

Forum: United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime

Issue #2: Reforming prison systems to end the cycle of crime and recidivism

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Introduction

In recent decades, the effectiveness of punitive justice systems has been subject to intense scrutiny. Across the globe, prison populations continue to grow, and high recidivism rates persist, signaling deep structural flaws in how societies address crime. Prisons were initially envisioned as institutions for rehabilitation have increasingly

become revolving doors that fail to address the root causes of criminal behaviour or support reintegration into society, meaning that people go in and out of prison because they don't get the help they need to change. Currently, the United States holds approximately 2 million individuals behind bars, more than any other country, yet nearly 68% of released prisoners are rearrested within three years (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2024). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, approximately 48% of adults are reconvicted within one year of release (UK Ministry of Justice, 2023). These figures highlight a systematic failure to rehabilitate offenders. In contrast, countries such as Norway have embraced a radically different model. With a recidivism rate of just 25%, Norway's prison system focuses on humane treatment, education, and vocational training (First Steps Alliance, 2024). These examples underscore the stark disparities in penal philosophies across nations, and create the debate on which system is more functional and better for the nation's security system. This debate seeks to examine the pressing need for comprehensive prison reform, with an emphasis on reducing recidivism through rehabilitation, education, mental health support, and community reintegration programs.

Definition of Key Terms

Exploitation: It refers to the unjust treatment of people or resources, typically in a susceptible situation, for example, manipulating assistance, unfair or unreasonable agreements, or exploitation of displaced individuals. (Merriam-Webster, 2023)

Recidivism: The tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend (Merriam-Webster, 2023)

Punitive Justice: A system of justice focused on punishment rather than rehabilitation. (Merriam-Webster, 2023)

Rehabilitation: The process of restoring someone to health or normal life through training and therapy after imprisonment (Merriam-Webster, 2023)

Vocational Training: Training in a specific skill or trait to prepare for employment. (Merriam-Webster, 2023)

Structural Flaws: Fundamental weaknesses or problems within a system.

Penal Philosophies: The principles and beliefs that guide a country's approach to punishment and corrections. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Prison Reform: The process of improving the prison system.

Punitive: The intent to punish someone, whether to rehabilitate or directly punish

Halfway Houses: Supervised residential facilities that provide temporary housing and support for individuals transitioning from prison back into the community (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

Probation Systems: Court-ordered periods of supervision in the community as an alternative to incarceration, requiring offenders to follow specific rules and conditions (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

Diversion Courts: Legal programs that redirect certain offenders away from traditional prosecution toward rehabilitation and community-based interventions (Law Dictionary, 2023).

General Overview

Global Surge in Prison Populations and Ineffectiveness of Incarceration

Across the globe, prison populations have surged dramatically, yet the effectiveness of incarceration in preventing crime remains highly unstable and questionable. Countries such as Brazil, South Africa, and India are experiencing unprecedented levels of overcrowding in prisons, with facilities often operating at 150% capacity or more (WPB, 2024). Despite including higher budgets for corrections, repeat offenses continue to overwhelm legal systems. In various cases, individuals are reincarcerated within a couple of months of release. This points to a deeper area of the problem, a deeper dysfunction: incarceration is failing to properly correct behaviour or offer a sustainable path away from crime. This dysfunction leads to an even deeper discussion: What is the proper way to ensure the effective correction of behavior and crime?

The Role of Inhumane Prison Conditions in Fostering Reoffending

Poor prison conditions are a major factor in the failure to reduce recidivism. Inmates in many regions have limited access to natural light, inadequate food, a lack of healthcare, and many more obstacles that degrade physical and mental health. Psychological deterioration, particularly for long-term isolation or abuse by many other inmates and even staff, fosters behaviour that is often more violent or antisocial than when the individual entered the system. A report by the UN subcommittee on prevention of Torture (2024) emphasized that carceral environments lacking structure, dignity, and purpose are more likely to produce re-offenders rather than reformed citizens. The internal culture of prisons is often ruled by gang hierarchies, corruption, and brutality, which just compounds the challenge, creating environments that some might argue make rehabilitation hard or even impossible. For example, prisons like El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center, designed to hold 40,000 inmates, have extreme overcrowding issues, mass punishment, and inhumane conditions, which have drawn concerns from organizations such as Amnesty International. In 2022, more than 75,000 people were detained and weren't granted a trial or formal charges (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In contrast, Norway's Halden prison, often called the most humane prison in the world, offers inmates private rooms, access to education and job training,

and regular interaction with staff in a respectful environment. Norway has a recidivism rate of just 20%, compared to over 60% in countries like the United States (World Prison Brief 2023).

