

PRISON DATA COLLECTION: A GUIDANCE NOTE



ROB ALLEN and HELEN FAIR

JULY 2024

Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research

Birkbeck, University of London

Malet St, London WC1E 7HX

Email h.fair@bbk.ac.uk

ICPR website <http://www.icpr.org.uk/>

World Prison Brief <http://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief>

X @icprtweet and @ICPSLondon

© 2024 Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research and the authors

The right of Rob Allen and Helen Fair to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This publication may be freely reviewed, abstracted or reproduced in part, but not for sale or for use in conjunction with any commercial purposes. Any changes to the text of this publication must be approved in writing by the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research.

Due credit must be given to the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research and to this publication. Enquiries should be addressed to h.fair@bbk.ac.uk

This document was produced with financial assistance from the Open Society Foundations. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the Open Society Foundations.

Design: www.intertype.co.uk

Cover photo image: iStock.com/BeritK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research would like to thank Clifford Msiska, Olivia Rope, Adam Stapleton, and Roy Walmsley for their advice about this Guidance Note and the stakeholders who provided information about data collection and publication in their own countries.

On behalf of ICPR and Birkbeck, we would like to thank the Open Society Foundations for providing financial support for our work on the criminalization of poverty and status: its implications for prison systems and penal reform in Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia and the Pacific.

CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
PRISON DATA: A GUIDANCE NOTE	5
About this Guidance Note	5
1. WHY COLLECT AND PUBLISH DATA ON PRISONS?	7
2. CURRENT DATA COLLECTION AND TRANSPARENCY IN COUNTRIES GLOBALLY	9
3. HOW IS DATA COLLECTED AND HELD?	13
4. CHALLENGES TO COLLECTION AND TRANSPARENCY OF DATA	14
5. RECOMMENDATIONS	16
Data Collection	16
Data Publication	16
The Role of International Organisations	17
6. FURTHER RESOURCES	18
International standards relevant to the collection and publication of data	18
Other Resources	18
ANNEX A: CORE PRISON DATA	19
A Template for Collection and Publication	19
ANNEX B: ADDITIONAL DATA FOR COLLECTION AND PUBLICATION BY PRISON SERVICES	22

SUMMARY

The collection and publication of statistics about the use and practice of imprisonment are essential if governments are to assess the effectiveness of criminal justice policies. Accurate and updated statistics also help to ensure there is sufficient capacity in the prison estate; enable civil society to monitor overcrowding and associated human rights violations and public health risks in prisons; and help to generate evidenced proposals for reform.

While prison authorities in almost all countries maintain administrative records about the individuals in their custody, the data is not always used as comprehensively as it might be to produce and use aggregated anonymised statistics.

Low income countries in particular face challenges in collecting systematic data due to lack of electronic systems and shortages of trained staff. This Guidance Note recommends that prison systems which do not have one should develop an electronic database for records, which will not only improve individual case management but also enable statistical data to be compiled according to a clear methodology. At least one staff member of sufficient seniority at the headquarters of the prison administration or in the relevant government ministry should be responsible for data collection, ideally as part of a unit responsible for statistics and research.

When statistics are produced, there is a large variation between countries in the extent to which they are published. Of the 226 countries for which information is held on ICPR's [World Prison Brief](#) website, in only 78 do prison services routinely and proactively make data on the prison population available online. Others make headline numbers sporadically available to the media, while a small number do not publish any data.

This Guidance Note makes the case for regular publication of the most important facts and figures about prisons. It recommends the routine and regular publication of **Core Data** on

- the number and types of people imprisoned on any one day
- the numbers received into and released from prison over set periods of time
- the uncrowded capacity of the prison system and how this is calculated.

It also proposes that **Additional Data** should be made publicly available where possible so as to ensure the greatest possible transparency. This includes more detailed information about the status and characteristics of prisoners, their treatment and conditions of detention, and about numbers of prison staff. The process for making this data available should be clear and accessible to all interested stakeholders.

International agencies and donors should consider how best to equip relevant countries with the resources, technology, know-how and training to introduce an effective data collection system.

PRISON DATA: A GUIDANCE NOTE

About this Guidance Note

The purpose of this Guidance Note is to encourage and assist prison authorities to improve the way in which they collect and disseminate data about prisons and prison populations in their countries.

The Guidance Note came about as a by-product of research conducted in 2022-2023 by the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research (ICPR) at Birkbeck, University of London under its World Prison Research Programme. This research explored the availability and use of imprisonment in connection with criminalisation of conduct related to poverty (such as vagrancy and homelessness). In the course of the research ICPR encountered a serious, long-standing lack of adequate and publicly available prisons data for a large number of less developed countries, and identified a need for guidance on the subject.

