

Overcrowding

Prison overcrowding is one of the key contributing factors to poor prison conditions around the world. It is also arguably the biggest single problem facing prison systems and its consequences can at worst be life-threatening at best prevent prisons from fulfilling their proper function.

Prisons in [over 118 countries exceeded their maximum occupancy rate](#), with 11 national prison systems at more than double their capacity.

Overcrowding is a consequence of criminal justice policy not of rising crime rates, and undermines the ability of prison systems to meet basic human needs, such as healthcare, food, and accommodation. It also compromises the provision and effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes, educational and vocational training, and recreational activities. The excessive use of pre-trial detention, and the use of prison for minor, petty offences, are critical drivers of prison population rates.

Overcrowding, as well as related problems such as lack of privacy, can also cause or exacerbate mental health problems, and increase rates of violence, self-harm and suicide.

We have developed a [10-point Plan to Reduce Prison Overcrowding](#) to provide guidance to policy-makers on how to address prison overcrowding and mitigate its harmful consequences. This includes, for example:

- investing in non-custodial alternatives to detention both pre-trial and post sentencing
- diverting minor cases out of the criminal justice system altogether
- investing in long-term strategies for crime prevention and reduction
- reducing high rates of pre-trial detention by improving access to justice

- making special or alternative arrangements for vulnerable groups, such as children, mothers with dependent children and people with mental health issues.

Key facts

1. **High rates of prison overcrowding** can be found in all regions of the world.
2. In many prison systems, detainees **do not have the minimum space requirements** recommended by international standards, and in some cases spending up to 23 hours of the day, if not all day, in overcrowded cells. Overcrowding can be so severe that prisoners sleep in shifts, on top of each other, share beds or tie themselves to window bars so that they can sleep while standing.
3. In some countries **only periodic amnesties and pardons relieve overcrowding**. While these provide short-term relief, they do not offer a sustainable solution and can erode public confidence in the criminal justice system. In others, costly prison-building programmes are undertaken to meet the growing demand for prison places. In 2020, many prison systems announced unprecedented mass releases of people in prison to reduce overcrowding and the risk of the transmission of COVID-19 in places of detention.
4. **Some groups are particularly adversely affected by prison overcrowding**. For example, the needs of women and children in detention – already often given little attention – tend to be even more neglected in overcrowded and overstretched prison systems.