UNODC
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

UNODC-KOSTAT
Centre of Excellence for Statistics
on Crime and Criminal Justice
in Asia and the Pacific

REGIONAL OVERVIEW
2021

KEY FACTS

(ASIA-PACIFIC REGION AS OF 2019)

POPULATION COVERED

- **4.6 billion** people live in Asia-Pacific
- **60%** of the world's population

TOTAL PRISON POPULATION

- **5.47 million** people are in prison in Asia-Pacific: **46%** of the world's prison population
- Between 2000 and 2019, the total prison population in Asia-Pacific has increased by **41%**

GENDER DISPARITIES

- More than **380,000 women** are in prison in the region
- Female incarceration has **increased** more compared to male incarceration (2000-2019)

UNSENTENCED PRISONERS

- At least **1.1 million** unsentenced prisoners
- Approximately **1/3 of the world's** unsentenced prisoners are in Asia-Pacific

5.47 MILLION PEOPLE IN PRISON IN ASIA-PACIFIC: A **41% INCREASE** BETWEEN 2000 AND 2019

The population held in prisons **worldwide** has grown more than 25% between 2000 and 2019. In the **Asia and Pacific region**, home to approximately 60% of the world's population, the **prison population has increased more than 40%** during the same period, reaching 5.47 million people in 2019.

As the number of prisoners increase in a scenario of limited resources and competing priorities, implementing **policies that are effective to reduce crime** must be a priority for policymakers. Better policies require a clear understanding of the regional dynamics and the identification of best practices in each context. This is only possible with the collection of **reliable data** that can be used for **analysis** to inform decision-making.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) collects crime and criminal justice data through the **UN-CTS (United Nations Surveys on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems)**. This analysis examines data collected from the period between **2000 and 2019** on prison population in countries in the Asia and Pacific region. As a large and diverse region encompassing more than 50 countries, dynamics and responses to crime vary widely, and no single measure can address its complexity. This analysis presents an overview of the region and investigates the overall trends of prison population in different subregions in the Asia and Pacific region.
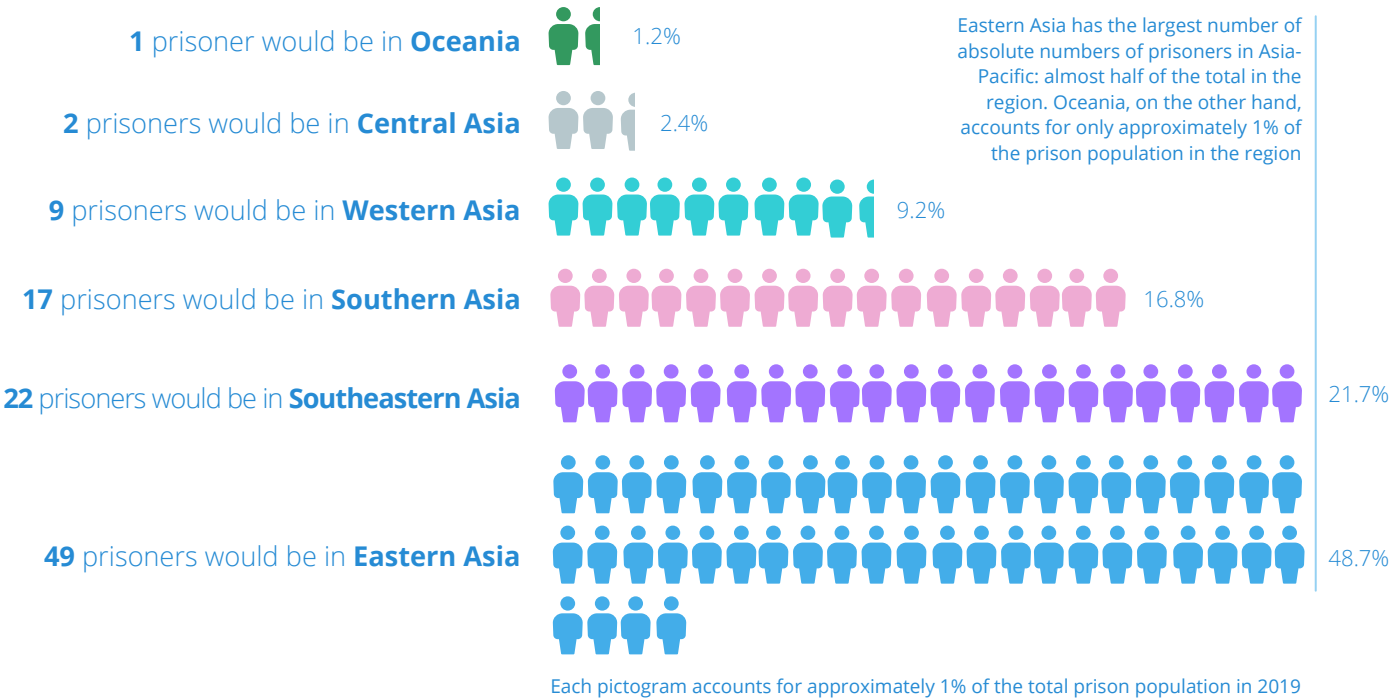
In the context of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, finding alternative solutions for detention and reducing prison overcrowding becomes even more critical to reduce the spread of the virus. Understanding the trends of prison population is an important first step to develop policies grounded on solid evidence. **Data** can inform decisions that improve the distribution of resources per prisoner, enhance the effectiveness of the criminal justice system, ensure compliance to the Mandela Rules for Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and promote rule of law at the national and international levels.

