

# Scotland's prison population

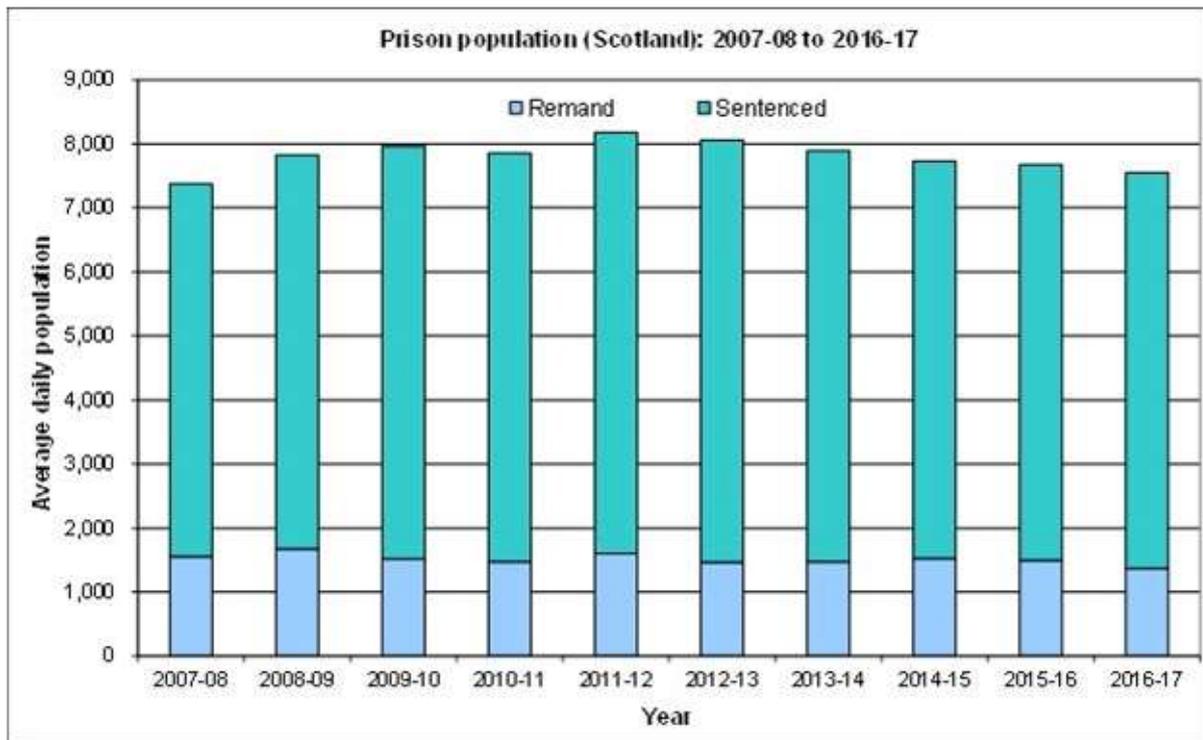
## How many people are in prison in Scotland?

There are just over 8,000 people in prison in Scotland on any given day. Each year, around 18,000 people are released from prison. [Figures for April 2019](#) showed there were **8,213 prisoners** held in prisons across Scotland. Exact numbers change from day to day, and even within each day.



