

Chapter 2

Corruption in prison systems – nature of the problem

2.1 Vulnerability of prison systems to corruption risks

Imprisonment creates a situation in which prisoners depend upon prison authorities for the fulfilment of almost all their day-to-day needs, including access to basic necessities, such as food and water. By depriving individuals of their liberty, the State automatically assumes a heightened duty of care to ensure that custody is enforced in a secure, safe, humane and dignified manner. This must include due diligence to prevent abuse and corruption that may be committed by prison staff, public officials and prisoners and requires a considerably higher level of due diligence than non-custodial environments.¹⁹

Specific inherent characteristics of prisons may increase exposure to corruption.²⁰ These characteristics can be gathered in four main groups: structural factors; governance and integrity system vulnerabilities; human resources and staff related risks; and prison population vulnerabilities.

2.1.1 Structural vulnerabilities

Closed environments. Prisons are relatively isolated from society and typically receive limited public attention. In addition and despite contrary provisions in the Nelson Mandela Rules,²¹ many countries lack effective monitoring and inspections of prison facilities. Only

¹⁹United Nations General Assembly (2006). *Extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions* (A/61/311), Report of the Special Rapporteur (paras. 51–52).

²⁰Penal Reform International; U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre (2024). *Corruption in prisons: A guide for detention monitors*. Bergen: U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Chr. Michelsen Institute (U4 Guide 2024:1). See also, Center for the Advancement of Public Integrity (2016). *Prison corruption: the problem and some potential solutions*. Research Centers & Programs at Scholarship Archive, Columbia Law School.

²¹*Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rule 83 establishes a twofold system of internal and external inspections for prisons.

38 per cent of Member States that responded to the questionnaire reported oversight bodies at the individual prison level and 43 per cent at the prison sector level.²² Further, the work of external oversight bodies, such as Prison Inspectorates or National Preventive Mechanisms, may be hindered by resource constraints or limited access to information. These issues may be compounded by little or no involvement of other external actors, including civil society, in the delivery of services in prisons.

Imbalance of power. The pronounced power asymmetry between prison staff and prisoners generates a high-risk environment for corruption. Prisoners, operating in a context of dependency and vulnerability, may attempt to influence outcomes through illicit means to obtain access to basic rights, services or protection. Conversely, staff members who control access to these resources may exploit their authority for private gain, thereby normalizing corruption. Corruption risks may also be generated by high-risk prisoners, who may seek to bribe or coerce prison staff, as well as by prisoners who occupy influential positions within informal prison hierarchies.

Different prison categories. Prisons are not uniform institutions and the type of facility can have a significant impact on nature and scale of corruption risks. Acknowledging these differences is important to ensure that corruption risk management strategies are appropriately tailored. High-security prisons, which often house violent offenders or prisoners assessed to present a high escape or other risk, may face heightened risks linked to collusion with organized criminal groups, trafficking of contraband or manipulation of security systems. Low-security prisons are not exempt from corrupt practices, either, where respective risks may relate to programme participation, including outside work placements, the misuse of progressive regimes, temporary release or community partnerships. Where supervision is lighter, there can be increased opportunities for bribery or favouritism in granting privileges. Women's prisons and juvenile prisons might face different dynamics again, including the risk of sexual corruption in exchange for privileges.

Overcrowding. In roughly two thirds of the 184 countries worldwide with available data, prison systems operate at more than 100 per cent of their planned capacity. Alarming, more than one in four countries globally are operating at over 150 per cent of their intended national prison capacity.²³ Unsurprisingly, corruption risks multiply in such conditions. Overcrowding compromises adequate supervision, weakens internal safeguards and creates conditions in which informal or corrupt practices can flourish. This increases the likelihood that valuable intelligence about corruption and organized criminal activity goes undetected due to limited supervision.²⁴

Poor prison infrastructure. A significant portion of prisons globally suffer from ageing or deteriorating infrastructure that does not or no longer corresponds to the operational needs of prison management. These shortcomings adversely affect prisoners' physical well-being and constrain the capacity of prison staff to maintain order, supervise movement and detect corrupt practices. Inadequate maintenance and substandard designs can contribute to operational blind spots, weakened perimeter security and increased opportunities for the circulation of contraband and other prohibited items, thereby exacerbating risks of corruption and misconduct.

²²UNODC (2025). Questionnaire: Preventing corruption in prisons through corruption risk management. [37 Member State submissions.]

²³UNODC (2026). *Prison Matters 2026: Global prison population and trends: A focus on prison-community engagement*, pp 19–20.

