

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# GLOBAL PRISON TRENDS 2023



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

*Global Prison Trends* is 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 2023 edition includes analysis on:**

**Trends in prison policy and practice**

- Crime and imprisonment, overcrowding, pre-trial detention and alternatives to imprisonment
- Legal aid in prisons
- 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**

- Infectious diseases, staffing and barriers to adequate healthcare
- Mental health in prisons
- Palliative and end-of-life care.

**Prison management issues and challenges**

- Prison governance and the situation for prison staff
- The impact of economic crisis on prisons
- Prison subcultures, security and violence
- Independent monitoring and inspection
- The impact of imprisonment on families
- Rehabilitation and reintegration
- Deaths in prison and prisons affected by conflict and climate change
- The role and use of new technologies, including artificial intelligence.

The full report can be downloaded at:  
[www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2023](http://www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2023)

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

# Introduction

This 2023 edition of *Global Prison Trends* by Penal Reform International (PRI) and the Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ) is published at a time where a string of financial crises and ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are greatly affecting vulnerable people around the world.

People in conflict with the law – and their families – are being hit by rising costs of living and austerity measures, as are prison systems. Our report assesses the impact of economic crisis on prisons and people detained or working in them, including in terms of food security. We also highlight the impacts of imprisonment on families who are often relied on to meet even the basic needs of their loved ones in prison.

Longstanding under-resourcing of prison administrations and inadequate support for families in need are compounding this situation. Adequate resourcing and capacity of prison systems are prerequisites to protecting the human rights and basic needs of every person affected by imprisonment.

The impact of prison overcrowding is central to our analysis in this year's edition of *Global Prison Trends*. From healthcare and nutrition to rehabilitation and countering violence and criminal subcultures in prison, all initiatives would be more viable and effective, and human rights of all better protected, with fewer people in prison. With 120 countries reporting prison populations exceeding capacity, urgent attention is needed to reduce the rising number of people in prison.

Two years after the adoption of the *Kyoto Declaration on Advancing Crime Prevention, Criminal Justice and the Rule of Law: Towards the Achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, as well as the United Nations System Common Position on Incarceration, little progress has been made in moving away from using imprisonment as the 'default' response or toward improved proportionality in sentencing. Rather, sentencing reforms have for the most part resulted in more and longer prison terms, as documented in our report.

Lack of transparency, limited publicly available data and the closing space for civil society in many parts of the world bring challenges to ensuring that prisons, and wider criminal justice systems, are rooted in evidence and human rights-based approaches. So, each year we continue to publish *Global Prison Trends* with the view to supporting policymakers, practitioners, advocates and civil society through up-to-date information and analysis on key trends and developments in prisons worldwide. We hope that this edition serves as a useful resource in promoting more effective and just policies and practices in criminal justice systems globally.

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# Key facts & figures

## Prison population

There are more people in prison than ever before



IN PRISON TODAY



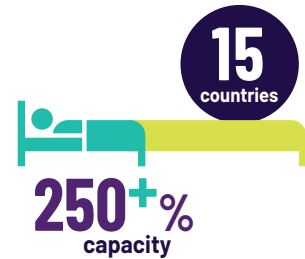
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## Overcrowding

Persisting, despite knowledge of harm



↗+2 countries since 2021



↗+4 countries since 2021

### KEY DRIVERS OF OVERCROWDING:

- 01** Few alternatives  
Investment needed to roll out, expand and successfully implement.
- 02** Increased sentences  
This includes life imprisonment and longer minimum terms.
- 03** Punitive drug policies  
An estimated 2.2m people are in prison for drug offences.
- 04** Discriminative laws  
Imprisonment often linked to socio-economic factors.



