

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GLOBAL PRISON TRENDS 2024





This executive summary includes extracts from the full report published in English.

This year marks the tenth edition of *Global Prison Trends*, Penal Reform International's flagship publication, published in partnership with the Thailand Institute of Justice. The report provides insights and analysis on recent developments and challenges in criminal justice, prison policy and practice.

The 2024 edition includes analysis on:

Trends in prison policy and practice

- Crime and imprisonment, overcrowding, pre-trial detention and alternatives to imprisonment
- Drug policies and extreme sentences of the death penalty and life imprisonment.

Key facts and figures on prison populations and specific groups in custodial settings

- Women, children and older persons in prison
- LGBTQ+ people
- Foreign nationals, minorities and indigenous people.

Health in prisons

- Mental health in prisons
- Neurodiverse people in prison.

Prison management issues and challenges

- Security and violence
- Corruption in prison
- Prison in fragile and conflict-affected settings
- Prison staff
- Transgender people in prison
- Environmental sustainability, climate change and prisons.
- **Prison labour and work (in focus)**

The role and use of technologies

The full report can be downloaded at:
www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2024

Full references for all figures in this publication can be found in the full report.

Cover photo: Two women weaving at the Herat Women's prison in Afghanistan.
This photo: Detainees in the courtyard of the Teixeira de Freitas prison, in Bahia, Brazil.

Introduction

This year marks the tenth edition of *Global Prison Trends*, the flagship report of Penal Reform International, co-published with the Thailand Institute of Justice – and this year also with the support of Europris. Over the past decade, this report has meticulously documented and analysed developments in prisons worldwide.

Gathering data on prisons is often challenging, reflecting a broader trend of limited transparency and inconsistencies in reporting. However, it is crucial to foster more debate, based on facts, about the conditions within prisons, where over 11 million people are detained on any given day. Many more individuals pass through the prison system annually, impacting countless families and communities. Consequently, prisons, facing many challenges, often fail to shape safer, more stable societies.

Over the past ten years, significant global changes have necessitated adaptations within prison systems. Unfortunately, issues such as prison

overcrowding have persisted, and violence, particularly in prisons where organised crime prospers, remains a significant – ever increasing – concern. Furthermore, the rise of punitive populism is exacerbating challenges within prisons, due to harsher policies and the increased reliance on prison sentences, which strain the system and hinder efforts at meaningful reform. It is clear that prisons are not immune to the influence of politics.

Positively, we have documented increased innovations within prisons aimed at supporting detainees. These innovations have often been led or supported by civil society or groups led by people with lived experience of prison, many aimed at increasing employability upon release. Technologies have been essential, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain family contact, and, more recently, ‘green’ initiatives to reduce the environmental footprint of prisons are inspiring change while enhancing rehabilitation opportunities for prisoners.

However, the overarching message of this report has remained consistent over the past ten years: while prisons can innovate and, in some cases, aid in reducing recidivism, the system still holds too many people. It emphasises the need for investment in broader criminal prevention strategies, legislative and policy changes to reduce the number of people criminalised, as well as non-custodial alternatives that do not expand the penal system, rather than merely building more prison space.

As always, we hope this report provides practitioners, decision-makers, advocates, and those affected by imprisonment with the evidence needed to reform and enhance criminal justice systems, ensuring they are consistent with human rights principles and standards.

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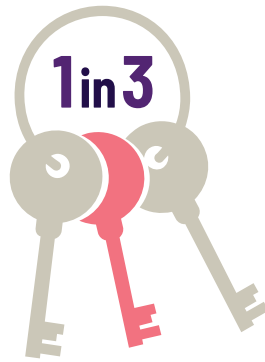
Key facts & figures

Status of prisons globally: **There are more people in prison than ever before**

GLOBAL PRISON POPULATION



IN PRISON TODAY
mostly men



IN PRE-TRIAL DETENTION
presumed innocent

KEY DRIVERS OF IMPRISONMENT



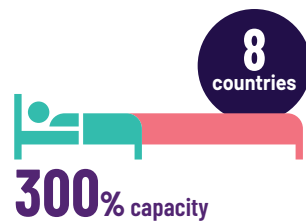
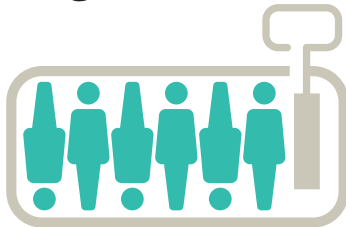
- 01 CRIMINALISATION OF POVERTY AND STATUS**
- 02 SYSTEMIC RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION**
- 03 PUNITIVE POPULISM**
 - harsh drug policies
 - overuse of pre-trial detention
 - lack of non-custodial measures
 - extreme sentencing

