

Too Many People in Prison? How do we compare with Europe?

(last update, January 2012)

It is often noted that England and Wales have more people in jail per head of population than the rest of Europe. The implication is that judges and magistrates are keen on the rather barbaric instrument of prison when everyone else in Europe prefers a more gentle approach.

But a closer look at the figures suggests a different interpretation. The proper comparison is not between the number of prison inmates and the total population, but between the number of prisoners and the volume of crime. A country with a high level of crime would expect to have to put more people in jail. And the crime rate in England and Wales is among the highest in Europe. Relative to the number of crimes, the prison population for 2008 is around the median for the EU-15 and well below that for the twelve countries of more recent accession. Even that is only the result of a rise in the prison population and a fall in recorded crime since 2003.

Prison and the EU Countries

[Click here](#) for a table showing the rate of imprisonment in the EU in 2008.

[Click here](#) for a table showing the rate of imprisonment in the EU in 2007.

[Click here](#) for a table showing the rate of imprisonment in the EU in 2003.

[Click here](#) for a table showing the rate of imprisonment in the EU in 2001.

[Click here](#) for a table showing the rate of imprisonment in the EU in 2000.

In the EU the average number of prisoners per 100,000 population (unweighted) in 2007 was 122, compared with 147 in England and Wales. But if we compare the number of prisoners to the number of recorded crimes, the EU (27) average was 20.7 and the figure for England and Wales was 16.1. In fact, 18 out of 27 EU countries had rates of imprisonment for every 1,000 crimes that were higher. Scotland also had a higher rate, 19.1 per 1,000 crimes.

What would the prison population have been in 2003 if we had imprisoned at the rate of [other EU countries?](#)

On this evidence prison in England and Wales is under-used. But does overseas experience suggest that greater use of prison would reduce crime? The best available evidence compares [England and Wales with the United States](#).

Prison population in EU countries, per 100,000 population and per 1,000 recorded crimes, 2008

Country	Prison Population	Prisoners per 100,000 pop	Estimated country population (thousands)	Recorded crimes per 100,000 population	Total recorded crimes	Prisoners per 1,000 recorded crimes
Belgium	9,858	92.4	10,667	9,314	993,495	9.9
Denmark	3,530	64.5	5,476	8,710	476,953	7.4
Germany (including former GDR from 1991)	73,203	89.0	82,218	7,436	6,114,128	12.0
Ireland	2,872	65.3	4,401	2,344	103,178	27.8
Greece	10,864	96.9	11,214	3,722	417,391	26.0
Spain	73,558	162.4	45,283	5,148	2,331,076	31.6
France	64,003	100.0	64,007	5,559	3,558,329	18.0
Italy	58,127	97.5	59,619	4,545	2,709,888	21.4
Luxembourg	673	139.1	484	5,831	28,210	23.9
Netherlands	14,734	89.8	16,405	7,403	1,214,503	12.1
Austria	7,899	95.0	8,319	6,885	572,695	13.8
Portugal	10,807	101.8	10,618	4,055	430,534	25.1
Finland	3,457	65.2	5,300	6,698	355,028	9.7
Sweden	6,806	74.1	9,183	15,005	1,377,854	4.9
England and Wales	83,194	153.3	54,268	8,665	4,702,468	17.7
Scotland	7,835	152.0	5,156	7,320	377,433	20.8
Northern Ireland	1,490	84.3	1,767	6,230	110,094	13.5
EU15	432,910	109.8	394,386	6,560	25,873,257	16.7
Bulgaria	9,922	129.9	7,640	1,658	126,673	78.3
Czech Republic	20,471	197.2	10,381	3,312	343,799	59.5

Estonia	3,656	272.6	1,341	3,802	50,977	71.7
Cyprus	646	81.8	789	927	7,314	88.3
Latvia	6,873	302.7	2,271	2,531	57,475	119.6
Lithuania	7,736	229.8	3,366	2,133	71,792	107.8
Hungary	14,626	145.6	10,045	4,066	408,407	35.8
Malta	444	108.2	410	3,364	13,803	32.2
Poland	84,549	221.8	38,116	2,839	1,082,057	78.1
Romania	26,212	121.8	21,529	1,344	289,331	90.6
Slovenia	1,318	65.6	2,010	4,075	81,917	16.1
Slovakia	8,313	153.9	5,401	1,940	104,758	79.4
AC12	184,766	178.9	103,300	2,554	2,638,303	70.0
EU27 total or average	617,676	124.1	497,686	5,729	28,511,560	21.7

Source: Eurostat 'Crime and Criminal Justice'

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/crime/data/database>

Tables crim_gen and crim_pris

Eurostat 'Population'

Tables demo_pjan and demo_r_pjannaggr3 (UK national figures)

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/database>

Notes: Prison population for Greece is for 2007; crimes for Ireland are for 2006 and for Netherlands 2007.

