

JUSTICE MATTERS

AN UPDATE ON JUSTICE AND LAW REFORM



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HOW IRELAND'S JUSTICE SYSTEM MEASURES UP

The Law Society of Ireland's Centre for Justice and Law Reform recently published its inaugural *Justice Indicators* report, which provides an assessment of the performance of core elements of Ireland's justice system compared to other jurisdictions.

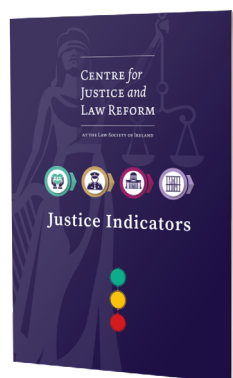
Using a traffic light system, the *Justice Indicators* evaluate the resourcing, effectiveness, and efficiency of the Irish justice system across four critical areas: trust, policing, courts and prisons.

The *Justice Indicators* demonstrate how core areas of the Irish justice system are performing by drawing on more than 100 national and international data sources.

Using the latest available data, the paper produces a total of 15 *Justice Indicators* which show that:

- Public trust in the Gardai, judiciary and courts is comparatively high in Ireland
- Per capita spending on Gardai is higher than the EU average; but the number of Gardai per 100,000 population has fallen

- While Ireland's rate of intentional homicide (including murder) is consistently lower than the EU average, Ireland has a comparatively high rate of sexual offences



The *Justice Indicators* also show that:

- Per capita spending on courts in Ireland (€38.23) is 25% less than the European average (€50.70)
- Court cases in Ireland take three times longer compared to the estimated European average, calculated by the Council of Europe

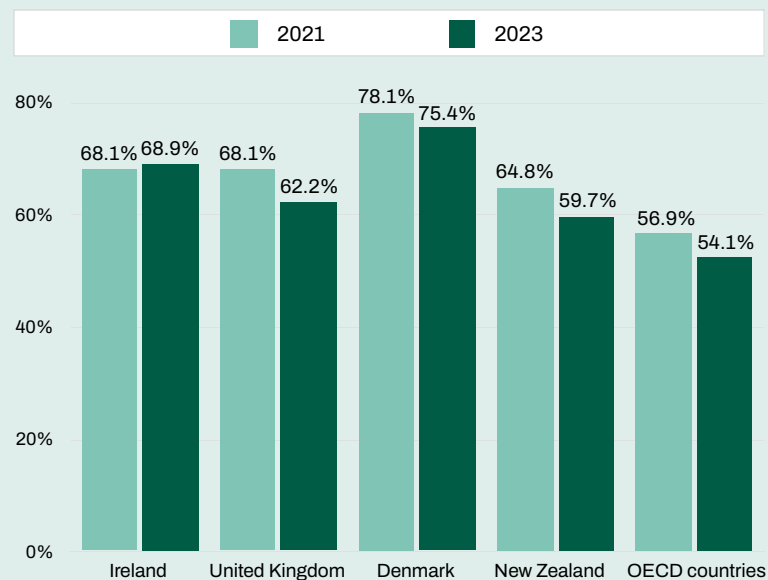
- Ireland has the lowest number of judges per 100,000 population among Member States of the Council of Europe
- The average sentence served in Irish prisons (5-7 months) was lower than the Council of Europe average (10-11 months)

The report highlighted several important data gaps. Those gaps can constrain policy decisions, influence budget allocations and narrow the terms of public debate. They affect litigants and victims waiting for cases to progress, families navigating the courts and those working across the justice system.

The *Justice Indicators* made 16 specific recommendations around improvements to data collection and reporting that should be prioritised. These relate to the Courts Service, An Garda Síochána, the Council of Europe, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the Department of Justice.

View the full publication and recommendations at: www.lawsociety.ie/justiceindicators

Percentage of people who rated their level of trust in the courts and judicial system between 6 and 10, on a scale of 0-10



Sources: Central Statistics Office Trust Survey, OECD Survey of Trust in Public Institutions

ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR JUSTICE AND LAW REFORM

The Centre for Justice and Law Reform is a research centre established by the Law Society of Ireland in 2025. The purpose of the centre is to improve the justice system and shape law reform to better serve the public interest. It conducts evidence-based research, provides a forum for open discourse, engages with policymakers and advocates for appropriate reforms. This work is guided by an Advisory Board of leading experts in their respective fields.

HOMICIDE RATE 40% LOWER AND SEXUAL OFFENCES RATE 43% HIGHER THAN EU AVERAGE, WHILE DETECTION RATES VARY

The *Justice Indicators* found that Ireland's spending on Gardaí was higher per capita than the EU average in all years assessed. In 2019 there were 291 Gardaí per 100,000 population while in 2024 there were 264 Gardaí per 100,000 population. That represents a decrease of 9%.

