

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GLOBAL PRISON TRENDS 2025



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

This year marks the eleventh edition of *Global Prison Trends*, Penal Reform International's flagship publication, published in partnership with the Thailand Institute of Justice. This year's edition has also received financial support from the Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (ILANUD).

The report provides insights and analysis on recent developments and challenges in criminal justice, prison policy and practice.

The 2025 edition includes analysis on:

Trends in prison policy and practice

- Crime and imprisonment, overcrowding and alternatives to imprisonment
- 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

- Mental health in prisons.

Prison management issues and challenges

- Security and violence
- Prisons in fragile and conflict-affected settings
- **Voting in prison**
- Rehabilitation and reintegration
- Restorative justice in prisons
- Lived experience informing prison reform
- Green prisons
- Prison systems in overseas territories.

The role and use of technologies

The full report can be downloaded at:

www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2025

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

Cover photo: Newly arrived women to Thonburi Women's Correctional Institution line up to be counted, Thailand, July 2017. Cory Wright.

This photo: Community service project, Kenya. Will Boase/PRI.

Introduction

by Olivia Rope

Executive Director, Penal Reform International

and Dr Phiset Sa-ardyen

Executive Director, Thailand Institute of Justice

The 2025 edition of our joint annual publication, *Global Prison Trends*, is filled with analysis and trends in prisons and broader criminal justice systems worldwide.

This year's report features new insights on voting rights for imprisoned individuals in the wake of the landmark election year of 2024. It also highlights fresh data on pressing challenges that prison systems face – challenges that critically impact the human rights of those in prison, including issues such as suicide, violence and inadequate healthcare.

The report also explores timely topics such as efforts to enhance environmental sustainability in prisons and the increasing role of technology in corrections.

A promising trend we document is the increasing leadership and involvement of people with lived experience of imprisonment in shaping reforms. Both of our organisations celebrate this development as a crucial step toward building sustainable, people-centred justice systems.

As 2025 marks the 15th anniversary of the UN Bangkok Rules and the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing+30), this report examines progress in implementing gender-sensitive policies for women in prison. While significant advancements have been made – many of these were shared at the largest global gathering on women in corrections in Bangkok in February 2025 – our

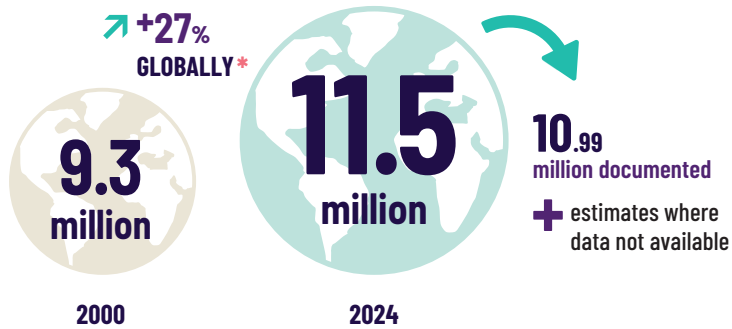
analysis underscores that much work remains, especially in reducing the number of women entering prison, a trend that continues to outpace the rate for men.

We publish this report at a time of global upheaval, where armed conflicts continue to affect communities across regions, and political shifts are reshaping societies. Amid these uncertainties, we hope *Global Prison Trends* 2025 serves as a vital resource for practitioners and stakeholders, emphasising the urgent need to prioritise prison reform through an evidence-based approach.

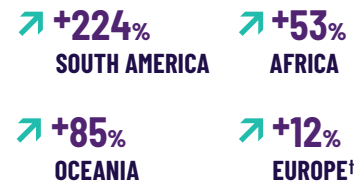
Key facts & figures

Global prison population

There are more people in prison today than ever before



INCREASE OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS



* global general population grew by 31%

† excluding Russia

Pre-trial detention



Extreme sentences

20,000+
ON DEATH ROW



Overcrowding

120 have overcrowded prisons
JURISDICTIONS



23 exceed double their official capacity
PRISON SYSTEMS

Voting in prison

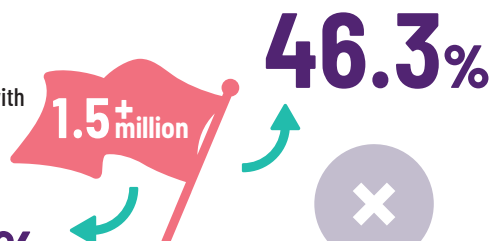


Reforms and implementation of voting rights in prison
Logistical barriers addressed to enable people to vote from prison in mega-election year of 2024