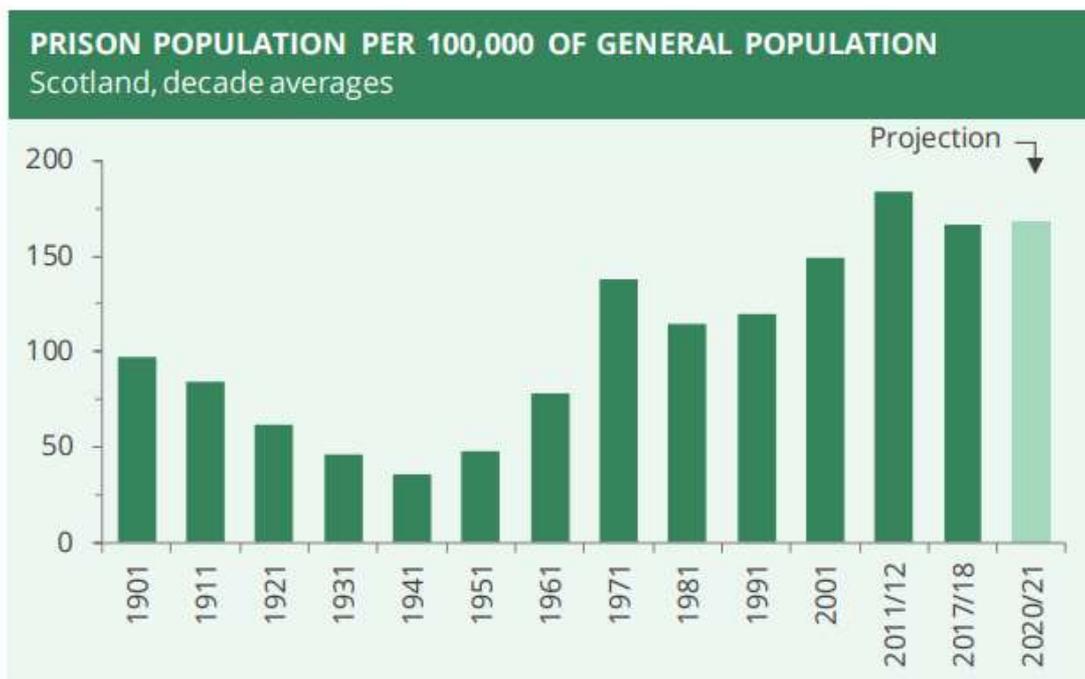
HMP & YOI Grampian

[Scotland has 15 prisons](#). 13 prisons are managed by the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and two are managed privately under contract to the SPS. The majority of prisons are located across the Central Belt of Scotland (this is also the most densely populated section of the country), though there are prisons across the country.



Source: Prison Statistic Scotland <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Crime-Justice/TrendPris>

### What is Scotland's imprisonment rate?



Source: [UK Prison Population Statistics](#), House of Commons Library (July 2019)

As is outlined in the [2008 Scottish Prisons Commission Report](#) and [The Scottish Prisons Commission: 10 Years On report](#), Scotland has one of the highest rates of imprisonment in Europe.

**International comparison**

The [World Prison Brief](#) provides the most comprehensive source of information about prison populations around the world. You can use it to generate comparisons between countries. Among Northern European countries, the most recent figures (Sept. 2018) show Scotland has a higher imprisonment rate (prisoners per 100,000 population) than all of its nearby neighbours:

European Country	Prison Population	Prison Population Rate
Iceland	131	37
Finland	2,842	51
Sweden	5,979	59
Denmark	3,635	63
Norway	3,373	63
Northern Ireland	1,435	76
Ireland	3,816	78
England and Wales	83,014	140
<b>Scotland</b>	<b>7,771</b>	<b>143</b>
Estonia	2,575	195
Latvia	3,765	195
Lithuania	6,544	235

Look at global highest to lowest prison population lists and make your own comparison of Scotland to the rest of the world, using the World Prison Brief database, maintained by [the International Prisons Research Centre website](#).

You can see the prison population and imprisonment rates across different continents, and also for specific populations of prisoner such as foreign prisoners, women, juveniles/youths and those who are remanded, as well as occupancy levels, differences in population size, countries cannot be properly compared using this measure.

## Understanding rising imprisonment rates

Over the past twenty years, many countries in the world have seen increasing rates of imprisonment, while levels of crime have actually fallen. The suggested reasons for increases in Scotland's prison population are presented below.

However, it is important to consider that changes in imprisonment rates in any country do not *just happen*. Penal policy (policy on punishment, the length of sentences and more) shapes these rates, and the political and social climate of any society at a given time shapes the penal policy.

As the [International Prisons Research Centre](#) website shows, there is considerable variation between different countries.

### Examples

#### The USA

Over the past 30 years there has been a rapid and vast expansion of the imprisonment rate in the USA, which has been called "*mass incarceration*" by criminologist **David Garland**. The USA is home to 5% of the world's total population, yet 25% of its prison population. In July 2015, President Barack Obama gave a speech calling for an end to *mass incarceration*, commenting on, among other things, the scale of the problem, the disproportionate impact of imprisonment on 'communities of colour', and sub-standard prison conditions. To see a verbatim (word for word) transcript of this, [click here](#).

## Scandinavia

Scandinavian countries have some of the lowest imprisonment rates in the world. This phenomenon, coupled with Scandinavia's quite unique and committed focus to the rehabilitative function of prison (see [SCCJR 'What's prison for?'](#)) has been referred to by some academics as '*Nordic exceptionalism*'.

