

Beyond the Prison Gate

An Analysis of Incarceration and
Reintegration in Morocco

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At a Glance

While some European countries were closing prisons and even renting unused cells to their neighbours, Morocco was moving in the opposite direction. The result is not simply overcrowding, but a deeper policy paradox: Morocco has become increasingly effective at managing incarceration without sufficiently questioning why it produces so much of it. This report examines the policies and institutions behind that trajectory and argues that the next generation of reform must shift from managing incarceration to decentralizing reintegration, reducing unnecessary imprisonment while moving reintegration closer to communities, opportunities and ordinary social life. The question is no longer how Morocco can manage more prisoners, but why it needs so many in the first place.

Keywords: Morocco; incarceration; penal policy; prison overcrowding; criminal justice reform; DGAPR; pre-trial detention; alternative sentencing; decentralised reintegration; community-based reintegration; former prisoners; civil society.

Overview

Morocco has a prison problem that cannot be explained simply by crime. Over roughly a decade, the Kingdom moved from 74,039 prisoners in 2015 to 105,094 at the end of 2024, an increase of approximately 42%. In 2000, Morocco held only 54,288 people in prison. By the end of 2025, despite the first significant decline in a decade, the prison population still stood at 99,366. Morocco has therefore almost doubled its prison population since 2000.

This trajectory has placed the Kingdom among Africa's most incarceration-intensive criminal justice systems. It is important to be precise: Morocco is not literally the country with Africa's highest imprisonment rate. Rwanda records a substantially higher rate, while South Africa also has a larger prison population and a comparable or higher incarceration rate depending on the year and methodology used. The significance of the Moroccan case lies elsewhere: in the speed, persistence and institutionalisation of its carceral expansion.

The central policy question is therefore no longer simply why Morocco has so many prisoners. It is why imprisonment has become such a routine instrument of Moroccan criminal policy and whether every person entering prison actually needs to be there. The paradox is that when some European countries were closing prisons, Morocco was filling them.

Over the past two decades, some European criminal justice systems demonstrated that prison populations can be deliberately reduced through changes in penal policy, greater reliance on probation and non-custodial sanctions, and declining use of imprisonment.

The Netherlands provides perhaps the clearest example. Between 2006 and 2022, its prison population fell from 20,463 to 10,899, almost 47%. The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture attributed the decline not only to falling crime but also to changes in penal policy and greater use of probation and alternatives to custody. The decline became so pronounced that prisons were closed.

The Netherlands eventually found itself in the unusual position of possessing more prison capacity than domestic prisoners. Spare capacity was temporarily rented to other European states. Belgium used Tilburg prison for up to 650 Belgian prisoners, while Norway rented 242 places at Norgerhaven from 2015.

Norway's experience is equally instructive. Faced with a temporary capacity shortage and a backlog of custodial sentences, it did not assume that constructing more domestic prisons was the only available response. It temporarily rented Dutch capacity while renovating its own estate and addressing its capacity constraints.

These arrangements were temporary, and Europe should not be romanticised. The Netherlands itself has again experienced serious prison-capacity pressures in recent years. Nor can Dutch or Norwegian criminal policy simply be transplanted into Morocco. But the comparison demonstrates something fundamental:

The size of a prison population is not simply a mechanical reflection of the amount of crime in society. It is also the cumulative result of policy choices about arrest, prosecution, pre-trial detention, sentencing, alternatives to custody, conditional release and reintegration.

While some European systems were asking how to reduce their reliance on imprisonment, Morocco was moving in the opposite direction.

If Morocco defines its problem as prison overcrowding, the apparent solution is to build more prisons. But If it defines its problem as excessive reliance on incarceration, an entirely different policy agenda emerges: reducing unnecessary pre-trial detention, expanding alternative sentences, developing probation, electronic monitoring and community service, increasing conditional release, treating drug dependence outside prison where appropriate, strengthening restorative approaches and investing in community-based reintegration.

Morocco has too often followed the reverse logic. From 54,000 to more than 100,000 The long-term curve of incarceration in Morocco tells the story.

According to World Prison Brief data, Morocco's prison population stood at approximately 54,288 in 2000, 64,877 in 2010, 74,941 in 2014, 83,757 in 2018 and 97,204 in 2022. It subsequently crossed the symbolic threshold of 100,000 before reaching 105,094 at the end of 2024. The growth of incarceration considerably outpaced the capacity of the prison estate.