The regular publication of clear and reliable data on the number of prisoners is a vital tool to protect fundamental human rights and keep communities safe.¹ Transparency in this context is in the interests not only of people in custody, but also of those who work in prisons, whether as uniformed staff, healthcare personnel or as providers of rehabilitation activities. Ensuring that politicians and other decision-makers, the media and the wider public are informed about the extent to which imprisonment is used also enables stakeholders to participate more effectively in the development of criminal justice policy, which in turn helps to reduce the harms of over-incarceration and to improve outcomes from the use of imprisonment, benefiting communities and wider society.²

Since 2000, ICPR's [World Prison Brief](#) (WPB) has compiled and published online data about prison systems using information largely derived from governmental or other official sources. Prison population data are available on the WPB website for almost every country in the world. The database aims to update information on a monthly basis, about:

- total prison populations, and prison population rates per 100,000 of the national population
- the use of imprisonment for women, juveniles and foreign nationals
- the extent of pre-trial/remand imprisonment
- prison overcrowding rates, as indicated by occupancy levels

Many countries both collect and make available this information routinely or on request, but it has proved challenging to obtain regular data about prison populations in others.³ It is hoped that this Guidance Note will encourage countries to collect and publish more and better quality data.

1 Data transparency is important in respect of all persons deprived of their freedom whatever the setting. This Guidance Note is concerned with people accused of or convicted of a criminal offence and held on remand or serving a sentence in establishments run by prison services.

2 In the 2021 Kyoto declaration, UN member states committed to evidence-based crime prevention through collecting and analysing data using systematic and coherent criteria and highlighted the need to ensure the integrity and impartiality of all institutions comprising the criminal justice system and the fair, effective, accountable, transparent, and appropriate administration, and delivery of justice.

3 UNODC Guidelines for the Production of Statistical Data by the Prison System say that “many prison systems around the world already collect large volumes of data. Subject to the national context, this typically includes, among others, information on the prison population and figures on human and material resources.” https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/Statistical_guidelines_prisons.pdf. But as Penal Reform International have pointed out, “Data on prisons, from basic information such as number of detainees, levels of capacity and staff numbers, are not always captured or transparently available. This is particularly the case in low-income countries or fragile and conflict affected settings where a lack of resources is a challenge.” <https://www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2021/data-collection-and-transparency/>

The Guidance Note is structured as follows:

[Section 1](#) covers the benefits of collecting and publishing prison data.

[Section 2](#) discusses how countries currently collect prisons data and the extent of data transparency

[Section 3](#) looks at how data is collected and held.

[Section 4](#) explores challenges to collection and transparency of data.

[Section 5](#) contains recommendations for improving data collection and transparency.

[Section 6](#) provides a list of further resources.

The Guidance Note has two Annexes. [Annex A](#) is a Template for collection and publication of Core Prison Data. [Annex B](#) proposes Additional Data for collection and publication by prison services.

1. WHY COLLECT AND PUBLISH DATA ON PRISONS?

Comprehensive and openly accessible prison populations data is important for the following main reasons:

1. Prison population statistics make it possible to follow and analyse trends in the numbers of people in prison. When prison populations, or specific sections of them, are on the increase, this may reflect more individuals being arrested and detained, greater use of pre-trial detention, longer sentences, or more restrictive release arrangements. Obtaining a clear picture about the drivers of prison population change in a particular country or region helps to assess the effectiveness of current criminal justice policies.⁴
2. Prison statistics can enable authorities and civil society to monitor and address the risk of overcrowding or congestion and identify the particular prisons where it is most prevalent. Overcrowding is a major reason for the failure of states to meet minimum standards of decency and humanity set out in the Nelson Mandela Rules and Bangkok Rules.⁵ Updated information on capacity in prison accommodation allows calculation of occupancy levels.⁶ Data can also be used to guide practical interventions to reduce prisoner numbers.⁷
3. As closed institutions, prisons require scrutiny and oversight by inspection bodies, civil society and other interested parties, for example members of the judiciary and legislature. While some of that scrutiny takes place at the level of individual cases (for example, through the investigation of deaths in custody), publishing aggregated prisons data can help to generate healthy and informed debate about whether prison is being used in an appropriate way and prisoners are being treated in accordance with domestic and international standards. Prisons data can help identify potential socioeconomic, racial and other disparities in the way the criminal justice system operates.⁸
4. Prison statistics can indicate the numbers of people who may be particularly vulnerable in prison, for example women and children, and other groups who have special needs.⁹ These include older prisoners, prisoners with disabilities, racialised prisoners, LGBTQI+ prisoners and foreign nationals.¹⁰ Detention can have harsher consequences for these categories of prisoner and their families which may be of particular concern from a human rights perspective.
5. Prison statistics can be used to monitor and combat disease in prisons, which has wider repercussions for public health. Rates of COVID-19 among staff and prisoners were not made public in many countries, highlighting long-standing shortcomings in data collection and transparency.¹¹

4 The Nelson Mandela rules say that “Prisoner file management systems shall also be used to generate reliable data about trends relating to and characteristics of the prison population, including occupancy rates, in order to create a basis for evidence-based decision making.” See also Azim and Shaharudin (2021) Data Transparency for Prison Reform, Khazanah Research Institute.

