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Peter Irwin, Uyghur Human Rights Project

Uyghur Tribunal Testimony

September 2, 2021

Eliticide: *A testimony by Peter Irwin, Senior Program Officer for Advocacy and Communications at UHRP, will draw directly from existing and ongoing UHRP research to explore the targeting of Uyghur elites across multiple segments of society. Mr. Irwin’s testimony will focus particularly on two groups, religious leaders and intellectuals, and on the practice of “eliticide,” whereby the Chinese state targets influential members of Uyghur society for detention or imprisonment in order to suppress, and eventually eradicate, the transmission of Uyghur cultural practices over time.*

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND, EXPERTISE, AND CREDENTIALS

Most recently, I researched and wrote a report for the Uyghur Human Rights Project, *Islam Dispossessed: China’s Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures*, which analyses a compiled dataset of detained or imprisoned Uyghur and other Turkic imams and religious figures. The report is also based on interviews with Uyghur imams overseas.

My particular research focus at UHRP in 2020–2021 has been the treatment of Uyghur religious figures and how this fits within broader policies to suppress and control Uyghur cultural and religious practices through influential members of Uyghur society.

PUBLICATIONS

- UHRP Report—*Islam Dispossessed: China’s Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures* (2021)
- World Uyghur Congress Report—*Seeking a Place to Breathe Freely: Current Challenges Faced by Uyghur Refugees & Asylum Seekers* (2016)
- London School of Economics Dissertation—*Out of our periphery? China’s manipulation of the War on Terror, the UN and its effects on human rights* (2014)

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Detention and Imprisonment of Uyghur and Turkic Imams and Religious Figures

UHRP compiled a dataset of 1,046 cases of Turkic imams and other religious figures from the Uyghur region detained for their association with religious teaching and community leadership since 2014.¹ The dataset is derived primarily from four sources: (1) the Uyghur Transitional

¹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Islam Dispossessed: China’s Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures,” May 13, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/islam-dispossessed-chinas-persecution-of-uyghur-imams-and-religious-figures/>.

Justice Database (UTJD);² (2) the Xinjiang Victims Database (Shahit.biz);³ (3) data compiled in the diaspora by Uyghur scholar and researcher Abduweli Ayup;⁴ and (4) information gleaned from additional open-source materials online.⁵

The list compiled of those detained, disappeared, or sentenced is by no means exhaustive. Though our conclusions are based on a dataset which was compiled as thoroughly as possible, we recognize the pitfalls of the source of the data, which in this case is second-hand information submitted primarily by members of the Uyghur diaspora. The Uyghur diaspora are typically the only sources able to gather information, albeit limited, about their family and friends in the Uyghur region. UHRP took steps, however, to corroborate this information, described in further detail below.

The fluidity of the situation on the ground may further affect the authenticity of the source data. Many of the cases that make up the dataset have been reported since 2017, and given that communication in and out of the Uyghur region is very limited, it is often difficult to ascertain whether some may have been released from camps since their initial detention.

A third hurdle is the paucity of information contained in the submissions or the compilation of the data itself. Although the cases contain enough information to make a reasonable assessment of various trends, many case details are either missing or uncertain. Nevertheless, all 1,046 cases include a name, occupation, and gender (100%); 925 (88%) include the prefecture; 668 (64%) include information about status at the time of reporting (prison, camp, released, house arrest, deceased); 601 (57%) include information about the month or year of detention or disappearance; 595 (57%) include the birth year; 313 (30%), the reason for detention or sentencing; 247 (24%), the place of detention or sentencing; and 186 (18%), information about the mosque where the religious figure was once affiliated.

As a result of these unknowns, UHRP took steps to corroborate the data where possible, by cross-referencing entries with multiple testimonies and by reporting from investigative journalists and researchers. Of all of the cases in the dataset, 105 were attested to by at least two sources, while the remainder were submitted by one source. We acknowledge that multiple testimonies about the same individual from different databases and other sources may have been submitted by a single source in some cases.

² Uyghur Transitional Justice Database: www.utjd.org.

³ Xinjiang Victims Database: <https://www.shahit.biz/eng>.

⁴ Uyghur scholar and researcher Abduweli Ayup has been able to track down an extensive list of detained imams through various public and private sources beginning in 2018. These sources include direct contacts, leaked documents such as the “Qaraqash List” and the “Aksu List,” and from scouring Chinese government websites. His organization, Uyghur Yardem, based in Norway, conducted interviews with Uyghurs in Istanbul between December 2019 and May 2020 and compiled a list of 4,577 cases of detention in prison or camps.

⁵ These sources include the Congressional Executive Commission on China’s political prisoner database, reports from journalists, and other sources.

To address the lack of direct corroboration in some cases, we compared prefectural detention rates in our dataset with the percentage of Turkic peoples of the entire region (Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar) living in each prefecture.⁶ The percentages of those detained in nearly every prefecture from our dataset align relatively closely with Turkic peoples residing in each prefecture as a percentage of the total regional Turkic population. This tells us that the compiled cases are at least comparable to what one might expect if a similar proportion of Turkic peoples were detained across the entire region. For example, 14.7% of the individuals in our dataset (of the cases which include residence data) reside in Ili, whereas the Turkic population makes up 15.6% of the total regional Turkic population. Similarly, 4.4% of our dataset is made up residents of Kizilsu, whereas the prefecture makes up 4.3% of the regional total of all Turkic peoples. One noticeable outlier was Kashgar prefecture, which makes up 16.9% of our data, in contrast to the Turkic population making up 32% of the total across the region. These lower statistics may be a result of heavier security measures in Kashgar, and the reduced ability of the Uyghur population to communicate outside the prefecture and the region.

Despite these limitations, UHRP considers the data the most authoritative account of Uyghur clergy detained or imprisoned since around 2014, given that no other studies have attempted to assess this form of detention. These detention rates should not be construed as a representation of broader trends for all Turkic peoples in the region, given that religious figures have been targeted more aggressively by the state—even before 2015. Detention rates among Uyghur clergy might be comparable to the detention of the intellectual class, who have been targeted for their influence within society, as explained below.⁷

In addition to the compilation of the dataset for the report, UHRP also conducted five telephone interviews from August to November 2020. Four of our interviewees are former imams from the Uyghur region; one is the family member of an imam who was detained from 2017–2020. All interviewees worked in either official or unofficial capacities at local mosques across the Uyghur region and are now residing abroad.

Disappearance, Detention, and Imprisonment of Uyghur and Turkic Intellectuals

UHRP, with the help of Uyghur scholar in exile, Abduweli Ayup, compiled a dataset of 341 cases of detention, imprisonment, and disappearance of Uyghur and other Turkic intellectuals from 2017 to March 2021. The data was collected from several sources, primarily family members, relatives, and colleagues of interned, imprisoned, and disappeared intellectuals. To minimize the likelihood of errors consistent with the findings, Ayup employed different data collection methods, including individual interviews with Uyghur exiles abroad and examination of government documents and records by tracking changes over time.