New findings show that of countries with populations over

53.7%

NEVER OR RARELY REMOVE THE RIGHT TO VOTE
from people with a conviction



deny the right in broader sets of circumstances



Key facts & figures

Alternatives to imprisonment

ALTERNATIVES USED MORE THAN PRISON

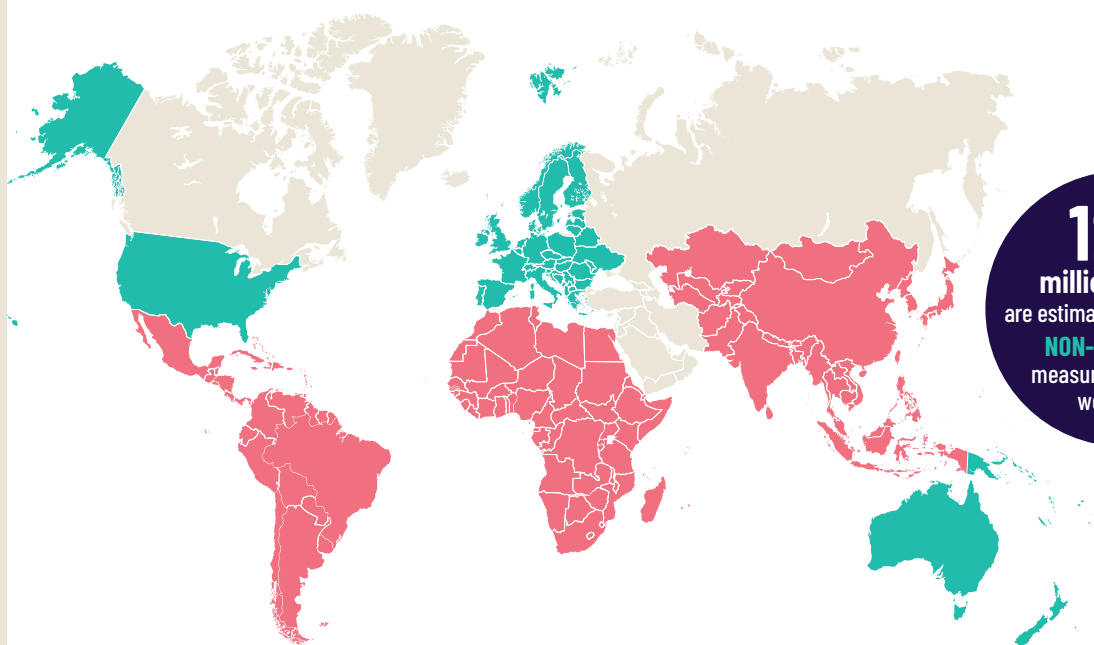
in Europe, North America and Australasia.



BUT

CONCERNS:

- net-widening
- back-door sentencing
- 'pains of probation'



12.5
million people
are estimated to be under a
NON-CUSTODIAL
measure or sanction
worldwide

PRISON USED MORE THAN ALTERNATIVES

in South America, Africa and Asia



BUT

BARRIERS TO EXPANSION:

- insufficient resources
- inadequate staffing
- lack of comprehensive legal frameworks
- absence of political will

Positive trends in justice systems



LIVED EXPERIENCE

Reform led and influenced
by people with lived
experience

A growing movement
advocating for, and
including, people with
lived experience



RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

More restorative justice
approaches in prison

REHABILITATION

Formal education and
vocational programmes
more popular



GREEN PRISONS

More innovative,
environmentally
sustainable
infrastructure and
operations in prisons



DECRIMINALISATION

At least 66 jurisdictions
across 40 countries have
decriminalised drug use
in some form, in line with
a trend towards human
rights and health-based
approaches to drug use.