5 Allen, R (2010) Current Situation of Prison Overcrowding https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/current_situation_of_prison_overcrowding_paper.pdf

6 The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has recommended that prison authorities “publish how capacity is measured, report accurately and regularly on detention conditions and overcrowding levels to policy- and decision-makers and monitoring bodies.”

7 Audits have been designed to examine the prison population and identify those eligible for release with a view to reducing both pre-trial and sentenced prison populations. See, for example, the work of the Governance and Justice Group, which has carried out a number of prison and justice audits in Asia and Africa <https://www.governancejustice.org/prison-audit>

8 The importance of statistical data in monitoring prisons has been identified by the Association for the Prevention of Torture who say that a National Preventive Mechanism designated under the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment “should also have an unrestricted ability to publish aggregate information derived from personal data, and to publish relevant information on any other matter that renders the personal data truly anonymous.”

9 The UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules) invite “Member States to collect, maintain, analyse and publish, as appropriate, specific data on women in prison and women offenders.”

10 See UNODC 2009 handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/Handbook_on_Prisoners_with_Special_Needs.pdf

11 Penal Reform International Global Prison Trends 2021 <https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Global-prison-trends-2021.pdf>

6. Data on mortality, violence, and self-harm in prison settings is an important tool to reduce the harmful impacts of custodial environments.¹² Tracking these harms can help prison authorities ensure staff and technology are in place to respond when staff and prisoners are at risk. In the absence of such data, there can be no proper accountability for deaths, violence and self-harm, and it is not possible to assess the effectiveness of measures aimed at mitigating risks.
7. As the UN has said, “Solid research, data and close collaboration with the media and communities are key to fostering public support and political will for penal reform.”¹³ Data can help to stimulate ideas for reform, measure the impact of policies and initiatives designed to reduce levels of crime and imprisonment and provide a bedrock for wider research on the best ways to deal with people in conflict with the law.¹⁴
8. Prison statistics can enable comparisons in the use of imprisonment between (and within) different countries. While there may be many reasons for disparities, accurate data can provide a basis for exploring why some otherwise similar countries make significantly different use of detention. For example, data from World Prison Brief shows the prison population rate in Africa ranges from 637 per 100,000 in Rwanda to 22 in Gambia.¹⁵ The percentage of pre-trial detainees varies from 84% in prisons in the Central African Republic to 11% in Ghana’s. Using data for cross-national comparisons must be undertaken with care given that definitions, counting rules and methodologies are different; but such data provides the starting point for further investigation.¹⁶

In addition, it is important to recognise that failing to maintain records and collect data carries a number of risks including enabling disappearances from prison, people being held beyond the legal limits of their detention or imprisonment, and a failure to properly to record deaths of prisoners.

12 See for example Penal Reform International and the University of Nottingham Investigating deaths in prison A guide to a human rights-based approach <https://www.penalreform.org/resource/investigating-deaths-in-prison-a-guide/>

13 United Nations System Common Position on Incarceration 2021 https://www.unodc.org/res/justice-and-prison-reform/nelsonmandelarules-GoF/UN_System_Common_Position_on_Incarceration.pdf

14 See UN Commentary on the Bangkok Rules which explains that “research should be based on accurate data collection, and where this poses challenges, should seek means to improve data collection methods, as well as harmonisation of data collection. Access to information should also be improved based on principles of transparency and in order to make the widest possible use of available data.” https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Bangkok_Rules_ENG_22032015.pdf

15 Data from June 2024 <https://www.prisonstudies.org/>

16 The United Nations Surveys on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS) periodically invites member states to submit data on prisons and prisoners. The survey’s purpose is to provide an overview of trends and interrelationships between various parts of the criminal justice system to promote informed decision-making in administration, “nationally and internationally”. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/United-Nations-Surveys-on-Crime-Trends-and-the-Operations-of-Criminal-Justice-Systems.html>

2. CURRENT DATA COLLECTION AND TRANSPARENCY IN COUNTRIES GLOBALLY

For operational reasons, almost all prison systems necessarily collect a range of administrative records about the people in their custody; for example an individual's age, sex and the reason for their imprisonment help determine in which prison or section of a prison they will be held. Individual prisons undertake regular counts of the numbers of prisoners they hold, in order to ensure that there have been no escapes. In the many countries where prison overcrowding is a serious problem, daily assessments of the numbers of prisoners in each prison can be used to inform population management strategies such as transferring prisoners to less crowded establishments or conducting audits to ensure prisoners eligible for release (on bail or parole or because they have served their sentence in full) are not unnecessarily detained.