## Pre-trial detention

**50+**  
countries have more people detained pre-trial than convicted



### REFERENCES:

#### Prison population and overcrowding

[www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief-data](http://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief-data)

#### Pre-trial detention

[www.prisonstudies.org/highest-to-lowest/pre-trial-detainees?field\\_region\\_taxonomy\\_tid=All](http://www.prisonstudies.org/highest-to-lowest/pre-trial-detainees?field_region_taxonomy_tid=All)

[www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/DataMatters1\\_prison.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/DataMatters1_prison.pdf)

#### Deaths in prison

[www.penalreform.org/resource/deaths-in-prison-examining-causes-responses-and-prevention](http://www.penalreform.org/resource/deaths-in-prison-examining-causes-responses-and-prevention)

#### Healthcare

[www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2022/in-danger-global-aids-update](http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2022/in-danger-global-aids-update)

## Cost of living crisis

Acutely impacting people in prison and their families

- Inadequate prison budgets are further stretched
- Families struggle to support loved ones in prison



FOOD



TRANSPORT



ENERGY



MEDICINE



ESSENTIALS



PHONE CALLS

# Key facts & figures

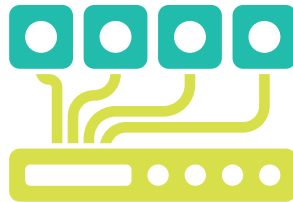
## Use of technologies in prisons

Continuing to gain pace across the globe



### VIRTUAL HEARINGS

Becoming a new norm in many countries after acceleration during the COVID-19 pandemic.  
 → Concern about the right to a fair trial and unequal outcomes.



### SECURITY & REHABILITATION

Digital solutions being developed by more prison services.  
 → including artificial intelligence and virtual reality  
 → sometimes replacing staff functions.

**BUT**

growing disparity in digital maturity of prisons globally

### KEY DRIVERS TO DIGITALLY MATURE PRISONS:

- 01 Solutions centred on need
- 02 Cross-organisation strategies and partnerships
- 03 Testing and evaluating outcomes.



## Legal aid

Huge gap in state-funded legal aid for people in prison in many parts of the world



- High needs but low access
- Concerns about quality
- Civil society often fills gap

## Deaths in prisons

High death rates but lack of transparency

Data often absent or highly unreliable

Available data usually aggregated

Only **11 of 25**

countries surveyed publish official information

→ Lack of data inhibits preventative targeted measures

## Healthcare

Prison healthcare systems are struggling



### INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Higher rates in prisons than in the community

e.g. HIV **x5 times**



### MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Worsening and exacerbated by a lack of mental healthcare staff in prisons



### OLDER PEOPLE IN PRISON

Numbers increasing, but lack of palliative and end-of-life care

## Prison subcultures

Violent and criminal subcultures are a key challenge in majority of systems

### LINKED TO:

- Violence
- Corruption
- Organised crime



### CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:

- Overcrowding
- Lack of access to basic necessities
- Inadequate staffing
- Absence of good governance

# Key messages

01

**There are more than 11.5 million people in prison worldwide, mostly men**

Around 120 countries have recorded occupancy rates exceeding prison system capacity.

02

**Around a third of the global prison population are presumed innocent but remain confined in pre-trial detention**

In over 50 countries there are more people detained pre-trial than those serving a prison sentence. Some efforts to tackle the use of pre-trial detention as a default measure have included time limits and removing mandatory pre-trial detention for specific offences.

03

**There are more than 740,000 women and girls in prison globally, increasing in nearly all regions**

Women and girls are a minority of the global prison population at 7%, but their number has increased at a faster rate than men, up 60% since 2000 compared to 22% for men. Poverty is a root cause of women's imprisonment, and sharp increases in female prison populations in parts of Latin America and Asia are due to punitive drug policies which disproportionately impact women.

04

**Almost 23 million children globally are affected by imprisonment, directly or parental**

An estimated 261,200 children were in criminal justice detention in 2020. In addition, there are estimated to be more than 22.5 million children globally with at least one imprisoned parent (over 1% of the world's child population) and a further 19,000 children living in prison with their mother.

05

**The rise in living costs and austerity measures are being felt acutely by people in prison and their families**

Rising costs of food, transport and energy bills have further stretched inadequate prison budgets. Also, families' ability to support loved ones in prison is reduced, especially felt where the prison system does not provide adequate quantities of food or essentials like medicines, there are charges for phone calls, or high transport costs for visits.