At the end of 2024, approximately 105,094 prisoners were being accommodated against roughly 65,152 available places, producing an occupancy level of approximately 161%.

By the end of 2025, despite a reduction in the prison population, World Prison Brief still recorded 99,366 prisoners against an official capacity of 64,812, equivalent to an occupancy rate exceeding 153%.

Building prisons may relieve immediate overcrowding. It may replace obsolete facilities and improve dignity, hygiene, healthcare and security. All of that is necessary. But it cannot answer the more fundamental question of why so many people are being incarcerated in the first place.

Morocco cannot simply build its way out of mass incarceration. The real issue is the volume of imprisonment.

One of the most revealing statistics comes from the Moroccan government itself. When presenting the legislation introducing alternative sentences, the Ministry of Justice acknowledged that prisoners serving sentences of less than two years constituted close to half of the prison population.

Morocco's prison population is not predominantly the consequence of exceptionally long sentences imposed on the most dangerous offenders. A significant proportion of prison pressure comes from the routine use of comparatively short custodial sentences.

This produces an obvious policy paradox. Short sentences are long enough to disrupt employment, income, education and family relationships and to expose individuals to the stigma of imprisonment. Yet they may simultaneously be too short for meaningful rehabilitation, vocational training, treatment and preparation for release.

The state therefore incurs the considerable financial and social cost of imprisonment while sometimes obtaining relatively little rehabilitative return. So the question should consequently move from: *Why is there so much crime?* to: *Why does the criminal justice system respond to so much offending with imprisonment?* These are fundamentally different policy questions.

Drugs and property offences feed the prison pipeline. The composition of Morocco's prison population reinforces this argument.

The Délégation Générale à l'Administration Pénitentiaire et à la Réinsertion (DGAPR) figures presented in 2025 indicated that drug-related offences accounted for approximately 28.39% of prisoners, or around 27,162 people, while property offences accounted for approximately 28.07%, representing around 26,854 prisoners. Together, those two broad categories represented more than 56% of the offences associated with the prison population.

The above findings do not mean drug offences or property offences are insignificant. Drug trafficking networks, organised criminality, violent robbery and serious repeat offending require effective criminal justice responses, including imprisonment where necessary. But broad categories can obscure crucial distinctions.

Drug consumption is not equivalent to international drug trafficking. Petty theft is not equivalent to organised armed robbery. The policy question therefore becomes: how many people within these categories genuinely need to be incarcerated to protect society, and how many could be punished, treated, supervised and rehabilitated more effectively outside prison?

For decades, Moroccan penal practice offered comparatively limited operational space between fines, acquittal and imprisonment. The consequence was predictable: prison became the ordinary currency of punishment.

The implementation of alternative sentencing therefore represents an important opportunity, but its success should not be measured by the existence of the legislation. It should be measured by whether it actually reduces prison admissions and the incarceration rate.

Pre-trial detention: incarceration before conviction

The second major driver has historically been extensive reliance on pre-trial detention. World Prison Brief data put pre-trial detainees at approximately 37.6% of Morocco's prison population at the end of 2023. In 2020, the proportion reached approximately 45.7%. At certain points, therefore, almost one prisoner in two had not received a final conviction. This is critical to understanding how prison populations are produced.

Overcrowding does not begin at the prison gate. It begins with decisions made in police stations, prosecution offices and courts: whether to arrest, whether to prosecute, whether to request detention, whether provisional release represents an acceptable risk, how quickly a case is processed and ultimately what sentence is imposed.

Recent developments demonstrate that these choices can change. Moroccan prosecution authorities reported that pre-trial detention had fallen to 31.79% at the end of 2024, its lowest level in at least a decade, which is significant progress. This progress followed a more deliberate policy of rationalising pre-trial detention, including closer statistical monitoring of detention decisions, greater scrutiny of the legality of committal orders, stronger central and regional coordination between judicial authorities, and more systematic follow-up of cases involving detainees. An important institutional step was the joint circular of 1 June 2023 between the Presidency of the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Supreme Council of the Judicial Power, which established monitoring commissions at local, regional and central levels.