At the central level, aggregating information about the numbers and core characteristics of people in prisons is also necessary for operational reasons, such as to ensure that there is sufficient cell space and food, an appropriate level of staffing and sufficient opportunities for prisoners to receive visits and participate in constructive activity. Information about prisoners' health status and any medication requirements is also needed to ensure that appropriate care is made available.

Beyond these operational uses, this administrative data can relatively easily be used to produce regular statistical information if anonymity and confidentiality are properly protected, and data quality is ensured.¹⁷

Internally such statistics are needed to inform the budgetary proposals submitted by prison services to their parent Ministry and/or Finance Ministry, which reflect the costs of maintaining the prisons they have, paying staff who work in them and, where necessary, creating additional prison space

Despite these operational imperatives for collecting and holding prisons data, the extent to which countries publish their prisons data is extremely variable. In the 226 countries for which information is held on the World Prison Brief website, only 78 make data on the prison population¹⁸ routinely and proactively available online. Information about the prison population in many others is found in reports of government bodies or in news media. In Europe, most countries provide data annually in response to the Council of Europe's Annual Penal (SPACE) statistics, while in Asia and Oceania a number of countries provide figures to the annual Asian and Pacific Conference of Correctional Administrators (APCCA).¹⁹ Some prison systems have informed ICPR that information is shared upon request, although it is not clear how or by whom such requests can be made and the criteria for granting them.

17 The UNODC Guidelines make the distinction between administrative records and statistics. **Box 1.1 page 8** https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/Statistical_guidelines_prisons.pdf

18 The figures on data availability in this report refer only to the total prison population in that country, and give the picture as at June 2024. Information on other categories of prisoner – for example the numbers of female, foreign national and juvenile prisoners, and the proportion of those being held pre-trial – may be published less frequently or not at all.

19 Council of Europe Annual Penal (SPACE) Statistics 2022 https://wp.unil.ch/space/files/2024/01/240111_SPACE-I_2022_FinalReport.pdf; Asian and Pacific Conference of Correctional Administrators (APCCA) <https://apcca.org/apcca-statistics/>

Chart 1

Availability of prison statistics (n=226)

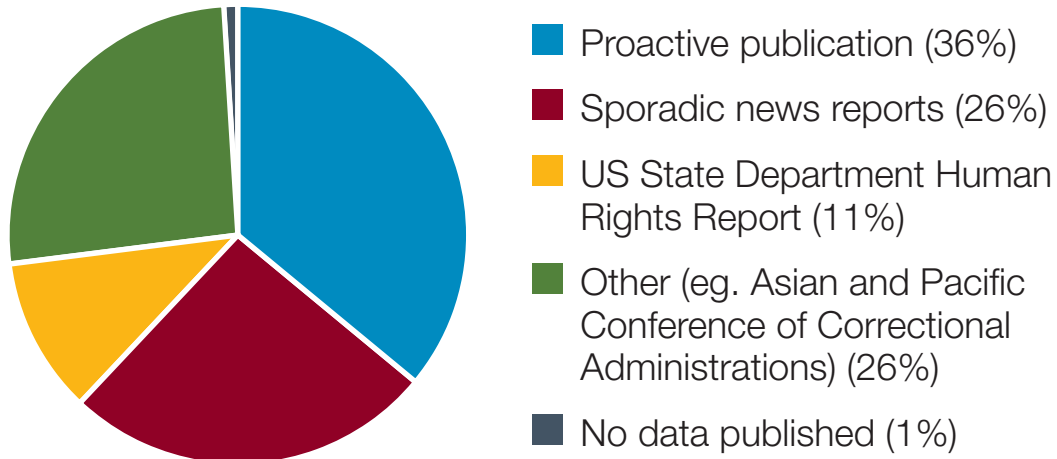
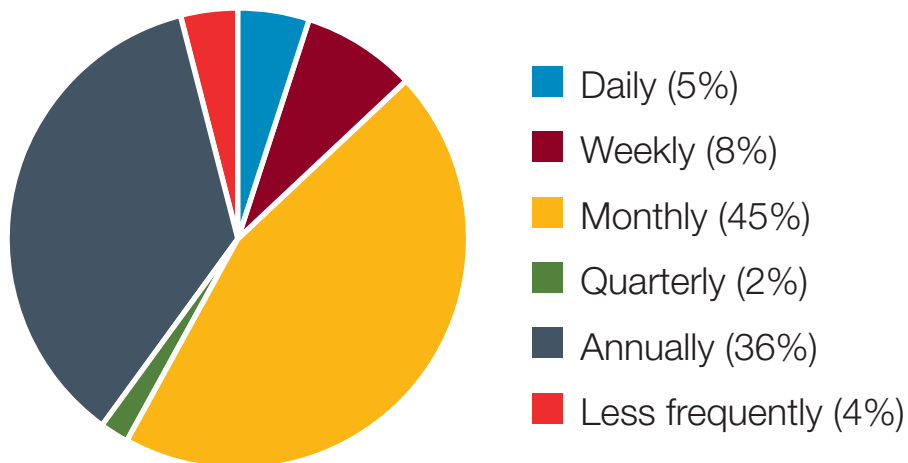


