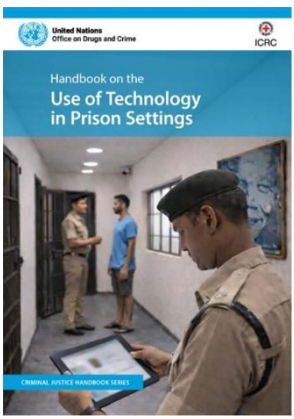
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REPORTS AND DOCUMENTS



Executive summary: *Handbook on the Use of Technology in Prison Settings*

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In June 2026, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) published the Handbook on the Use of Technology in Prison Settings *(the Handbook), intended as a reference document to ensure that technology in prisons is deployed in compliance with*

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international standards, particularly the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*, or Mandela Rules.*[1]

The Handbook draws on the two organizations' expertise and experience working in custodial environments around the world. It was reviewed and validated in November 2025, during an expert group meeting with representatives of prison services as well as international entities, NGOs, academia and the private sector. The Handbook is designed to support prison practitioners in harnessing the benefits of technology while safeguarding the dignity and rights of all. It is expected to also be a valuable tool for policy-makers, independent monitoring bodies, civil society and technology developers.

The Handbook is intended to be a principled roadmap that offers practical, rights-based and operationally relevant guidance. It aims to raise awareness about both the potential opportunities and risks of technology in prison settings. Digital tools such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and rehabilitation platforms can positively impact safety, living conditions and reinsertion of prisoners into the community, but they can also introduce new risks, including over-surveillance, privacy breaches, excessive automation, diversion of scarce resources and a reduction in meaningful human interactions. Technology is also not a panacea for deep-rooted issues and systematic prison deficiencies. New technologies should serve clearly identified needs, be legally grounded, and preserve the central role of human judgement and contact in prisons.

Executive summary[2]

The application of technology in prisons has developed rapidly in the last decade, driven in particular by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in prisons, and prison administrators are increasingly implementing technology strategies or adopting technology on a piecemeal basis. Technology can improve operations and ensure that prisoners are not excluded from the digital evolution shaping everyday life in their communities, but it also brings new risks and challenges. As technology increasingly changes the administration and management of prisons, the *Handbook on the Use of Technology in Prison Settings* (the Handbook) aims to ensure that its use does not reduce but rather enhances compliance with international standards. However, it is not the intention of the Handbook to endorse the use of any specific type of technology in prison, nor to advocate that technology should necessarily be adopted in prisons. States are at different stages when it comes to

1 *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)*, UNGA Res. 70/175, 17 December 2015, Annex. See also *United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules)*, UNGA Res. 65/229, 21 December 2010, Annex; *United Nations Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies)*, UNGA Res. 80/226, 18 December 2025, Annex; *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules)*, UNGA Res. 45/110, 14 December 1990, Annex.

2 The Handbook from which this executive summary is extracted was prepared jointly by the ICRC and UNODC as part of the latter's Criminal Justice Handbook Series. ICRC and UNODC, *Handbook on the Use of Technology in Prison Settings*, Vienna, 2026, available at: www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/PPR/2600927E-HB_on_the_Use_of_Technology_in_Prison_Settings-accessible.pdf. The Handbook can also be accessed via the QR code at the end of this executive summary.

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implementing technology in their prisons, and the Handbook is intended to apply to all levels of digitalization, including the implementation of smart prisons. The Handbook also acknowledges the pace of change in new technologies but argues that the key principles outlined in its pages will remain applicable to emerging and future technologies.

Part 1 of the Handbook describes the historical and current use of technology in prisons. Part 2 provides practical advice on the development, implementation and use of technology in prisons. It highlights the relationship between technology and United Nations prison standards and sets out considerations and safeguards that should be applied when considering and implementing technical solutions. It also explores procurement issues, working with the private sector, and operational issues that need to be managed over the life cycle of the technology. Part 3 looks at different types of technology currently being used in thematic areas in prisons, including digital prisoner file management, infrastructure management, health care, security, operations and safety, rehabilitation and contact with the outside world, and human resources and administration. It is complemented by four annexes on technology solutions, including a dedicated annex on AI.

Overall, the Handbook argues for an informed approach to adopting technology in prisons. Technology should be integrated into long-term prison strategy and is not a single solution for the many challenges facing prison systems such as overcrowding, poor conditions, staff shortages, resource constraints and the inherent vulnerabilities of prisoners. Furthermore, the risks of technologies are likely intensified in systems that are confronted with such issues.

Technology can play a role in tackling some of these challenges and can also generate significant benefits for prison management and the treatment of prisoners, including through the digitalization of prisoner files. However, this can only be achieved where it is part of an evaluated solution that is well thought through and properly costed. The benefits may also extend to the broader community, such as improved continuity of care, better preparation for life after release and strengthening public trust in the prison system.

Any technology-based solution must ensure that it has a positive impact on the treatment of prisoners, is fully compliant with the relevant legal framework and is sustainable in the mid- and longer term. Technology is not an end in itself, but may be a viable contribution to solving existing problems.

The Handbook focuses on places of detention within criminal justice systems, excluding the deprivation of liberty in armed conflict, which is regulated by international humanitarian law.

The Handbook can be accessed via the QR code below. French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic translations will be available soon.

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