

Chapter 1

Introduction and purpose of the Guide

1.1 Scope and objectives of the Guide

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) supports Member States in meeting the requirements of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC)¹ and managing their prison systems in alignment with the United Nations standards and norms related to prison management and the treatment of prisoners.²

In 2017, UNODC developed a *Handbook on Anti-Corruption Measures in Prisons*, which outlines the causes and manifestations of corruption in prisons and proposes a range of anti-corruption measures.³ In 2020, this was followed by the UNODC publication entitled *State of Integrity: A Guide on Conducting Corruption Risk Assessments in Public Organizations*, which offers general guidance on corruption risk management processes for public sector organizations.⁴

The current Guide builds on and complements those two publications. It is intended to be a practical “how-to toolkit” for implementing an effective corruption risk management approach in the specific context of prison systems. It provides practical guidance for prison administrations and managers to prevent, identify and counter corruption, and outlines approaches for corruption prevention strategies, frameworks, structures and processes. More specifically, the Guide proposes measures to implement the relevant articles and rules of UNCAC⁵ and the United Nations

¹United Nations (2003). *Convention against Corruption*, General Assembly resolution 58/4 of 31 October 2003.

²United Nations (2015). *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)* (A/RES/70/175); United Nations. (2011); *United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules)* (A/RES/65/229); United Nations (2025). *United Nations Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies)* (A/RES/88/226).

³United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2017). *Handbook on Anti-Corruption Measures in Prisons*.

⁴UNODC (2020). *State of Integrity—A Guide on Conducting Corruption Risk Assessments in Public Organizations*.

⁵Those include, among others, art.7 Public sector, art. 8 Codes of conduct for public officials, art.10 Public reporting, art.13 Participation of society, and art. 33 Protection of reporting persons.

Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), aiming to strengthen integrity, accountability, transparency and oversight in prison settings.

The objective is not only to address corruption once it occurs, but to assist Member States in preventing, thereby protecting prisoners, prison staff and communities from its insidious consequences. This does not detract from the fact that prison management is one of the most demanding public functions and that many prison officials work with great professionalism, commitment and integrity to ensure safe, secure and humane custody.

This Guide addresses corruption in prison systems, defined as all authorized places of detention in the criminal justice process, including facilities holding individuals during pretrial detention or after conviction. Many of the principles and measures outlined are also applicable to other forms of detention, such as police custody during arrest and initial procedures, or immigration detention facilities where applicable.

The primary focus of this Guide is the prevention and countering of corruption. It also discusses other forms of abuse, misconduct and mismanagement, recognizing that these often overlap with corruption and may reinforce one another. Several of the measures proposed specifically target corruption risks, while others aim more broadly to strengthen accountability, transparency and oversight to prevent and deter all forms of abuse and misconduct.

The content of this Guide has been informed by the responses from States parties to UNCAC to a questionnaire distributed in August 2025. The questionnaire collected information on legal and institutional frameworks governing prison systems, as well as practical experiences, effective practices and lessons learned in preventing and managing corruption risks within them. The examples and policies contained in the 37⁶ submissions received in response to the questionnaire are referenced throughout the Guide and have been equally made available in the thematic compilation of the prevention-related information website.⁷

As the research for this Guide has shown, there remains a considerable gap in data collection and analysis on corruption in prison systems. Available case examples and documented anti-corruption measures specific to prison systems remain limited. It is hoped that this Guide will prompt more Member States to proactively address the challenge of corruption in prisons and contribute to the growing body of knowledge and experience in this field.

The specific objectives of this Guide are:

- To raise awareness among prison authorities, decision-makers and anti-corruption stakeholders of corruption risks in prison systems and their impact on public safety and trust in the criminal justice system.
- To support prison administrators and practitioners as well as other relevant stakeholders in understanding the benefits of a structured corruption risk management process and the steps required to identify and address risks.
- To assist policymakers in identifying and prioritizing areas where anti-corruption efforts are most needed.

⁶Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burundi, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, France, Germany, Ghana, Guyana, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Kingdom of Morocco, Lithuania, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mali, Malta, Myanmar, Republic of North Macedonia, Niger, Poland, Qatar, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Thailand, Uganda, and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

⁷See also: www.unodc.org/corruption/en/cosp/WGP/preventive-anti-corruption-bodies.html

- To provide examples of corruption risk mitigation strategies and tools for those responsible for designing and implementing them.
- To promote a dialogue on corruption risks within prison systems and encourage collaboration among stakeholders to address this persisting and evolving challenge.