The importance of pre-trial detention lies in the fact that it has historically been one of the principal mechanisms feeding prison overcrowding in Morocco. Academic analysis of Moroccan

prison data has linked overcrowding not only to the frequency with which pre-trial detention is ordered, but also to the length of judicial proceedings, repeated adjournments, court congestion and shortages of judges, all of which can extend the period an accused person spends in prison before a final determination of the case.

The reduction of the pre-trial detention therefore removed significant pressure from the prison system. Had the 45.70% pre-trial detention proportion recorded in 2020 still applied to the 105,094-person prison population of December 2024, roughly 48,000 prisoners would have been awaiting final adjudication. Instead, there were 33,405 pre-trial detainees.

Yet this achievement also reveals the limits of focusing on pre-trial detention alone. Despite reducing its share of the prison population to 31.79%, Morocco still ended 2024 with a record 105,094 prisoners, 2.4% more than in 2023, and a national prison occupancy rate of approximately 161%.

This apparent contradiction is one of the most important findings of the analysis. Morocco succeeded in substantially reducing one major source of prison overcrowding without solving the broader problem of over-incarceration. The explanation is that pre-trial detention represents only one part of the prison pipeline. At the end of 2024, 70,279 prisoners, 66.87% of the total, were serving final custodial sentences, compared with 33,405 in pre-trial detention. The centre of gravity of prison reform must therefore increasingly move beyond the question of *who is detained before trial* toward the equally important question of who receives a custodial sentence after conviction, for what offences, and for how long.

In all, the analysis proves the larger argument: incarceration rates are not inevitable consequences of criminality. They are partly products of institutional behaviour. When institutional behaviour changes, prison numbers can change. In other words, Morocco has begun successfully addressing one of the flows into prison. The next challenge is to address the overall volume of incarceration.

DGAPR: managing the crisis, but also normalizing it

Any serious analysis must therefore place the Délégation Générale à l'Administration Pénitentiaire et à la Réinsertion (DGAPR) within this wider institutional architecture.

DGAPR does not decide who is arrested, prosecuted, remanded in custody or sentenced to imprisonment. Those decisions occur upstream. It would therefore be analytically incorrect to blame the prison administration for Morocco's incarceration rate. But the opposite conclusion, that DGAPR simply inherits a problem created elsewhere, is equally insufficient.

The Conseil économique, social et environnemental (CESE) has characterised prison overcrowding as a structural phenomenon. The danger is that a structural problem of incarceration becomes institutionally translated into a capacity-management problem.

If the diagnosis is that Morocco lacks prison places, the answer is more prison places. If the diagnosis is that Morocco imprisons too many people for whom custody may not be necessary, the answer becomes criminal-justice reform. This distinction should be central to evaluating DGAPR.

A prison administration naturally seeks sufficient infrastructure for the population entrusted to it. But continually expanding capacity can produce a paradox: new prisons may alleviate overcrowding today while making a high-incarceration equilibrium easier to sustain tomorrow. This is what made Morocco over the years one of the highest-incarceration systems in Africa.

The persistence of overcrowding despite years of prison construction should itself trigger reconsideration of the model. Morocco needs adequate prisons, and it also needs fewer people unnecessarily entering them.

The reintegration paradox

DGAPR's own data expose another contradiction. The CESE reported an average period of detention of only 12.47 months in 2024, while also noting the difficulty that relatively short sentences create for meaningful reintegration.

This outcome produces a dysfunctional sequence. The state sends large numbers of people to prison for relatively short periods and then asks DGAPR to rehabilitate them within overcrowded institutions.

A twelve-month average detention period provides limited time to assess individual needs, address addiction or psychological vulnerabilities, deliver meaningful vocational training, maintain family relationships, prepare for employment and organise release.

DGAPR has nevertheless developed substantial programmes. In 2024, thousands of prisoners participated in literacy, vocational and agricultural training programmes. These efforts deserve recognition.

However, the relevant measure of success should no longer simply be how many programmes were delivered or how many prison staff or prisoners attended them. A modern reintegration system needs to know what happened afterwards. Did participants improve; did they find employment? Did they maintain stable housing? Were family relationships restored? Did they return to prison? Did vocational training correspond to actual labour-market opportunities? Did women experience different reintegration outcomes from men?