The report recommended that An Garda Síochána should record and publish the number of resignations, retirements, and appointments to the service each year.

In terms of recorded crime incidents:

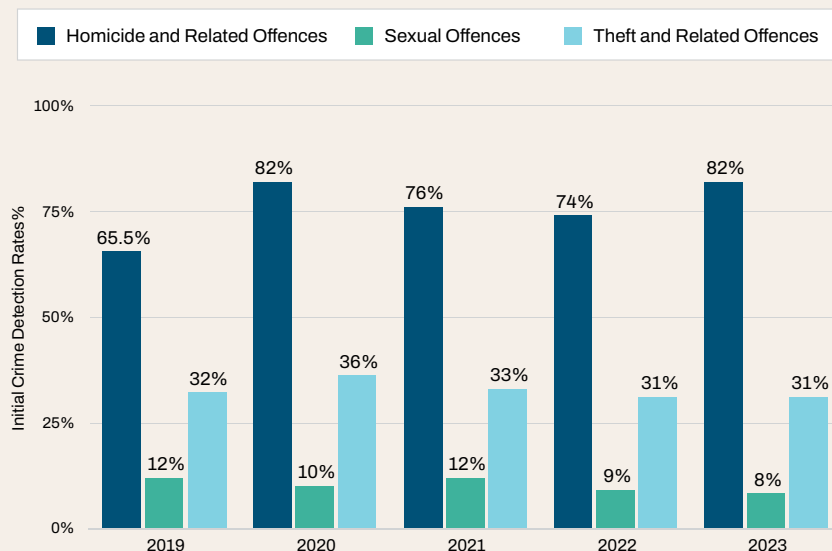
- Ireland's homicide rate was 40% lower than the EU average.
- Ireland had higher rates of theft (14%) and sexual offences (43%) compared to the EU average.

The report also reviewed crime detection rates—the proportion of recorded crime incidents where at least one person has been identified as being responsible for the offence.

In the latest available data:

- Theft-related offences had a detection rate of approximately 33%.
- Sexual offences generally had a low detection rate of 16%.
- Homicide-related offences had a higher detection rate of 85%.

Initial detection rates of selected categories of offences in Ireland, 2019 to 2023

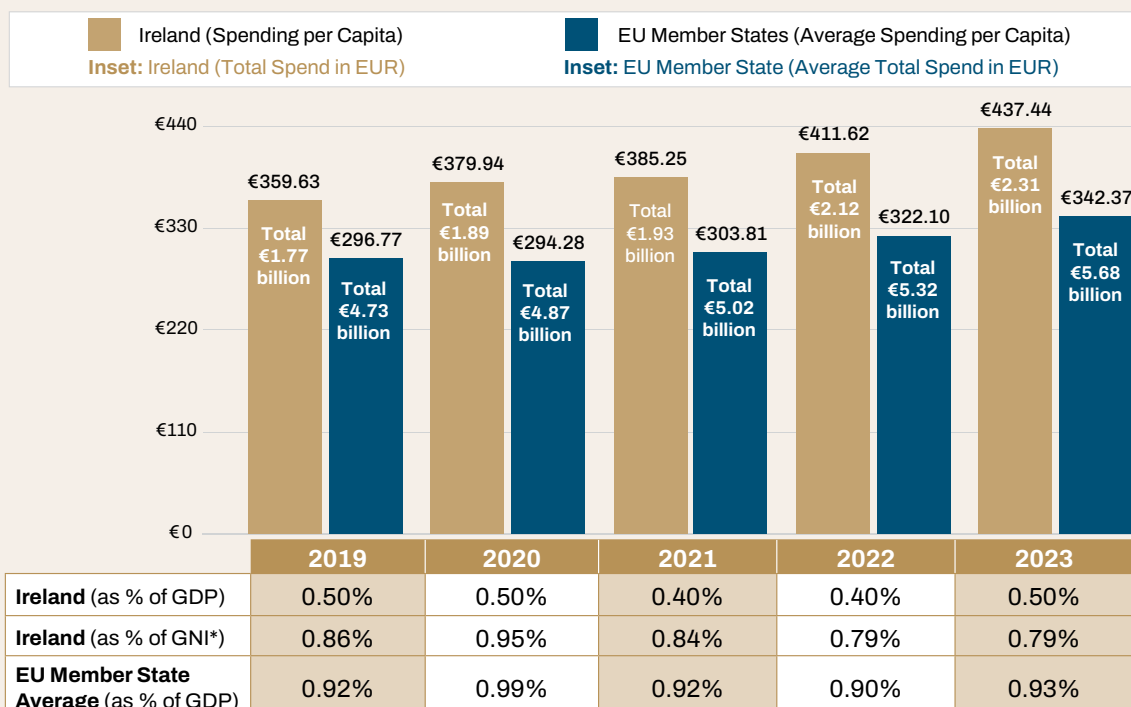


Source: The Central Statistics Office Recorded Crime Detection

Combining historic and contemporary cases makes it difficult to understand current investigative performance. This is particularly relevant for sexual offences where reporting of historic cases has increased in recent years, which can lower overall detection

rates. The report concluded that distinguishing between historic and current cases would provide a more accurate picture of present-day issues and performance as well as helping to identify where change is needed. ■