Overcrowding **is worsening**

ONLY

1 in 3

countries' prison system operates within capacity



CURRENT APPROACHES:

- ➔ Build new prisons
- ➔ Renovate existing facilities
- ➔ Temporary spaces
- ➔ Plea bargaining systems

PROVEN INEFFECTIVE/ TO CAUSE MORE HARM

SOLUTIONS:

- ➔ Diversion programmes
- ➔ Alternatives to imprisonment

EFFECTIVE

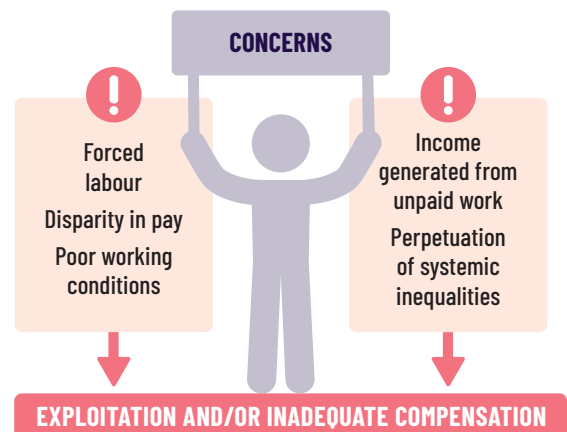
Prison labour and work

There are significant disparities globally



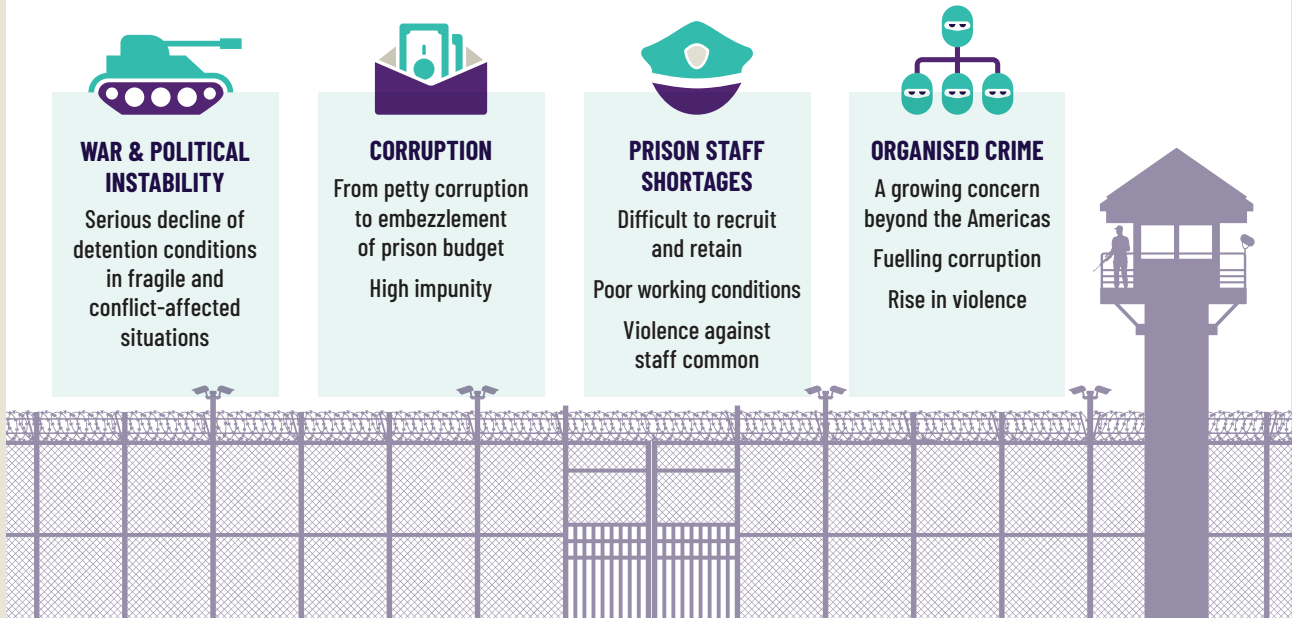
TYPES OF PRISON WORK AVAILABLE INCLUDE:

- ➔ Prison maintenance
- ➔ Cleaning and cooking
- ➔ Farming
- ➔ Factory work
- ➔ Carpentry
- ➔ Handicrafts