Without longitudinal outcome measurement, reintegration risks becoming an administrative output rather than a measurable social result.

Morocco is incarcerating people during their most economically productive years

The demographic composition of the prison population makes this even more important.

According to data considered by the CESE, approximately 76% of prisoners in 2024 were under 40, while nearly 45% were between 18 and 30 years old. Men represented approximately 97.4% of the prison population. Women represented 2.6%..

These figures should be treated as a national policy alarm. Morocco is incarcerating large numbers of people precisely during the years in which individuals ordinarily accumulate

education, professional skills, employment history, savings, social networks and family responsibilities. For serious offenders, incarceration may be necessary despite those costs.

For minor, non-violent and first-time offenders, however, prison can potentially intensify the very vulnerabilities associated with future offending: unemployment, stigma, family breakdown, educational interruption and economic marginalisation. The social cost of incarceration therefore extends far beyond the prison budget.

A prison sentence affects households, children, employers, neighbourhoods and eventually the labour market. This is why incarceration should be understood not simply as a criminal-justice intervention, but as a social and economic policy choice.

When institutions outlive the context that created them

The changing profile of incarceration also raises a more uncomfortable institutional question: are all the institutions created during an earlier period of Moroccan prison reform still adapted to the reintegration challenge Morocco faces today?

The Fondation pour la Réinsertion des Détenus, established in 2002, illustrates this question particularly well. The Foundation emerged during an important period in Morocco's political and human-rights evolution, when the country was reconsidering the relationship between detention, dignity, rehabilitation and reconciliation following the context of the *années de plomb* and the establishment of the national reconciliation process in the country. Its formal mandate was broader than political detention: education, vocational training, family support, assistance after release and the social and professional reintegration of former prisoners. Its creation represented genuine institutional progress.

The state was effectively acknowledging that its responsibility toward an incarcerated person does not necessarily end when the prison gate opens. But institutions should not be assessed solely according to the historical importance of their creation. They must also be evaluated against the problem that exists today. The Morocco of 2026 is not confronting the same penitentiary landscape as the Morocco of 2002.

A prison population exceeding 100,000, dominated by young men and characterised by large numbers of short sentences, drug-related offences, property offences and recurrent socioeconomic vulnerabilities creates a fundamentally different reintegration challenge. Reintegration has consequently moved beyond being predominantly a penitentiary problem. It has become a mass social-policy problem.

This evolution risks making elements of the traditional institutional model increasingly *désuet* unless their roles are reconsidered.

The paradox of an institution for “former detainees”

There is a deeper conceptual difficulty. Successful reintegration ultimately requires the former prisoner to stop being socially defined by imprisonment.

Yet specialised institutions built around the administrative identity of the *détenu* or *ancien détenu* (or even “*ancien pensionnaire d'un établissement pénitentiaire*”) can inadvertently

reproduce the very category they are intended to overcome. This is particularly important for women.

Women constitute a small minority of Morocco's prison population, but the stigma attached to female imprisonment can be especially severe. A woman leaving prison may confront family rejection, relationship breakdown, difficulty regaining custody or trust, economic dependence and employment discrimination. Asking such a woman to continue presenting herself to an institution publicly associated with “detainees” may therefore create an additional psychological, social and economic barrier.

She may prefer to approach an ordinary women's association, employment programme, cooperative, neighbourhood organisation or entrepreneurship initiative where she is treated primarily as a woman looking for employment, a mother rebuilding her family, an entrepreneur seeking capital or a citizen requiring assistance.

Stigma is itself a reintegration variable. If accessing assistance repeatedly requires a person to identify herself through her former prisoner status, the architecture of reintegration may inadvertently prolong the social identity that successful reintegration is supposed to dissolve.

Decentralizing reintegration would return the Foundation to its original vision

Decentralizing reintegration would not mean dismantling the original vision of the Foundation for the Reinsertion of Detainees. It would mean returning to it. The Foundation was conceived as a bridge between detention and society and as a mechanism for mobilising public institutions, the private sector and civil society around reintegration. Moroccan institutional reporting itself describes post-release support as a cross-cutting programme involving multiple public and private actors, rather than the responsibility of one specialised institution. This philosophy has also been expressed through the Foundation's message that reintegration is a responsibility shared by society.