Further, while the primary focus of this Guide is on prisons that hold adults, the outlined principles and measures should equally apply, as appropriate, in facilities where children or young persons are deprived of their liberty to protect minors from abuse, exploitation and neglect. Member States should ensure that all corruption prevention, oversight and complaints mechanisms are child-sensitive, accessible and fully aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty.⁸

The particular and often wide-ranging challenges of reforming prison systems in post-conflict settings or in contexts where systematic human rights violations have occurred or persist are beyond the scope of this Guide. In such situations, systems may have collapsed and institutional knowledge is lacking. Establishing or restoring prison systems grounded in order, constructive staff-prisoner relationships and respect for human rights – including efforts to address corruption – will require significant resources and external support. The overall considerations in this Guide remain equally relevant in such contexts.

The context of each prison system is unique. Accordingly, the advice contained in this Guide should be used as a starting point for developing tailored corruption risk assessments and mitigation plans.

1.2 International legal and policy framework

The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) is the only legally binding anti-corruption instrument of global scope. It was adopted in October 2003 and is close to reaching universal application.⁹ The mandatory character of many of its provisions makes UNCAC a unique tool for developing a comprehensive response to a global problem. Its key provisions on the prevention of corruption address the entire public sector and therefore also include the prison system and prison management.

The *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)*, adopted by the General Assembly in December 2015, resulted from an extensive inter-governmental review process and represents a landmark harmonization of the original version of the Standard Minimum Rules (1957) with international law and good prison management practices. As such, the 122 Rules represent a universally recognized benchmark for prison management and the treatment of prisoners and are an essential reference and source of guidance for efforts to address corruption in prison systems.¹⁰

⁸United Nations General Assembly (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (A/RES/44/25). See also, United Nations General Assembly (1985). *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules)* (A/RES/40/33); United Nations General Assembly (1991). *United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (Havana Rules)* (A/RES/45/113).

⁹As of April 2026, the Convention has 192 States parties.

¹⁰United Nations (2015). *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)* (A/RES/70/175).

The *United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules)*,¹¹ adopted by the General Assembly in December 2010, address the specific needs and circumstances of women in detention. They emphasize non-discrimination, gender-sensitive management, equal access to services and safeguards against abuse or exploitation. The Bangkok Rules are also relevant to corruption prevention, as unequal treatment, coercion or extortion affecting women prisoners often intersect with broader integrity risks within prison systems.

Finally, the *United Nations Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies)*,¹² adopted by the General Assembly in December 2025, emphasizes the need to address corruption in prisons as part of efforts to create rehabilitative prison environments.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT)¹³ establishes a monitoring system including regular visits by independent national and international bodies to places of detention. The work of National Preventive Mechanisms, as foreseen by OPCAT, contributes directly to transparency and accountability within prison systems, thereby reducing opportunities for corruption.

Beyond the applicable international legal framework, practical guidance on its implementation has been developed at international and regional levels by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE),¹⁴ the European Union¹⁵ and the Council of Europe.¹⁶

1.3 What is corruption?

There is no universal definition of corruption and national legal frameworks vary in how it is described. UNCAC recognizes that corruption is a continuously evolving phenomenon affected by various factors. It offers a list of universally agreed corruption offences¹⁷ and allows each Member State to go beyond the minimum standards expressed in the Convention. Chapter 2 of this Guide outlines examples of corruption that have been observed in prison systems by Member States.

For the purposes of this Guide, corruption is understood as instances where the action of a person in his or her capacity as a public official or a person entrusted with the performance of a public function, is influenced by private interest in gaining an undue advantage (tangible or intangible, pecuniary or non-pecuniary), personally or for another person or entity. Such action amounts to an abuse of power, office or function.¹⁸ It is also noted that prisoners and their proxies could equally engage in corruption with a view to achieving such influence.

¹¹United Nations (2011). *United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules)* (A/RES/65/229).

¹²United Nations (2025). *United Nations Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies)* (A/RES/88/226).

¹³OHCHR (2002). *Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (A/RES/57/199).