Chart 2

Frequency of proactive publication in 78 countries



India has developed a prison information portal, described as a “citizen centric portal showing statistical data of various prisons in the country”.²⁰ It is updated on a daily basis and shows the numbers in the country’s prisons broken down by state and jail and the nationality, gender, and age group of the prisoners. It also shows the numbers of admissions, releases, and visits to prisons each day. Much more detailed data is provided on an annual basis in a report collated and published by the National Crime Records Bureau.²¹ Colombia, Ireland and Indonesia also publish daily prison population figures.²²



Among the countries which publish weekly information are Ghana, Nigeria, and Mauritius. Ghana Prisons Service publishes data on the numbers of convicted, remand and trial prisoners broken down by sex, plus figures on the numbers of prisoners on death row, juveniles and life sentenced prisoners, and the overcrowding rate. Mauritius provides weekly population data by prison establishment and includes the number of infants in prison. Nigeria provides weekly data on the number on parole and subject to non-custodial measures including community service, probation and restorative justice. The three jurisdictions of the United Kingdom also publish weekly prison population statistics.

Of the countries which provide monthly data, the Uganda Prison Service also includes numbers of uniformed and non-uniformed staff.²³ The Sri Lanka Department of Prisons includes the numbers of all convicted and unconvicted men and women as well as numbers of “convicted persons released” and “unconvicted persons on bail”. Peru publishes monthly statistics which also include information on the numbers of prisoners by education level and by offence type.²⁴ In Georgia prison population data is included in the extensive monthly Unified Report on Criminal Justice Statistics.²⁵

²⁰ <https://eprisons.nic.in/public/DashBoard>

²¹ <https://ncrb.gov.in/prison-statistics-india.html>

²² Colombia <https://www.inpec.gov.co/web/guest/tableros-estad%C3%ADsticos>; Ireland [2024 Prison Population - Irish Prison Service](#); Indonesia <https://sdppublik.ditjenpas.go.id/>

²³ <https://prisons.go.ug/sites/default/files/September%20202023%20Report%20%281%29.pdf>

²⁴ <https://siep.inpe.gob.pe/form/reporte>

²⁵ <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/16/unified-report-on-criminal-justice-statistics-by-months-2024>

Of the countries which provide annual data, Singapore is one of the few to include two- and five-year recidivism data for those leaving prison.²⁶ In a number of countries, including Argentina, Spain and South Africa, prison population figures are included in the prison administration's annual report.

In those countries where the prison system does not routinely make prison population data available online, the numbers of people in prison are sometimes reported in the media or in the annual reports of government departments. They can also be requested by the public. ICPR were informed that this is the case, for example, in Zambia where such requests are dealt with by the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security or the Commissioner General of the Zambia Correctional Service.

²⁶ <https://www.sps.gov.sg/resource/annual-reports/>

3. HOW IS DATA COLLECTED AND HELD?

Many countries have an electronic system for gathering and holding records on prisoners.²⁷ This should make it relatively straightforward to aggregate and anonymize data in order to produce information for statistical purposes, and for wider dissemination.

In June 2013, the Namibian Correctional Service implemented an electronic data Offender Management System, which is the primary mode of data collection on persons under its custody. The Offender Management System is modularized, with modules for Admission, Reception and Assessment, Health, Case Management, Security Incidents, Visits, Sentence Management, Pre-Release, Transfer, Release, Community Supervision and Reporting.

All data generated through this system is securely hosted at headquarters on a centralized server and access to the information on the system is regulated. All of the 14 prisons in the country are connected to the system through a secure network.

Upon an offender's arrival at a prison, the Admission and Discharge office at the facility records and registers them on the Offender Management System. The prisons are thus responsible for the collection of information on offenders at their facilities, which they feed into the system on a daily basis. Data entry is, therefore, exclusively conducted at the facility level, with the central headquarters only having access to the data in the form of reports generated from the system.²⁸

Some countries have developed such electronic case management systems but do not appear to convert data into use for statistical purposes, or at least do not make the data readily available. Bangladesh has developed a biometric-enabled prisoner database management system in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)²⁹ but does not publish its outputs other than via news reports.