OVERVIEW | TOTAL PRISON POPULATION BY SUBREGIONS (2019)

The **5.47 million prisoners** in the Asia and Pacific region are not evenly distributed across its 6 subregions. Explore the below graphic to see how the different subregions contributed differently in 2019 to the total number of prisoners in Asia and Pacific.
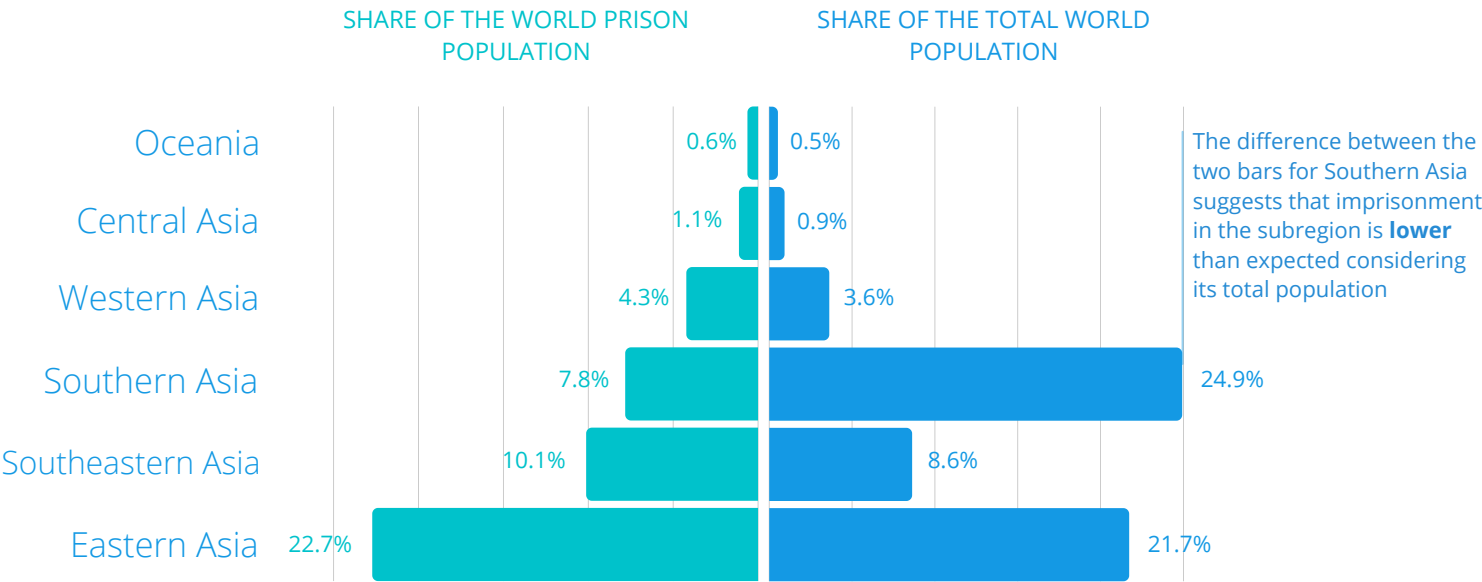
If the total prison population in the **Asia and Pacific region** were comprised of **100** prisoners, approximately...