²⁴For detailed guidance on how to address situations of prison overcrowding, see, UNODC (2013). *Handbook on Strategies to Reduce Overcrowding in Prisons*. Criminal Justice Handbook Series.

Dormitory and cell-based accommodation. The structure of prison accommodation can shape behaviours and pressures. In the absence of proper oversights and safeguards, dormitory-style housing may give rise to informal peer structures, extortion or other coercive arrangements in which dominant individuals or groups control access to resources, protection or privileges. Conversely, cell-based systems may heighten the power imbalance between staff and prisoners, with cell assignments or movements becoming items that staff can trade or use as leverage. Both models, under conditions of scarcity and deprivation, can create environments ripe for corrupt practices.

Insufficient technological infrastructure. Outdated or insufficient technological systems can weaken a prison's ability to prevent and detect corruption. Tools such as CCTV, audio-video monitoring, scanners and secure electronic file management systems play an important role in ensuring transparency, identifying misconduct, tracking unauthorized access and maintaining reliable audit trails.²⁵ When such systems are missing, poorly maintained or only partially implemented, it becomes easier for illicit activities to remain undetected and accountability becomes harder to enforce.²⁶

Privately run prisons. Where applicable, privately managed prisons introduce an additional layer of complexity due to the interplay between financial incentives, contractual obligations and operational realities. The pursuit of profits may lead to cost-cutting measures, understaffing or inadequate training, factors that weaken the overall integrity framework and can render staff more susceptible to corruption. At the same time, gaps in oversight or transparency may provide opportunities for manipulation of records, procurement irregularities or collusive arrangements between private operators and public authorities.

2.1.2 Governance and integrity system vulnerabilities

Lack of information gathering, sharing and documentation. Inconsistent or poorly coordinated information sharing can undermine the integrity and effectiveness of prison systems. When prison intelligence is fragmented, records are incomplete and cooperation with law enforcement, judicial bodies or central authorities is limited, critical indicators of corruption or organized criminal activity can be overlooked. Informal data collection without proper safeguards undermines oversight and can delay action in cases of misconduct.²⁷ Weak record-keeping and inter-agency coordination hinder investigations, reduce transparency and obscure emerging risks.²⁸

2.1.3 Human resources and staff related vulnerabilities

Poor human resources management policies. Prison administrations, managers and staff have a unique level of control and power over prisoners and their well-being. This creates increased risks of abuse of power and corruption and requires strong oversight. In many jurisdictions, insufficient attention is being paid to the proper recruitment, training and management

²⁵ UNODC (2017). *Handbook on Anti-Corruption Measures in Prisons* (p.76). Criminal Justice Handbook Series.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 68–70.

²⁸ *Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rules 6–10 outline the requirements for a standardized prisoner file management system that ensures accurate, secure, and confidential record-keeping throughout imprisonment, supporting legal compliance, prisoner rights, and data-driven prison administration.

of prison staff.²⁹ This is also reflected in the results of the questionnaire to Member States, in which only 76 and 73 per cent reported competitive recruitment processes and vetting at the recruitment stage, respectively. While 69 per cent reported that they provided regular ethics training, only 38 per cent confirmed the use of integrity testing or continuous vetting.³⁰ If the disciplinary management system is weak or ineffective, it can undermine any deterrent effect and create the perception that wrongdoing is tolerated.

Inadequate salaries of prison staff. Low salaries of prison staff can contribute to dissatisfaction, potentially making it “easier” for prison staff to justify their involvement in corruption. Inadequate salaries and recognition of the work of prison staff can also contribute to the lack of appropriate candidates, leading to the appointment of candidates who are either not suitable or ill-equipped to carry out their day-to-day duties.³¹

Limited diversity within prison management. Limited diversity in prison administrations, including gender diversity, can increase corruption risks. For instance, even though women make up around 30 per cent of the prison workforce,³² they are significantly underrepresented in leadership roles in prison administrations. Diverse leadership contributes to more balanced decision-making.³³

2.1.4 Prison population vulnerabilities

Organized crime and prison subcultures. Organized criminal networks often extend their influence into prisons, creating parallel authority structures and illicit economies that erode integrity.³⁴ Through intimidation, bribery and coercion, these groups may corrupt staff, control access to goods and privileges and exploit prisoners and families to secure compliance with their demands. Such dynamics can blur the line between formal and informal power and heighten corruption risks. This is reflected in States’ questionnaire responses: 84 per cent indicated that specific categories of prisoners, particularly members of organized criminal groups or other prisoners assessed to be of high risk, pose heightened corruption risks within their prison systems.³⁵ Preventing organized crime infiltration requires coordinated intelligence sharing, staff vetting and, where necessary, rotation, protection measures for prison staff and families, and consistent oversight.³⁶