06

**The digital capacity of prisons across the globe continues to gain pace, albeit with growing disparity in digital maturity**

More prison services are developing digital solutions in the areas of security and rehabilitation, including artificial intelligence and virtual reality, sometimes replacing staff functions. Research has found that key drivers to digitally mature prisons include solutions centred on need, cross-organisation strategies and partnerships, and testing and evaluating outcomes.

07

**Virtual hearings and video calls are expanding at speed in all regions**

Initially propelled by restrictions on movement during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of virtual hearings has been retained as a new norm in many countries. This has sparked widespread concern about the right to a fair trial and unequal outcomes for vulnerable and marginalised groups.

08

**There is a huge gap in providing state-funded legal aid for people in prison in many parts of the world**

Generally, people in prison cannot access legal aid for matters beyond their criminal case, despite the high needs. Civil society frequently fills the gap by providing legal aid services and innovative solutions in all parts of the world such as paralegal, university law clinic and jailhouse lawyer programmes.

- 09** **Benefits of non-custodial measures like probation are not matched by adequate resources to roll-out, expand and ensure successful implementation**
- Where non-custodial alternatives are available, they do not always lead to decreases in national prison populations, indicating net widening and implementation issues. More justice systems are looking to electronic monitoring systems, with challenges and varying impacts reported.
- 10** **Global abolition of the death penalty continues, with some outliers**
- 144 countries have either formally abolished the death penalty or do not practice it, but a small number of states executed at least 883 individuals in 2022, an increase of 53% from 2021. The number of executions for drug offences globally saw a 'sharp deterioration' with at least 285 drug-related executions recorded in 2022, a 118% increase from 2021.
- 11** **Many sentencing reforms have brought longer sentences, including life imprisonment**
- With some exceptions, sentencing reforms result in longer sentences, including life imprisonment and longer minimum terms. There are an estimated half a million people serving formal life sentences, with an unknown number in prison under *de facto* or virtual life sentences which, although not referred to as a life sentence, result in imprisonment until their death.
- 12** **More countries are turning their back on punitive drug policies which have led to an estimated 2.2 million people in prison for drug offences**
- 63 jurisdictions in 36 countries have implemented an alternative approach through some form of decriminalisation. In international fora, there are indications of moves to a more balanced human-rights based approach to drug policies being accepted by an increasing number of nations.
- 13** **Prison healthcare systems struggle with high rates of infectious diseases, mental health conditions, and more older people in their care**
- Data from 2022 show that people in prison are five times more likely to be living with HIV than in the community, but treatment is often lacking, and proven harm reduction measures remain piecemeal and inadequate. A worsening mental health crisis in prisons is exacerbated by a lack of mental healthcare staff in prisons, and specialised care for older or ill persons such as palliative and end of life care is rarely provided.
- 14** **Lack of transparency on prison deaths inhibits targeted measures to prevent loss of life**
- New research has found a lack of data collection and transparency on the causes and demographics of prison deaths, which contributes to poor responses to deaths in prisons globally. Less than half of 25 countries surveyed by PRI in 2022 publish official information on deaths in prison, with data in many countries totally absent or highly unreliable.
- 15** **Prisons remain hotbeds for violence including torture and ill-treatment, despite some efforts to prevent it**
- Reports show that torture and ill-treatment persist in many places with wholly inadequate responses to cases that come to light, and solitary confinement is excessively used, causing harm that can be irreparable. Positively, scrutiny of prisons is expanding with 77 countries having designated a National Preventive Mechanism as an external monitoring mechanism, under OPCAT.
- 16** **Violent and criminal subcultures in prisons constitute a key challenge to the majority of prison systems globally**
- Prison gangs retain control in prison facilities to varying degrees in a significant number of countries. Criminal subcultures in prisons are linked to violence, corruption and organised crime; factors contributing to their establishment and persistence include overcrowding, lack of access to basic necessities, inadequate staffing and absence of good governance.