From Table 1, Statistics in Focus 58/2010

Prison population in EU countries, per 100,000 population and per 1,000 recorded crimes, 2007

Prison population in EU countries, per 100,000 population and per 1,000 recorded crimes, 2007

Country	Prison Population	Prisoners per 100,000 pop	Estimated country population (thousands)	Recorded crimes per 100,000 population	Total recorded crimes	Prisoners per 1,000 recorded crimes
EU (27) Average		121.8				20.7
England and Wales	79,730	147.5	54,072	9,156	4,950,671	16.1
Northern Ireland	1,484	84.4	1,759	6,166	108,468	13.7
Scotland	7,376	143.4	5,144	7,494	385,509	19.1
Austria	8,887	107.1	8,299	7,160	594,240	15.0
Belgium	9,950	94.0	10,585	9,471	1,002,552	9.9
Denmark	3,646	66.9	5,447	8,175	445,271	8.2
Finland	3,370	63.9	5,277	6,515	343,820	9.8
France	60,403	95.3	63,392	5,662	3,589,293	16.8
Germany	73,319	89.1	82,315	7,635	6,284,661	11.7
Greece	10,280	92.0	11,172	3,790	423,422	24.3
Ireland (Eire)	3,053	70.8	4,313	2,392	103,178	29.6
Italy	48,693	82.3	59,131	4,960	2,933,146	16.6
Luxembourg	666	139.9	476	5,935	28,252	23.6
Netherlands	14,450	88.3	16,358	7,425	1,214,503	11.9
Portugal	11,587	109.3	10,599	3,776	400,222	29.0
Spain	67,100	150.9	44,477	5,193	2,309,859	29.0
Sweden	6,740	74.0	9,113	14,335	1,306,324	5.2

Bulgaria	10,792	140.5	7,679	1,754	134,685	80.1
Czech Republic	19,110	185.8	10,287	3,474	357,391	53.5
Cyprus	671	86.1	779	970	7,557	88.8
Estonia	3,466	258.3	1,342	3,754	50,375	68.8
Latvia	6,548	287.1	2,281	2,438	55,620	117.7
Lithuania	7,770	229.5	3,385	2,009	67,990	114.3
Hungary	14,743	146.5	10,066	4,241	426,914	34.5
Malta	382	93.6	408	3,678	15,005	25.5
Poland	90,199	236.6	38,125	3,024	1,152,993	78.2
Romania	29,390	136.3	21,565	1,305	281,457	104.4
Slovenia	1,336	66.5	2,010	4,388	88,197	15.1
Slovakia	8,235	152.7	5,394	2,054	110,802	74.3

Source: Eurostat 'Crime and Criminal Justice'

Table 1 Crimes recorded by the police:

Total Crime http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/crime/documents/total_crime.pdf

Table 10 Prison Population:

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/crime/documents/prison.pdf>

Notes: Prison population for Greece is for 2006; and all figures for Ireland are for 2006.

Figures for Spain radically revised in 2006. 2007 figures not consistent with Civitas table for 2003.

Prison population in EU countries, per 100,000 population and per 1,000 recorded crimes, 2003

Country	Prison Population	Prisoners per 100,000 pop	Estimated country population (thousands)	Recorded crimes per 100,000 population	Total recorded crimes	Prisoners per 1,000 recorded crimes
EU Average		98				17.5
England and Wales	72,992	139	52,481	11,241	5,899,333	12.4
Northern Ireland	1,185	70	1,697	7,515	127,499	9.3
Scotland	6,642	131	5,055	9,639	487,232	13.6
Austria	7,816	97	8,067	7,881	635,784	12.3
Belgium	8,688	84	10,356	9,784	1,013,211	8.6
Denmark	3,577	66	5,384	9,013	485,215	7.4
Finland	3,437	66	5,206	10,343	538,488	6.4
France	57,440	93	61,700	6,605	4,075,285	14.1
Germany	79,567	96	82,537	7,976	6,583,127	12.1
Greece	8,555	81	10,565	4,158	439,280	19.5
Ireland (Eire)	2,986	75	3,964	2,634	104,401	28.6
Italy	57,238	102	56,306	4,236	2,385,105	24.0
Luxembourg	498	111	448	5,728	25,679	19.4
Netherlands	18,242	113	16,193	8,530	1,381,229	13.2
Portugal	14,232	137	10,408	3,983	414,531	34.3
Spain	55,244	136	40,683	2,377	967,035	57.1
Sweden	6,755	76	8,941	13,995	1,251,265	5.4