Key messages

01

Global imprisonment has reached 11.5 million, with prison populations rising sharply in some regions

Over the past 25 years, prison populations have surged in South America, Oceania and Africa. Nearly one-third of the global prison population – 3.5 million people – are awaiting trial, reflecting widespread issues with inefficient justice systems. While there are promising initiatives to reduce prison numbers, these remain insufficient to effect systemic change.

02

The global female prison population has grown by 57% since 2000, far outpacing the growth of male imprisonment

Discriminatory, punitive legal frameworks, harsh drug policies, and the criminalisation of poverty and status are driving female prison populations up in some regions. Gender-based violence, inadequate healthcare, and a lack of gender-responsive rehabilitation remain critical concerns in prisons.

03

Prison overcrowding has reached alarming levels worldwide, with dire consequences for human rights of people within prison systems

Across at least 120 jurisdictions, detention facilities operate beyond capacity, with some exceeding double their intended limits. The trend towards longer sentences and the unintended consequences of non-custodial sanctions further exacerbate the crisis. People in overcrowded systems face high levels of violence and poor conditions.

04

The use of non-custodial sanctions is increasing, yet their application remains uneven, contributing to prison overcrowding in some regions

An estimated 12.5 million people worldwide are under non-custodial measures. While such alternatives to imprisonment are underused in South America, Africa and Asia, leading to overburdened prisons, in contrast, greater reliance on probation in North America, Europe, and Australasia raises concerns around ‘net widening’.

05

Prison violence is intensifying significantly, driven by overcrowding, corruption, organised crime and systemic failures in governance

Prisons remain environments where violence, exploitation, and abuse are widespread. Organised criminal networks operate with impunity, influencing internal prison dynamics and, in some cases, direct criminal activity beyond prison walls. Incidents of torture, sexual and gender-based violence, continue to escalate, exacerbated by staff shortages and inadequate security measures.

06

The number of armed conflicts worldwide has reached unprecedented levels, significantly impacting millions of people in detention

Across multiple conflict zones, people in prison face severe human rights violations, including torture, ill-treatment, sexual violence, and denial of access to justice. Reports document dire prison conditions, arbitrary detentions, and systemic abuses including in Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza, Lebanon, Russia, South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine.

07

The global movement towards the abolition of the death penalty has gained unprecedented momentum, although significant challenges remain

There is a growing international consensus against the death penalty. However, some jurisdictions have intensified their application of the death penalty, particularly for drug offences, with executions surging dramatically.

- 08 Punitive drug policies continue to drive global imprisonment, disproportionately impacting racialised and marginalised communities**

Despite evidence that criminalisation fails to reduce drug use or crime, millions of people are still arrested and imprisoned, deepening systemic inequalities and entrenching cycles of poverty, discrimination and criminalisation. Positively, an increasing number of jurisdictions are embracing decriminalisation and harm reduction approaches to drug use.
- 09 The right to vote is a cornerstone of democracy, yet millions of people in prison are still denied this basic right**

In 2024, over 4.3 billion people participated in elections across 140 countries, yet millions in detention faced significant barriers to voting. While some jurisdictions have made strides in ensuring voting rights others impose broad restrictions based on conviction status, sentence length, or bureaucratic hurdles. Even where legal rights exist, logistical challenges and concerns over electoral integrity often hinder participation.
- 10 Suicide in prisons is a growing crisis, accounting for more than one in ten deaths in some regions**

Suicide rates in prisons are highest in Europe and the Americas, with particularly high rates among women. Critical shortages in mental health support contribute to the crisis, though some jurisdictions are responding with improved assessments, staff training, and community-led care.
- 11 There is growing recognition of the importance of involving individuals with lived experience in prison reform**