[This academic paper](#) offers a comprehensive insight into the nature and roots of '*Nordic exceptionalism*'.

What is particularly interesting is that Finland was previously an exception to this '*Nordic exceptionalism*'. Until the 1970s, Finland had one of the highest rates of imprisonment in Western Europe, similar to the current level in Scotland. However, there was a shift in penal policy: a move away from a punitive approach to justice, and a move towards rehabilitation, which was supported by a belief that criminal policy and social policy should be closely linked. A "[conscious, long-term and systematic criminal policy](#)" has meant that Finland's imprisonment rate is now similar to the rest of Scandinavia.

In the 2008 [Scottish Prisons Commission Report](#), Finland was referred to as a

## Why have we seen such increases in Scotland's prison population in recent years?

*These are due to an:*

- Increase in the average sentence length, which has increased the long-term prison population
- Increase in the number of custodial sentences for those convicted of less serious offences
- Increase in the number of remand prisoners (see below)
- Increase in recalls from supervision or license (and a decrease in the number of long-term prisoners granted parole)
- Steady rise in average daily prison population over the last year (April 2018-March 2019) from approximately 7,500 to 8,200.
- The main growth is in male prisoners, sentenced and remand
- Home Detention Curfew (HDC) restrictions have had a large impact with a nearly 80% drop in use from 300 to 50 on HDC at any given time over a year

- The average custodial sentence in days was 263 in 2008-09; in 2017-18 it was 318 days (21% increase)
- The average length for housebreaking has more than doubled from 6 months to one year, handling an offensive weapon has tripled from 3 months to more than a year since the early 1990's
- The average time served for murder has also increased from 8-9 years in early 1970's to nearly 20 years today.
- 20 years ago nearly 30% of lifers received parole, today 12% do.

These figures come against a backdrop of long term decline in crime (with exception of convictions for sexual offences including historic) and a long term decline in convictions (66% drop over the last decade) and prosecutions. There has also been a drop in the use of short term sentences (of three months or less) from 41% of all custodial sentences to 27%.

**Long term prisoners:** those serving sentences of four years or more.

### Are there areas of Scotland with higher rates of imprisonment than others?

[Scottish Government Prison Statistics and Population Projections for Scotland, 2012-2013](#)

(see page 30) show that:

- The incarceration per 100,000 (16 years+ population) is the highest for Dundee (322), followed by Glasgow (313) and West Dunbartonshire (265)
- Inverclyde (207), North Lanarkshire (205), Renfrewshire (204) and North Ayrshire (200) also have relatively high imprisonment rates
- Aberdeenshire has the lowest imprisonment rate in Scotland (49) followed by East Dunbartonshire (55) the Orkney Islands (61) and East Renfrewshire (67).

Dr Ben Matthews (University of Edinburgh) wrote a paper, [‘Is the relationship between imprisonment and deprivation in Scotland at its most pronounced in Glasgow?’](#) which was published by Howard League for Penal Reform (April 2019) and illustrates how inequality affects areas with high imprisonment rates and how changing patterns of inequality in Scottish society filter through the justice system.

### What are the characteristics of prisoners?

Some key facts from the [Prisoner Survey 2017](#)

- 62% of prisoners have children (see [SCCJR ‘Impact of crime: prisoners’ families’](#)).
- 39% were drunk at the time of the offence and 38% said they were under the influence of drugs.
- Under one fifth of prisoners reported having used new psychoactive substances while in prison (18%) with synthetic cannabis again being the most commonly used (78%), followed by a hallucinogen (23%).

- 34% reported having a disability.
- 26% reported that during their upbringing they had been in care.

We also know that prisoners are often from Scotland's most deprived communities: In 2005, Robert Houchin and researchers from Glasgow Caledonian University [produced a report on social exclusion and imprisonment in Scotland.](#)

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) identifies five types of deprivation:

- Income Deprivation
- Employment Deprivation
- Health Deprivation and Disability
- Education, Skills and Training Deprivation
- Geographical Access to Services

[For more information on SIMD](#)

Houchin and his colleagues found that the imprisoned population of Scotland comes disproportionately from the most deprived communities in Scotland (those which score highly on SIMD). In addition, they found that the probability of imprisonment increases with increasing deprivation.