⁶ These figures are based on the 2018 Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook.

⁷ Uyghur Human Rights Project, “UPDATE – Detained and Disappeared: Intellectuals Under Assault in the Uyghur Homeland,” May 21, 2019, <https://uhrp.org/report/update-detained-and-disappeared-intellectuals-under-assault-in-the-uyghur-homeland/>.

For example, data on detained intellectuals were extracted by investigating online information published by Chinese public institutions, like universities. To corroborate whether a faculty member has been detained or disappeared, Ayup searched the institutional website where disappeared faculty members belong. Given that university regulations require faculty members to teach at least one course per semester or to conduct research, Ayup cross-checked this information with institutional information published online. When Ayup was not able to locate information about certain faculty members, this raised the possibility that they may have been taken into detention camps, after which these suspected disappearance or detention cases were confirmed through colleagues and relatives of detainees.

A further source of data includes Uyghur scholars already in exile prior to 2017 as well as scholars who fled China following increasingly repressive policies since then. For example, three Uyghur scholars from Northwest Minzu University reported extrajudicial detentions of their colleagues. Ayup also collected data from university members, colleagues, and close relatives to confirm claims that faculty members might have been detained. Reports from Radio Free Asia have also helped verify information concerning some cases.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Chinese state has targeted Uyghur elites, including intellectuals and religious leaders for many decades, as demonstrated in our recent research.

Uyghur Intellectuals

We define intellectuals as those who hold prominent or influential roles in society in various fields, including university lecturers and scholars, medical researchers and doctors, journalists, editors, publishers, writers, and artists. Our dataset, compiled by Abduweli Ayup, includes 341 cases of detention, imprisonment, and disappearances of Uyghur and other Turkic intellectuals from 2017 to March 2021.

UHRP has focused its research on this area because of the importance of these figures in Uyghur society. Intellectuals act as culture-bearers who produce and reproduce knowledge. In turn, these figures help build on and shape culture over generations and act as a bridge from the past to the future.

The Chinese state targets Uyghur intellectuals because they are the architects of modern cultural identity and custodians of cultural heritage and a driving force in creating the collective memory associated with shared values and norms. The persecution of Uyghur elites demonstrates the Chinese state's intention to deprive the Uyghur population of leadership and a chance for self-preservation. This represents a form of twenty-first century eliticide that suffocates the store of collective knowledge while, in some cases, preserving the physical bodies of these figures.

China has a long history of targeting Uyghur intellectuals, particularly during the anti-Rightist campaigns in the late 1950s as well as during the Cultural Revolution. More recently,

the Chinese state has harassed and detained Uyghur journalists and writers in particular. Abdughani Memetemin, a journalist, was imprisoned in 2003 for providing information about human rights abuses to an overseas Uyghur group; Abdulla Jamal, a teacher, was arrested in 2005 after submitting a manuscript Chinese authorities claimed was separatist in intent; Uyghur writer Nurmemet Yasin was imprisoned for “inciting separatism” in 2005 and later reportedly died in detention; and Mehbube Ablesh, a Xinjiang People’s Radio Station journalist, was arrested in 2008 for writing critically about so-called “bilingual” education.

The latest assault on intellectuals, however, represents a significant escalation in persecution, and a new approach to Uyghur elites. Whereas journalists and writers were targeted in the 1990s and 2000s, this new phase includes the targeting of a much broader swath of the intellectual class, including scholars, textbook publishers, medical professionals, artists, and other intellectuals.

Scholars

Ilham Tohti, a Uyghur scholar at the Central Nationalities University in Beijing, advocated implementing regional autonomy laws in China, and was ultimately found guilty of separatism and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2014. Tohti’s case served as a warning to Uyghur professors and scholars about what the Chinese state no longer permits in terms of academic debate.

By 2017, the Chinese state went much further, and began detaining a significant number of Uyghur scholars based in the Uyghur region on dubious charges. UHRP’s dataset of detention, imprisonment, and disappearances includes 76 university scholars, including 22 professors from Xinjiang University, 13 professors from Xinjiang Normal University, 11 professors from Kashgar University, and 8 professors from the Xinjiang Islamic Institute.

Some of the prominent detentions include the former president of Xinjiang University, Tashpolat Tiyip, who was arrested in 2017 and given a two-year suspended death sentence in 2019, as well as Weli Barat, who took over as president of Xinjiang University after Tiyip in 2017. Also included in our dataset are Nurmemet Emet, the dean of the Department of Uyghur Traditional Medicine at Xinjiang Medical University, as well as Enwer Tohti, an instructor in the same department. The dean of the Institute of Philology at Xinjiang Normal University, Abdubeshir Shükuri, and former dean, Arslan Abdulla, are also included in the dataset of those detained, imprisoned, or disappeared.

Textbook Publishers

Like in any society, Uyghur textbooks on history, literature, history, and art have been a crucial vehicle in formulating and consolidating Uyghurs’ political and social norms.

Since 2017, the state has been working to scrub history textbooks of references to prominent Uyghur figures throughout history, and arrest the editors and publishing house staff involved with printing and disseminating the texts. Some of the textbooks, written for Uyghur primary and

middle schools and published in 2003 and 2009, had previously made it through the censors. By 2017, however, they became symbols of “extreme ideologies” or “separatism.”⁸

Those responsible for organizing, editing, and printing the textbooks have been targeted, including former Deputy Secretary of the Xinjiang Education and Work Committee, Sattar Sawut, who received a two-year suspended death sentence, and Alimjan Memtimin, the Committee’s Deputy Director-General, and Tahir Nasir, the former President of the Education Publishing House, who were both given life sentences.

In total, our dataset includes 45 cases of Uyghur and Kazakh staff members for several prominent publishing houses, primarily from Xinjiang Education Press and Kashgar Uyghur Press, who have been detained, imprisoned, or disappeared. These publishers have published extensively on subjects like Uyghur culture, history, and art. Another 11 associated with editing and publishing Uyghur textbooks for schools have also been detained, imprisoned, or disappeared.

Rewriting or banning school textbooks that were accepted less than a decade prior illustrates the intensification of the Chinese state’s campaign to extinguish the transmission of Uyghur culture and history.

Physicians, Doctors, and Medical Researchers

Although not targeted before 2017, the Chinese state has detained, imprisoned, or disappeared at least 18 prominent Uyghur physicians, doctors, and medical researchers, according to the UHRP dataset. The most prominent among them is Halmurat Ghopur, the former president of Xinjiang Medical University and head of XUAR Medical Oversight Bureau, who was detained in 2017 and given a two-year suspended death sentence in 2018 for “separatism.” Two other notable dataset cases include Nurmemet Emet, the Dean of the Department of Uyghur Traditional Medicine at Xinjiang Medical University, and Enwer Tohti, an instructor in the same department.

