



Prison and penal reform

Work with us

Around the world, prison systems face immense challenges which pose huge financial costs and threaten the health, safety and dignity of our societies. Prison and penal reform is vital and urgent. UNODC is a trusted and expert partner, providing impactful technical assistance in over 50 Member States worldwide.

Find out more

Visit our website for more information:
bit.ly/prison-and-penal-reform
To discuss opportunities to work together contact your UNODC country representative or email unodc-prisonreform@un.org

“ UNODC has improved my knowledge, professional outlook and how I approach my work. You are helping to bring the prison system up to the level where we can compare ourselves to other advanced jurisdictions in terms of best practices. When I see how prisoners' lives have changed, I feel proud.

Superintendent Adamu Latif Abdul
Prison officer at Nsawam Male prison,
Ghana

“ The UNODC program has changed many things in my life. I was wrong about many things. Today I am a welder, with a salary. I can provide for myself in the first place and give a helping hand to my family. I have a mother, a sister, a grandmother. I know whatever I do is a drop in the ocean – but this is how I make a difference.

Adilzhan*
Participant in UNODC-supported
rehabilitation initiative, Kazakhstan

“ The penitentiary system of Ukraine has been significantly affected over the past two years and requires immediate action for restoration and future development. We urgently need highly specialized expertise to assist us in achieving our goal of ensuring the protection of human rights. We greatly appreciate the support of UNODC.

Ms. Olena Vysotska,
Deputy Minister of Justice, Ukraine

The world's prisons face urgent challenges

The global prison population is increasing, reaching 11.5 million in 2022. Member States around the world face great challenges when it comes to prison and penal reform, many of which are shared.



Overuse of pre-trial detention

Nearly a third of the global prison population remains in pre-trial detention, with extensive costs to the state, communities, families and individuals.



Overcrowding

Prisons are overcrowded in the majority of countries worldwide. This is an acute global human rights, health and security crisis.



Inadequate conditions and poor prison health

Budget, resource and capacity constraints lead to unliveable conditions and poor prison health. Prisoners are likely to have existing health problems on entry to prison, and the poor conditions in many prisons jeopardize health further.



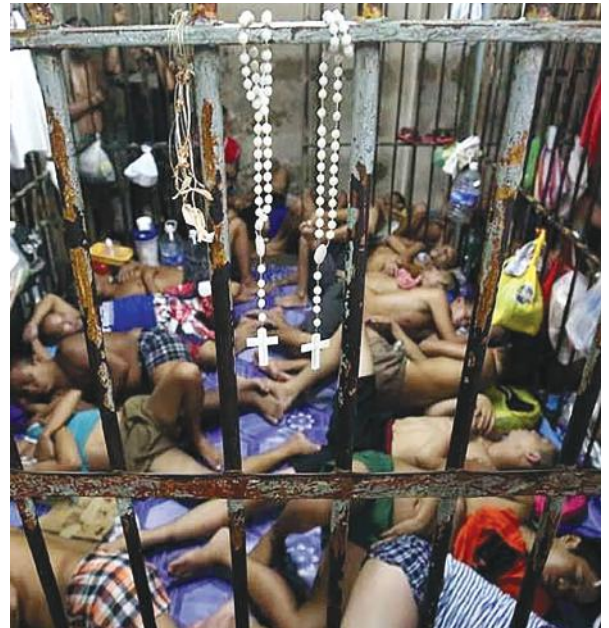
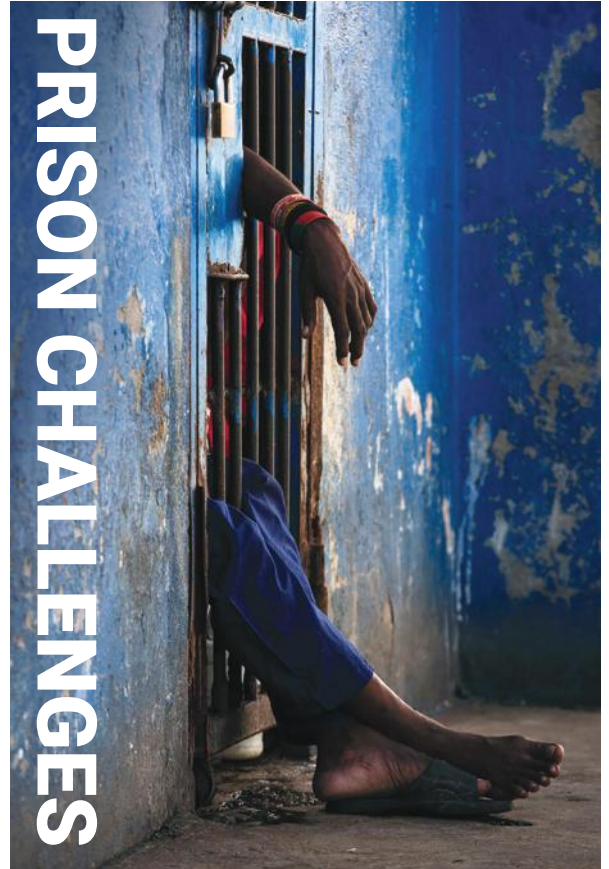
Compromised safety and security

Overcrowded, underfunded prisons with a lack of tailored training for prison officers and ineffective management cannot ensure security, making both prisons and wider society less safe.