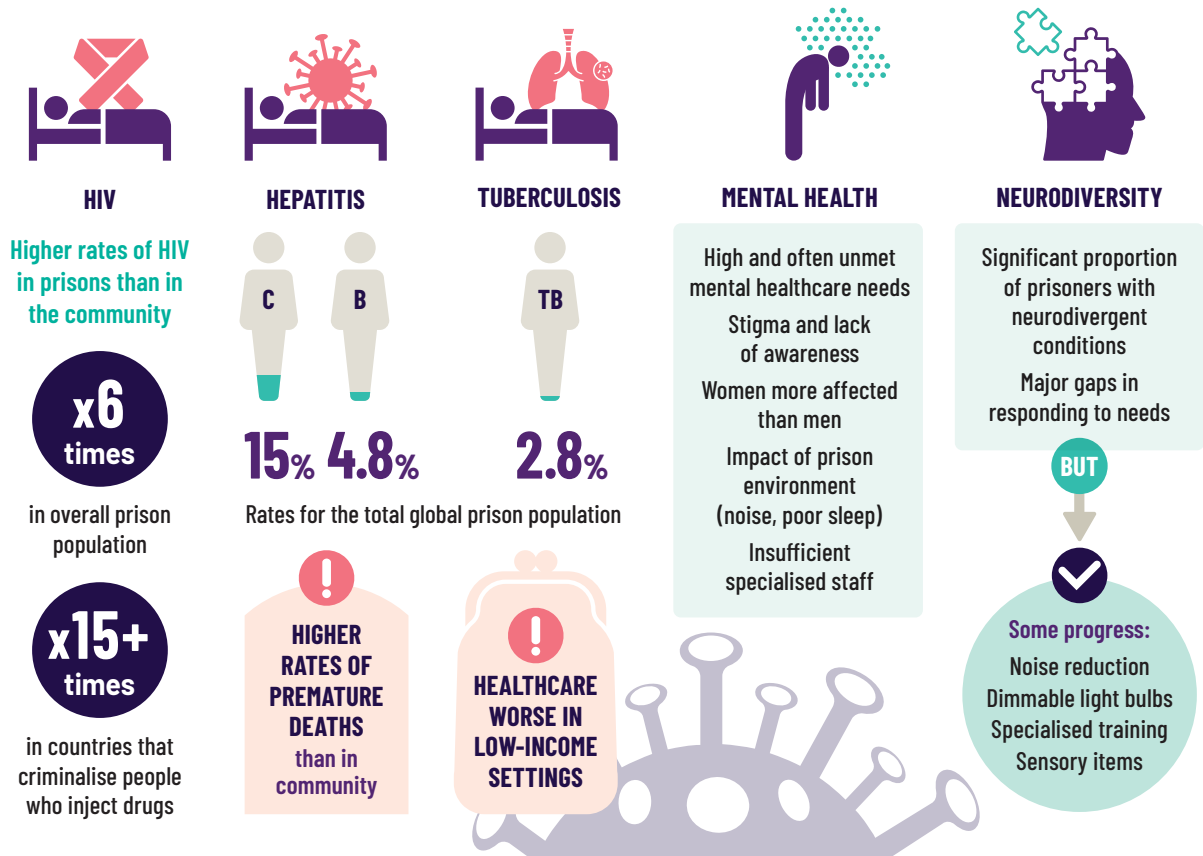


Key facts & figures

Challenges facing prison systems and the people detained in them, globally



Health in prison Prison healthcare systems are struggling



Key messages

- 01** **There are more people in prison than ever before – an estimated 11.5 million, mostly men**

Over the past decade the global prison population has reached unprecedented levels. This is a result of a rise in punitive populism, where political pressures lead to tougher policies on crime, increased pre-trial detention, limited alternatives to imprisonment and criminalisation of poverty and drug use.
- 02** **Prison overcrowding is worsening and only 30% of prison systems operate within their capacity**

Latest data shows that 155 countries report overcrowded prisons, with only 68 apparently operating within their official capacity. Chronic overcrowding is prevalent across the Americas, Asia and Oceania, where prison populations have continued to rise steeply. In Africa, high rates of pre-trial detention and poverty-related offences are the primary causes of severe congestion levels.
- 03** **Common approaches to tackling overcrowding fail to make headway**

Building new prisons, renovating existing facilities, and creating temporary spaces, as well as plea bargaining systems, are strategies employed to address overcrowding. Increasing the use of diversion and alternatives to imprisonment is widely recognised – and proven – as a solution to overcrowding if used effectively; however, progress is often hindered by the prevalence of punitive populist policies including harsh drug policies.
- 04** **Pre-trial detention remains the rule in many places, not the 'last resort'**