The Rise of Restorative Justice and Community-Based Solutions

As a consequence of these challenges, a growing number of countries and advocacy groups are calling for a shift towards restorative justice and community-based sentencing. Rather than relying solely on incarceration, these models focus on repairing harm through meditation, restitution, and structured rehabilitation outside of prison. In countries such as New Zealand and Rwanda, restorative justice practices have shown success in lowering recidivism by emphasizing accountability and healing over punishment (UNPD, 2023; NZMJ, 2022). In New Zealand, family group conferences and parole supervision have led to significantly reduced reoffending among youth and adults. Recidivism rates for young offenders dropped by approximately 20% compared to traditional court processes (NZ Parole Board, 2011). Rwanda's Gacaca courts processed nearly 1.9 million cases in just a decade, with roughly 25% resulting in dismissal and many sentences reduced to community service, helping both to ease prison overcrowding and support re-integration (UNPD 2022, Human Rights Watch, 2011). Meanwhile, community-based correctional programs, such as halfway houses, probation systems, and diversion courts, have helped reduce the burden on prisons while providing offenders with tailored support to re-enter society (PRI, 2023). However, some countries, such as El Salvador, present a stark contrast. Since 2022, the government has imprisoned over 75,000 people without trial under emergency anti-gang measures (HRW, 2023). While crime has significantly dropped, critics argue the approach undermines Human rights and offers no long-term solutions (Amnesty International, 2023). This highlights the global divide between punitive and rehabilitative justice models.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

El Salvador

El Salvador has had a controversial stance when it comes to treatment in prisons. Since 2022, President Naim Bukele has launched an intense crackdown on gangs, resulting in the imprisonment of 75,000 individuals who were involved with gangs (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Many of whom weren't granted a trial or due process. The new "Terrorism confinement center" in El Salvador is designed to hold up more than 40,000 people (AP News, 2023), where prisoners are subjected to mass punishment, limited communication, limited resources, and extremely poor living conditions, many of which violate human rights standards. Human rights groups like Amnesty International have expressed that this "Iron Fist" approach neglects basic rights and fails to address the root causes of criminal behaviour. El Salvador was included as a case study to demonstrate how harsh and punitive prison systems, such as the one implemented under President Bukele, can potentially exacerbate the cycle of crime and recidivism. By prioritizing mass incarceration while disregarding due process and rehabilitative frameworks, this example underscores the consequences of neglecting reintegration and failing to address the underlying social issues driving criminal behavior. It offers a stark contrast to more reform-oriented models and highlights the urgency of pursuing meaningful prison reform.

The United States of America (USA)

The United States is one of the most criticized prison systems globally due to its extremely high incarceration rates and disproportionate number of incarcerated minors. (The sentencing project, 2023). The U.S operates under a punitive justice model with more than 1.7 million people behind bars (The Sentencing Project, 2024). Despite heavy investment, the country suffers from a high recidivism rate, with nearly 66% of former inmates being rearrested 3 years after their initial release(Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). The U.S. is crucial to this topic not only because of its global influence, but also because it shows the long-term consequences of prioritizing punishment over rehabilitation. Additionally, the U.S. prison system highlights serious racial and socioeconomic disparities, as people of color, particularly Black and Latino

communities, are incarcerated at disproportionately high rates (The Sentencing Project, 2023). With extensive documentation of solitary confinement, private prison abuses, and lack of mental health resources, the U.S. remains a central case study for how large-scale incarceration can perpetuate cycles of crime rather than break them (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022).

Norway

Norway has become a model for rehabilitation-centered justice. Norway has one of the world's lowest recidivism rates, which is about 20% (The Fulcrum, 2024). Norwegian prisons emphasize dignity, humanity, and reintegration. Halden prison, for example, offers private rooms, therapy, and education so inmates can re-enter society better. Norway's penal model is based on the principle of "normality," meaning life inside should closely resemble life outside, to ensure smoother reintegration. Prisons like Bastøy Island, often called "the world's most humane prison," allow inmates to work on farms, fish, cook their food, and live in shared wooden cottages with minimal supervision. The focus is not on punishment but on preparing inmates for a constructive return to society. Guards are trained not just in security but also in communication and social work, fostering respect and accountability. This approach has gained international praise and inspired reforms in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands (World Economic Forum, 2022; BBC, 2019). Norway is important to the issue because it proves that a humane, rehabilitation-centered system can significantly lower recidivism and improve public safety.

