

French prison population hits all-time high

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Paris, August 1 (RHC)-- France has more people in prison than ever before – 74,513 – according to official statistics released by the Justice Ministry on Monday. The country has broken its own inmate records six times – nearly every month – since the end of 2022.

The figure represents an increase of 2,446 since last year, and 15,818 since the summer of 2020, after about 10,000 prisoners were released because of the COVID-19 outbreak in order to alleviate the prison system's notorious overcrowding. France surpassed 73,000 inmates for the first time last April.

The occupancy rate for the entire prison system stands at 122.8%, and rises to 146.3% for those facilities housing pre-trial detainees and inmates with short sentences. As a result, 2,478 inmates don't even have proper beds to sleep in and must use mattresses on the floor.

The country's prisons are so overstuffed that the European Court of Human Rights condemned the system in 2020 for "structural" overcrowding, ordering it to pay 32 inmates damages of up to ?25,000 (\$27,500) for "serious breaches of fundamental rights."

While Paris responded with a pledge to add a total of 15,000 more prison beds by 2027, the court reprimanded it again earlier this month. Weeks later, the French parliament issued a report stressing the "urgent need" for a prison regulation mechanism.

The situation has only gotten worse after violent riots engulfed the country last month following the police shooting of a teenager of North African descent during a traffic stop in Nanterre. The government's demand for a "firm," "rapid," and "systematic" response saw over 742 protesters sentenced to prison terms and 600 incarcerated, according to the report.

Some 45,000 police officers were deployed to quell the unrest, which caused ?650 million (\$721 million) worth of damage, according to insurance association France Assureurs. Over 4,000 people were detained as a result, with 1,200 of those being minors.

Prisoner advocacy group Observatoire International des Prisons warned that overcrowding would likely worsen as the authorities have upped the ante with a "zero-crime" policy for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.

The group last year called for the decriminalization of some misdemeanors, including driving without a license and drug use, as well as reducing the use of pre-trial detention and devising alternatives to incarceration for other crimes as possible ways to reduce overcrowding, insisting that merely building more prison beds only exacerbated the problem.

However, France has gone the opposite direction in recent years, criminalizing "cyber harassment" and even schoolyard bullying.

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