Prisoners with little to lose. Some prisoners may seek to exploit the weaknesses of the system, for example, by attempting to corrupt prison staff, as they may feel they have much to

²⁹ *Nelson Mandela Rules*, Rule 74(1) and *United Nations Convention against Corruption*, art. 7(1) call for the careful selection of every grade of prison staff in order to ensure integrity, humanity, professional capacity, and personal suitability.

³⁰ UNODC (2025). Questionnaire: Preventing corruption in prisons through corruption risk management. [37 Member State submissions.]

³¹ Ross, J.I. (2013). Deconstructing correctional officer deviance: Toward typologies of actions and controls. *Criminal Justice Review*, 38(1), 110–126.

³² Association for the Prevention of Torture (2024 Dec.). *Global report on women in prison: Analysis from National Preventive Mechanisms*.

³³ UNODC (2020). *The Time is Now: Addressing the Gender Dimensions of Corruption*.

³⁴ Penal Reform International; U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre (2024). *Corruption in prisons: A guide for detention monitors*. Bergen: U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Chr. Michelsen Institute (U4 Guide 2024:1)

³⁵ UNODC (2025). Questionnaire: Preventing corruption in prisons through corruption risk management. [37 Member State submissions.]

³⁶ See, Penal Reform International (2024 Aug.). *Corruption in prisons: A guide for detention monitors*. U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre.

gain and little to lose, especially if facing a long-term sentence. Prisons house large numbers of individuals with criminal backgrounds, many of whom have been confined for long periods of time and they may have suffered or continue to suffer from deprivation that is inherent in situations of incarceration. When these individuals are housed in overcrowded or poorly designed and managed facilities, the conditions pose exceptionally challenging circumstances that affect the state of mind and behaviour of prisoners and prison staff. Indeed, the environment of prisons revolves around crime like no other institution.

Vulnerabilities within the prison population. Prisoners are not a homogeneous group and differ in their backgrounds, needs and vulnerabilities.³⁷ Prisoners with special needs, marginalized groups and those with limited skills may be more dependent on prison staff and services and therefore at greater risk of exploitation through corruption.³⁸ Where such dynamics are not adequately addressed, staff may collude with influential prisoners or overlook abuses in exchange for favours or illicit payments.³⁹

Pretrial detainees. Persons held on remand may be particularly vulnerable due to legal uncertainty and dependence on prison authorities, including for access to legal counsel.⁴⁰ The absence of a final judicial determination may create incentives for some prisoners to seek to influence their cases, through illicit interactions, while staff may solicit or accept undue payments for services or rights guaranteed under law.

While these factors do not themselves mean that corruption will occur, they may increase vulnerabilities to corrupt practice. For a more detailed discussion, see the UNODC *Handbook on Anti-Corruption Measures in Prisons*.⁴¹

2.2 Importance of addressing corruption risks in the prison system

Corruption is a significant threat to meeting the minimum standards embodied in the Nelson Mandela Rules. It undermines public trust in prison and criminal justice systems, as well as confidence in a government's ability to protect society and uphold prisoners' inalienable human rights. Corruption also places additional strain on already limited financial and human resources within prison systems while increasing incarceration. Importantly, it undermines the ability of prison services to effectively deliver on their mandate to ensure safe, secure and humane custody while advancing rehabilitation and social reintegration prospects.

Addressing corruption risks within the prison system is therefore essential. Efforts to combat corruption can have several direct benefits, including respect for prisoners' human rights; the

³⁷ For example, in relation to their legal status, age and duration of sentence, as well as physical and mental health, literacy and numeracy, language, gender, culture, religion and ethnicity. See also the *Nelson Mandela Rules*. Rule 2(2) requires prison administrations to "take account of the individual needs of prisoners, in particular the most vulnerable categories in prison settings".

³⁸ See, UNODC (2009). *Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs* for details of categories of prisoners who may be at risk of being exploited as a result of corrupt activity. Also see, *Bangkok Rules*, for risks faced by women in prisons or detention facilities.

³⁹ Council of Europe (2025 Apr. 25). *Informal Prisoner Hierarchy*. Prison Standard CPT/INF (2025)12. European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT).