There is an important institutional detail here that should not be overlooked: the head of the Foundation carries the title of “*Coordonnateur de la Fondation*” (Foundation Coordinator), rather than Director General or another title implying primarily executive service delivery. The title continues to be used officially in the Foundation's partnerships and activities. This is more than semantics. It points toward what should arguably be the Foundation's comparative advantage: coordinating a national reintegration ecosystem rather than becoming that ecosystem itself. Indeed, the National Coordinator has himself described the Foundation's approach in terms of mobilising the different components of society and building partnerships with public departments and national and international institutions.

The policy implication is therefore clear: if reintegration depends on all of us, as the Foundation's slogan says, it cannot belong to one institution. The Foundation should increasingly act as the national coordinator, catalyst and guarantor of reintegration, setting standards, mobilising resources, building referral mechanisms, generating evidence and financing or enabling local interventions, while much of the actual post-release support is delivered through municipalities, employers, mainstream social services, women's organisations, specialised NGOs, families and trusted community actors. This is particularly important where the label of *former prisoner* itself becomes an obstacle to reintegration. A woman leaving prison, for example, may be more likely

to seek assistance discreetly from a local women's organisation, employment programme or community association than from an institution publicly identified with *détenus*. Proximity can therefore achieve what institutional specialization sometimes cannot: support the individual without continually reproducing the identity of the prisoner.

Seen from this perspective, decentralization is not a retreat by the Foundation. It is an evolution from institutional ownership to national coordination; from delivering reintegration to making reintegration happen. The Foundation's success should ultimately be measured not by how many former prisoners remain connected to its structures, but by how effectively it enables them to reconnect with ordinary institutions and ordinary social life. The paradox of successful reintegration is that the institution responsible for enabling it should progressively become less visible in the life of the person reintegrated.

Civil society has something institutions struggle to reproduce: proximity

This is where civil society has demonstrated a structural advantage. Its comparative strength is not necessarily larger budgets or greater technical sophistication. It is proximity.

A local association can encounter a former prisoner within the ordinary geography of community life. Instead of asking: “*What services do we provide to former prisoners?*”, as it has been the case, it can ask: “*What prevents this particular person from participating normally in society?*” The answer might be employment. It might be addiction-rehabilitation. It might be housing. It might be family conflict. It might be documentation. It might be psychological support. It might simply be stigma.

Once the problem is effectively and accurately framed this way, the former prisoner becomes less important as an administrative category than the actual barriers preventing the individual from becoming socially and economically autonomous.

This is precisely where civil society, municipalities, local businesses, women's organisations, social workers and community actors can often operate more effectively than a centralised institution.

The policy conclusion should therefore not be that the Foundation has no role. Quite the contrary. Its role needs to become more strategic and less institutionally possessive of reintegration. Reintegration should begin in prison but disappear into normality.

A clearer division of labour is required. DGAPR should retain primary responsibility for rehabilitation inside prison and preparation for release. The Foundation could increasingly become the bridge between incarceration and ordinary society: financing community partners, developing case-management standards, mobilising employers, coordinating with ministries, ensuring continuity of healthcare and social assistance, and producing evidence about reintegration outcomes.

Civil society and mainstream public services should then assume a much larger role in long-term community reintegration.

Six months before release, for example, an individual reintegration assessment could examine documentation, housing, employment, education, healthcare, addiction, family relationships, debt and other vulnerabilities. The resulting plan should follow the person beyond the prison gate. But institutional responsibility should then progressively migrate away from the prison ecosystem.

A former prisoner requiring employment should eventually enter the ordinary employment system. A woman requiring economic empowerment should participate in mainstream women's programmes. A person experiencing drug dependence should primarily encounter the healthcare system. A young person requiring training should enter ordinary vocational structures.

Specialised expertise should remain available, but increasingly behind the service rather than on the sign above the door. The objective should be a warm handover rather than permanent attachment to a correctional identity. We could think that the theory of change of the Foundation must be framed as the institution being less and less needed. The measure of successful reintegration is therefore somewhat paradoxical: the more successful reintegration becomes, the less visible the prison system should be in the person's life.