The value of involving people with lived experience is gaining traction, in recognition that their insights contribute to more informed and empathetic policies. This approach is gaining support globally, particularly in the Global North, where grassroots organisations and governments alike are championing their role in shaping criminal justice strategies. Challenges include stigma and legal barriers.
- 12 As the environmental impact of prison systems continues to be recognised, efforts are underway to create more sustainable and resilient facilities**

Some jurisdictions are adopting sustainability measures to enhance resilience and reduce the ecological footprint of prisons, with initiatives like green rehabilitation projects, solar panel installation and energy-saving programmes. Cautions issued focus on sustainability efforts not overshadowing the need for broader prison reforms and risks of ‘greenwashing’.
- 13 Prisons in overseas territories face significant challenges, many of which are influenced by historical legacies**

Overseas territories of countries like the UK, France, the Netherlands, and the US face persistent prison challenges – overcrowding, poor conditions, and violence—often worsened by colonial legacies and complex socio-economic realities, despite ongoing reform efforts.
- 14 Technological advancements are transforming prison systems worldwide, though the pace and scope varies significantly**

In nations with greater resources, ‘smart prisons’ are integrating cutting-edge technologies to improve rehabilitation, education and communication. However, the rapid rise of AI and digital surveillance in prisons raises concerns about privacy, autonomy and potential biases, particularly affecting vulnerable individuals.

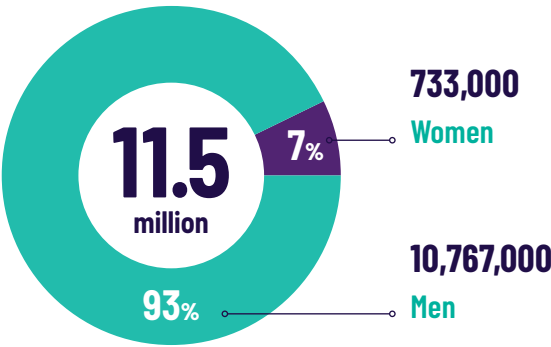
GLOBAL TRENDS

Prison populations

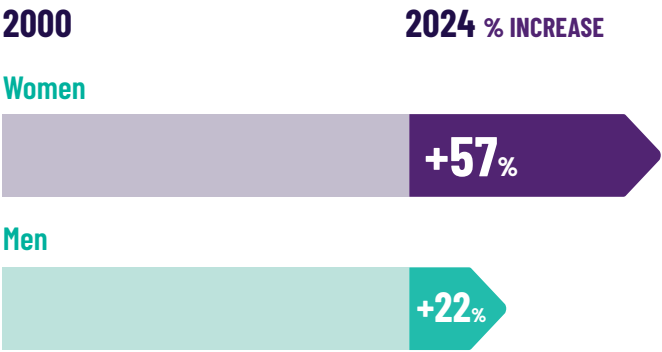
Women

Women remain a minority in all prison systems but there have been significant rises in the number of women in prison since 2000.

GENDER DISTRIBUTION GLOBALLY



INCREASE IN PRISON POPULATION GLOBALLY



SNAPSHOT DATA:

2000 **2024 % INCREASE** (proportionally to the 2000 figure)



Children

There are
240,000
CHILDREN
in detention
worldwide
(est.)

BUT ISSUES WITH DATA:

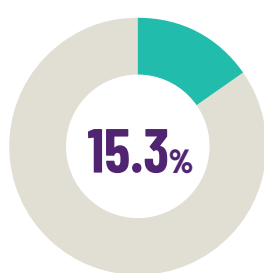
- many countries lack reliable data or do not record information on children in detention
- lack of government transparency and political will often undermine efforts to monitor and report on children in detention
- there is inconsistent quality of data and available data is often uneven, with varying reliability and incomplete age coverage.

CHALLENGES FACED:

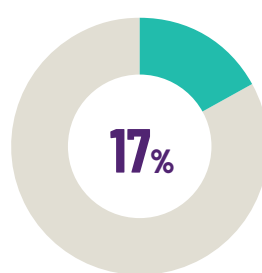
- 01 Violence against children in prison continues, often socially tolerated and not addressed
- 02 Systems lack the resources and trained staff to protect children
- 03 Lack of legal protection leaves children vulnerable to detention.