# Prison populations

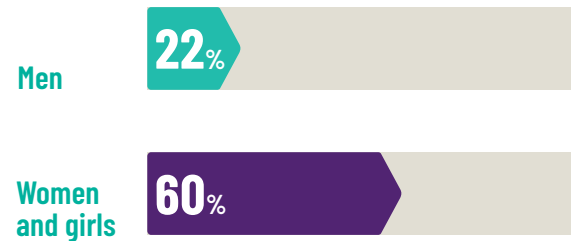
## Women and girls in prison

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

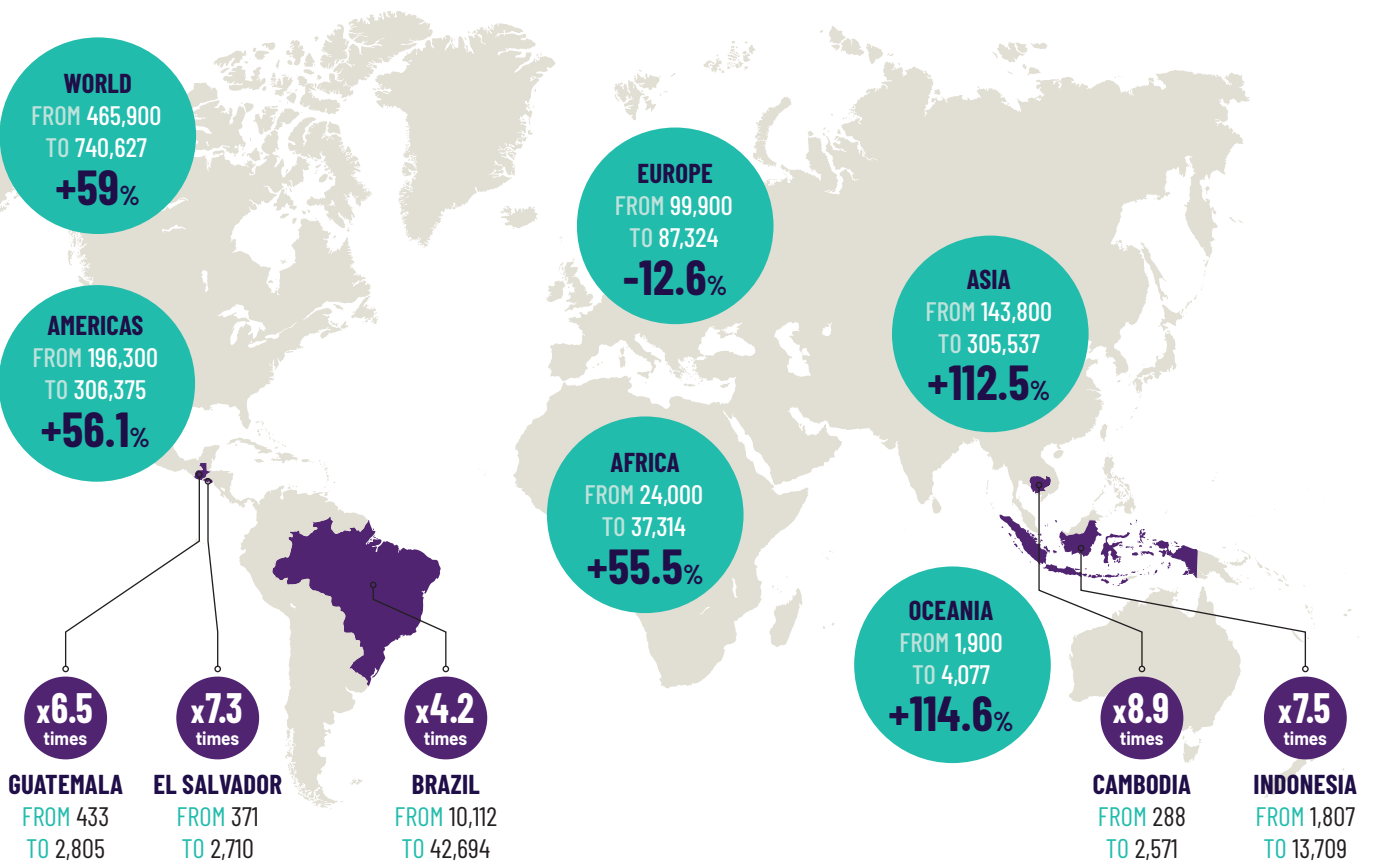


### INCREASE IN PRISON POPULATION FROM 2000 TO 2022



### WOMEN IN PRISON: CHANGES IN NUMBERS PER REGION + SHARPEST INCREASES PER COUNTRY

FROM 2000 TO 2020