1 prisoner would be in **Oceania**   1.2%

2 prisoners would be in **Central Asia**   2.4%

9 prisoners would be in **Western Asia**   9.2%

17 prisoners would be in **Southern Asia**   16.8%

22 prisoners would be in **Southeastern Asia**   21.7%

49 prisoners would be in **Eastern Asia**   48.7%

Eastern Asia has the largest number of absolute numbers of prisoners in Asia-Pacific: almost half of the total in the region. Oceania, on the other hand, accounts for only approximately 1% of the prison population in the region

Each pictogram accounts for approximately 1% of the total prison population in 2019

OVERVIEW | WORLD COMPARISON (2019)

However, comparisons using absolute numbers can be misleading due to the **different total population sizes** of subregions. While Oceania has a population of 42 million people, Eastern Asia, with 1.6 billion people, is 38 times larger. Since total population varies, it is expected that certain subregions will have more prisoners than others, due to the simple fact that they are home to more people.

One way to consider population differences is comparing the share that each subregion contributes to the **world prison population** and to the **total world population**. Compare the two bars to identify if the prison population in 2019 was expected or not considering the share of the total population of the subregion.

	SHARE OF THE WORLD PRISON POPULATION	SHARE OF THE TOTAL WORLD POPULATION
Oceania	0.6%	0.5%
Central Asia	1.1%	0.9%
Western Asia	4.3%	3.6%
Southern Asia	7.8%	24.9%
Southeastern Asia	10.1%	8.6%
Eastern Asia	22.7%	21.7%

The difference between the two bars for Southern Asia suggests that imprisonment in the subregion is **lower** than expected considering its total population

OVERVIEW | SUBREGIONAL IMPRISONMENT RATES (2019)

A more reliable measure for comparing imprisonment between different subregions is the **imprisonment rate,** which is adjusted to the population size. See below how this number is calculated and why it is important.

$$\text{IMPRISONMENT RATE} = \frac{\text{PRISON POPULATION OF THE SUBREGION}}{\text{TOTAL POPULATION OF THE SUBREGION}} \times 100{,}000$$

This simple formula gives us a measure that facilitates comparisons between different subregions. The imprisonment rate is a measure of prison population **proportional to the total population of the subregion**, allowing direct comparison adjusted to the different population sizes.

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

SDG 16 indicator 16.3.2. Unsentenced Detainees as a Proportion of Overall Prison Population

As part of the global commitment towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the collection of data on imprisonment allows us to compute the indicator **16.3.2.** This information can then be used to measure progress towards the promotion of rule of law and equal access to justice in countries, as well as for enhancing national understanding and channeling resources in a more rational manner.

The map below shows the sharp differences in imprisonment in different subregions of the Asia and Pacific region. In 2019, the overall imprisonment rate per 100,000 in Asia-Pacific was **118**, a number lower than the world total (152).

However, this does not mean that imprisonment rates are lower everywhere in Asia-Pacific when compared to the rest of the world. In fact, 5 out of 6 sub-regions have imprisonments rates **higher** than the world total.