Between 2000 and 2022, an average of 29.5% of the global prison population, approximately 3.39 million individuals, were held in pre-trial detention, presumed innocent. The global proportion of pre-trial detainees has consistently hovered around 30% for decades, disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups.
- 05** **Racialised and Indigenous populations continue to be disproportionately imprisoned**

The body of evidence connecting colonialism, racism and inequality with imprisonment continues to grow. In the US, Black people constitute 43% of the pre-trial population and are jailed at more than three times the rate of white people. In several countries, including Canada, New Zealand and Australia, Indigenous peoples are imprisoned disproportionately.
- 06** **Driving factors in the rise of women in prison are punitive drug policies, poverty and inequality**

While women are a minority of the global prison population at 7%, totalling 741,000 as of 2022, there has been a 60% rise in female prisoner numbers since 2000, compared to a 22% rise for men. Drug offences continue to be a driver, with more than one in three imprisoned women being detained for a drug-related offence.
- 07** **As wars wage, there are high levels of insecurity and dire prison conditions**

As violent conflicts escalate, prison systems are grappling with deteriorating infrastructure and severe challenges in delivering essential services. Prisons are targeted, and prisoners have been recruited in war efforts (and in some cases exploited).

- 08** **Violence, organised crime and corruption in prisons persist the world over**

Violence continues to dominate prison life, affecting both staff and detainees. A major cause is organised crime. In the Americas, several incidents involved criminal groups seizing control of prisons and in Europe, the impact of organised crime in prison is becoming a bigger concern. Corruption in prisons is a widespread problem, but in general effective responses are lacking.
- 09** **Disparities in prison work and labour seen in access, pay and conditions**

Prison work spans from routine tasks like cleaning and cooking to more specialised roles such as farming and factory work. Pay varies widely, from nominal wages to no compensation, often on the grounds it is vocational training or cost offsetting. Persistent concerns include working conditions, exploitation, and insufficient pay.
- 10** **Digital technologies in prisons accelerate worldwide, for various purposes**

The global surge in adopting digital technologies within prisons aims to enhance security, improve operational efficiencies, and support rehabilitation efforts. However, ongoing concerns persist regarding issues of discrimination, privacy violations, and the exclusion of vulnerable groups from fully benefiting from these advancements.
- 11** **There is a growing trend to 'green' prisons**

There is a rising movement towards establishing environmentally sustainable 'green' prisons, driven by the substantial energy consumption and waste production of prisons, which contribute to environmental impacts (with some concerns about 'greenwashing'). Concurrently, initiatives promoting food security through agricultural training and sustainable food production are gaining traction to mitigate food insecurity.
- 12** **Obstacles to ensuring adequate prison health stem from resource constraints**

Inadequate healthcare provision for people in prison, particularly in low-income settings, result in higher rates of HIV, Hepatitis, TB and other communicable diseases, as well as premature deaths. An ever-increasing body of evidence confirms high and often unmet mental health needs. Healthcare staff shortages are commonly reported.
- 13** **Struggles to recruit and retain prison staff common, due to difficult working conditions**

Many systems face challenges in recruiting and retaining staff due to challenging working conditions, including rural locations and stigma associated with prison work. There have been several fatal incidents involving prison staff over the past year. Pay raises, enhanced job advertising, and innovative recruitment methods using technologies have been adopted.
- 14** **The death penalty is increasingly rejected, but number of executions by hardliners grew in 2023, and life imprisonment continues to be used with a possible upward trend**

Abolition of capital punishment continues; however, 2023 marked the highest recorded number of executions in nearly a decade (primarily driven by executions in Iran). At least half a million people are serving formal life sentences globally, while many more endure 'de facto' life terms, including '100-year' prison terms. At least 64 countries have sentences that are 'de facto' life.

GLOBAL TRENDS

Prison populations

Women

Women remain a minority in all prison systems but the number of women in prison globally is increasing much faster than men.

PEOPLE IN PRISON WORLDWIDE, BY GENDER:



INCREASE IN PRISON POPULATION FROM 2000 TO 2022



KEY DRIVERS:

- 01 Punitive drug policies
- 02 Criminalisation of poverty and status
- 03 Offences directly or indirectly related to gender-based violence
- 04 Social and economic inequality
- 05 Lack of gender-sensitive sentencing

Older persons

Known rates of older persons in prison vary from 0.5% in Montenegro to 35% in Japan. What is considered “older” in detention ranges from 50 to 70 years old, due to recognition of accelerated aging in prison. In the US, almost half of those serving life without parole are over 50, with one-third projected to be by 2030.