Writers, Poets, Singers, and Other Artists

Artists including writers, poets, musicians, and actors have also been targeted since 2017, likely because of threat that these figures pose to the state. Art may often act as a means of empowerment and self-representation, or as a form of resistance to oppression, which Uyghurs have embraced in subtle forms. Our dataset includes 48 cases of detention, imprisonment, and disappearance of these figures.

⁸ “The war in the shadows: Challenges of fighting terrorism in Xinjiang,” *CGTN*, April 2, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-02/The-war-in-the-shadows-Challenges-of-fighting-terrorism-in-Xinjiang-Z7AhMWRPy0/index.html>.

Other Professionals

The UHRP dataset also includes 21 engineers, programmers, technicians; 13 general researchers at institutes or government committees; 9 journalists and newspaper editors, including 5 members of the Uyghur Editorial Department at the Xinjiang Gazette, and 3 Uyghur staff at Xinjiang Television;⁹ and 73 other professionals. The latter category includes government staff, local mayors, high school teachers, former activists, and other prominent people.

Imams and Other Religious Figures

Many non-Han religious figures were humiliated in public and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution. In the aftermath, the 1980s offered a period of relative openness for religious practice, but this changed dramatically in the 1990s when the state took control of all aspects of Islamic teaching and the official training of religious figures. The state mandated that only imams approved and licensed by the authorities were legally allowed to preach.¹⁰ This is reflected in policy today, where all candidates for official religious leadership positions are required to be trained at an official institution controlled by the state.¹¹

A shift took place in the 1990s, illustrated by the passage of “Document No. 7” in 1996—which mandated that authorities strengthen leadership and control over religion, including the teachings of imams.¹² By the logic of the Chinese state, if you can control influential religious figures in Uyghur society, you can control, end eventually eliminate, practices deemed “abnormal.”¹³

Mandatory courses were introduced in the early 2000s in order to “clarify the CCP’s policy on religious belief and the distinction between legal and illegal religious activities.”¹⁴ Failure to take the courses resulted in either house arrest or a prison sentence.¹⁵ One imam told UHRP, that the courses were about “how to change our teachings, how to change our religion, so that everything supports Chinese socialism.”¹⁶ These “re-education” courses typically lasted 20 days, sometimes longer. Another imam told UHRP that he knew the state was simply trying to use

⁹ Perhaps make reference to the fact that so many journalists had already been detained, and that “journalism” has basically been prohibited by 2017.

¹⁰ Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang—China’s Muslim Far Northwest* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 73.

¹¹ Graham Fuller and Jonathon Lipman, “Islam in Xinjiang,” in *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland*, ed. Frederick Starr (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 333.

¹² Human Rights Watch, “State Control of Religion: Update #1,” March 1, 1998, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a7d08.html>.

¹³ Recall that the Chinese Constitution officially sanctions “normal religious practice.” What constitutes “normal” or “abnormal” (legal or illegal) behavior has never been clearly expounded, allowing the Chinese state to shift their boundaries over time, as evidenced by radical changes in the last four years.

¹⁴ Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang—China’s Muslim Far Northwest*, p. 90.

¹⁵ Spiessens, “Diasporic Lives of Uyghur Mollas,” p. 283.

¹⁶ UHRP interview with Abdurahman, August 2020.

them as a means of indoctrinating the local population. He said that, “The authorities wanted me to become an imam so that they could use me for the government’s benefit.”

Uyghurs attending state-controlled Islamic institutes to become imams were only accepted if they had no record of “anti-government views,” and had a “clean” family history regarding political activity. One former imam told us that he spent half the day learning about the compatibility of Islam with socialist principles and harmonizing religious preaching with state policy. According to the interviewee, Quranic education lasted just one of the three years they spent in training and the books they used were published by the state.

Control over religious figures steadily increased in the 2000s and into the 2010s. The Regulations on Religious Affairs was amended in 2005, which gave even more oversight to state officials. In 2008, the Islamic Association of China established a corps of liaisons in each province in charge of the official interpretation of religious texts. By 2010, sermons were nearly entirely written by Islamic Association of China officials and imams were forced to explain national and local laws as well as party rules to the people who came to the mosque to worship.

The introduction and implementation of the so-called “second-generation nationalities policies” beginning around 2014 closed the door on any remaining autonomy for Turkic imams and religious figures to lead their communities.¹⁷ Amendments in 2017 to the Regulations on Religious Affairs expressly prohibited religious teaching in regular schools and narrowed the scope of religious practice to state-approved venues—effectively criminalizing religious practice outside of state-controlled mosques, guided by state-approved and state-controlled imams, reciting sermons often completely pre-written by state officials.

For Uyghurs in particular, the amendments led to more direct interventions by the state into the lives of imams and their congregations. The “four-enter” policy, for example, stipulates that every mosque must feature a Chinese flag, information regarding China’s laws on religion, materials promoting “core socialist values” of China, and documents on the country’s “outstanding traditional culture.”¹⁸ Surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition software have been installed at the entrance to many mosques, which adds to relational surveillance by community members to ensure no deviation from state regulations.¹⁹

Based on the dataset compiled by UHRP in 2021, Uyghur and other Turkic religious leaders have been detained in internment camps and imprisoned for their current or past behavior. UHRP recorded a total of 1,046 Turkic religious figures who may have been detained in camps or

¹⁷ See James Leibold, “Planting the Seed: Ethnic Policy in Xi Jinping’s New Era of Cultural Nationalism,” *China Brief*, December 31, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/planting-the-seed-ethnic-policy-in-xi-jinpings-new-era-of-cultural-nationalism/>.

¹⁸ The Economist, “China’s repression of Islam is spreading beyond Xinjiang,” September 28, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/china/2019/09/26/chinas-repression-of-islam-is-spreading-beyond-xinjiang>.

¹⁹ Pierre Hamdi, “Videos show how China has installed facial recognition scanners in Uighur mosques,” *France 24*, September 13, 2019, <https://uhrp.org/report/islam-dispossessed-chinas-persecution-of-uyghur-imams-and-religious-figures/>.

imprisoned in the Uyghur region primarily since 2014.²⁰ A small number of these individuals have been released, are now under house arrest, or have died in detention. The dataset includes 850 imams, 122 mollas, 20 muezzins, 33 talibs, and several others identified with different occupations, possibly because they gave up former duties as imams.

Of the total cases in the dataset, 313 (30%) include information on the basis for detention or imprisonment. The most frequently cited reason for detention in camps and imprisonment is simply for “being an imam.” This suggests that the testifiers who supplied the information may be speculating in some cases, given their understanding that any kind of religious affiliation may be grounds for detention.²¹ The second most cited reason for detention or imprisonment is “teaching religion to children,” illustrating the focus on the transmission of religious knowledge across generations.