The overall imprisonment rate is affected by variations between the sub-regions. For example, the low rate observed in Southern Asia influences the overall measure, hiding substantial differences between subregions.
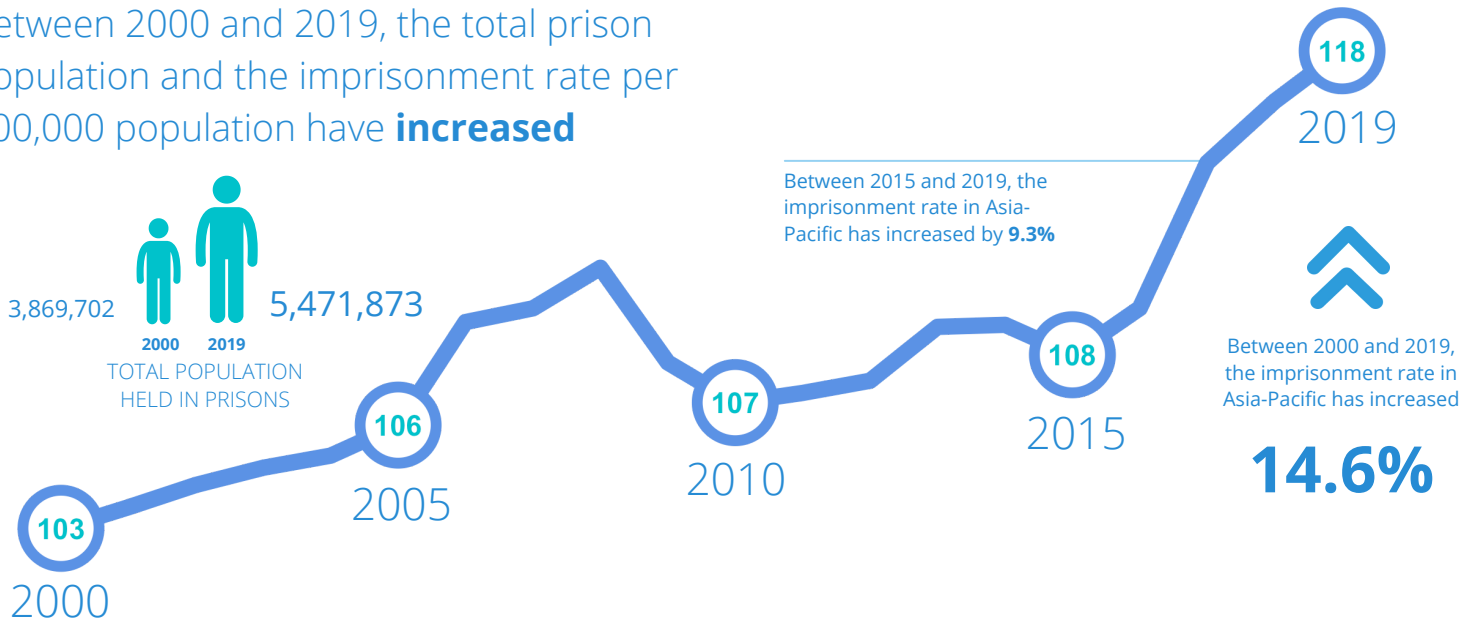
This highlights the importance of carrying out **analysis and comparisons at the subregional level**, especially in a large, diverse and complex region such as Asia-Pacific. Explore the below map to see the subregional differences in imprisonment rates.