Deprivation itself does not cause people to end up in prison. There are people in prison who have not experienced multiple deprivation, and there are lots of people who have experienced multiple deprivation who have not been to prison. The Houchin report suggested a new idea: that living in a deprived area exposes people to a greater risk of being imprisoned, just as people in deprived communities are at greater risk for poor air quality. That is, there is something about the way communities are supported, and the way services are made available to them (including more or less punitive courts, or heavy or reduced policing), that affects the chances of going to prison, at least as much as the level of crime. [Scottish Prisons Commission: 10 Years On](#)

- **About 95% of prisoners are male**

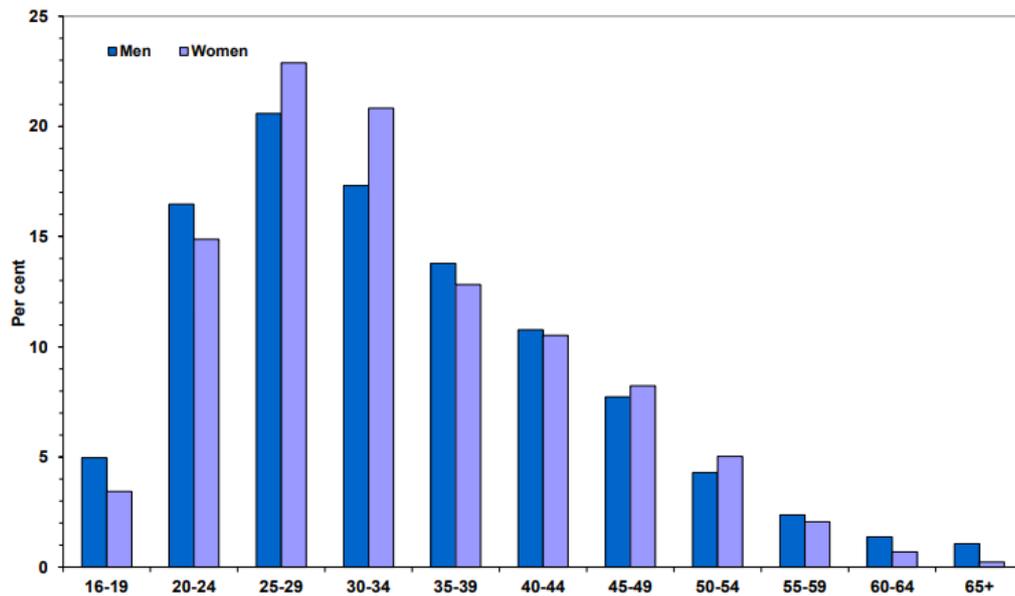
There are 400 women in prison in Scotland, 100 of whom are currently on remand, meaning women account for just 5% of the prison population (see [SCCJR 'Women in prison'](#))

- **Most prisoners are young**

For example, in the Houchin study, 42% of the sample was under 30, and 72% under 36. According to the Scottish Prison Service as of August 2019 the average age of male prisoners was 37 and female prisoners were 36.

The graph below shows the age distribution of prisoners by sex and age. Detailed information about the age of prisoners has not been available since 2013. At 30 June

2013 (the latest available data) around 59% of prisoners were under the age of 35. Just over one-fifth of prisoners were under the age of 25.



Age distribution of prisoner by sex, Justice Analytical Services, Scottish Government (figures June 2013)

- **Most prisoners are white (around 98%)**

Like Scotland, which is The proportion of black and minority ethnic (BME) individuals in prison is numerically proportionate to the general population. Unlike in other jurisdictions, notably the USA, BME individuals are not over-represented in the prison population in Scotland (information from [Prison Health in Scotland](#))

- **Prisoners' health**

In 2011 the responsibility for healthcare in Scotland's prisons was transferred to NHS Scotland. In 2017 the Scottish Parliament's Healthcare and Sports Committee produced a report, [Healthcare in Prisons](#), which concluded that the overriding impression the committee had was of a population which had been "very much underserved by the change in responsibilities" and that they were "disappointed to discover the unique opportunity to address health inequalities within the prison environment is not being taken." In response to a letter from Lewis Macdonald MSP, Joe Fitzpatrick MSP, Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing gave [a full update](#) on what has happened in the years since the report was produced.

### What about remand prisoners?

The prison population includes individuals who have been **remanded in custody**.