In Rwanda, prison data is collected electronically using the Rwanda Integrated Electronic Case Management System. This is a centralized database for all justice sector institutions, including the Rwanda National Police (RNP), National Public Prosecution Authority (NPPA), Rwanda Judiciary (RJ), and Rwanda Correctional Services (RCS). According to the User Guide, the database “is intended to ensure improved access to and transparency of justice information both for the government institutions and general public.”³⁰

Some lower income countries do not yet have reliable electronic systems. In Malawi at prison level, Gatekeepers and Reception Officers are responsible for the collection of prison numbers and for submitting them to the Officer in Charge. They are then further transmitted to Regional Commanding Officers either through phone calls or WhatsApp as part of the daily situation reports. The regional Commanders manually consolidate numbers for their regions and submit these to the Central Authority (National Prisons Headquarters) for a final tabulation on the national prison population. The data is mostly transmitted to the central office through phone calls and in some instances by sending scans or photographs of the manual data via WhatsApp.³¹

27 For example, Bangladesh https://www.unodc.org/southasia/frontpage/2019/July/bangladesh_-home-minister-launches-unodcs-prisoner-database-management-system.html and Malaysia <https://www.m2sys.com/blog/e-governance/malaysia-heading-towards-digital-prison-management-solution/>

28 Communication from Namibia Correctional Service to ICPR 2024. Not all of the prison population is included in the Offender Management System because most pre-trial detainees are not held by the Correctional Service.

29 <https://www.biometricupdate.com/201909/bangladesh-biometric-prisoner-database-to-enhance-prison-management>

30 Rwanda Correctional Service IECMS User Manual https://iecms.gov.rw/en/help/pdfs/Rwanda_IECMS_RCS_UserManual.pdf

31 Information to ICPR 2024

4. CHALLENGES TO COLLECTION AND TRANSPARENCY OF DATA

It has been argued that “Burdensome or cumbersome procedures, and decentralised systems, can ... be a challenge to data collection and transparency – as well as a lack of political prioritisation”.³²

It is obviously more complex to collect data in large countries where prisons are under the responsibility of different levels of government. In Canada for example, statistics are drawn from multiple sources at federal and provincial level. “Data are compiled from the Adult Correctional Services Survey, Youth Custody and Community Services Survey, Integrated Correctional Services Survey, Canadian Correctional Services Survey, as well as the Adult and Youth Corrections Key Indicator Reports.”³³ This perhaps helps to explain why the data is only published one or two years in arrears.

A further challenge relates to developing and applying a clear methodology for collecting data. Countries differ in their definitions of pre-trial detention or remand, for example, with some including prisoners who are waiting for their first trial, and others also including prisoners for whom a definitive sentence has not yet been pronounced by a judge.³⁴ Countries also differ in the range of institutions which they classify as prisons, for example in respect of children deprived of their liberty. As an example of good practice, the Australian Bureau of Statistics clarifies the types of prisons and prisoners included and excluded, the source of data, and the counting rules.³⁵

In some countries, legislation limits data collection on ethnicity and religion. In other countries, specific groups such as LGBTQI+ people are excluded from prison population data.³⁶ These restrictions can prevent the development of appropriate measures and policies to meet the needs of particular groups in prison.

A further fundamental challenge is that of ensuring the accuracy of the data collected. As recently as 2016, the Auditor General in South Africa had serious concerns about the credibility of Correctional Department records, calling into question several crucial indicators such as the number of inmates who had escaped, died unnaturally or were injured in an assault.³⁷ A process of quality assurance is required to ensure information is reliable. In several countries, such assurance is provided by the National Statistics Authority.³⁸

A small survey of African countries found the following obstacles to the collection of data:³⁹

- Lack of resources, both financial and human
- Lack of standardization in data collection practices

32 Penal Reform International Global Prison Trends 2021 <https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Global-prison-trends-2021.pdf>

33 Statistics Canada Adult and Youth Correctional Statistics 2021/2022 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230223/dq230223g-eng.htm>

34 UN Economic and Social Council 2012 Report of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on a road map to improve the quality and availability of crime statistics at the national and international levels. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/857340?ln=en>

35 <https://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/corrective-services-australia-methodology/sep-quarter-2023>

36 PRI Global Prison Trends 2021 <https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Global-prison-trends-2021.pdf>

37 Africa Check Factsheet: The state of South Africa's prisons (2017) <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/factsheets/factsheet-state-south-africas-prisons#:~:text=Lack%20of%20accurate%20data,the%20credibility%20of%20our%20records%E2%80%9D>

38 In Bangladesh, for example, the government includes crime data in its statistical year book. https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/b2db8758_8497_412c_a9ec_6bb299f8b3ab/2023-10-03-08-00-ada41955015bec30b5ed5d7df7de48f8.pdf

39 The survey was undertaken by ICPR in 2024. Stakeholders from seven countries responded.

- Manual databases make it difficult to consolidate numbers and make them available to the general public
- No platform (active website or database) through which the updated data collected can be made public.

A range of measures is needed to overcome these obstacles. Developing an electronic database of prisoners is a particularly important prerequisite for collecting timely and accurate information. Such a database not only provides an effective system of administrative records to enable individual case management of people in prison; it can also be used to generate aggregated and anonymised reports which can be used for statistical purposes.