Central Asia: 177

Western Asia: 183

Southern Asia: 48

South-eastern Asia: 179

Eastern Asia: 159

Oceania: 158
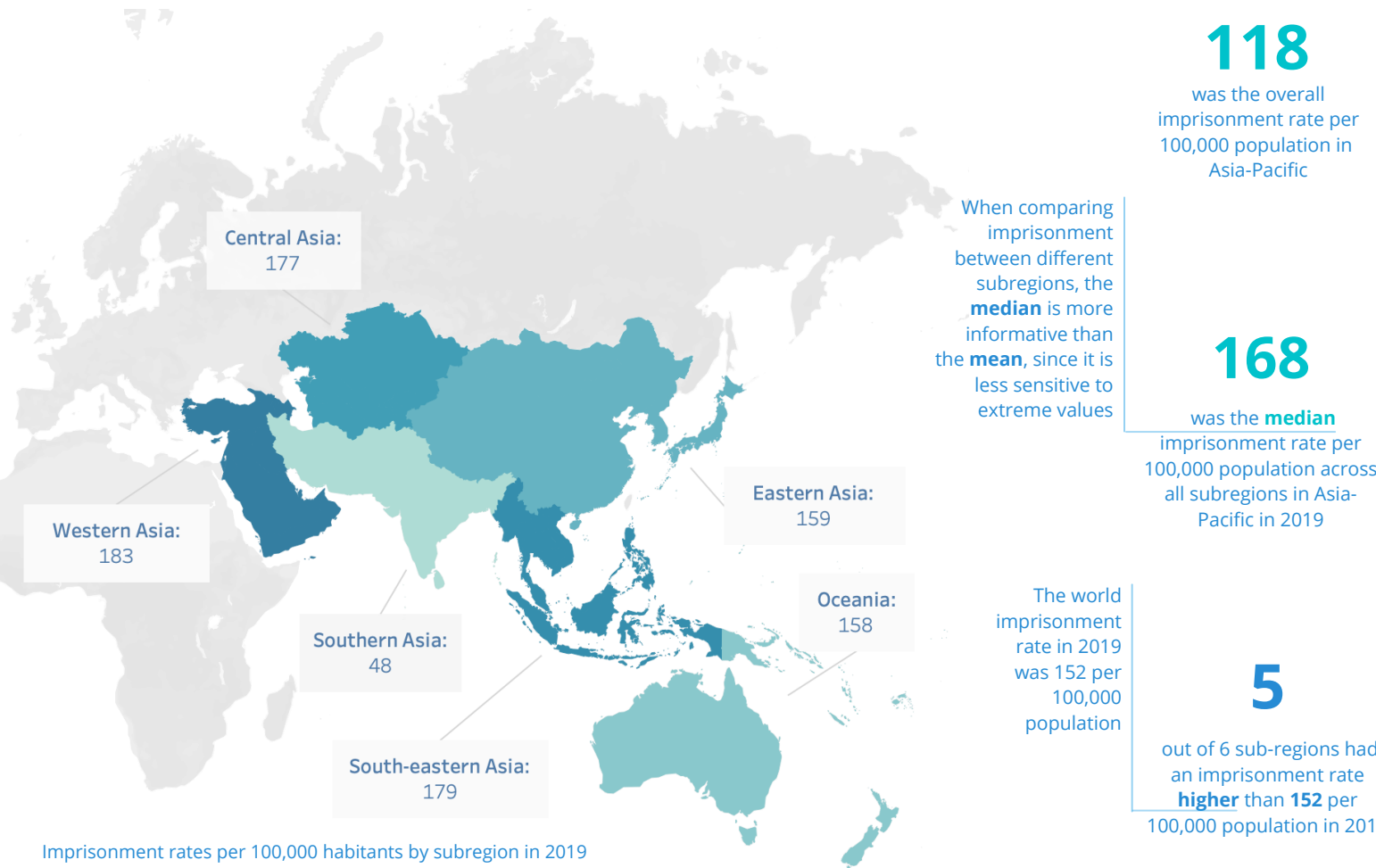
Imprisonment rates per 100,000 habitants by subregion in 2019

118 was the overall imprisonment rate per 100,000 population in Asia-Pacific

When comparing imprisonment between different subregions, the **median** is more informative than the **mean**, since it is less sensitive to extreme values

168 was the **median** imprisonment rate per 100,000 population across all subregions in Asia-Pacific in 2019

The world imprisonment rate in 2019 was 152 per 100,000 population

5 out of 6 sub-regions had an imprisonment rate **higher** than **152** per 100,000 population in 2019
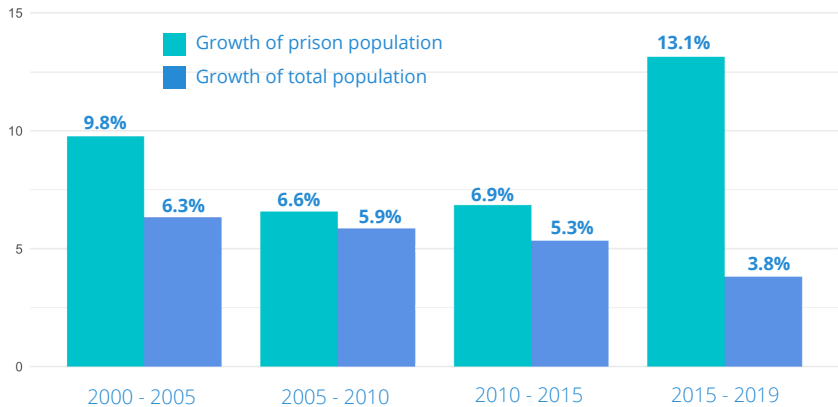
HISTORICAL TRENDS | REGIONAL ANALYSIS (2000-2019)