THE PROPORTION OF OLDER PERSONS IN PRISON IS INCREASING GLOBALLY



Prison systems lack appropriate healthcare, palliative and end-of-life care

KEY DRIVERS:

- 01 Overcriminalisation and harsh sentencing policies (including life imprisonment and longer minimum terms)
- 02 Elder-poverty, resulting in unjust criminalisation and imprisonment
- 03 Ageing populations in countries where rises happening

Children

The number of children in criminal justice-related detention is increasing.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN DETENTION WORLDWIDE:



MINIMUM AGE OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY:



19,000
CHILDREN LIVE IN PRISON WITH THEIR GUARDIAN (mainly their mother)



KEY DRIVERS:

- 01** Low minimum age of criminal responsibility
- 02** Lack of non-custodial sanctions
- 03** Discriminatory laws and racial inequity
- 04** Lack of access to education and basic services

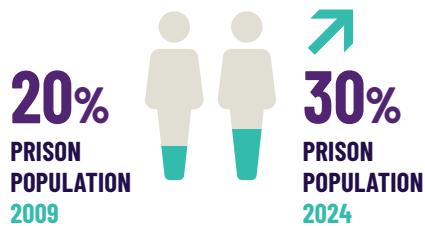
Race and ethnicity

Racial, ethnic and indigenous minorities are disproportionately arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned.

AUSTRALIA
Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders



CANADA
Indigenous peoples



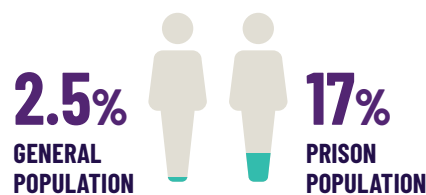
LIKELIHOOD OF IMPRISONMENT COMPARED TO WHITE PEOPLE



LATIN AMERICA
Indigenous peoples



ROMANIA
Roma people



KEY DRIVERS:

- 01** Racist law enforcement practices
- 02** Widespread discrimination in society leading to arrests and prosecution
- 03** Perpetuation of colonial practices, policies and judicial systems
- 04** Lack of recognition or accommodation of Indigenous practices

Foreign nationals

Population rates of foreign nationals in prisons are increasing.

INCREASE IN THE PROPORTION OF FOREIGN NATIONALS IN PRISONS FROM 2000 TO 2022

+56%

Serbia

+61%

Georgia

+62%

Albania

+258%

Turkey

+136%

Botswana

+33%

Argentina

KEY DRIVERS:

- 01 Immigration flows
- 02 A rise in conflict bringing a rise in the global refugee population
- 03 Ineffective 'prisoner transfer' schemes
- 04 Discrimination against foreign nationals, including by criminal justice systems
- 05 High proportions of foreign nationals in prison systems in countries with large numbers in their general population

LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ persons are often excluded from prison statistics, where available it underestimates the total population due to incomplete reporting.

Evidence shows LGBTQ+ individuals face unique challenges, especially stigma and discrimination.

KEY DRIVERS:

- 01 Criminalisation of same-sex relations between consenting adults (at least 67 countries)
- 02 Discrimination, including by criminal justice systems
- 03 Criminalisation of sex work

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Children

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Race and ethnicity

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Older persons

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Foreign nationals

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LGBTQ+

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IN FOCUS

Prison labour and work

Global status

Many people participate in some form of work during their imprisonment. The type of work varies greatly from daily operational tasks such as cooking, cleaning and general maintenance to large scale farming projects, civil construction and on-the-job vocational training programmes. Agriculture, construction, cleaning, metalwork and carpentry are commonly seen across Sub-Saharan Africa. In many prison systems, people in prison handle in-house tasks like daily maintenance or meal prepping and distribution. Making handicrafts to sell is often common in women's prisons as seen in Nepal and Thailand.

People in prison work both inside and outside of prison facilities, employed directly by the prison administration, the public sector, by NGOs or private companies. Prison classification may allow people to leave the establishment temporarily to undertake work outside. In Colombia, new legislation now includes the option of independent employment, allowing people in prison to acquire materials and carry out occupational activities on their own account.

People detained are sometimes employed in the public sector cleaning government offices and military facilities or sewing uniforms and shoes for officials. Jobs in the private sector for people in prison include textile work, call centre work, factory work and food preparation, for instance.