Comparison between Ireland's general government expenditure on policing services with the average expenditure of EU Member States



Sources: Eurostat, the Central Statistics Office GNI* and De-Globalised Results, the Central Statistics Office's Population and Migration Estimates, Census of Population 2022, Eurostat

COURTS: FEWER JUDGES, LONGER WAITS AND LOWER SPENDING COMPARED TO EUROPE

The findings in the Courts section of the *Justice Indicators* are quite stark. According to the latest comparative data available:

- Spending on courts in Ireland was lower than the average for 46 countries in the Council of Europe.
- Ireland had the lowest number of judges per 100,000 inhabitants among Member States.
- Ireland also had the lowest case clearance rate across EU Member States, meaning Irish courts cleared fewer cases than were opened annually, leading to an increasing backlog of unresolved matters.

- Case disposition times, which refer to the length of time it takes for a specific case to be resolved, are considerably longer in Ireland: 541 days (18 months) versus 168 days (6 months).
- There is no data on civil cases available from District and Circuit courts since 2020.

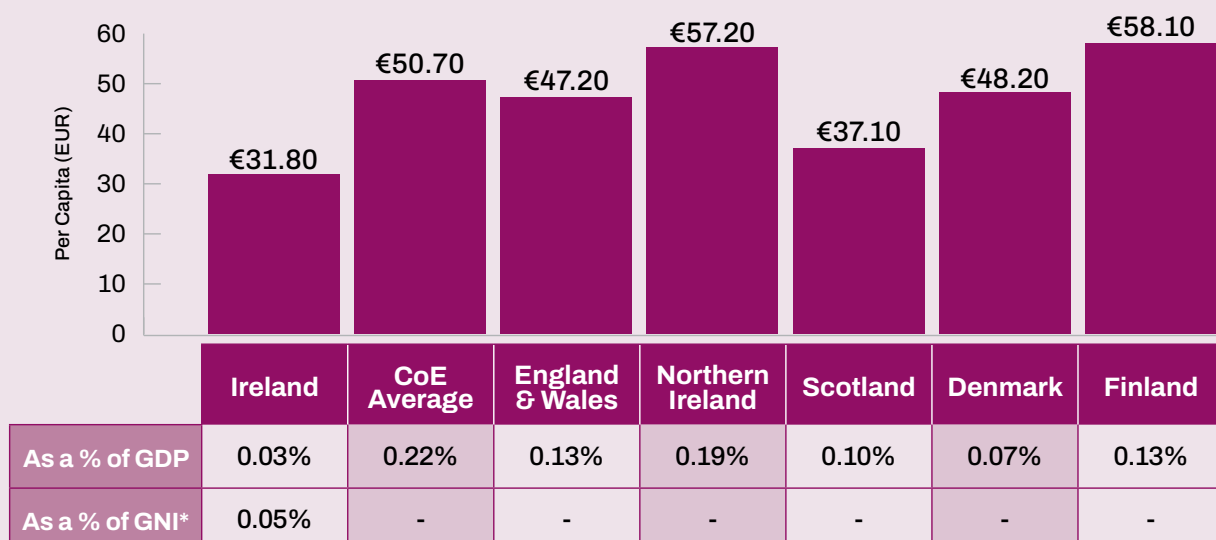
Ireland's much longer court timelines have wide-ranging consequences, including delayed access to justice, greater emotional and financial strain on individuals, and reduced confidence in the legal system.

The delays also cause backlogs to grow, putting more pressure on

judges, court staff, and support services. Businesses facing slower dispute resolution and reduced certainty, are impacted economically. Overall, the lengthy delays disproportionately impact those with fewer resources and undermine the efficiency and fairness of the justice system.

