July 2023.

¹¹⁵ Yuhnenko, Farouki, and Fazel, ‘Criminal Recidivism Rates Globally’.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Rehabilitative prison environments

The idea of rehabilitative prison environments was addressed at the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in 2021 when it was the subject of a high-level event.¹¹⁷ Several intersecting lines of research have developed over recent years that contribute to the evidence base for this concept, though it still lacks a precise definition. Research done on positive prison climates and on developing a more rehabilitative culture within prisons (see below) are examples of approaches that can contribute to understanding how prisons can be reformed to support prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration. Nevertheless, improving prison conditions generally, and redesigning prison regimes with a view to supporting rehabilitation more specifically, are key elements as highlighted, for example, in the ASEAN region.¹¹⁸

One suggested approach to understanding and designing more rehabilitative prison environments has been to focus on the social climate of the prison. This follows research in contexts ranging from business to classroom education that shows how positive social climates improve both desired outcomes and the wellbeing of the people who inhabit those spaces.¹¹⁹ There is broad consensus in the research literature that prison social climate can be “defined as the enduring social, emotional, organisational and physical characteristics of a prison as perceived by inmates and staff”.¹²⁰ While operationalising that definition provides challenges due to the nature of social climate as a subjective experience, robust measurement tools have nevertheless been developed. They find prison social climate to have distinct features. These include perceived safety and security; perceived cohesion among prisoners; and level of perceived therapeutic support offered to prisoners by the prison.^{121 122}

Thinking about a prison environment in terms of shared attitudes and values has been the focus of work in England and Wales, United Kingdom, where the concept of rehabilitative prison culture emerged.¹²³ The objective of a rehabilitative culture is that “all the aspects of the prison intend to support rehabilitation, contribute to the prison being safe, decent, hopeful and supportive of change, to progression, and to help people desist from crime.” As such, it has clear overlaps with prison climate.¹²⁴ Unlike the latter, however, the concept of a rehabilitative culture in prisons currently remains too diffuse to measure beyond a prison system’s overall compliance with international minimum standards.¹²⁵ However, research on implementing such a culture has provided some

¹¹⁷ UNODC, ‘Promoting Rehabilitative Prison Environments’ (High-Level Event, The 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Vienna, 10 March 2021).

¹¹⁸ Ayaka Takai, ‘Promoting the Implementation of Rehabilitative Environments in the ASEAN Region’, *Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders*, UNAFEI’s Resource Material Series, no. 112 (2021).

¹¹⁹ Ware and Galouzis, ‘Impact of Prison Climate on Individuals with Sexual Convictions’.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Schallast et al., ‘EssenCES, a Short Questionnaire for Assessing the Social Climate of Forensic Psychiatric Wards’.

¹²² Alison Liebling et al., *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality, and Prison Life*, Clarendon Studies in Criminology (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹²³ Mann, ‘Rehabilitative Culture Part 2: An Update on Evidence and Practice’.

¹²⁴ Flora Fitzalan Howard and Helen Wakeling, ‘Evaluating the Impact of “Rehabilitative Adjudications” in Four English Prisons’, *Psychology, Crime & Law* 27, no. 10 (26 November 2021): 1010–31.

¹²⁵ UNODC, ‘Assessing Compliance with the Nelson Mandela Rules: A Checklist for Internal Inspection Mechanisms’ (New York, NY: United Nations, 2017).

insight into the potential, but also challenges associated with, efforts to change the culture of prisons to be more supportive of prisoner rehabilitation.^{126 127}

Efforts have also been made to understand how prisons can actively support each of the three stages of desistance described above (“act desistance”, “identity desistance”, and “relational desistance”) and thus to provide a bridge connecting positive prison environments with effective social reintegration.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Flora Fitzalan Howard, Rachel Gibson, and Helen Wakeling, ‘Understanding Culture Change - A Case Study of an English Prison’, Case study, Ministry of Justice Analytical Series (London: HM Prison and Probation Service, 2023).

¹²⁷ Matthew Cracknell, “‘Trying to Make It Matter’: The Challenges of Assimilating a Resettlement Culture into a “Local” Prison’, *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 23, no. 2 (April 2023): 165–82.

¹²⁸ Melissa De Vel-Palumbo, Mark Halsey, and Andrew Day, ‘Assisted Desistance in Correctional Centers: From Theory to Practice’, *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 50, no. 11 (November 2023): 1623–42.