Data on prison sentences offer more clues about the basis for sentencing. The most common category relates to “illegal teaching,” “illegal preaching,” or “teaching religion to children” (61 cases, 30% of all charges)—something raised by several of the imams we spoke with in the diaspora. Uyghurs under the age of 18 are also prohibited from entering mosques, so aside from a limited number of highly-controlled religious schools across the region, Chinese state policy effectively prevents Uyghur children from receiving a religious education.

The compiled data suggests that the state has accelerated its attempts at severing the intergenerational transmission of religious knowledge for Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples. The Chinese state now retains complete control over what religious knowledge may be passed from generation to generation.

DRAMATIC CHANGES IN POLICY SINCE 2017

In the 1990s, 2000s, and early 2010s, the Chinese state targeted, harassed, detained, and imprisoned prominent Uyghurs for what they said or what they wrote. Since around 2017, prominent Uyghurs have been detained and imprisoned for what they know, what they represent, for who they are, and who they *used to be*. This significant shift is demonstrated by the relationship between the Chinese state and Uyghur intellectuals and prominent religious figures over time.

Although their teachings and movement were closely controlled, Uyghur imams in the 1990s and 2000s were at least able to perform basic functions as leaders of their communities. For example, the influential Uyghur Islamic scholar, Muhammed Salih Hajim, who was the first to

²⁰ An additional 30 cases from 1999 to 2013 have also been included in the total 1,046, though the vast majority of individuals whose records we researched (571 of 601) were detained in or after 2014.

²¹ Recent leaks from Aksu prefecture, reported by Human Rights Watch, confirm some of these suspicions. See Human Rights Watch, “China: Big Data Program Targets Xinjiang’s Muslims,” December 9, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/09/china-big-data-program-targets-xinjiangs-muslims>. The “Qaraqash List” document also revealed that religious affiliations may lead to detention, though it was not the leading cause. See Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Ideological Transformation: Records of Mass Detention from Qaraqash, Hotan,” February 2020, https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP_QaraqashDocument.pdf.

translate the Quran into the Uyghur language in a state-approved project in 1986, was allowed to practice as an imam for many years. He was detained, however, in 2017 at 82-years-old and died in detention 40 days later.

Most of the 1,046 imams and religious figures in our dataset were likely approved for their position by the state, and would have also been required to attend “patriotic education” courses to retain their status. One previously approved Kazakh imam, for example, Aqytzhan Batyr, was sent to an internment camp in 2018 before being sentenced to at least 17 years in prison in May 2019.²² He was quoted in Chinese media in 2016 saying, “We have truly realized the danger of illegal religion; we firmly stand against illegal religious activities. As a patriotic religious person, I will promote it and make sure religious people understand the harm of illegal religious activities and live a good life.”²³ Despite his outspoken support for state policies, he was sentenced just three years later.

Our data on imam detentions also demonstrates how the state, since 2017, has detained or imprisoned religious figures retroactively for things that took place years prior. Some of these cases involve Hajj pilgrimages as well as travel abroad.²⁴ Several individual cases in the dataset stand out, including an imam who was sent to prison for “preaching in a cemetery 10 years ago;” an imam (now deceased) who was detained in 2014 for preaching at a wedding in 2010; and an imam who was allegedly sentenced to 20 years in prison for group prayer in 2009.

The same can be said about the relationship between the state and Uyghur scholars, professors, researchers, and other professionals. For example, prominent Uyghur anthropologist, Rahile Dawut, was disappeared in late 2017 and her whereabouts are still unknown. Dawut received research grants and awards from China’s Ministry of Culture, and she had been a Communist Party member for 30 years before her disappearance. Halmurat Ghopur, the former president of Xinjiang Medical University and head of the XUAR Medical Oversight Bureau, was detained in 2017 and given a two-year suspended death sentence in 2018 for “separatism.” Ghopur was the recipient of numerous awards from the state throughout his career.

Another indication of the dramatic change in policy has been in relation to the treatment of Uyghur textbooks used in schools. Some of the textbooks, published in 2003 and 2009 for Uyghur primary and middle schools, had previously made it through the censors, demonstrating that the content was acceptable to Chinese authorities at the time. By 2017, however, these same

²² Radio Free Asia, “新疆塔城一伊斯兰教伊玛目被重囚四十七年,” *Radio Free Asia*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibao>.

²³ Du Hong, “我县举办学习贯彻党的十八届五中全会、自治区党委八届十次全委（扩大）会议、地委扩大会议精神专题培训班” [Our county holds special training courses for studying and implementing the Fifth Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the Party, the Tenth Plenary (Expanded) Meeting of the Eighth Party Committee of the Autonomous Region, and the Spirit of the Expanded Meeting of the Prefectural Committee], Shawan News, February 23, 2016, archived at archive.is/fE0Go.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, “China: Big Data Program Targets Xinjiang’s Muslims,” December 9, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/0>.

texts were regarded as symbols of “extreme ideologies” or “separatism.”²⁵ Those responsible for organizing, editing, and printing the textbooks have been detained, imprisoned, or disappeared, including at least 45 Uyghur and Kazakh staff members for prominent publishing houses, primarily from the Xinjiang Education Press and Kashgar Uyghur Press.

By 2017, the Chinese state had secured control over not only the intellectual class in Uyghur society, but all channels of dissemination of cultural knowledge. In terms of Islam, the state now retains complete control over the selection, education, and teaching of Uyghur imams and religious figures, adding to the prohibition of teaching outside of state-controlled mosques. The same can be said about the control over the dissemination of Uyghur history and culture through published texts, school textbooks, or artwork.

In addition to control over formal channels like mosques and schools, the state also controls the Internet and other electronic forms of communication. The transmission of cultural knowledge has now been constricted to a point where it is no longer recognizable and no longer meaningful for Uyghurs.

Autonomous expression of Uyghur culture is no longer permitted, and only Han-centric cultural narratives are acceptable to the state. Although some performative elements of Uyghur culture may be preserved by the state in order to claim respect for cultural expression, it already appears to be a hollow shell of itself and not nearly adequate for the Uyghur identity to survive in any meaningful way.²⁶

The effect of these policies is near total control over the entire Uyghur population, from birth to death. Formerly private behavior and expression is now under the control of the state, along with the most important elements of personhood that collectively make up Uyghur culture and identity over time. The secondary effect of these policies is the signal sent to the rest of the Uyghur population who have managed to escape detention or imprisonment. Nearly every movement, expression, or action of Uyghurs are constrained by the understanding that even the most basic elements of their identity are subject to state censure.

IMPLICATIONS

The repression of Uyghur identity and production of knowledge illustrates the Chinese state’s goal of forcibly assimilating Uyghurs into the dominant Han culture. Since 2017, more gradual assimilatory policies have been replaced by accelerated measures designed to erase key aspects of the Uyghur identity in a single generation.