Source: Council of Europe, SPACE I 2003, Table 1

European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics 2006, Table 1.2.1

EU averages unweighted

Figure for Spain radically revised in 2006. Original figure of 967,035 increased to 2,144,155 in Eurostat 36/2009

Statistics in Focus

Prison population in EU countries, per 100,000 population and per 1,000 recorded crimes, 2001

Country	Prison Population	Prisoners per 100,000 pop	Estimated country population	Total recorded crimes	Prisoners per 1,000 recorded crimes	Recorded crimes per 100,000 population
EU Average		87			16.9	6,738
England and Wales	67,056	129	52,084,500	5,525,316	12.1	10,608
Northern Ireland	872	52	1,689,300	139,786	6.2	8,275
Scotland	6,137	121	5,064,200	421,093	14.6	8,315
Austria	7,059	87	8,150,835	522,710	13.5	6,413
Belgium	8,536	83	10,258,762	848,648	10.1	8,272
Denmark	3,105	58	5,352,815	473,290	6.6	8,842
Finland	3,110	60	5,175,783	361,105	8.6	6,977
France	47,005	77	59,039,173	4,061,792	11.6	6,880
Germany	70,203	85	82,280,551	6,363,865	11.0	7,734
Greece	8,343	76	10,939,771	439,630	19.0	4,019
Ireland (Eire)	3,019	79	3,840,834	86,621	34.9	2,255
Italy	55,743	96	57,844,924	2,163,830	25.8	3,741
Luxembourg	341	77	442,972	22,646	15.1	5,112
Netherlands	14,968	94	15,981,472	1,219,653	12.3	7,632
Portugal	13,210	128	10,356,117	372,170	35.5	3,594
Spain	46,594	116	41,116,842	1,015,640	45.9	2,470
Sweden	6,089	69	8,875,053	1,189,393	5.1	13,402

Source: Home Office, International Comparisons of Crime 2001, HOSB 12/03

Belgian crime is for 2000

EU averages unweighted

Prison population in EU countries, per 100,000 population and per 1,000 recorded crimes, 2000

Country	Prison Population	Prisoners per 100,000 pop	Estimated country population	Total recorded crimes	Prisoners per 1,000 recorded crimes	Recorded crimes per 100,000 population
EU Average		87			17.7	6,625
England and Wales	65,666	124	52,939,000	5,170,843	12.7	9,762
Northern Ireland	1,011	60	1,697,800	119,912	8.4	7,095
Scotland	5,868	115	5,114,600	423,172	13.9	8,297
Austria	6,861	84	8,127,024	560,306	12.2	6,909
Belgium	8,524	83	10,239,085	848,648	10.0	8,279
Denmark	3,240	61	5,330,020	504,231	6.4	9,443
Finland	2,887	56	5,181,115	385,797	7.5	7,448
France	48,835	80	58,746,500	3,771,849	12.9	6,405
Germany	79,507	97	82,142,684	6,264,723	12.7	7,620
Greece	8,038	76	10,521,669	369,137	21.8	3,502
Ireland (Eire)	2,887	76	3,790,000	73,276	39.4	1,933
Italy	54,579	94	57,679,895	2,205,782	24.7	3,819
Luxembourg	400	92	435,700	22,816	17.5	5,185
Netherlands	13,847	87	15,940,815	1,173,688	11.8	7,368
Portugal	12,728	124	9,997,590	363,294	35.0	3,558
Spain	45,309	114	39,852,651	923,269	49.1	2,339
Sweden	5,678	64	8,882,800	1,214,968	4.7	13,678

Sources: Home Office Statistical Bulletin 5/02, July 2002

OECD Health Data

EU averages unweighted