Between 2000 and 2019, the total prison population and the imprisonment rate per 100,000 population have **increased**
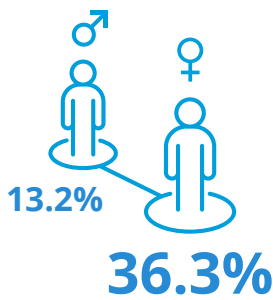
3,869,702   **2000**   **2019**   5,471,873
TOTAL POPULATION
HELD IN PRISONS

103 2000

106 2005

107 2010

108 2015

118 2019

Between 2015 and 2019, the imprisonment rate in Asia-Pacific has increased by **9.3%**

Between 2000 and 2019, the imprisonment rate in Asia-Pacific has increased

14.6%

Between 2000 and 2019, the total prison population in Asia-Pacific has increased more than **40%**. The line chart above shows the values adjusted for population growth (imprisonment rate per 100,000). Between 2000 and 2019, the rate has increased by **14.6%**: from 103 to 118. If we look at the most recent years, from 2015 to 2019, the increase is **9.3%.** This indicates that, in the last two decades, **the prison population in Asia-Pacific has grown at a faster pace than the overall population growth in the region.**

The bar chart below compares side by side the growth of **prison population** to **total population (including prisoner and non-prisoner population)** in the region (by five-year periods). By comparing the differences between the sizes of the bars, we identify that prison population growth has been outpacing total population growth.

Growth of prison population
Growth of total population

9.8% **6.3%** | 2000 - 2005
6.6% **5.9%** | 2005 - 2010
6.9% **5.3%** | 2010 - 2015
13.1% **3.8%** | 2015 - 2019

This suggests that **imprisonment is accelerating in recent years.** People in Asia-Pacific are being sent to prison at a higher rate today than in 2000, and at an increasingly faster pace during the last **five years**.
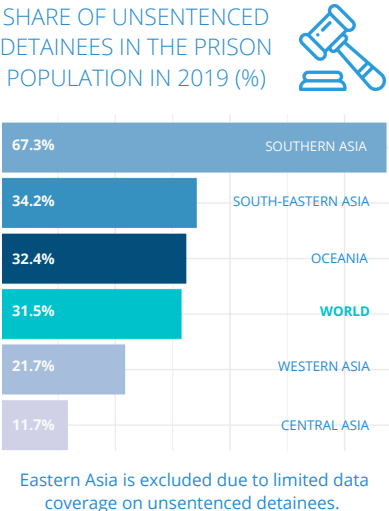
HISTORICAL TRENDS | DISAGGREGATION

13.2%

36.3%

Between 2000 and 2019, the female imprisonment rate per female population has **increased by 36.3%**, higher than for males.

Oceania is excluded due to limited data coverage on gender disaggregation.

The UN-CTS data has several levels of disaggregation, providing important details on subpopulations that can inform decision making. Two examples of disaggregation are presented here.