¹⁴Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2016). *Handbook on combating corruption*.

¹⁵Huss, O., Beke, M., Wynarski, J., & Slot, B. (2023). *Handbook of good practices in the fight against corruption*. European Union.

¹⁶Council of Europe (2025 Mar.). *24th General Activity Report of the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) Anti-Corruption Trends, Challenges and Good Practices in Europe & the United States of America*.

¹⁷United Nations (2004). *United Nations Convention against Corruption* (A/RES/58/4) (arts. 15–24).

¹⁸UNODC (2014). *Handbook on Anti-Corruption Measures in Prisons* (p. 3). Criminal Justice Handbook Series.

There are cases in which prisons are, to a significant degree, run by organized criminal groups or informal prisoner hierarchies led by powerful prisoners. This is different from the above understanding of corruption, which focuses on public officials and the performance of public functions. The same exclusion applies to bribery and similar conduct that may originate from prisoners or visitors, notwithstanding criminal liability for such acts as per national law, as applicable. It is important to recall, however, that such situations often occur with the active involvement, consent or acquiescence of prison staff.

Given that this Guide focuses specifically on corruption risks, it is important to distinguish between *corruption* and *corruption risk*. Corruption refers to an offence that has already taken place (see table 1), whereas corruption risks are weaknesses in a system that might present opportunities for corruption to occur. In other words, addressing corruption is a reactive measure, whereas addressing corruption risks is a proactive approach aimed at prevention.

This Guide is concerned primarily with identifying, assessing and mitigating corruption risks with a view to strengthening integrity, transparency and accountability in prison settings.

Table 1. Examples of corruption offences

CORRUPTION OFFENCE	EXAMPLES
Active/passive bribery	The promise, offering or giving or the solicitation or acceptance, to/by a national public official, a foreign public official or an official of a public international organization, directly or indirectly, of an undue advantage, in order to act or refrain from acting in matters relevant to official duties
Embezzlement	Theft, diversion or misappropriation of property, funds, securities or any other item of value entrusted to a public official in his or her official capacity
Bribery in the private sector	Active or passive bribery, directly or indirectly, to or by any person who directs or works in any capacity for a private sector entity, to act or refrain from acting in breach of his or her duties
Embezzlement of property in the private sector	Embezzlement by any person who directs or works in any capacity for a private sector entity
Abuse of functions	Performance of or failure to perform an act, in violation of the law, by a public official in order to obtain an undue advantage
Trading in influence	Abuse of a public official's real or supposed influence with an administration, public authority or State authority in order to gain an advantage or influence particular outcomes
Illicit enrichment	A significant increase in assets of a public official that cannot reasonably be explained as being the result of his or her lawful income
Money-laundering	The concealment of the origins of proceeds of crime, often by means of conversion or transfers involving foreign banks or legitimate businesses
Concealment	Hiding or continued retention of property, knowing that it has resulted from corruption

1.4 Structure of the Guide

Chapter 2 of this Guide highlights the inherent vulnerability of prison systems to corruption and outlines the main reasons for that vulnerability. It goes on to emphasize the importance of due diligence to prevent abuse and corruption that may be committed by prison staff, public officials or prisoners and points out that prison systems require a considerably higher level of due diligence than non-custodial environments. The negative impact that corruption can have on the management of prisons is explored along with the benefits of addressing corruption risks.

Preventing corruption through effective corruption risk management is explored in chapter 3. It sets out the organizational corruption risk management process and describes in detail each of the five steps in that process. Examples are provided of the types of corruption risks that may be identified, together with the approach that can be taken to categorize and evaluate those risks. The importance of risk management is discussed and a process is suggested for reviewing and assessing existing controls for identified corruption risks. The chapter ends by pointing out the need for corruption risk management strategies, policies and plans.

Chapter 4 considers the different types of strategies that can be adopted in relation to corruption risk management, that is, *process-based strategies* that foster a preventive approach aimed at implementing or strengthening controls; *people-based strategies* that foster a preventive approach by focusing on the people carrying out the process; and *enforcement-based strategies* that can deter corruption and address a corrupt act after it has occurred. The chapter also provides case studies of approaches that have been adopted by Member States.

The final chapter of the Guide sets out recommendations to Member States on actions that should be taken to manage corruption risks in prison settings.