Discrimination and inequality

Prisons reinforce existing inequalities, with an overrepresentation of marginalized communities and insufficient attention to women, youth, persons with disabilities and other prisoners with special needs.



The benefits of penal reform

Prison and penal reform offers benefits not only to the lives of incarcerated individuals but to their families, communities and to society as a whole. UNODC is working towards a world in which no one is deprived of their liberty unless strictly necessary; a world in which prisoners' human rights are respected in safe and secure prisons with decent conditions; a world in which penal systems are gender-, age- and disability-responsive; and in which ex-prisoners are supported to reintegrate as full members of our societies.



Increased dignity

Prisoners are people, and prisoner rights are human rights. Protecting these rights is fundamental to our dignity as a society.



Safer citizens

While crime flourishes in poorly managed prisons, those that respect rights and focus on rehabilitation mean prisoners are less likely to reoffend – making us all safer.



Healthier societies

Contagious diseases spread fast in prisons, and from there travel out to the wider community. By improving health inside prisons, we keep the wider community healthier too.



Stronger communities

Imprisonment can disrupt social cohesion and cause long-lasting impoverishment of families and communities. Limiting imprisonment to a measure of last resort and working to maintain family ties can reduce this damaging impact.



Boosted public finances

Imprisoning a person is expensive and comes with long term indirect costs. Penal reform can save governments vast amounts of money, while supporting individuals to become productive members of society.



Fairer justice systems

Evidence-based reform supports the provision of timely trials and proportionate sentencing, making hope and the fair and effective delivery of justice a reality for many more people.





Why work with UNODC?

UNODC works with Member States around the world to reduce the scope of imprisonment, strengthen prison management and improve prison conditions, and foster the social reintegration prospects of offenders, grounded in universally recognized UN standards and norms, such as the Nelson Mandela Rules.

- **A trusted international partner** for prison and probation services, providing advisory services and technical assistance in over 50 Member States across the globe.
- **Track record of success**, as evidenced by tangible results, increasing requests from Member States and a continuous growth of our portfolio.
- **Holistic and practice-oriented reform approach** that responds both to persistent and emerging challenges in prison and offender management.
- Access to an **international network of experts and professional associations**.
- Support to Member States in **international standard-setting** as the custodian of the UN standards and norms related to prison and offender management.
- **Dedicated expertise** in the Field Office network and a prison and penal reform team in the Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Section.
- Creating opportunities for **partnerships and knowledge-exchange** at regional and international levels.
- Access to a wide range of evidence-based **resources and tools**, including the e-learning course on the Nelson Mandela Rules.

What we offer

- Providing **expert advice** on prison and probation policies and legislation.
- Assessing the compliance of prison systems with **international minimum standards**.
- Introducing and implementing **non-custodial measures**.
- Developing **strategic development plans** for prison and probation services.
- Strengthening the application of core **prison management** practices.
- Enhancing the **well-being, health, safety and security** of prisoners.
- Investing in the prison and probation workforce through **tailored training**.
- Improving prison conditions through **procurement and infrastructure support**.
- Initiating quality and sustainable **rehabilitation programs** in prisons.
- Ensuring tailored approaches for **women and prisoners with special needs**.
- Building capacities to manage prisoners assessed to be of **high risk**.
- Facilitating collaboration with relevant **(non-)governmental stakeholders**.
- Supporting the provision of **post-release support** in the community.
- Developing strategies to respond to **existing and emerging prison challenges**.
- Conducting **research** as a basis for informed decision-making.

This is not an exhaustive list. We offer a wide variety of support, developing our programs in close consultation with national authorities.

“When I first entered prison, I didn't even know how to put a thread in the needle. The training [did more than teach me to sew] – it changed my mentality. I started interacting with other inmates. The positive change in my behaviour led to a reduction in my sentence. Don't underestimate the power of second chances. You can build hope with your own hands.

Lama*
Participant in UNODC-supported vocational training,
Lebanon

“Our new model prison, developed with support from UNODC, is a symbol of progress and reform, a place where justice is not just a lofty ideal, but a tangible reality.

Wenida Papandayan,
Marawi City Executive Judge, the Philippines