Older persons

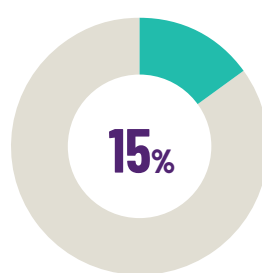
SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF OLDER PEOPLE IN PRISON



UNITED STATES
2021



ENGLAND AND WALES
2023



JAPAN
2023

CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 At greater risk of abuse and ill-treatment
- 02 Experience 'accelerated ageing' due to being in prison
- 03 Greater needs than older persons in the community, including mental health problems, drug dependence, sensory impairments, and psychosocial or intellectual disabilities.

LGBTIQ+ persons

Globally, 61 states criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts by law and 131 do not.

SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF LGBTIQ+ PEOPLE IN PRISON

30%

Lesbian & bisexual women

5%

Gay & bisexual men

UNITED STATES
2020

2.7%

Bisexual people

0.3%

Homosexual people

0.3%

Trans men

0.2%

Trans women

MEXICO
2020

CHALLENGES FACED:

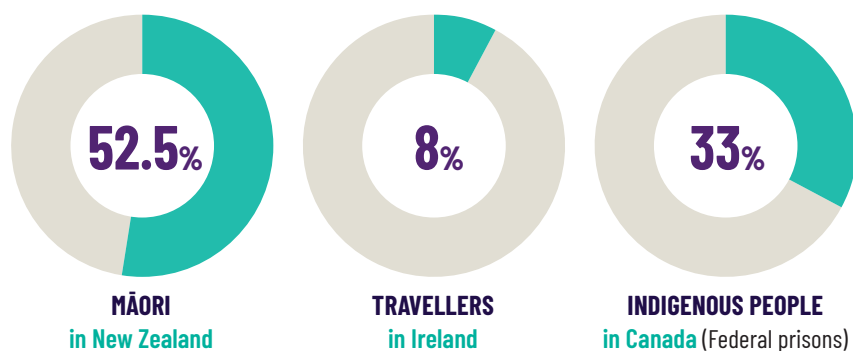
- 01 Obtaining accurate data remains challenging because of inadequate data collection by authorities and discrimination
- 02 Violence, discrimination and stigma in prison
- 03 Criminalised and imprisoned for their status.



'J' (name withheld) takes a break from his work cleaning prison vehicles near Bastøy's prison farm and stable, Norway, 2023. Cory Wright.

Race and ethnicity

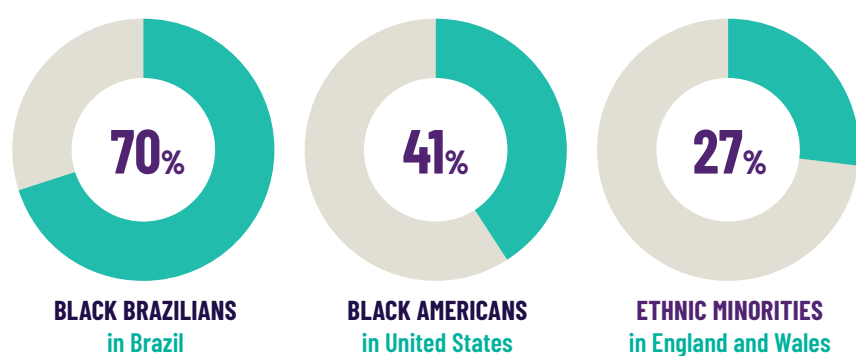
SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN PRISON



CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 Indigenous peoples are disproportionately arrested, criminalised and imprisoned
- 02 Cultural disconnection: severs to land, language and community
- 03 Discriminatory treatment in prison, including higher rates of solitary confinement and use of force.

SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF RACIALISED GROUPS IN PRISON

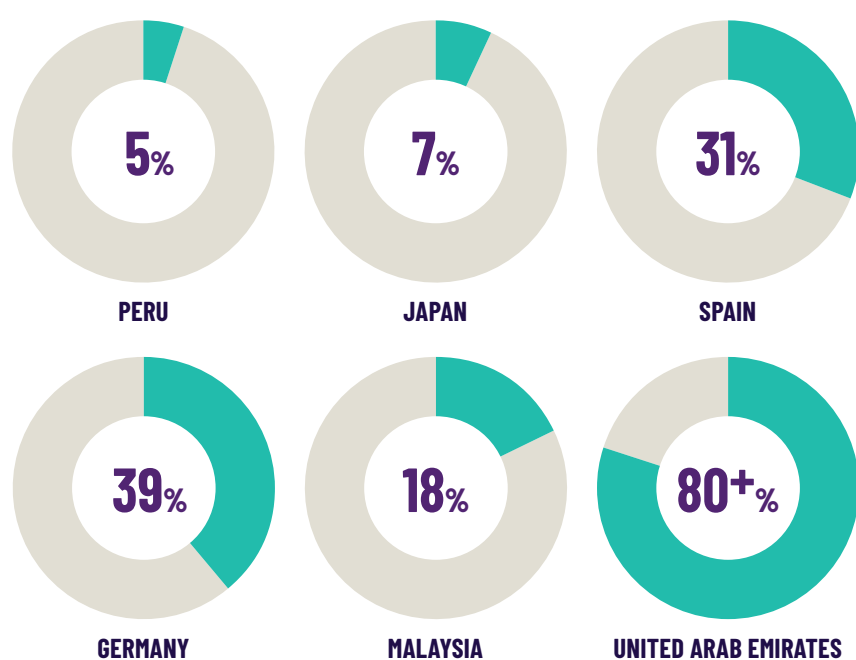


CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 Disproportionate imprisonment due to structural racism in policing and sentencing
- 02 Often face discriminatory treatment and harsher disciplinary measures
- 03 High imprisonment rates fuel intergenerational cycles of trauma and social exclusion.

Foreign nationals

SNAPSHOT DATA: PROPORTION OF FOREIGN NATIONALS IN PRISON



CHALLENGES FACED:

- 01 Lack of contact with family and support networks
- 02 Language barriers and limited legal awareness
- 03 Lack of tailored regimes or rehabilitation programmes.

IN FOCUS

Voting in prison

2024 was a year of elections; more than 4.3 billion people casted their votes in 140 elections around the world. The legal recognition of voting rights for people in detention varies significantly across countries. A 2024 report by The Sentencing Project found that 73 of 136 countries with populations of 1.5 million and above, never or rarely deny a person's right to vote because of a conviction. It also found that, in the other 63 countries laws deny the right in broader sets of circumstances.

Many jurisdictions allow people in pre-trial detention to vote but impose restrictions on people who are convicted and are serving sentences, with some differing rules based on the severity and type of offence or length of sentences. Some also impose restrictions even after individuals have completed their sentences.

Efforts to realise voting rights for people detained have seen some impact in recent years, including through litigation. In Mexico, for the first time, more than 31,000 people in pre-trial detention were declared to be eligible to vote in the 2024 general elections. This was following the ruling by the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judicial Branch in 2019, which gave individuals in pre-trial detention the right to vote. In Nepal, a 2022 Supreme Court order paved the way for people in prison to vote in parliamentary elections, although ultimately a low number were registered to vote.

In New Zealand, several legal challenges to a blanket ban on voting in prison were heard in the decade leading up to 2020 when the Electoral Act was amended to allow

people serving a sentence for three years or less, or those on remand, to vote in prison. One report suggested that turnout for the 2023 general election, among the 5,000 or more eligible people in prison, was low. In Japan, although the case was dismissed, the disenfranchisement of people in prison was challenged in front of the Tokyo High Court in 2024, sparking a discussion on the topic.

Other reforms have been achieved through advocacy of civil society and other public interest groups.