Uyghurs already represent a vulnerable group in China, given widespread persecution along ethnic and religious lines that existed prior to 2017. Our data illustrates how the Chinese state is

²⁵ “The war in the shadows: Challenges of fighting terrorism in Xinjiang,” *CGTN*, April 2, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-02/The-war-in-the-shadows-Challenges-of-fighting-terrorism-in-Xinjiang-Z7AhMWRPy0/index.html>.

²⁶ See Rachel Harris, “How Uyghur cultural practices are being politicized and co-opted in Xinjiang,” January 16, 2020, <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/resources/5955/>.

now persecuting intellectuals and elites as a part of a broader strategy aimed at eliminating the collective memory and cultural identity of Uyghurs.

By attacking the guardians of cultural norms that help define Uyghur identity, the Chinese state is depriving Uyghurs of leadership and a chance for self-preservation. This represents a form of eliticide, a campaign designed to eliminate the expression and manifestation of Uyghur identity, and to suffocate the store of collective knowledge while preserving the physical bodies of these figures.

1 **13th September 2021 (7:26:20 – 8:18:28)**

2 **Peter Irwin**

3

4 PETER IRWIN – I will start by talking about the methodology. It is based on two
5 reports: one is detention, imprisonment of intellectuals and religious figures. We define
6 intellectuals as Members of Uyghur and Kazakh of society who are influential. On the
7 imam case we drew a data set of 1046 cases compiled by four sources: 1. UTJD, 291
8 cases were from here 2. Xinjiang Victims Database, 259 from here 3. Research from
9 Uyghur scholar Abdulweli Ayup, based in Norway, 480 from him. He spoke to direct
10 contact relatives, looked at Qaraqash and Aksu lists, Chinese government websites,
11 primarily organised between December 2019 and May 2018 where he compiled 4577
12 cases in general of people detained based on interview in Turkey primarily 4. 16 came
13 from Congressional US Commission on China's political prisoner database. I can go
14 into data on this as well. There were a number of cases we did not use based on
15 insufficient evidence of info past to confirm the case. I will take you through what is
16 contained in cases: 100% have the name, occupation and gender, 88 contained the
17 prefecture, location, 64 had information on status (detained in a camp, prison,
18 disappeared), 57 had information on data detention, 57 the birth year, 30 the reason
19 for detention, 24 the place of detention, 18 on mosque affiliation of religious figures
20 themselves. We took steps to corroborate data. 10% of cases were from 2 sources in
21 databases, we cross checked from multiple sources, so there were no duplicate cases
22 in the larger dataset.

23 Moving on, another check we did was we looked at the proportion of Turkic people
24 living in each prefecture and compared to the dataset case information to where

25 people were and compared to Turkic people in the region. 14.7 individuals in set come
26 from *Illi* prefecture, Turkic makes up 15.6 % regional population, which is close, 4.4
27 from *Kisusu*. One Kashgar prefecture numbers were off: 17% from data but Turkic
28 across region makes up 32% across region. We took some steps for this dataset. We
29 took as many steps as we could. The nature of accessing information and determining
30 and confirming cases is very difficult but have taken step to make our best guess. This
31 is likely more people and imams are detained. These are ones we have sufficient
32 information on these cases to make an estimate, on estimate. I am not the author of
33 this report. It's a forthcoming report. UHRP has made three reports on detention of
34 intellectual figures, more detained and more information accrued. This derives from
35 the dataset primarily from Uyghur Abduweli Ayup who has done research using
36 interview with the Uyghur diaspora, and government documents. One way he used to
37 find information on scholars from university's was when scholars were confirmed
38 detained, they remove names from university website. This is one extra check we took.
39 He would get hints in one direction or another then try find family abroad. He has
40 conducted extensive research in turkey. He is connected with the Uyghur community
41 abroad.

42 *COUNSEL – What are main reasons for arrests especially arresting scholars?*

43 PI – This is for Imams [shows slide], these are charges. Primarily religious as you
44 would expect. Interestingly, teaching religion to children. Part of the reason for that
45 Imams are pushed to the side, they cannot in some ways to in their circles they cannot
46 include things such as weddings and funerals where Imams can continue this. The
47 intellectual point began around 2014, it often two faced. To be fair I do not think there
48 is not much information as to why they are detained. It is fairly limited. Quite often,
49 there a few reasons, the two-faced charge. There is a quote 'break their lineage, break

50 their roots, break their connections, break their origins. Completely shovel up the roots
51 of two-faced people dig them out, and vow to fight these two-faced people until the
52 end'. They are being charged for separatism often. We have very few details beyond
53 this. Evidence shows that they are not sufficiently loyal to the communist party, but
54 just to Uyghur.

55 *COUNSEL – In your report you say most of 1000 figures, they have been approved*
56 *by the state, how can that sit with that they have been arrested, though approved by*
57 *the state?*

58 PI – It shows the nature of the report. I am making the case for the other side. The
59 imams had to be approved by the state, beginning in the 1990s. In 80s Uyghurs could
60 practise relatively openly. In 90s it changed dramatically. There were purges of imams.
61 They had to do training courses. All Islamic figures have to go through training
62 processes. This changed as scholars, the ascriptive nature of victimisation. It is
63 inescapable, targeted not for what you say or write but what you are and what you
64 used to be. There is a shift beginning around 2016 where Imams detained fairly
65 arbitrarily. Uygur imams, Kazakh imams were around 17%. for things done 10 years
66 ago they were sentenced. Both kinds of groups targeted and sentenced not for their
67 actions, what they represent in relation to the CCP.

68 *COUNSEL – This morning one of our witnesses quoted from president Xi to destroy a*
69 *nation you have to destroy its history. Do you think this eliticide is depriving Uyghur*
70 *people of their history?*

71 PI – One parallel is Nazi and soviet occupation. Physical elimination of polish elites,
72 with Uyghurs it is incapacitation. Uyghur textbooks from primary and middle schools –
73 CGTN had a long documentary on this which mentioned director of Xinjiang education

74 department. It basically in 2017 in 5 were charged at the same time with forced
75 confessions of him sentenced to death because he had directed his members of the
76 Xinjiang education department to insert more Turkic figures into the textbooks. These
77 textbooks published in 2003, 2009 but only filed the charges in 2016. They did an
78 investigation about him directing his staff and two former heads of publishers and two
79 editors who were also sentenced. They were targeting the textbooks. If you watch the
80 documentary, they pan over the textbooks, they show one of leaderships only
81 evidence to audience. Pretty good example of targeting children.

82 *PANEL – On methodology, you have highlighted relating on other states texts and*
83 *other interviews with former imams, have any of those interviewees been detained*
84 *previously and what have you learnt from that type of fresh collection of data?*

85 PI – That was one aspect of the methodology, 5 Uyghur imams outside of China. They
86 spoke anonymously. We learned contextually, we wanted to know what was
87 happening to them of mass detention. They all left before 2015, they fled. Had they
88 been detained, 1 of them had been detained for a little while in 1990s which was a lot
89 of experience, would have to check the source. They had the sense they had to leave.
90 What we learned was happening and how they responded to these types of
91 restrictions. They would education s patriotic courses to 15 days such as Urumqi, sit
92 down and people telling them you are preaching is in line with CCP. I asked them
93 whether this influenced them. He said we went there we wrote some of this down, I
94 went through the motions, I went home and put in practices there were before. There
95 is pressure. The feature of the way they responded to the restrictions was in creative
96 ways. The underground resistance cannot expose exactly methods, but continued to
97 teach children. The ubiquitous surveillance, detentions, detaining people associated
98 with these figures.

