

## Council of Europe releases new prison statistics

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News

Central and Eastern European countries have the highest prison population in Europe, according to a new report by the Council of Europe.



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These include Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.

Among Western European countries, England and Wales have the highest prison population rates. They are closely followed by Scotland, Portugal and Spain.

The figures are contained in a new report by the Council of Europe, based in Strasbourg.

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Among the 85,134 inmates held in England and Wales, there were 1497 foreigners held for what it calls “administrative reasons”, of whom 822 are held in centres especially designed for that type of detention.

Some 15,479 inmates (out of the 85,134) were held in private facilities. Only England, Wales, Scotland, Germany and Finland use private detention facilities. However, Finland only has 11 people in such facilities, said the report.

Marcelo Aebi, from the University of Lausanne and the lead researcher on the report, said people under the supervision or care of probation services are serving “community” sanctions, better known as “alternatives to imprisonment.”

He added, “This means that, if such alternatives did not exist, all these people would be in prison. In that case, England and Wales, for instance, would have a rate of 474 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants.

“Then the questions are: How many prisons would the country need to hold so many persons? What would be the budget needed for such a huge prison population?”

He added, “That is why our research suggests that such sanctions do not always seem to be functioning as real alternatives.”

He said, “Technological developments (namely electronic monitoring) have facilitated the task of having more people under control or what we usually call ‘widening the net of the criminal justice system.’

“I am not saying that this is the beginning of the Orwellian nightmare or that such alternative sanctions should not exist.

“Alternative sanctions are really needed but they should be functioning as real alternatives, in other words, they should be applied systematically in order to avoid sending a person to prison.”

The annual penal statistics - known as the SPACE reports - are compiled for the 47-nation Council of Europe by the University of Lausanne. This year’s reports cover the period 2015-2016.

Some 47 of the 52 prison administrations in the Council of Europe area answered this year’s questionnaire - prison administrations in Liechtenstein, Ukraine, the Russian Federation and two of the three administrations in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not.

Key points include:

- 859,102 people were being held in penal institutions across Europe (not including Russia) on 1 September 2016 - 18,454 more than in 2015, a rise of 2.2 per cent;

- Across Europe as a whole, there were 135 inmates for every 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 - in other

words, one prisoner for every 741 inhabitants;

- The incarceration rate grew from 115.7 to 117.1 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants between 2015 and 2016, a rise of one per cent.

- Some 13 prison administrations, including Belgium and France, reported overcrowding in 2016 while the median proportion of female and foreign inmates across Europe was 5.3 per cent and 11.6 per cent respectively.

The CoE report said that 42 European prison administrations spent over €18.8bn in 2015 while the median amount spent per inmate per day in 2015 was €51, which was €9 (or 15 per cent) less than in 2014.

The average length of imprisonment in 2015 was 8.5 months. The biggest proportion of inmates were serving sentences for theft (18.9 per cent), drug offences (17.5 per cent), robbery (12.6 per cent) and homicide (12.1 per cent). The most common length of sentence (26.4 per cent) was one to three years.

The report says that the mortality rate was 31 deaths per 10,000 inmates in 2015, up from 27 deaths per 10,000 inmates in 2014. Suicide accounted for on average 15.6 per cent of deaths in penal institutions.

On average, only two per cent of inmates who committed suicide were females.

### **About the author**

Martin Banks is a senior reporter for the Parliament Magazine

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