Global trends show that prison work is adapting to changes in local labour markets, as witnessed in numerous European jurisdictions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many work programmes were adjusted or introduced to involve production of personal protective equipment. With the tech industry in Finland, people in prison are now employed in digital industries as 'click workers', training artificial intelligence to perform specific tasks by feeding it large amounts of data. In the US, prison labour is increasingly linked to disaster mitigation and response, with some minimum-security prisons now designed specifically to provide training to people in prison to assist in responding to emergencies such as fires and floods, although it has attracted some criticism.

Access to work in prison is not guaranteed for those who want to participate; issues such as corruption, overcrowding and poor prison conditions continue to be reported as the major challenges. Infrastructure also impacts work opportunities. For example, in France, only a third of people in prison had access to work opportunities in 2022 due to increases in the number of people in prison and lack of opportunities, with 40% of jobs offered estimated to be low-skilled and less relevant to the job market. In Italy, research by the NGO Antigone found there was a lack of space for work in 32% of the prisons they visited, while in other facilities everyone had an opportunity to perform some type of work. Opportunities may also be limited for specific groups, often due to factors such as criminal offence, status as a foreign national, or the nature of their sentence (with those serving life sentences or on death row frequently excluded). In Morocco, people convicted of drug offences are excluded from opportunities to work.