99 *PANEL – With these intellectuals, you allude to other experiences historically these*
100 *intellectuals have been detained, can you argue that in Uyghur society these*
101 *intellectual society intellectuals play a particularly important role vs other societies, and*
102 *secondly whether removal of this class constitutes a crime against the whole group?*

103 PI – Uyghur intellectuals are more influential in this society. In a smaller group of
104 people in a smaller area this can be true. It has been fairly confined, the Uyghur
105 diaspora exists, particularly in turkey. One of issues, when books and most people still
106 there - I don't think comparatively they are more influential but definitely influential still.
107 Yes, it is a crime against them. Keep in mind in one sense you do not to detain every
108 single intellectual, one purpose of this campaign and seen this in the data set is they
109 are detaining to send a signal to the rest of the intellectual class. I wouldn't put Illan
110 Tohti in the same set, but that sends a signal to all intellectuals, scholars in particular
111 there is a line you cannot cross. By 2016 when you have such significant detentions
112 of so many of these figures, they are not nobody's - the president of the Xinjiang
113 University with suspended death sentenced, his successor was there for a year before
114 also being detained. Those affiliated, dean of traditional medicine, former head of
115 education, former dep of justice, publishers – these are targeted to show the rest. Not
116 all are detained. People still work in these departments. You know how far you can go.
117 They are going to be the victim of the state based on what they are not what they do.

118 *COUNSEL – Is the gain creating fear?*

119 PI – The importance is to keep people afraid and unsure. It is humiliating, national
120 humiliation of the Uyghur people to put out a signal.

121 *PANEL – You said many of these books you mention have gone through censorship*
122 *procedure. Now the same people have been detained. I'd like to focus on the outcome,*

123 *particularly on the next generation, what is the impact on them in the change of*
124 *transmission of culture?*

125 PI – This is really important. The transmission of culture and religion. Children under
126 18 cannot go to the mosque. The regulation in 2017 make it illegal to teach religion.
127 They have restricted it to state approved imams and mosques. Children are deprived
128 of the ability to learn a religion. In terms of the textbooks, so it was two textbooks which
129 were banned. If the line, is you cannot teach, and fact Uyghurs had independent
130 republics in 30s, 40s is a fact. He directed his staff. Publishing in Uyghur language will
131 not touch Uyghur culture. Altering the way history is taught, teaching them Uyghurs
132 are not Turkic people but Chinese. Scrubbing the history books.

133 *PANEL – Is it assimilation?*

134 PI – It is at the very least. It has a pernicious nature.

135 *PANEL – In terms of the others in this group, can you explain what the threat of*
136 *arresting, detaining writers, singers, other artists, what threat does this pose?*

137 *PI – Artists in particular, there are a lot of poets and writers because they are culture*
138 *which can be adapted and built on. These are people who are prominent figure are*
139 *those who people look to develop culture. Everyone reads books and poetry. The*
140 *threat is the perceived threat that these people will carry the Uyghur culture forward.*
141 *Maybe they are not threatened but they want to get rid of it.*

142 *PANEL – The inception of beliefs, this is assimilation or is it a crime?*

143 PI – Absolutely.

144 *PANEL - I note your definition of intellectual, how does this compare the proportion of*
145 *intellectual against non-intellectuals?*

146 PI – It depends on how broadly you define it. If you consider prominent figures have
147 influence in society. I do not know about estimating the proportion of intellectuals.

148 *PANEL – Is it higher than non-intellectuals?*

149 PI – One features isn't the detention, it is the nature of detention – it is harsher such
150 as people sentenced to death. This is more prevalent in the intellectual community.
151 Whereas I see where you are coming from, how do you know they are targeting them.
152 It is the nature of the detention, how many years in jail.

153 *PANEL – The decimation of intellectuals by invading country has been done before.*
154 *Now we are in the 21st century. There is no doubt these intellectuals will have*
155 *worldwide contact list. Would the disappearance of most of them worry the PRC*
156 *because people get to know what is happening?*

157 PI – Why would they worry?

158 *PANEL – Because it would get known what they are doing?*

159 PI – They did it anyway. They did not seem to be worried as they did it anyway.

160 *PANEL – These people are the leaders of the country, they have huge contacts,*
161 *students, research, surely by removing all of them so no academics so known it has*
162 *gone would just raise the point that what is happening to them. They are disappearing*
163 *due to death or detention. Surely this is perpetuating what they don't want?*

164 PI - I would agree. I think they did not seem to worry about this. The international
165 community did not respond very quickly. There was very little response to these figures
166 but it continued to grow.

167 *PANEL – It had a decimating effect...*

168 PI – Absolutely, it set the country back 10 or 20 years. Comparing historical examples,
169 in this case there is not mass killing. It is a form of state violence.

170 *PANEL – Reputational damage to the country?*

171 PI – It doesn't seem to bother them. They know there is pushback from the
172 international community, they are keenly aware of the perception.

173 *PANEL – You made the comparison with Poland, the reason Poland recovered was*
174 *because there were too many people. Although they killed the elite there were many*
175 *remaining elite. Is this recoverable? How big is the tertiary educated population?*

176 PI – I'm not an expert on this in particular, on the point if this is recoverable, we have
177 not seen this slow down. I mentioned the president of Xinjiang University and his
178 successors hard to say here. The way it is going it does not seem so. You are
179 trying to make the point of there may be educated people who could pick this back up
180 again in 20 years. One thing we see in Qaraqash people from 90s, 80s they identify
181 them as important people. They are keeping watch. I would not say that things will get
182 better.

183 *PANEL – The first Han Chinese president of Xinjiang University, replacing Uyghurs?*
184 *Intellectuals have been badly treated in China's history, how is this viewed in the rest*
185 *of China? There are very famous cases of poets for example. How much publicity was*
186 *given of the removal in China and in Xinjiang? Are people aware? Intellectual have a*
187 *habit of being a bit separate/*

188 PI - I am not in a position to speak on the perception in China.

189 *PANEL – Do you think there is a plan to replace senior intellectuals?*

190 PI – It is possible, that would be a good way for the Chinese government. I wouldn't
191 say you need a Han person in that person but in the sense, there is no academic
192 freedom. If you dispossess the intellectual class of culture, religion, what is left for the
193 Uyghur intellectual to teach is no difference.

