

PRISONERS

Crime is not only a cause of suffering to victims and their families but also a manifestation of the extreme marginalisation from mainstream society that affects some individuals. Crime also generates high costs to society in the form of imprisonment, where these costs are normally justified by reference to a combination of three societal “needs”: to inflict retribution, to deter others from behaving in a similar way, and to prevent re-offending. The basic indicator of the size of the prison population in each country is the number of persons in prison (including pre-trial detainees and remand prisoners) per 100 000 of national population. Data on the prison population can also be broken down according to their demographic characteristics and legal status.

The prison population rate is highest in the United States, where more than 700 per 100 000 population

were in prison in 2005. This level is more than three times higher than the second highest country (Poland). Iceland, Japan and Norway have the lowest rates (Table).

There are large differences across countries in the make-up of the prison population. On average, one in four prisoners is a pre-trial detainee or a remand prisoner, but these two categories account for a much higher share of the prison population in Turkey, Mexico and Luxembourg. Women and youths (aged below 18) account, on average for 8 percent and 1 percent of the prison population – but in the case of minors this may reflect the specific forms of correction applied to them in different OECD countries (forms which may fall outside the scope of the statistics used here). A much larger share of prisoners is accounted for by foreigners (close to 8 percent of all prisoners, on average), with this share exceeding 40 percent of the total in Luxembourg, Switzerland, as well as Austria, Belgium and Greece.

Prison population across OECD countries

Prison population rate, composition and occupancy level, based on latest year available

		Prison population (:000)	Prison population (per 100 000 pop.)	Composition of the prison population (percentage)				Occupancy level in %
				Pre-trial and remand detainees	Women and girls	Youths (aged less than 18)	Foreigners	
Australia	2006	26	125	22	7	0	20	106
Austria	2006	9	105	23	5	2	45	107
Belgium	2006	10	91	37	4	0	42	111
Canada	2004	34	107	30	5	6	n.a.	90
Czech Republic	2007	19	183	12	5	1	7	100
Denmark	2005	4	77	25	5	1	18	97
Finland	2006	4	75	12	6	0	8	112
France	2006	52	85	32	4	1	21	110
Germany	2006	77	94	17	5	4	28	97
Greece	2005	10	90	28	6	7	42	179
Hungary	2005	16	156	25	6	3	4	140
Iceland	2005	0	40	15	6	2	13	87
Ireland	2006	3	72	16	4	2	9	99
Italy	2006	62	104	36	5	1	33	139
Japan	2005	79	62	15	6	0	8	106
Korea	2006	47	97	34	5	1	1	99
Luxembourg	2006	1	167	42	5	1	75	110
Mexico	2006	214	197	43	5	n.a.	1	134
Netherlands	2006	21	128	30	9	10	32	96
New Zealand	2007	8	183	20	6	2	9	92
Norway	2006	3	66	16	5	0	17	92
Poland	2007	90	237	16	3	1	1	121
Portugal	2007	13	120	24	7	1	19	104
Slovak Republic	2006	8	158	27	5	2	2	81
Spain	2007	65	145	24	8	0	30	134
Sweden	2006	7	82	20	5	0	26	103
Switzerland	2005	6	83	39	5	1	71	93
Turkey	2006	65	91	48	3	3	2	77
United Kingdom	2007	79	147	16	5	3	14	112
United States	2005	2,194	737	21	9	0	6	108
OECD		3,226	276	23	8	1	8	109

Source: World Prison Brief, International Centre for Prison Studies, School of Law, King's College, University of London, United Kingdom (www.prisonstudies.org).

In several countries, the rapid rise in the prison population has extended beyond the receptive capacity of existing institutions. Occupancy levels are above 100 percent in more than half of OECD countries, and above 125 percent in Greece, Hungary, Italy, Spain and Mexico. Such overcrowding feeds violence and rebellion against institutions.

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Reference

World Prison Brief.