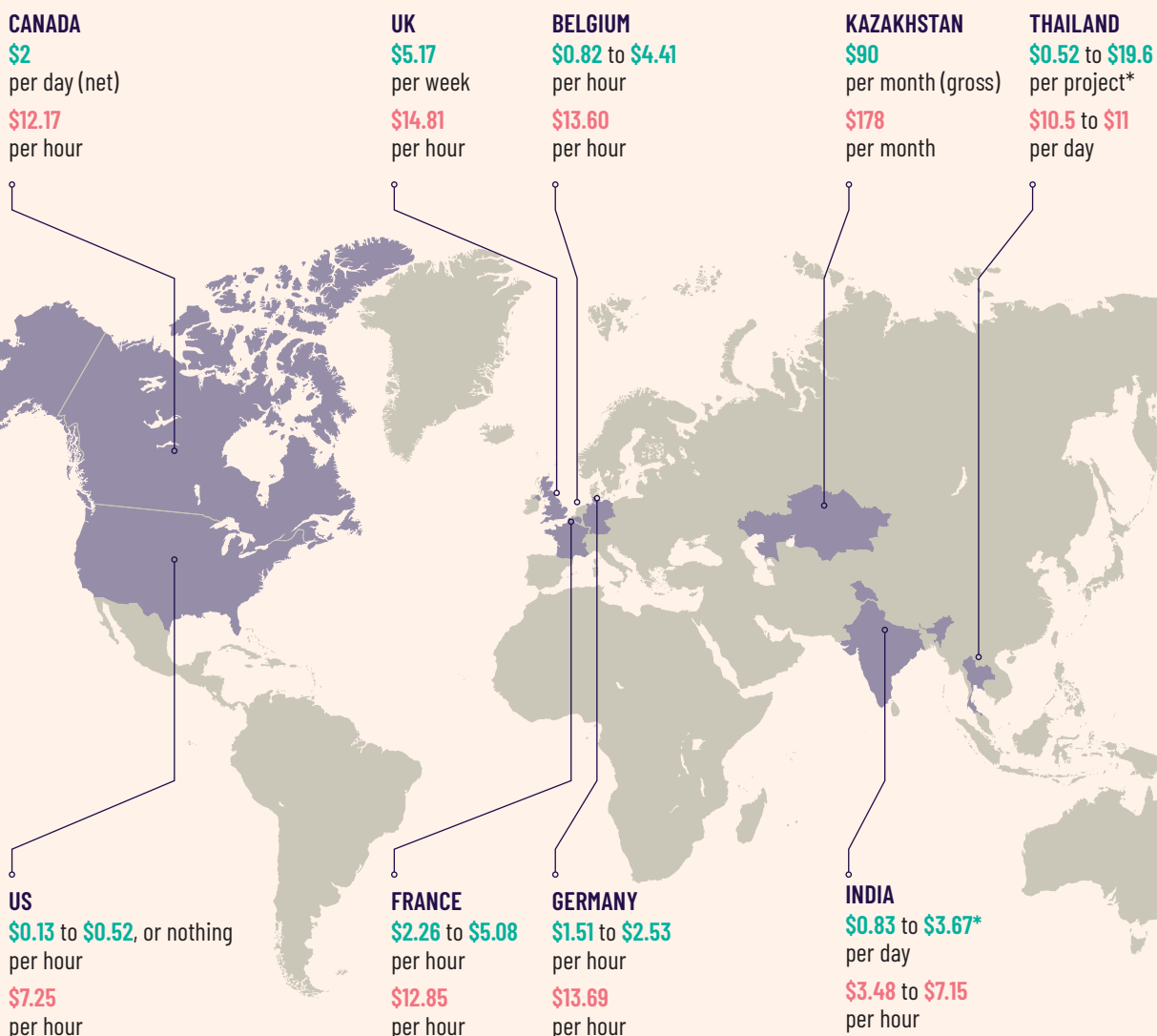
Remuneration

There is a huge disparity in approaches to paying people for prison work across the world. In most Middle Eastern countries prison labour is not compensated, and similarly in Latin America, if

it is compensated, wages are low. North American countries provide pay for prison labour, but there is much criticism of exploitation schemes in the US and Canada. In Asia, some countries provide pay

for prison work like in South Korea and Taiwan, albeit minimum, but in contrast forced labour without pay has been documented in China and Myanmar. The picture in Europe is mixed with Scandinavian countries

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



Key: **PRISON LABOUR WAGE** (in green) / **NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE** (in red)

*projects can range from two days up to several weeks.

adopting a more progressive approach to pay for prison work, whereas other parts do provide pay but levels and access to fair and equitable work programmes vary greatly.

Where prison work is not compensated, it is sometimes justified on the grounds of providing vocational training as a rehabilitation opportunity or offsetting the costs of imprisonment. In Jordan, prison work is often unpaid, as it is designed to provide vocational training for rehabilitation, helping people in prison learn trades and professions

to support their reintegration into society. In Japan, work inside prisons is not covered by the relevant minimum wage legislation because it is not based on a contract between an employee and an employer, leaving detainees without the legal protections and fair compensation typically afforded to workers. Under the country's penal code, prison labour is considered a form of punishment and rehabilitation, and not necessarily a means to earn an income, although detainees can request to use some of their earnings to buy daily amenities.

Where prison labour is paid, the rates vary greatly. A common approach is for salaries to be based on a nominal wage that is significantly lower than the national minimum wage. Pay based on or close to market rates is a less common approach but exists in Norway and Sweden. Some countries differentiate based on who the employer is. In Romania, for instance, people in prison who are employed by external companies receive the minimum wage and are not required to contribute to social security.

Typically, the money earned from prison work is insufficient for purchasing items needed or to keep in contact with people outside. Exploitation is also a concern often raised by watchdogs or NGOs. In Niger, workers on prison farms barely receive any salary and have no social protection. An investigation into prison labour in the US by the American Civil Liberties Union found that people in prison earn a pre-tax hourly average wage of between 13 and 52 cents, and in some states, they receive nothing. This is even though every year imprisoned workers in the US produce more than \$2 billion in goods and commodities and over \$9 billion in services for the maintenance of the prisons.

In Canada, the Office of the Correctional Investigator has stated that the payment system for people in prison is so flawed that it fails to encourage participation in vocational and work programmes. People in prison are paid a maximum of \$6.90 a day – a rate that has remained the same since 1981 – with the majority

earning less, and with significant discrepancies in pay for Black people in prison. Mandatory deductions for prison-related costs mean that the net pay is approximately \$2.78 per day, contrasting with the current minimum wage in Canada of \$16.65 per hour. A similar trend can be found elsewhere, including in Germany and Australia where prison wages are also paid disproportionately lower than free-market wages. In 2023, Germany's Federal Constitutional Court ruled that the current prison wages, ranging from €1.37 to €2.30 per hour, were too low and should provide people in prison with a tangible benefit over those who do not work. In the State of New York, a proposed Prison Minimum Wage Act is under debate, which would set a minimum wage of \$3 per hour for prison work.

Corruption and bribery leading to unequal access to work and rehabilitation programmes continues to be reported in many parts of the world. (See Spotlight: Corruption in prisons) In self-governing prisons

or where gangs are dominant, people in prison in positions of power can control who has access to employment and what they get paid. In Lebanon, for example, it is reported that richer people in prison delegate cleaning tasks to poorer prisoners, who work in exchange for food and protection. In El Salvador, while wage protections for people in prison are in place, they are reported to be regularly flouted in practice.

The impact of low wages in prisons combined with the high cost of imprisonment can leave people in prison with little spending power and few opportunities to support their families, save for release or pay for legal fees. Goods available for purchase by people in prison are often sold with a higher margin. In many cases people in prison report having to spend all their pay on basic commodities. This has been reported by people released from prison in Cambodia and in Japan.'