There is no transparency for prospective court users on delays prior to initiating proceedings to help with planning and make informed decisions about pursuing legal action. Policymakers also need this information to properly determine where and when to allocate resources. ■

2022 implemented court's budget per capita and as % of GDP compared with the CoE average and selected CoE Member States



Sources: European Judicial Systems CEPEJ Evaluation Report 2024 (Parts 1 and 2), Central Statistics Office Measuring Ireland's Progress 2022

Average case disposition times in Ireland 2019 to 2024 (expressed in days)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Civil Matters (Excluding Supreme Court)	719	532	663	699	675	501
Criminal Matters (Excluding Supreme Court)	504	390	506	507	527	503
Supreme Court (from Grant of Leave to Disposal)	-	392	364	434	329	371
All Matters	590	442	525	541	538	486

Source: Annual Reports of the Courts Service

IRELAND'S PRISONS: SHORTER SENTENCES, RISING OVERCROWDING

The *Justice Indicators* show that the average prison sentence served in Ireland is lower than the average across 46 member states of the Council of Europe, ranging from 5 to 7 months, compared to 10 to 11 months in Europe.

As stated in the report, the dearth of data makes it impossible to know the reasons behind shorter sentences. Do they reflect effective rehabilitation, greater leniency for serious offending or early release pressures caused by overcrowding? Or do they relate to an overuse of imprisonment for lower-level offences where alternatives such as electronic monitoring or community service might be more appropriate?

The occupancy rate, which is the number of prisoners compared to the official capacity of the prison system, has been above the EU

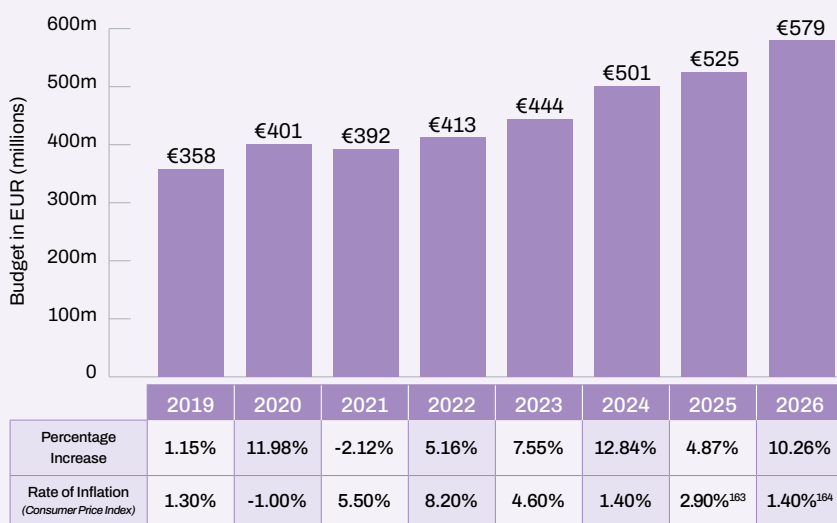
average since 2022. In fact, it was reported in the Dail in 2024 that:

- 4,690 male prisoners occupy 4,329 spaces
- 251 female prisoners occupy 202 spaces

Also, the rate of those detained in prison without receiving a final sentence (on remand) is lower than the Council of Europe average.

The Irish Prison Service has noted that the system experiences a high turnover of prisoners, which affects both sentence lengths and occupancy levels. Without consistent, detailed data, it is difficult to determine which factors are leading to comparatively shorter sentences, how they interact, or where reform efforts should be directed. ■

Ireland's prison budget from 2019 to 2026 compared with the rate of inflation during the same period



Sources: Where Your Money Goes, the Central Statistics Office Consumer Price Index, the Central Bank of Ireland

HIGH PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN COURTS AND POLICING

The *Justice Indicators* examined perceptions of An Garda Síochána, the judiciary and courts, as well as confidence in the effectiveness of the prison service to assess levels of public trust in different pillars of justice.

Public perceptions of fairness can have an impact on people's willingness to report crime, engage with the courts, or abide by the law. This can, in turn, affect measurable outcomes, including the numbers of reported crime incidents and the number of matters brought before the courts. The report found that:

- Public trust in the Irish judiciary and the courts is 27% higher than the OECD average.
- Irish people have a high level of trust in An Garda Síochána - 12% higher than the average across 30 OECD countries in 2023. Of the comparative jurisdictions, New Zealand had the highest level of trust in its police force.
- 51% of the Irish public expressed confidence in the Irish Prison Service's ability to provide secure and safe custody for prisoners in 2022.

The Centre for Justice and Law Reform recommended that the Department of Justice, in collaboration with the Irish Prison Service, develops data-collection mechanisms to measure public and stakeholder confidence in the effectiveness of the prison system.

It also recommended that the Council of Europe include indicators on public trust in prison systems in its annual penal statistics reports. ■

ABOUT THE LAW SOCIETY

The Law Society works to support and shape a just and accessible legal system that works for all. It educates, regulates and supports solicitors throughout their career.



CONTACT US

For information on any of the topics addressed in this newsletter, please contact **Brian Hunt (Director of Policy)** at: b.hunt@lawsociety.ie