⁴⁰ UNODC (2017). *Handbook on Anti-Corruption Measures in Prisons*. Criminal Justice Handbook Series.

⁴¹ See, chapter 1. UNODC (2017). *Handbook on Anti-Corruption Measures in Prisons*. Criminal Justice Handbook Series.

effective and accountable use of public resources; strengthened public trust in the prison system; disruption of criminal networks; improved rehabilitation outcomes; and lower rates of recidivism. Preventing corruption may also result in the removal of barriers to access prison services, thus reducing inequities among a particularly vulnerable and marginalized segment of society.⁴²

2.3 Manifestations of corruption in the prison system

Corruption in prisons can have far-reaching harmful consequences for prisoners, prison staff, the overall prison system and the general public. It can occur at the individual level or manifest more systemically across all levels of prison administration. The responses to the UNODC questionnaire developed to inform this Guide reflect these vulnerabilities in practice: 61 per cent of all respondents reported anti-corruption challenges at the individual prison level, 47 per cent at the prison headquarters level, 63 per cent at the prison sector level and 36 per cent at the level of the wider criminal justice system.⁴³ Corruption can take many different forms. Research indicates that some of the most common include:

- (a) **Abuse of authority over prisoners' rights and services.** Prison staff may demand bribes for access to legal resources and processes, early release or basic services, such as food, family visits, healthcare or favourable housing conditions.⁴⁴ Payments may also be required to “prevent” torture or other forms of ill-treatment or manifest in the context of rehabilitation programmes and prison labour. Sexual corruption by prison staff (or them receiving bribes to tolerate or facilitate sexual corruption among prisoners) is another and severe abuse of authority and human rights violation.
- (b) **Financial and procurement-related corruption.** Procurement processes may be manipulated for personal gain, from everyday supplies to large-scale contracts, resulting in financial losses, substandard products and poor services. In the responses to the UNODC questionnaire, 31 per cent of respondents indicated procurement-related integrity issues within their prison systems, coupled with challenges concerning embezzlement or the misuse of resources by prison reported by 49 per cent.⁴⁵ This can significantly affect prison infrastructure and services and can consequently undermine prison conditions, safety and security.
- (c) **Human resources and institutional integrity violations.** Corruption may involve misuse of public property or biased recruitment and promotion practices

⁴²Blanco, E. (2021). Creating rehabilitative prisons environments: Anti-corruption policies. In *Workshop 2 Report: Reducing reoffending: Identifying risks and developing solutions* (pp. 61–73). United Nations Fourteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (Kyoto, Japan, 2021 Mar. 7–12). United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI).

⁴³UNODC (2025). Questionnaire: Preventing corruption in prisons through corruption risk management. [37 Member State submissions.]

⁴⁴See, for example, Robbins, S. (2019 Mar. 13). *Systemic Colombia prison corruption reaches top officials*. Caymen iNews; Also see, Rajendran, S. (2017 Aug. 8, updated 2022 Aug. 25). *Multipronged strategy required to tackle corruption in prisons*. The Hindu Centre for Polics and Public Policy. [Newsletters online.]

⁴⁵UNODC (2025). Questionnaire: Preventing corruption in prisons through corruption risk management. [37 Member State submissions.]

driven by favouritism or bribery. Of the States that responded to the questionnaire, 33 per cent reported nepotism in recruitment or promotions.⁴⁶

- (d) **Information and data manipulation.** Staff may alter prisoner records, suppress evidence (e.g., CCTV) or unlawfully share sensitive information for personal gain.
- (e) **Security breaches and criminal facilitation.** Corruption can lead to escapes (e.g., by smuggling tools, leaving doors unlocked, providing access to keys and ignoring alarm triggers⁴⁷), neglect of duties or smuggling of contraband (e.g., drugs or mobile phones).⁴⁸ In some cases, staff can collaborate with criminal operations inside and outside the prison or enable prisoner exploitation (e.g., knowingly allowing prisoners to extort others for protection or services, often sharing the illicit proceeds), severely undermining safety and institutional integrity. Such risks are particularly evident in scam centre operations, where fraud schemes may continue to be coordinated from within prisons with the assistance or acquiescence of corrupt prison officials.