It is essential that sustainability is built into any such initiatives. Effective and reliable internet connectivity is needed for the transfer of data, an issue that was mentioned by several respondents to the ICPR survey.

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission recommended in 2022 the establishment of a computerised filing system recording the legal status of prisoners.

In 2018 the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission found that “a digital centralized database to maintain prisoner records exists in certain prisons but such systems have not been successful due to the lack of equipment as well as the lack of trained officers in IT.”⁴⁰ It is likely that improvements have been made since, as the prison system now publishes monthly data.⁴¹

40 Prison Study by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (2020) <https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prison-Report-Final-2.pdf>

41 <http://prisons.gov.lk/web/en/statistics-information-en/>

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

As is clear from the previous sections, there is a wide variation in the extent to which prison systems collect and publish data and the ways they do this. In view of the many benefits inherent in collecting and disseminating accurate prison populations data, it is important that relevant authorities review their policy and practice in this area. The following recommendations are designed to inform that process of review.

Data Collection

Recommendation 1 In every country, the Prison Service, and/or Ministry responsible for it, should maintain accurate administrative records about prisoners in their custody and use this to generate reliable anonymised data relating to the prison population, its characteristics, and trends over time.

Recommendation 2 Prison systems which do not have one should develop an electronic database for prison records, which will not only improve individual case management but enable statistical data to be aggregated.

Recommendation 3 Prison systems should have in place a reliable methodology for the collection and compilation of data with a clear set of counting rules (including definitions) and arrangements for data governance and protection, developed where possible in cooperation with the National Statistics Authority.

Recommendation 4 Prison systems should designate at least one staff member of sufficient seniority at the headquarters of the prison administration or in the relevant government ministry to be responsible for data collection, ideally as part of a unit responsible for statistics and research and for the training of other relevant personnel involved in the data collection process.

Data Publication

Recommendation 5 In every country, the Prison Service and/or Ministry responsible for it should regularly publish Core Data on

- a) the number and types of people imprisoned on any one day
- b) the numbers received into and released from prison over particular periods of time
- c) the uncrowded capacity of the prison system and how this is calculated.

A Template for the publication of Core Data is at [Annex A](#).

Recommendation 6 Prison systems should develop and maintain a website or data portal on which Core Prison Data is published and updated on a regular basis, at least quarterly but preferably more frequently. The template at [Annex A](#) suggests monthly data is published where possible.

Recommendation 7 Once arrangements and infrastructure for the collection and publication of Core Data have been established, Prison Services should develop plans for publishing Additional Prison Data providing more detailed information about the status and characteristics of prisoners, their treatment, and conditions of detention; and about numbers of prison staff. Key topics on which such additional data should be collected are proposed at [Annex B](#).

Recommendation 8 While Core Data should be made available to the public on a routine basis, where Prison Services decide to make Additional Prison Data available on request, they should put in place a transparent process for so doing.

The Role of International Organisations

Recommendation 9 International agencies and donors should consider how best to equip relevant countries with the resources, technology, know-how and training to introduce a suitable data collection system.

Recommendation 10 Civil society at national and international levels should advocate for more and better prisons data and transparency and these issues should be a priority for consideration at the 15th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in 2026.

6. FURTHER RESOURCES

International standards relevant to the collection and publication of data include:

UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics 2014

https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/hb/E-fundamental%20principles_A4-WEB.pdf

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) Rule 10

https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-ebook.pdf

United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules) Rule 67, 68

https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Bangkok_Rules_ENG_22032015.pdf

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Guidelines on Conditions on Arrest, Police Custody and Pre-Trial Detention in Africa, 2014 (the Luanda Guidelines)

https://www.unodc.org/documents/congress/background-information/NGO/Open_society_foundation/The_Luanda_Guidelines.pdf

ACHPR Principles on the Decriminalisation of Petty Offences in Africa

<https://achpr.au.int/en/node/846>

Other Resources

United Nations Surveys on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS)

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/United-Nations-Surveys-on-Crime-Trends-and-the-Operations-of-Criminal-Justice-Systems.html>

Council of Europe Annual Penal (SPACE) Statistics

<https://wp.unil.ch/space/space-i/annual-reports/>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Guidelines for the Production of Statistical Data by the Prison System

https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/Statistical_guidelines_prisons.pdf

Penal Reform International's Global Prison Trends 2021 includes a section on data collection and transparency

<https://www.penalreform.org/global-prison-trends-2021>

United Nations System Common Position on Incarceration

https://www.unodc.org/res/justice-and-prison-reform/nelsonmandelarules-GoF/UN_System_Common_Position_on_Incarceration.pdf

Current issues and good practices in prison management - Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5552-current-issues-and-good-practices-prison-management-report>