194 *PANEL – Is there guilt by association, if people are detained are children taken to*
195 *orphanages?*

196 PI – the three circles in the Qaraqash list, we see this. In terms of intellectuals, many
197 figures there is more data – on the Xinjiang victim database they have family trees.
198 This happens quite often. Separation I cannot speak of cases but I imagine this
199 happens.

200 *PANEL – It is not forced assimilation, but something else?*

201 PI – Sociology in modern academics has enable another famous piece of human
202 behaviour which also for a long time.

203 *PANEL - Do you think that which describes needs a label would help it be determined*
204 *as a separate crime?*

205 PI - Is it something different, in a few ways, technologically so sophisticated it makes
206 it a kind of campaign. Other difference is in some ways one questions well they asked
207 will you get rid of Islam in total and disallow Uyghurs from practicing. My answers is
208 no, that is not the intention to completely eliminate, they know they can only go so far.
209 The polish case, they did take steps to hide it but it became of the intent. I think China
210 is being careful and hide intentions. I do not think that they will get rid of religion in
211 general but dispossess it, strip it of recognisable characteristics so it is an empty shell.
212 This needs to be named in a certain way as it is insidious and targeting these people
213 through violence.

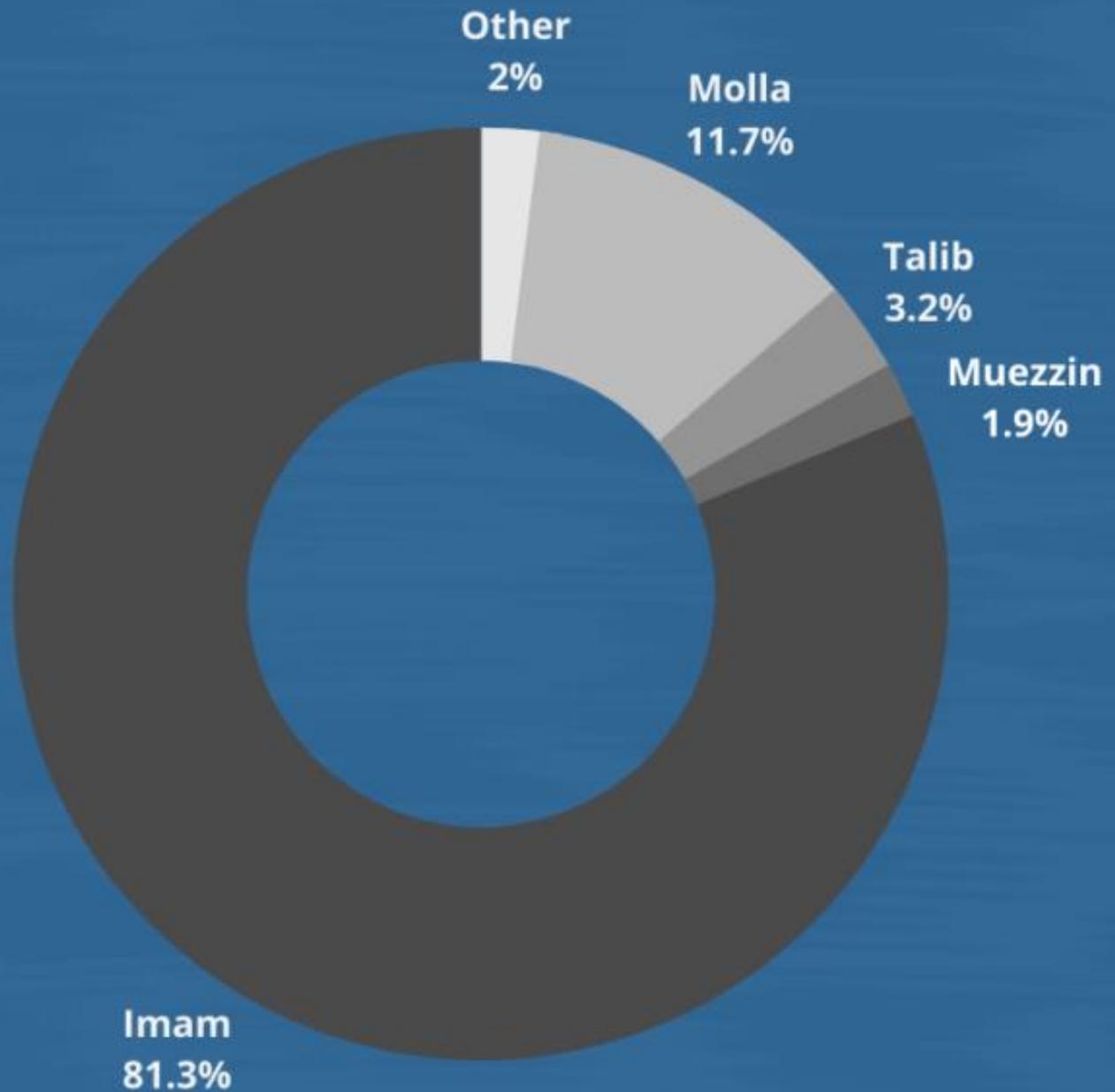
214 *COUNSEL – What are the chances these elites are detained in the general rounding*
215 *up of the population, how confident are you they are specifically targeted as*
216 *intellectuals? You mention these intellectuals get harsher punishments including*
217 *deaths, do you think there is a specific policy or movement towards intellectuals?*

218 Yes, this is the most important question. Few reasons why targeted in this way. They
219 are targeting the top-level officials. I used the word targeting which is what it looks like,
220 the intensity of sentences, they have targeted intellectuals with death sentences
221 before in 2014. Part of this to consider is I do seem as targeted at the same time you
222 do not need to target them all, the more prominent ones to instil fear in the rest. They
223 have an open letter campaign where they encourage prominent Uyghurs in society to
224 write to Uyghur people in their region stressing the point about what can be taught in
225 schools, the government says Uyghurs should not forget their history, blood mixed
226 with Han.