UNITED KINGDOM: SMUGGLING CONTRABAND INTO PRISON

In 2023, a prison officer in England was convicted following a multi-year police investigation (Operation Amalfi) into the smuggling of prohibited items into the facility. The officer admitted to trafficking drugs, mobile phones, SIM cards and other restricted items, often concealed in everyday packaging such as cereal boxes to avoid detection. Investigators uncovered that family members of specific prisoners had transferred funds into the officer's personal bank account in exchange for smuggling contraband, which was later sold within the prison wings under his supervision. The investigation, launched in 2018 after repeated discoveries of illicit items, eventually exposed a broader network involving several prisoners and outside collaborators. In total, nine individuals, including the officer, were prosecuted and received penal sentences ranging from six months to four years. Authorities described the officer as a central figure in the smuggling operation, noting that his actions had seriously compromised prison safety, sustained illegal prison economies, strengthened criminal networks and disrupted the rehabilitation of prisoners.

Source: UNODC Questionnaire on Preventing Corruption in Prisons through Corruption Risk Management to Member States (August 2025).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Pittaro, M. (2022 May 11). Prison corruption: A glimpse into manipulation tactics. *Psychology Today* [Blog].

⁴⁸ See, for example, Taylor-McCune, K. (2020). *Correctional officers' perspectives on cellphone contraband introduction by fellow officers* [PhD Dissertation, Walden University]; Loureiro-Revilla, R. (2024 Dec. 20). *Corruption as a limit to state capacity: Mobile phones in Peruvian prisons*. U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. Chr. Michelsen Institute (U4 Brief 2024:7).



FRANCE: ORGANIZED SMUGGLING NETWORK INVOLVING PRISON AND CIVILIAN STAFF

A 2021 judgment by the Avignon Court of Justice exposed an extensive criminal network involving prison staff, private workshop personnel, prisoners and external accomplices. The investigation revealed various smuggling methods, including the throwing of packages over prison walls, the handover of prohibited items during visits and staff intentionally bringing in drugs and mobile phones. The organized criminal networks exploited institutional weaknesses, including gaps in oversight and staff vulnerabilities, to facilitate the smuggling of illicit items into correctional facilities. A total of 22 individuals were convicted, among them prison officers and contracted civilian employees. A workshop foreman was sentenced to 24 months in prison, with 12 months suspension, for offences related to corruption and drug trafficking.

Source: UNODC Questionnaire on Preventing Corruption in Prisons through Corruption Risk Management to Member States (August 2025).

HUNGARY: PREVENTING DUTY FAILURES THROUGH TARGETED INSPECTIONS

The National Protective Service, acting on covert human intelligence, identified a unit supervisor at a high-security prison who intended to smuggle prohibited items and narcotics to prisoners during a scheduled holiday duty shift. Upon the supervisor's arrival, the duty commander conducted an inspection of their belongings and clothing. The search led to the seizure of several hundred tablets of unidentified substances, paper sheets suspected of being coated with narcotics, tubes of unknown liquids, multiple SIM cards and compact mobile phones. The supervisor's official work phone contained communications with prisoners that further substantiated the allegations. Criminal proceedings were initiated and subsequent searches of the supervisor's locker, vehicle and residence uncovered additional miniature mobile phones suspected of use in smuggling. Follow-up inspections of the prisoners' cells led to the discovery of more prohibited items, including mobile phones, SIM cards, USB drives, tablets and an unidentified white powder.

Source: UNODC Questionnaire on Preventing Corruption in Prisons through Corruption Risk Management to Member States (August 2025).



LITHUANIA: ABUSE OF OFFICE AND DESTRUCTION OF EVIDENCE

Lithuanian prison officers intercepted a package containing psychoactive substances being passed between prisoners. Although the contraband was seized, a senior prison officer instructed subordinates not to document the incident and later destroyed the evidence by flushing it down the toilet. The court found that the officer had deliberately concealed a serious offence, violated official reporting procedures and compromised the integrity of the prison administration. He was convicted of abuse of office, fined €8,500 and prohibited from holding a civil service position for four years.

Source: UNODC Questionnaire on Preventing Corruption in Prisons through Corruption Risk Management to Member States (August 2025).

SINGAPORE: MISUSE OF SENSITIVE PRISONERS' INFORMATION

In 2022, a prison officer in Singapore was convicted for unauthorized access to the secure prison database PORTS II and for disclosing confidential information to a disruptive prisoner in an attempt to prevent conflict. The officer repeatedly accessed prisoner's location data without proper authorization and shared the information upon request with another prisoner. Following an internal inquiry, the matter was referred to the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau. The officer received a 10-week custodial sentence and was dismissed from service.

Source: UNODC Questionnaire on Preventing Corruption in Prisons through Corruption Risk Management to Member States (August 2025).