In Ireland, civil society organisations, and in Belgium, the Central Prison Supervisory Board, advocated for prison authorities to support registration and facilitate voting procedures ahead of the 2024 elections. In Nigeria, stakeholders adopted a draft framework to ensure the voting rights of people in prison developed by the Carmelites Prisoners' Interest Organization and are working with the National Assembly for legal reforms. In Peru, Congress is considering granting voting rights to people in pre-trial detention, following the initiative of a multisectoral working group led by the Ombudsperson.

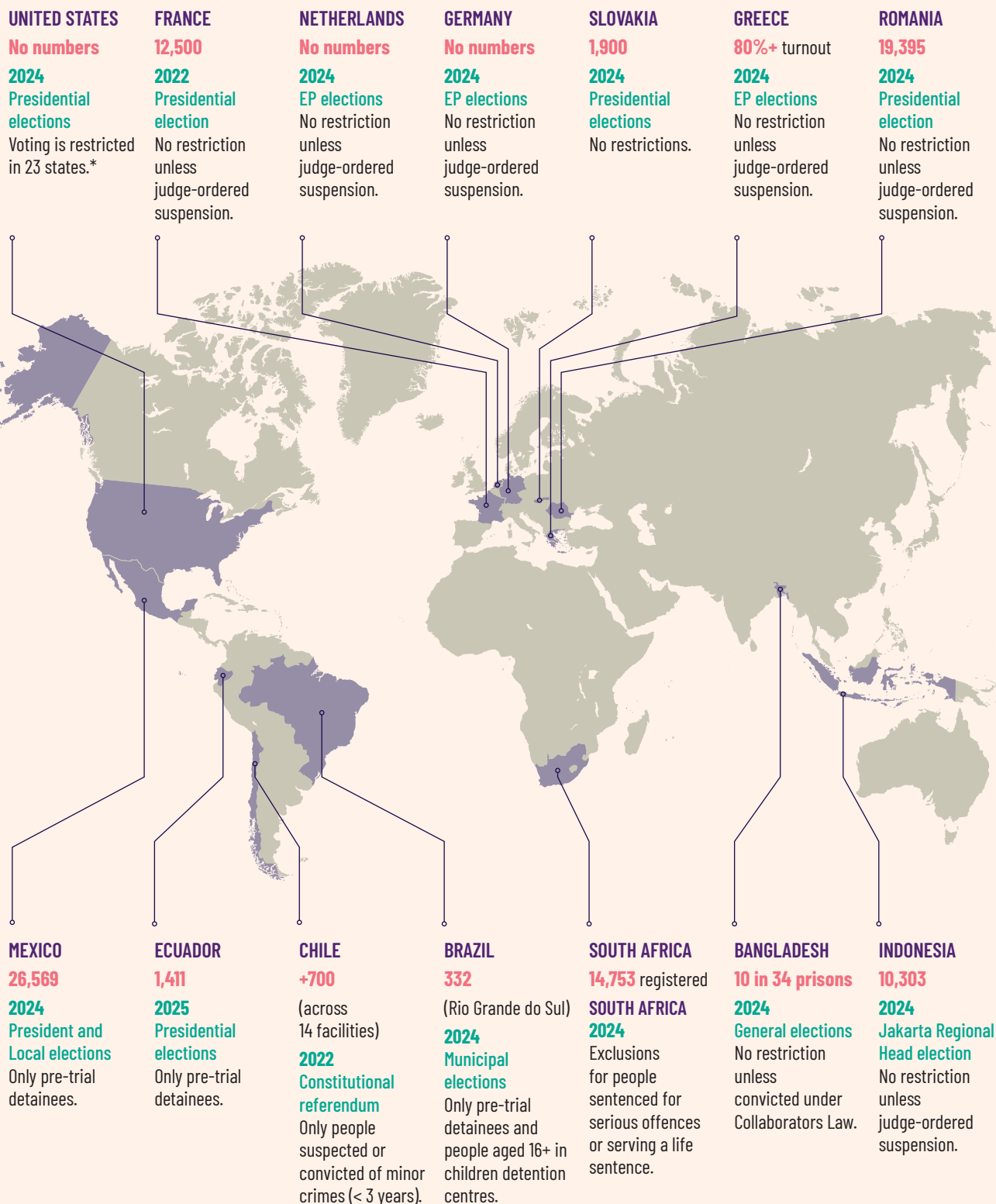
Even when voting rights are legally granted to people in prison, logistical and bureaucratic hurdles often limit actual participation. In South Africa, election officials visited prisons with the aim of registering 100,000 people in prison, but ultimately only reaching 17,000, with concerns about voter registration processes in prison. In Chile, the constitution grants voting rights to individuals in pre-trial detention for minor crimes or those serving sentences of less than three years, but it was only in 2022 that