Brazil

Brazil's prison system is facing a deep crisis. Prisons are vastly overcrowded, often running at over 170% capacity (Wilson Center, 2019), and controlled internally by gangs like Primeiro Comando da Capital or the PCC. Although Brazil has adopted some rehabilitative programs in certain regions, corruption and lack of resources have undermined their effectiveness. The government's efforts often focus on containment rather than rehabilitation. As a result, Brazilian prisons have become places where violence grows and spreads. In 2019, a violent prison riot in Altamira left 62 inmates

dead, 16 of them beheaded (BBC,2019). In 2017 alone, over 100 prisoners died in riots across the country, including 56 killed in a single day at the Anísio Jobim penitentiary. Many of these outbreaks were linked to gang turf wars exacerbated by overcrowding and a lack of oversight. Brazil's justice system has also been criticized for excessive pre-trial detention, with around 40% of the prison population held without conviction (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Brazil is important to the issue because it highlights the urgent need for structural reform in prison systems that are failing to protect human rights or reduce violence.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1948	On December 10th, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, which set the basis for all international human rights protections, including prison conditions.
1955	The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (SMRs) were adopted. These rules gave the first international framework on humane prison conditions. Later revised into the Nelson Mandela Rules.
1984	On December 10th, the UN General Assembly adopts the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, a key treaty for protecting inmates' rights.
1990	Strangeways Prison Riot in the UK: One of the longest prison riots in British history, lasting 25 days. It exposed severe overcrowding, poor conditions, and brutal treatment, resulting in injuries and highlighting urgent prison reforms (Prison Reform Trust, 1990).
2000	The Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) opens for signature and introduces preventive visits to places of

detention like prisons to avoid inhumane treatment.

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| 2006 | Carandiru Massacre in Brazil: Police stormed Carandiru Penitentiary to suppress a riot, killing 111 inmates. The event drew global condemnation and exposed systemic human rights violations in Brazilian prisons (Amnesty International, 2006). |
| 2010 | Halden Prison Opens in Norway. A revolutionary prison designed to be humane and rehabilitative, influencing global penal reform debate. |
| 2017 | Rikers Island Crisis, USA, Multiple deaths and abuse scandals prompted federal investigations into the New York City jail, focusing on violence, inadequate medical care, and poor conditions (New York Times, 2017). |
| 2022 | El Salvador Declares State of Emergency for Gang Crackdown (El Salvador) |
| 2023 | UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture Issues New Global Report. Warns that poor prison conditions globally lead to worsening recidivism. |

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners

The United Nations has played a big role in reforming prison systems around the world, especially in promoting human rights and reducing recidivism. One of the earliest and most important documents is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted on December 10, 1948. Article 5 of this document clearly states that prisons must respect the prisoners and should mirror life outside as much as possible to promote responsibility, dignity, and reintegration into society. It highlights the importance of humane treatment and rehabilitation over mere punishment. These rules provide comprehensive standards

on the treatment of prisoners. This includes emphasizing the prohibition of torture and the necessity to access healthcare, education, and legal representation. The UN has also held congresses on crime prevention and criminal justice, where global leaders have discussed strategies for improving prison conditions.

UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly Resolutions

The UN Human Rights Council and the General Assembly have adopted numerous resolutions. For instance, the UNHRC resolution on the "Human Rights of Persons Deprived of Liberty" focuses on the treatment of prisoners and calls on states to ensure humane conditions in detention facilities, emphasizing the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment. The General Assembly Resolution, "United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)" endorses the Nelson Mandela Rules, which set international standards for the treatment of prisoners, including recommendations on minimum living conditions, healthcare access, and respect for dignity. That stresses the urgent need for prison reform across the globe. These resolutions often respond to reports of overcrowding, abuse, and lack of medical care in prisons. While not legally binding, they carry significant political and moral weight, encouraging countries to adopt policies that align with international human rights standards. Many of these resolutions also promote the reduction of pretrial detention, the use of non-custodial alternatives to imprisonment, and improved conditions for vulnerable groups such as women, children, and persons with disabilities.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

Adopted in 1966 and entered into force in 1976, the ICCPR is a legally binding treaty that protects civil and political rights, including fair trial rights, freedom from torture, and humane treatment of all persons deprived of liberty. Article 10 of the ICCPR specifically mandates that "All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.". Countries that ratify the ICCPR are required to report regularly to the UN Human Rights Committee, which monitors implementation and can issue recommendations. This treaty plays a crucial role in holding governments accountable for prison abuses and ensuring that

incarceration does not violate basic human rights.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The Implementation of Rehabilitation Programs, Educational and Vocational Training in Prisons

Some previous attempts to find a proper and effective way to reduce recidivism include the implementation of rehabilitation programs and educational and vocational training in prisons. Countries like Norway have adopted a humane prison model that focuses on preparing inmates for reintegration into society, resulting in some of the lowest recidivism rates in the world. In contrast, highly punitive systems like the United States often see much higher rates of reoffending due to a lack of rehabilitation and support. Non-governmental organizations and international bodies have also launched reentry initiatives aimed at helping former inmates find housing, employment, and mental health services. While these efforts have shown positive outcomes in some regions, challenges like underfunding, overcrowding, and stigma against ex-prisoners continue to limit their long-term success globally.