← Although the total female population in prisons is still small compared to the male one, there has been a substantial increase in female imprisonment rates in the past two decades.
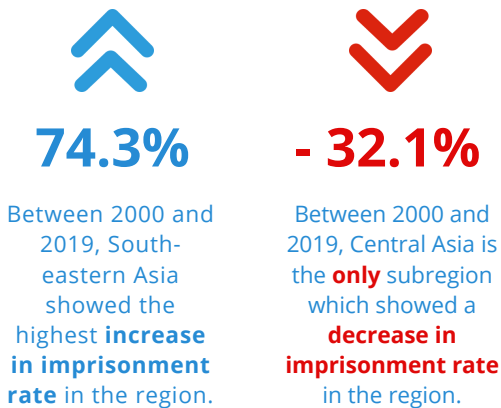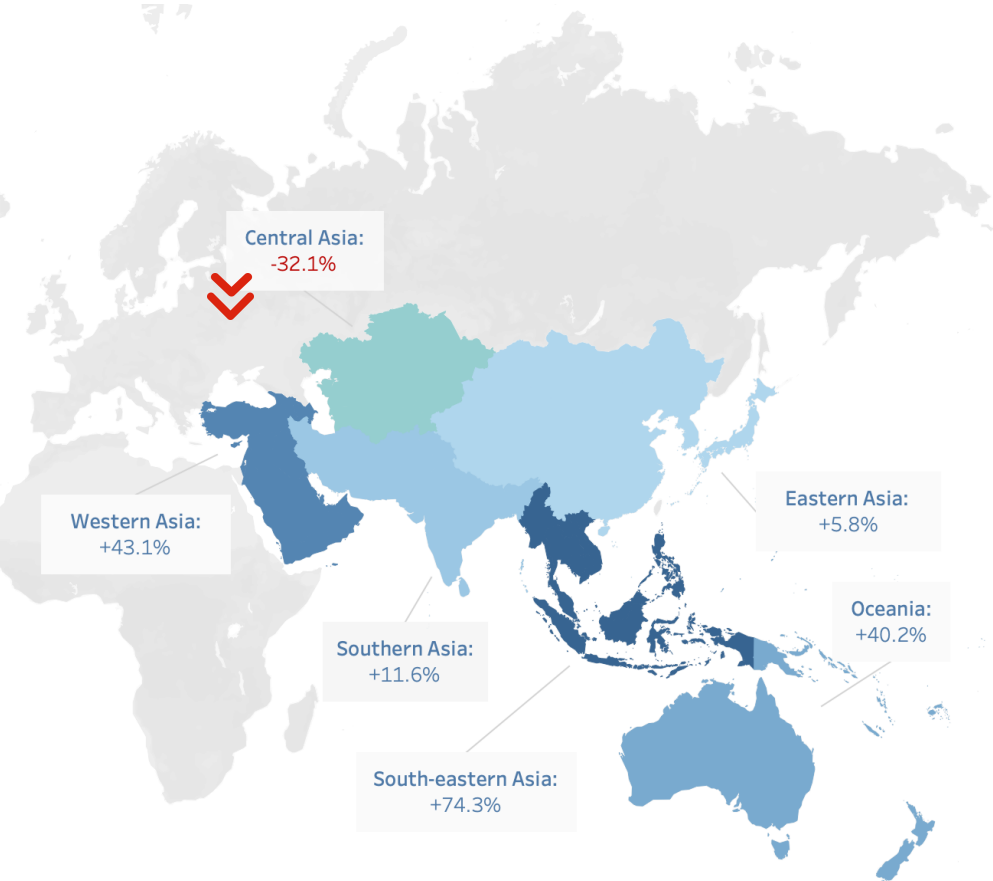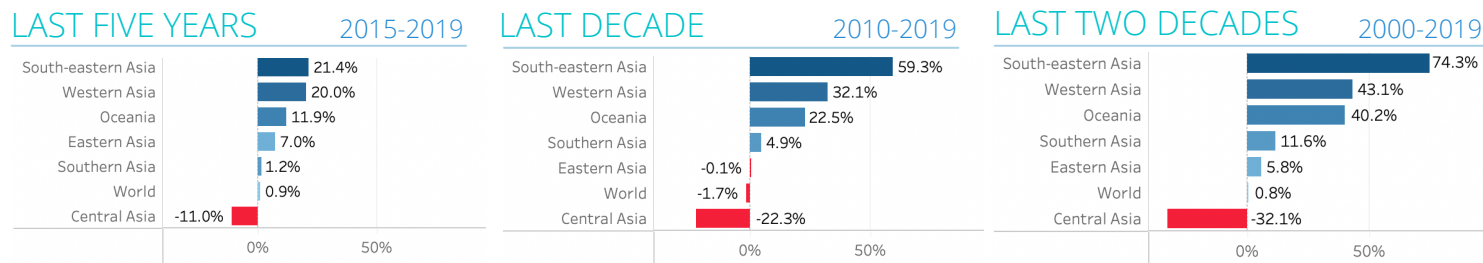
➡ In 2019, the proportion of unsentenced detainees varied significantly between different subregions

SHARE OF UNSENTENCED DETAINEES IN THE PRISON POPULATION IN 2019 (%)

67.3%	SOUTHERN ASIA
34.2%	SOUTH-EASTERN ASIA
32.4%	OCEANIA
31.5%	**WORLD**
21.7%	WESTERN ASIA
11.7%	CENTRAL ASIA

Eastern Asia is excluded due to limited data coverage on unsentenced detainees.