voting was practically implemented, resulting in more than 700 people voting across 14 prisons. In the US, where most people in pre-trial detention are eligible to vote, they face significant obstacles due to the lack of in-person polling stations and voting by mail proving to be difficult with mail delays, registration issues and lack of voter guidance. One of the biggest barriers is that eligible voters, as well as officials, might not know that they have the right to vote. This sparked efforts by civil society and public bodies in states such as Colorado and Nevada to ensure voting services are available for eligible individuals in jails.

Another significant issue is the lack of coordination between election and prison authorities. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, people in only 10 out of 115 facilities were registered to vote before the 2023 general elections resulting in eligible voters to be unregistered, and inadequate logistical support meant that many eligible voters were unable to participate. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, complex bureaucratic procedures, such as requesting ballots and providing extensive documentation, resulted in extremely low voter turnout. Across 34 jails it was reported that only 10 out of 47,000 eligible voters cast their vote in Bangladesh, and in one Pakistani prison, fewer than 100 people voted out of 7,000.

Similarly, in Mozambique, Nepal and Sri Lanka, adequate voter registration was not conducted in prisons ahead of elections, effectively disenfranchising many eligible people in prison. In the Netherlands, authorities set up mobile voting locations for the

RECENT ELECTIONS: VOTING FROM PRISON



Key:

COUNTRY

NUMBER

of eligible people who voted

YEAR Election

Legal framework on the right to vote

* Estimated 4 million people were enfranchised due to felony convictions. In the US, two states and two jurisdictions allow voting, including with felony charges, and few localities allow it for pre-trial detainees and misdemeanour charges.

European Parliament elections; however, as the people in prison were informed too late, some had thrown away their voting pass.

Beyond logistical barriers, concerns about the integrity of the voting process in prisons persist. Reports from Georgia indicate that ‘powerful’ individuals within prisons coerced others to vote for specific parties in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Successful cases where prison voting was facilitated through strong institutional coordination have been seen, for example, in Indonesia, where the collaboration between prison and election authorities enabled 10,000 Jakarta citizens to vote in 2024. Romania also established inter-institutional links, ensuring that people detained received valid identification documents ahead of the 2024 presidential elections, allowing over

19,000 eligible people in prison to vote. In Ghana and Namibia, electoral commissions worked closely with prison authorities to register eligible voters ahead of the 2024 elections, ensuring accessible voting practices. For the 2024 European Parliament Elections, eligible people in prison in countries such as France, Germany and Greece were able to vote through the effective and timely organisation of either special polling stations or mailing systems.

About Penal Reform International

Penal Reform International (PRI) is a non-governmental organisation working globally to promote criminal justice systems that uphold human rights for all and do no harm. We work to make criminal justice systems non-discriminatory and protect the rights of disadvantaged people. We run practical human rights programmes and support reforms that make criminal justice fair and effective.

www.penalreform.org

About the Thailand Institute of Justice

Thailand Institute of Justice (TIJ) is a public organization established by the Government of Thailand in 2011 and officially recognized by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as the latest member of the 'United Nations Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Programme Network Institutes' (PNIs) in 2016. One of the primary objectives of the TIJ is to promote and support the implementation of the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (or 'the Bangkok Rules'). In addition, the TIJ strives to serve as a bridge that transports global ideas to local practices with an emphasis on fundamental issues including interconnections between the rule of law and sustainable development, human rights, peace and security.

www.tijthailand.org

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