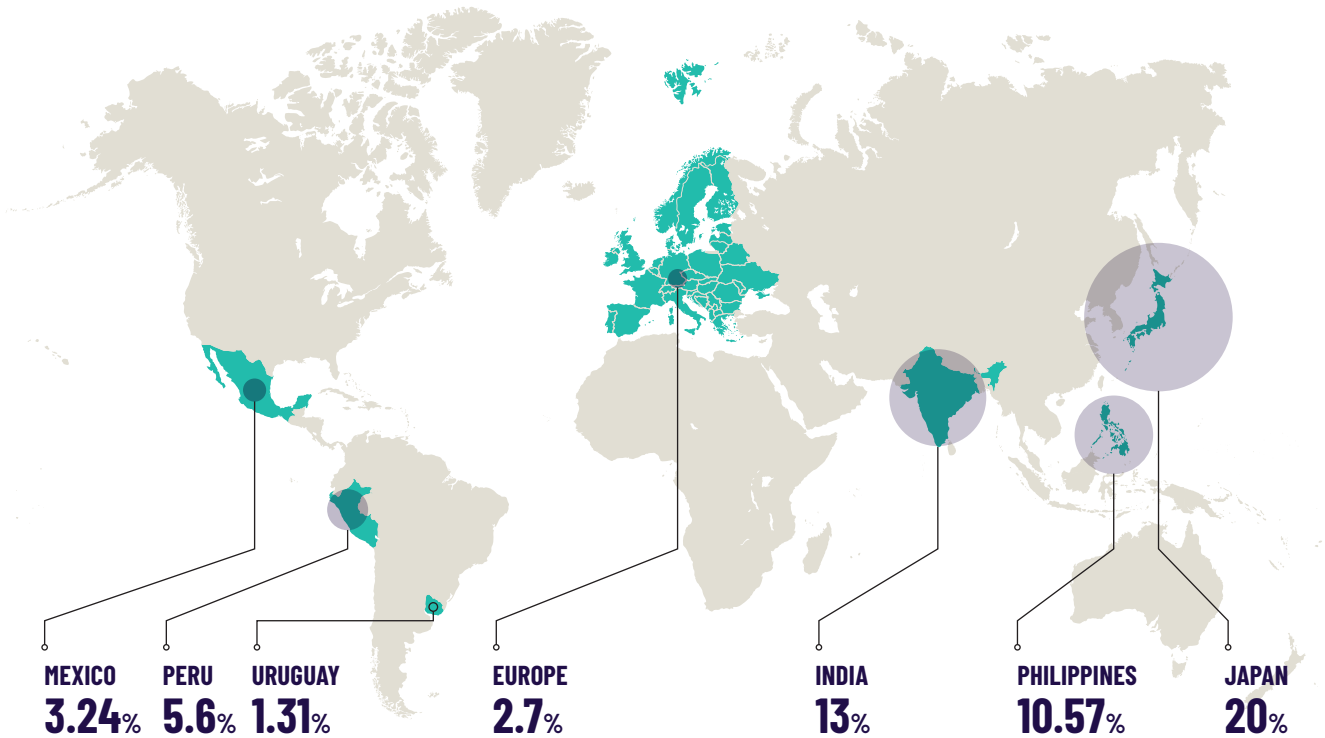




## Older persons

Known rates of older persons in prison vary from 0.5% in Montenegro, to as high as 20% in Japan. What is considered “older” in detention ranges from 50 to 70 years old, due to recognition of accelerated aging in prison.