Forced labour in prison

Compulsory or forced labour is when someone is forced to do work they have not agreed to under threat of penalty. In prisons, forced labour violates international law when carried out for private individuals or companies.

Reports indicate that abuses of compulsory labour take place in public and private prisons in most regions. The Global Slavery Index found such abuses in Brazil, China, North Korea, Poland, Russia, Turkmenistan, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. In 2023, the UN Mechanism on Racial Justice in Law Enforcement described unpaid or poorly paid convict labour in the US

as a 'contemporary form of slavery', where people in prison are required to work and can face punishment such as solitary confinement or loss of family visits if they refuse to do so. The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery is currently investigating the links between imprisonment and slavery among both currently and formerly imprisoned people.

There have been cases of forced labour connected to global supply chains. In 2023, two large international retailers opened investigations into their supply chains in Cambodia following allegations that women in prison

were being forced to make clothing for export as part of a purported rehabilitation programme. An investigation revealed the women were paid between \$1.75 to \$5 per month and punished if they refused to work. Three local companies had previously been fined for using people in prison to make goods for export to a value of approximately \$190,000. An investigation into US prisons also found that agricultural goods produced by people in prison under coerced conditions end up in the supply chain of the country's biggest food companies and brands.

Improving prison work conditions

A new report published in August 2024 by the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery advocates for recognising people in prison as 'workers' under national law, ensuring they receive labour protections such as fair wages in line with the national minimum wage and adjusted for inflation, reasonable working hours, and safety measures. The report also recommends investing in education and vocational training to aid in their rehabilitation and reintegration upon release.

There have been some recent efforts to improve protections for prison workers, such as in France where a 2022 decree improving work-related rights of persons in prison includes an employment contract specifying responsibilities, working time and minimum amount of remuneration. However, the pay rate remains below the minimum wage. Several US states have reformed their constitutions in recent years to protect against forced prison labour, with others aiming to follow suit soon. Similar efforts are underway at the federal level. In the UK, the prison officers' union has called

for people in prison to be paid the national minimum wage, noting that this would create a better work ethos and allow people in prison to save for their release.

A recent international report cast doubt on the extent to which prison work benefits people in prison, prison leavers and society, noting that the work rarely meets expectations because so much is unskilled and simply sustains the prison's operations. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has also pointed out that work and education programmes in prisons often only provide for rudimentary skills rather than equipping people with marketable skills upon release.

For prison work to benefit people, adequate systems and protections need to be in place. Benefits include relieving stress and boredom, improving chances of successful reintegration, and reducing recidivism. Many people in prison report that they wish to be productive while in prison, to have the opportunity to earn money and acquire skills useful for future

employment. When opportunities to work were reduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, some described missing the daily routine of work, giving them something to look forward to and the chance to socialise.

Cooperation with community organisations and potential future employers has been shown to be useful for the success of prison work programmes and ensuring post-release opportunities. In Mexico, the National Committee for Penitentiary Labour Promotion is working with private companies to promote the importance of including people in prison in the workforce. In Malaysia, authorities are encouraging more employers to come forward to give opportunities to people released from prison, and in Singapore 6,516 employers supported the hiring of people released from prison during 2023. Finally, Brazil has recently legislated to incentivise private companies to contract prison labour and employ people released from prison.

Prison work for women

For women, work programmes often reinforce a domestic role with many centred around gendered stereotypes including beadwork, sewing and laundry. In Belgium, one report pointed to discriminatory practices towards women in prison who face limited access to work and education, with job opportunities often being rare, gendered, and low paying, such as sewing, which

provide little training or social benefits. Compensation for prison work in Belgium is minimal, ranging from €0.75 to €4 per hour, with no job security or social protection, making it difficult for them to save money for legal fees or daily expenses, thereby exacerbating the financial burden of women in prison. There are some efforts to address this issue, as seen with an innovative aquaponics

programme for women in Botswana's prisons and new programmes for women in prison to code in the US. PRI has also implemented small business training for women in prison including in Uganda and Georgia to tackle this issue.

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.

www.penalreform.org

About the Thailand Institute of Justice

Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ) is a public organization established by the Government of Thailand in 2011 and officially recognized by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as the latest member of the 'United Nations Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Programme Network Institutes' (PNIs) in 2016. One of the primary objectives of the TIJ is to promote and support the implementation of the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (or 'the Bangkok Rules'). In addition, the TIJ strives to serve as a bridge that transports global ideas to local practices with an emphasis on fundamental issues including interconnections between the rule of law and sustainable development, human rights, peace and security.

www.tijthailand.org

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