ANNEX A: CORE PRISON DATA

A Template for Collection and Publication

1. Prison population on particular day (e.g. last day of month)

Total Number	Number of Males	Number of Females
Number of Children under 18		
Number of Infants with Mothers		
Number of Pre-trial Detainees		
Number of prisoners who have been found guilty but have not received a final sentence		
Number of Sentenced Prisoners		
Number of Other Prisoners ⁴²		
Number of Foreign National Prisoners		

⁴² Civil, Immigration etc

2. Sentenced prisoners on particular day

Total Number	Number of Males	Number of Females
Number of Children under 18		
Number receiving sentences of		
Less than 1 year		
1 year to 4 Years		
Over 4 Years		
Life sentence		
Death sentence		
Other		

3. Receptions into and releases from prison per month/ quarter /year

Total Number	Receptions	Releases
Number of Children under 18		
Number of Males		
Number of Females		
Number of Pre-Trial Detainees		
Number of Sentenced Prisoners		
Number of Other Prisoners ⁴³		
Number of Foreign National Prisoners		

⁴³ Civil, Immigration etc

4. Reception of sentenced prisoners per month/quarter/year

Total number received	Male	Female
Number of Children under 18		
Total number received serving sentences of		
Less than 1 year		
1 year to 4 Years		
Over 4 Years		
Life Sentence		
Death Sentence		
Other		

5. Capacity of prison system

Uncrowded capacity of prison system	How uncrowded capacity is calculated / measured

ANNEX B: ADDITIONAL DATA FOR COLLECTION AND PUBLICATION BY PRISON SERVICES

In addition to core or basic data about prison numbers, several countries publish a wider range of information about the characteristics of prisoners, incidents in prisons and matters relating to staff.

In order to inform strategies for reducing overcrowding and improving conditions, particularly significant data relates to:

- The types of offences for which people are held on remand or under sentence
- The length of time that pre-trial detainees spend on remand

Some of the most extensive information is provided in England and Wales where in addition to the weekly aggregate population data, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) publishes:

- Monthly data on the population in each prison
- Quarterly "Offender Management Statistics" giving detailed breakdowns of the prison population, prison receptions and releases plus numbers of adjudications for disciplinary offences and people recalled to prison for breaching release conditions and license recalls
- Quarterly Safety in Custody statistics provide updates on deaths, assaults and self-harm in prison custody
- Quarterly workforce statistics cover staffing levels and staff inflows and outflows
- Annual statistics on escapes, absconds, failure to return from release on temporary licence (ROTL), releases in error, prison crowding, foreign national offender referrals, working in custody, incidents, finds of illicit items, prison earnings, accredited programmes, random mandatory drug testing, incentives and earned privileges, mother and baby units and electronic monitoring
- Annual prison population projections providing a 5-year projection of the prison population to aid policy development, capacity planning and resource allocation within the criminal justice system.
- The UNODC Guidelines for the Production of Statistical Data by the Prison System propose 13 Key Dimensions with detailed technical elements for each. Countries should consider applying the guidelines where appropriate and sustainable. In brief, the Key Dimensions envisage information being produced regarding:
 - Human resources covering data on the workforce in prisons
 - Financial resources including data on budgets
 - Physical resources: the infrastructure available for the operation of prisons
 - Staff safety and well-being
 - The profile of each prisoner upon admission as well as in the course of their imprisonment
 - Visits received by prisoners
 - Health care activities, and treatment services

- Programmes supporting rehabilitation
- Sanctions and disciplinary action taken against prisoners
- Searches of individuals, cells or other prison buildings
- Prisoner incidents such as riots, escape attempts, self-harm or protests
- Complaints submitted by prisoners
- Use of force



Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research

The Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research (ICPR) is based in the Law School of Birkbeck, University of London. ICPR conducts policy-oriented, academically-grounded research on all aspects of the criminal justice system. ICPR's work on this report forms part of the ICPR World Prison Research Programme, a programme of international comparative research on prisons and the use of imprisonment. Further details of ICPR's research are available at <http://www.icpr.org.uk/>

ICPR's book, *Imprisonment Worldwide: The current situation and an alternative future* (Coyle, Fair, Jacobson and Walmsley) was published in June 2016 and is available from Policy Press.



World Prison Brief

The World Prison Brief was established by Roy Walmsley and launched in September 2000 by the International Centre for Prison Studies. Since November 2014 the Brief has been hosted and maintained by the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research. The data held on the Brief (which is updated on a monthly basis) are largely derived from governmental or other official sources. The data used in this report were accessed from the database in June 2024. The World Prison Brief is researched and updated by Helen Fair (Research Fellow at ICPR) and can be accessed at <http://prisonstudies.org/>

Rob Allen

Rob Allen is an independent researcher and consultant on criminal justice and prisons and former Director of the International Centre for Prison Studies at King's College London.