### RATIO OF OLDER PERSONS IN PRISON, COMPARED TO OVERALL PRISON POPULATION



## Children in prison

### CHILDREN IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE DETENTION, PER REGION

Region	Rate per 100,00 general population	Number of children
North America	137	32,200
Latin America and the Caribbean	77	50,300
Eastern and Southern Africa	45	48,600
Western Europe	41	10,000
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	40	8,100
East Asia and the Pacific	37	40,700
Middle East and North Africa	28	18,000
South Asia	12	44,900
West and Central Africa	8	8,100
<b>World</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>261,200</b>

### CHILDREN IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE DETENTION, GLOBALLY



## Foreign nationals

There are nearly half a million foreign nationals in prisons worldwide: 5% of the global prison population.

### RATIO OF FOREIGN NATIONALS COMPARED TO OVERALL PRISON POPULATION

30+%



In the Middle East overall

50+%



In 14 countries worldwide  
(See below)

70+%



In 7 countries worldwide  
(See below)

Country	%
Monaco	92.3
United Arab Emirates	87.8
Liechtenstein	83.3
Luxembourg	73.7
Qatar	73.3
Macau (China)	72.1
Switzerland	70.1
Gambia	66.7
French Guiana (France)	63.0
American Samoa (USA)	62.2
Greece	59.9
Andorra	57.4
Austria	51.4
USA	52.0
Aruba (Netherlands)	50.0
Saudi Arabia	49.0
Italy	32.8
Malaysia	27.8
Russia	4.3
Global average	5.0

## LGBTQ+

Data and information on the number of LGBTQ+ people in prison remains scarce globally.

### USA prisons & jails

90,000

People self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual

### USA prisons

6,000

People self-identify as transgender (no jail information)

### UK prisons\*

230

People self-identify as transgender (\*England & Wales)

### India penitentiary

91

Transgender persons reported in official statistics

### Colombia prisons

1,707

Persons from the LGBTQ+ community (0.9%)

## Race and ethnicity

Disaggregated data on imprisonment rates and treatment while in prison of Indigenous peoples and members of national, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities remains incomplete or unavailable in most countries.

Where data is available, it shows these groups are often over-represented in prisons and experience stricter security measures and ill-treatment.

### AUSTRALIA

#### Aboriginal people



Increase in prison population numbers by ethnicity since 2004



### BRAZIL

#### Black people



Increase in the representation of black people in prison since 2011



### CANADA

#### Indigenous peoples



### BULGARIA

#### Roma people



### LIKELIHOOD OF INCARCERATION

In all countries where data is available, racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be incarcerated

#### Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander children



AUSTRALIA

#### Black men



USA

#### Latino men



USA

### REFERENCES:

#### Women and girls in prison

[www.prisonstudies.org/resources/world-female-imprisonment-list-5th-edition](http://www.prisonstudies.org/resources/world-female-imprisonment-list-5th-edition)

#### Older persons in prison

[www.coe.int/en/web/prison/space](http://www.coe.int/en/web/prison/space)

[www.economist.com/international/2020/09/07/the-pandemic-is-boosting-efforts-to-get-the-old-out-of-prison](http://www.economist.com/international/2020/09/07/the-pandemic-is-boosting-efforts-to-get-the-old-out-of-prison)

[www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2022/report-older-persons-deprived-their-liberty](http://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2022/report-older-persons-deprived-their-liberty)

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[ncrb.gov.in/en/prison-statistics-india-2021](http://ncrb.gov.in/en/prison-statistics-india-2021)

#### Children in prison

[data.unicef.org/resources/children-in-detention-report](http://data.unicef.org/resources/children-in-detention-report)

[inccip.org/statistics](http://inccip.org/statistics)

[digitallibrary.un.org/record/3813850](http://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3813850)

#### Foreign nationals

[prisonwatch.org/foreign-prisoners/](http://prisonwatch.org/foreign-prisoners/)

#### LGBTQ+

[www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/Incarcerated-LGBTQ-Youth-and-Adults.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/Incarcerated-LGBTQ-Youth-and-Adults.pdf)

[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-offender-equalities-annual-report-2021-to-2022](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hm-prison-and-probation-service-offender-equalities-annual-report-2021-to-2022)

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#### Race and ethnicity

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[forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/20-anuario-2022-as-820-mil-vidas-sob-a-tutela-do-estado.pdf](http://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/20-anuario-2022-as-820-mil-vidas-sob-a-tutela-do-estado.pdf)

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