HISTORICAL TRENDS | SUBREGIONAL ANALYSIS (2000-2019)

Central Asia: -32.1%

Western Asia: +43.1%

Southern Asia: +11.6%

South-eastern Asia: +74.3%

Eastern Asia: +5.8%

Oceania: +40.2%

Change in imprisonment rates per 100,000 habitants by subregion between 2000 and 2019.

74.3%

Between 2000 and 2019, South-eastern Asia showed the highest **increase in imprisonment rate** in the region.

- 32.1%

Between 2000 and 2019, Central Asia is the **only** subregion which showed a **decrease in imprisonment rate** in the region.

Almost all subregions showed an increase in the imprisonment rate between 2000 and 2019, but the increase has not been the same. The map on the left and the bar charts below compare the changes to the imprisonment rates by subregions between 2000 and 2019.

CHANGE IN IMPRISONMENT RATES BY SUBREGION

LAST FIVE YEARS 2015-2019

Subregion	Change
South-eastern Asia	21.4%
Western Asia	20.0%
Oceania	11.9%
Eastern Asia	7.0%
Southern Asia	1.2%
World	0.9%
Central Asia	-11.0%

LAST DECADE 2010-2019

Subregion	Change
South-eastern Asia	59.3%
Western Asia	32.1%
Oceania	22.5%
Southern Asia	4.9%
Eastern Asia	-0.1%
World	-1.7%
Central Asia	-22.3%

LAST TWO DECADES 2000-2019

Subregion	Change
South-eastern Asia	74.3%
Western Asia	43.1%
Oceania	40.2%
Southern Asia	11.6%
Eastern Asia	5.8%
World	0.8%
Central Asia	-32.1%

The line chart below helps us visualize the **ups and downs of imprisonment rates in the different subregions** in the last two decades. Visualizations such as this can help us see fluctuations in time series that might otherwise be hidden by single measures. In order to have additional insights into the possible underlying patterns in the data, we can carry out several **statistical tests.** For identifying the existence of linear trends over the period, the Mann Kendall test was conducted.
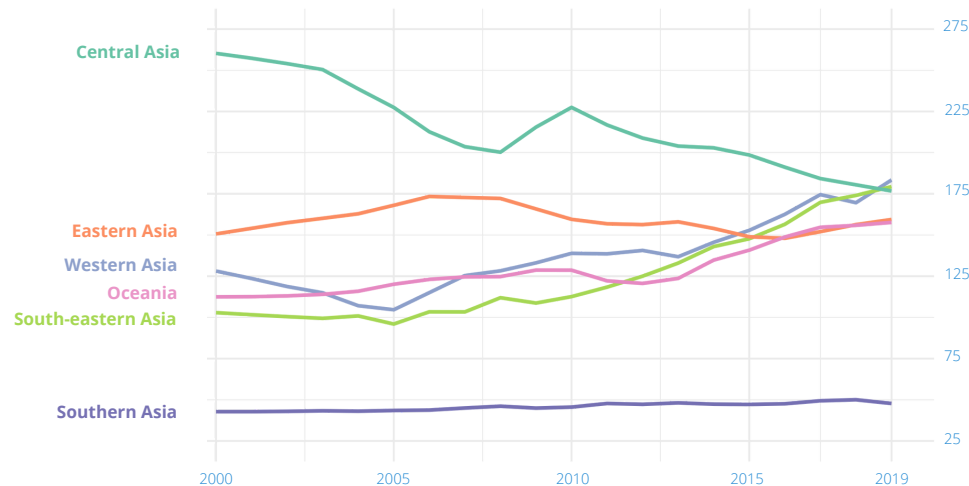
The **results** of the Mann Kendall test showed an increasing trend for 4 sub-regions (Oceania, South-eastern Asia, Southern Asia, and Western Asia), a decreasing trend for Central Asia, and no trend for Eastern Asia.

Although indicative of certain patterns, these results must be contextualized and can only be interpreted within the specificities of each subregion.

Imprisonment rates per 100,000 population by sub region between 2000 and 2019.

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Regional Snapshot 1 - Prison Population in Asia and the Pacific: Regional Overview

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