The accountability problem extends beyond DGAPR

Morocco's incarceration crisis ultimately reflects fragmented governance. DGAPR can correctly argue that it does not determine prison admissions. Judges can correctly invoke judicial independence. Prosecutors can argue that detention is justified by the circumstances of individual cases. The Ministry of Justice can point toward legislative reform. The Foundation can argue that it intervenes principally after incarceration has already occurred. Each institution can therefore reasonably describe the prison population as partly the consequence of decisions taken elsewhere. Yet the collective outcome is more than 100,000 prisoners.

This is a classic problem of fragmented accountability. Morocco therefore needs a national incarceration strategy that transcends institutional mandates and establishes explicit, measurable objectives for reducing unnecessary imprisonment without compromising public safety.

The Ministry of Justice, Presidency of the Public Prosecutor's Office, judiciary, DGAPR, CNDH, The Foundation for the reinsertion of detainees and relevant social ministries should work against shared indicators.

These should include not only prison occupancy, but:

- incarceration per 100,000 inhabitants;
- admissions to prison;
- average length of pre-trial detention;
- proportion of defendants held on remand;
- number and profile of short custodial sentences;
- use of alternative sentences;
- conditional release rates;
- employment and housing after release;
- gender-specific reintegration outcomes; and
- recidivism at defined intervals following release.

This would transform prison data from an administrative record into an instrument of penal policy. The reform target should be incarceration, not merely overcrowding.

The central policy distinction here is that an overcrowding target asks: *How many additional prison places does Morocco need?* An incarceration target asks: *How many of the people entering Morocco's prisons actually need to be incarcerated?*

The second question is more challenging, but considerably more important. Morocco should consider establishing a medium-term national objective for reducing its incarceration rate while simultaneously monitoring violent crime, recidivism and public safety.

- Alternative sentencing should be evaluated according to how many unnecessary custodial sentences it actually replaces.
- Pre-trial detention reform should be assessed according to reductions in both its proportion and duration.
- DGAPR should increasingly be evaluated not only on prison security and conditions, but on measurable rehabilitation and release outcomes.
- The Foundation should evolve from a specialised structure associated primarily with former detainees toward a national platform enabling decentralised, discreet and proximity-based reintegration.
- Civil society should receive greater institutional space and predictable financing to provide community-based support.
- And ministries responsible for employment, health, education, housing and social protection should recognise reintegration as part of their ordinary public mandates rather than treating former prisoners as the exclusive responsibility of the penitentiary sector.
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From managing prisons to effective reintegration

Morocco has made genuine progress in prison administration. It has modernised facilities, developed educational and vocational programmes, introduced alternative sentencing, reduced pre-trial detention and constructed an institutional architecture around rehabilitation and reintegration. Those achievements should be recognised. However, they also create the risk of confusing better management of incarceration with successful penal policy. A country can have better prisons while still imprisoning too many people. It can deliver more rehabilitation programmes while continuing to generate more prisoners than those programmes can effectively reach. It can build sophisticated reintegration institutions while maintaining a former prisoner as a permanent administrative category.

The next generation of Moroccan penal reform therefore requires a conceptual shift: from prison capacity to incarceration reduction; from institutional rehabilitation to community reintegration; from counting activities to measuring outcomes; and from managing former prisoners as a category to addressing the vulnerabilities and micro-incidents that prevent individual citizens from rebuilding their lives.

This does not mean becoming “soft on crime.” On the contrary, prison capacity should be concentrated where incarceration serves its strongest legitimate purposes: protecting society from serious violence, organised criminality, persistent dangerous offending and other conduct

for which deprivation of liberty is genuinely necessary. For many other offenders, punishment can remain real and enforceable without necessarily being custodial. That distinction is ultimately what a mature criminal justice system must be capable of making.

The objective should therefore not be to empty Morocco's prisons. It should be to ensure that the people inside them genuinely need to be there. And for those who leave, the ultimate objective of reintegration should not be lifelong management as *anciens détenus*. Prison should remain an episode in their relationship with the state, not the institutional identity through which the state continues to see them.

Morocco has become increasingly capable of managing prisons. It now has an accredited training center in Tifelt entirely run through Moroccan expertise. The next challenge is considerably more ambitious: to govern incarceration itself and decentralize reintegration.

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