According to a 2009 report by the [Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research \(SCCJR\)](#), "Scotland has a remand problem" given that the number of people entering prison on remand each year is higher than the number entering to serve a sentence.

This continues to be a problem in 2019. [Scottish Prison Service \(SPS\)](#) figures from April 2019 show there were:

- 1368 'untried' male adults and 77 'untried' female adults being held in prisons across Scotland.
- There were 82 untried young offenders (under 21). In addition there were 256 individuals who had been convicted in court and were being held in prison awaiting sentencing.

The total prison population is approximately: 8,213. This means that in April 2019, approximately 20.7% of prisoners in Scotland were not yet convicted or were awaiting sentencing.

Remand: the imprisonment of individuals prior to trial or after they have been convicted but are waiting to be sentenced

### **Why is this a problem?**

According to the 2009 SCCJR Report Prisons and Sentencing Reform: Developing Policy in Scotland

Many of those remanded will either be found 'not guilty' or will receive a non-custodial sentence. This raises the question of why they were remanded in custody in the first place.

- Overcrowding is an issue in the accommodation of remand prisoners, and overcrowding poses a number of problems.
- Remanding an individual in custody is one of the most expensive ways of monitoring them prior to trial.

### **Further Reading**

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Houchin R (2005) *Social Exclusion and Imprisonment in Scotland A Report*. Available from: <http://www.scotpho.org.uk/downloads/SocialExclusionandImprisonmentinScotland.pdf>

International Prisons Research Centre Website, World Prison Brief, online database. Available from: <http://www.prisonstudies.org/>

Lappi-Seppälä, T. (2008) *Controlling Prisoner Rates: Experiences from Finland*, 13<sup>th</sup> International Senior Seminar, Visiting Experts' Papers, Resource Materials Series 74. Available from: [http://www.unafei.or.jp/english/pdf/RS\\_No74/No74\\_05VE\\_Seppala1.pdf](http://www.unafei.or.jp/english/pdf/RS_No74/No74_05VE_Seppala1.pdf)

Pratt J (2008) *Scandinavian Exceptionalism in An Era of Penal Excess* *British Journal of Criminology* 48 119-137. Available from: <http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/jus/ikrs/KRIM4001/h09/undervisningsmateriale/pratt1.pdf>

Royal College Nursing Scotland (2016) *Five Years On: Royal College Nursing Scotland Review of the Transfer of Prison Health Care from the Scottish Prison Service to NHS Scotland*. Available from: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/about-us/policy-briefings/sco-pol-five-years-on>

SCCJR and SPIF (Lightowler, C. and Hare, D.) (2009) *Prisons and Sentencing Reform: Developing Policy in Scotland* Available from: [http://www.sccjr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Report\\_2009\\_02\\_-\\_Prisons\\_and\\_Sentencing\\_Reform.pdf](http://www.sccjr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Report_2009_02_-_Prisons_and_Sentencing_Reform.pdf)

SCCJR (2018), SPC10 briefing link

Scholin, L, Holloway, A, Schwannauer, M, McKinstry, B. (2018) *Research on health in prison settings in Scotland - a colloquium*. Available from: [https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/briefing\\_report\\_prison\\_health\\_colloquium.pdf](https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/briefing_report_prison_health_colloquium.pdf)

Scottish Government (2012) *Statistical Bulletin, Crime and Justice Series, A National Statistics Publications for Scotland, Prison Statistics and population projections for Scotland, 2011-2012*. Available from: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0039/00396363.pdf>

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Scottish Prisons Commission (2008) *'Scotland's Choice'*. Available from: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/230180/0062359.pdf>

Scottish Prison Service Website, especially 'Prisons' section. Available from: <http://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Prisons/Prisons.aspx>

Scottish Prison Service Prisoner Survey 2017. Available from: [http://www.sps.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?fileName=16th+PRISONER+SURVEY+20175752\\_2702.pdf](http://www.sps.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?fileName=16th+PRISONER+SURVEY+20175752_2702.pdf)

White House (2015) *Remarks by the President at the NAACP Conference*. Available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/14/remarks-president-naacp-conference>

*Updated August 2019*

*SCCJR's learning resources for schools (Modern Studies) were initially developed by Rebecca Foster and Greg Duncan. They are regularly reviewed and updated by SCCJR researchers. Any queries (including notes of broken links, ideas for development and new topics) about these resources should be sent to [enquiries@sccjr.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@sccjr.ac.uk) )*

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