Community-Based Alternatives and Diversion Programs

Community-based correctional strategies, such as probation, halfway houses, and diversion courts, have also been implemented as alternatives to traditional incarceration. These systems aim to reduce prison overcrowding and offer individuals tailored support during reentry into society. For example, drug courts in the United States have successfully diverted non-violent offenders toward treatment instead of prison, which has led to lower relapse and reoffending rates than before, yet the United States remains a country with a system that needs improvement (NIJ,2021). Similarly, halfway houses provide transitional housing and job readiness support. While these alternatives show promise, they often suffer from inconsistent oversight, inadequate funding, and social resistance, especially in areas where punitive justice remains the dominant approach.

Possible Solutions

Comprehensive Rehabilitation and Education Programs

One essential solution to breaking the cycle of crime and recidivism is the widespread implementation of comprehensive rehabilitation programs within prison systems. These programs should include mental health services, substance abuse treatment, vocational training, and educational opportunities tailored to the needs of inmates. Evidence from countries like Norway shows that investing in rehabilitation not only reduces reoffending but also prepares individuals to contribute positively to society upon release. Governments should allocate sufficient funding and resources to develop and sustain these programs, ensuring they are accessible to all incarcerated individuals regardless of their sentence length or offense. Incorporating these initiatives helps shift the focus from punishment to restoration and equips inmates with the skills needed for successful reintegration.

Community-Based Alternatives

Another viable solution is expanding community-based alternatives such as probation, diversion courts, and halfway houses, which provide support while keeping individuals connected to their communities. These alternatives reduce prison overcrowding and allow offenders to maintain family ties and employment, factors shown to decrease recidivism. To be effective, these programs require robust oversight. Coordination between justice and social services, and public education, to reduce stigma towards participants, is very important. Furthermore, policies should emphasize individualized approaches, matching interventions to each offender's risk level and needs. By prioritizing rehabilitation and social support outside prison walls, criminal justice systems can foster safer communities and reduce the long-term costs associated with incarceration.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

SDG #16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Reforming prison systems to end the cycle of crime and recidivism is not only a justice issue, it's a direct pathway to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16. Goal 16 focuses on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. This goal envisions a world where justice is accessible to everyone, institutions are accountable, and societies are safe and inclusive. Yet, when prisons are overcrowded, inhumane, and focused solely on punishment, they fail to uphold these values. In many cases, they deepen cycles of violence, reinforce social inequality, and erode public trust in the legal system. By improving prison conditions, expanding rehabilitative and educational programs, and investing in community-based alternatives, governments can reduce reoffending and help individuals return to society as contributing members. This not only enhances public safety but also supports broader development of communities, particularly those disproportionately impacted by crime and incarceration. Ensuring that justice systems are restorative and fair gives meaning to the promise of human rights and dignity for all, even those behind bars. A just society cannot exist if it abandons people at their most vulnerable moments. For this reason, prison reform is essential to fulfilling the deeper mission of SDG 16, to create institutions that not only punish wrongdoing but also help rebuild lives, restore trust, and promote lasting peace.

Appendix

In the appendix, chairs provide delegates with useful resources to access during their research.

<https://www.vera.org/ending-mass-incarceration>

Source A: The Vera Institute of Justice is a non-profit organization dedicated to ending mass incarceration in the U.S. This website outlines data-driven reforms, including alternatives to prison, policy change, and community support, aiming to create a fairer, more humane justice system.

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/>

Source B: An investigative journalism nonprofit, The Marshall Project, publishes in-depth

stories on the U.S. justice system. It provides analysis and first-hand accounts on prison conditions, rehabilitation efforts, wrongful convictions, and policy changes across the country.

<https://www.penalreform.org/issues/alternatives-to-imprisonment/>

Source C: Penal Reform International (PRI) advocates for fair and effective criminal justice worldwide. This page focuses on non-custodial measures such as probation, community service, and restorative justice, emphasizing how these alternatives can reduce recidivism, prison overcrowding, and human rights violations.

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