

What are thematic reports?

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Thematic reports are documents in which NPMs focus on a single issue linked to the risk of torture and ill-treatment. A thematic report might, for example, contain an in-depth analysis, of: a particular practice, such as the use of restraints across a range of detention settings; a particular moment or period of detention, such as the first hours after arrest; a particular group in situations of vulnerability, such as the treatment of children in different places of detention; or a particular type of institution, such as closed psychiatric facilities.

Why draft a thematic report?

There are a number of reasons why NPMs may wish to publish a report on a specific thematic issue.

First, thematic reports are especially useful way to address complex and systemic issues that go beyond a single place of deprivation of liberty. Thematic reports are likely to contain recommendations that are aimed at a wide range of different institutions and that relate to both the legal framework and the practices found in different detention settings. They may thus enable NPMs to focus on problems and propose solutions more effectively than in their individual visit reports.

Second, the publicity and media attention around thematic reports can help generate political will around issues that might not otherwise be on the agenda of politicians and policy makers. They can thus contribute to changing laws and public policies that might otherwise be stuck as low priorities.

Third, thematic reports are extremely valuable an awareness raising and educational tool. They can help to introduce, expose and explain complex detention issues to a wide audience that might otherwise not be aware of them. In addition, the publicity around a thematic report can help demonstrate the role and value of the NPM to policymakers and the public. Nevertheless, thematic report should not be considered as a replacement for [visit reports](#). Because they target a range of institutions, follow-up to thematic reports may be more complicated, with responsibility dispersed among several facilities, and some potentially “hiding” behind this fact. For this reason, and depending on their resources, NPMs may wish to first prioritise visit reports, and then build on them later with a more thematic focus.

How to choose a topic for a thematic report?

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The point of departure when considering a thematic report should always be findings identified through the NPM's regular visits to places of detention and be anchored in the NPMs 'findings on the ground'. A number of considerations are important for NPMs when choosing a topic for a thematic report. These may include:

- Where the same or similar issues are found in a number of places of deprivation of liberty of the same type (such as police stations or psychiatric hospitals), often with a common, systemic, cause. An example of this might be failings in the way police inform suspects of their rights or provide access to a lawyer, following arrest.
- When related issues are present across a number of different types of places of deprivation of liberty. This might include issues faced by a particular group in situations of vulnerability, such as children in both police stations and long-term detention facilities, or a particular set of practices and procedures that increase the risk of torture, such as seclusion or the use of restraints.
- Themes where previous visit reports or recommendations have not led to the required change – particularly where such changes require new political will.
- Areas where there has been no or very little attention paid previously, either by the NPM or other oversight bodies, such as closed psychiatric institutions or aged care homes, for example.
- When it is in line with their strategy to do so, NPMs may also consider linking topics for thematic reports to those under consideration by international and regional human rights institutions, in order to magnify their visibility. For example, in the run up to a state appearing before the Child Rights Committee, an NPM could consider adopting a thematic focus on children in detention.
- Patterns and systemic issues that the NPM has identified during their regular visits that require sustained attention.
- Issues identified through consultation with civil society,
- Issues linked to ongoing public debates around important policies or legislative changes. In this regard, thematic reports can be an important way for NPMs to participate in and contribute to public debates.
- Thematic reports may also be a useful way for multiple body NPMs to build their collective identity and multiply their impact by speaking with one voice on a particular topic of concern across their different areas of expertise.

Finally, it is important to note that decisions about thematic priorities should be linked to the NPM's [strategic planning](#) process.

How to gather information for a thematic report?

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A thematic report will commonly be based on a number of visits to places of detention, as well as related research and consultations. It may be useful for NPMs (while maintaining their independence) to consult with civil society organisations, experts, and other relevant oversight institutions, both when selecting topics for a thematic report, as well as in the drafting and follow-up phase. This can ensure that the NPM is fully informed of the priorities and concerns of relevant organisations, including those working with specific groups in situations of vulnerability. This kind of consultation around a thematic report can also help the NPM push for implementation of the key recommendations after publication. This kind of consultation, as well as the number of visits that are usually required to prepare a thematic report, means that NPMs usually produce no more than one a year and sometimes even less.

Suggested content of a thematic report

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Thematic reports commonly involve an in-depth analysis including: the problems and risks identified and contributing factors at the legal level, the policy and practice level, the detention management level and even the cultural level. Such reports will often include reference to the relevant international and regional standards and clear recommendations about the results the NPM would like to see.

Suggested format of a thematic report

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The content and format of thematic reports should be responsive to the topic that has been chosen and NPMs may wish to be creative in choosing a format and content that fulfils each report's specific objective. However, it is good practice to include an executive summary of main findings, a description of the scope and methodology, the rationale for the report, and the analysis and recommendations. In common with other NPM reports, it may be helpful to the reader if the recommendations are also grouped together in one place as well as appearing in the text.

In addition, the following considerations may be useful:

- Some thematic reports are printed in hard copy but most are also available online, including in different languages. In common with other reports, some NPMs also publish their reports in plain language versions. Publication of a word or text only version can also help differently abled people who use specialised software to access reports. Printed reports may also be distributed to places, including places of deprivation of liberty, where internet access may be limited.
- When used for a clear purpose, graphics and photographs can be a powerful way to illustrate specific trends, conditions or situations documented in the report, although it is important to ensure that, in photographs, individual persons cannot be identified.
- NPMs may also consider other ways of disseminating their findings, including video and audio summaries.

What should be the dissemination and follow-up strategy for a thematic report?

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When planning a thematic report, NPMs should ensure that they also allocate sufficient time and resources for its dissemination and to follow-up on its key recommendations. NPMs may wish to define a dissemination and [follow-up](#) strategy for each report, depending on the subject. This strategy might include some or all of the following:

- Presentation of the report and discussions with high-level authorities, including, for example, bilateral or roundtable meetings with the heads and senior policy makers within the relevant ministries.
- Presentation to parliament and relevant parliamentary committees, particularly in relation to recommendations on law reform.
- Meetings with the judiciary.
- [Dialogue](#) with the heads of institutions covered by the report to discuss the findings and relevance for each institution, as well as how they will implement the recommendations.
- A public event, such as a press conference or public panel, to launch the report and raise awareness of the key findings.
- Working meetings with key partners, in particular civil society organisations, the bar association, or others who have an interest and can play a role in ensuring the recommendations are implemented.
- Wide dissemination of the report, by email, social media, post, and so forth.

It is important to note that dissemination and follow-up is not a one-time event and that the findings of a thematic report will likely be embedded in the NPM's ongoing dialogue with authorities and planning for future action.