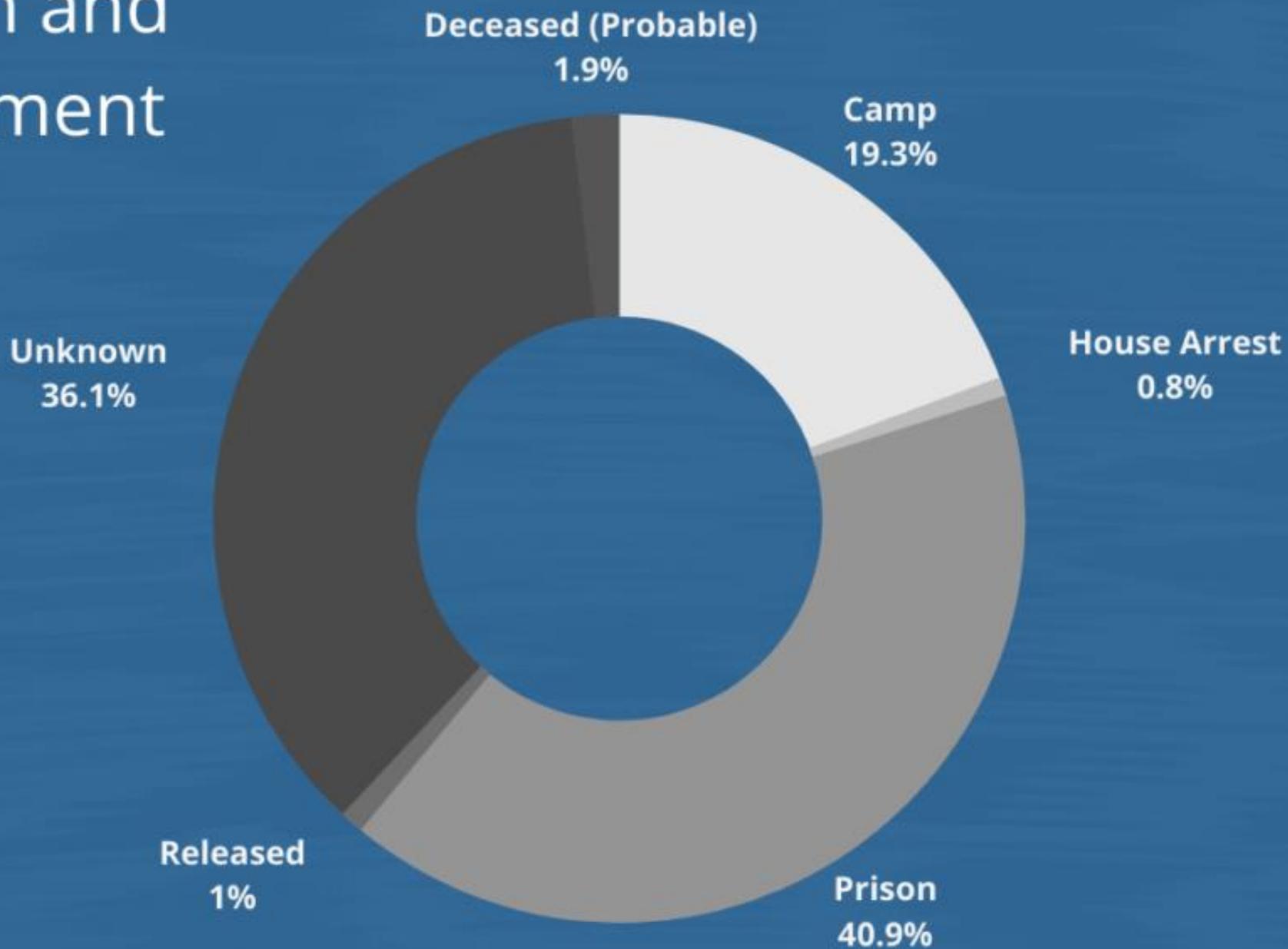
**Islam Dispossessed:
China's Persecution of Uyghur
Imams and Religious Figures**

Data Analysis

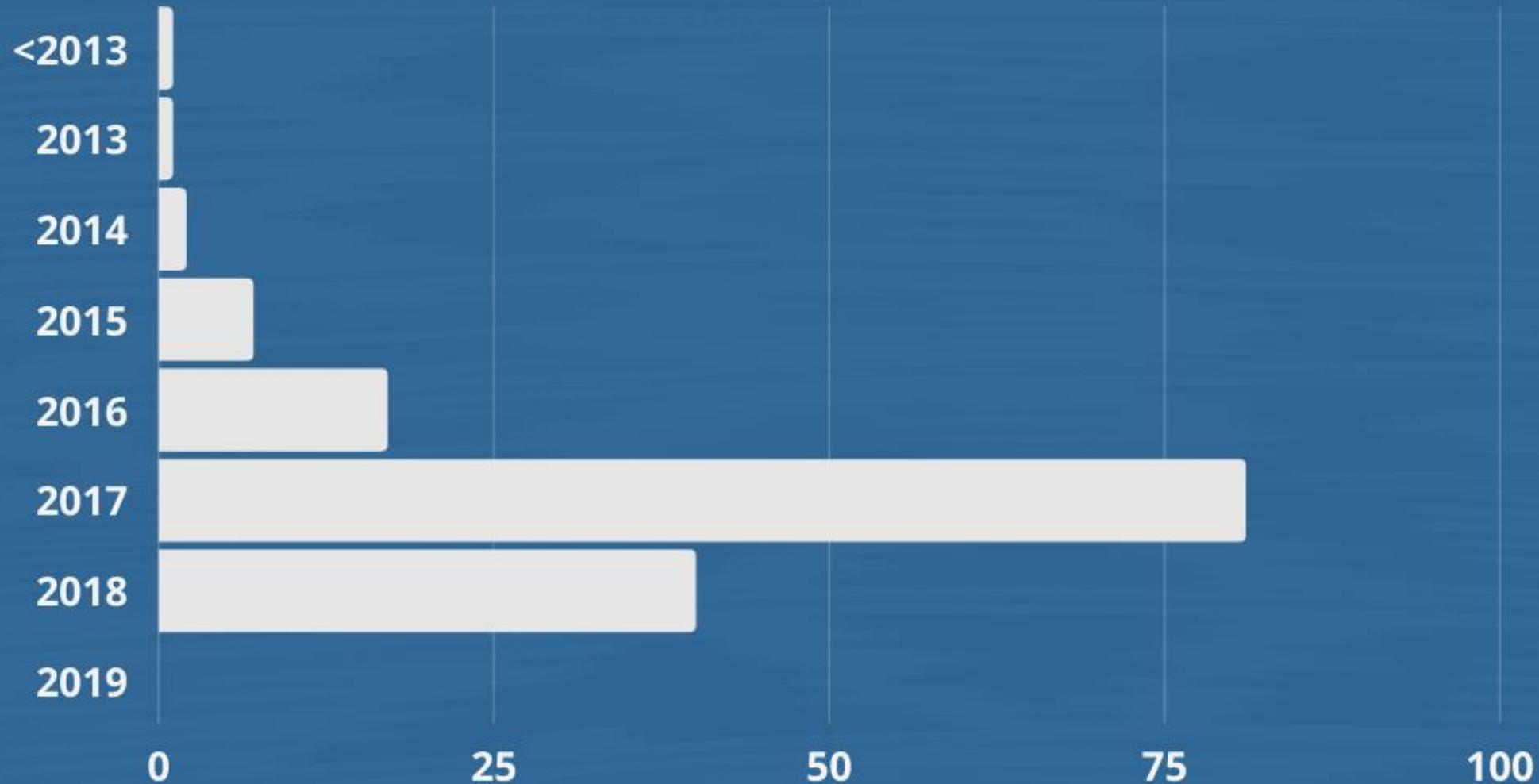
Detention and imprisonment by occupation



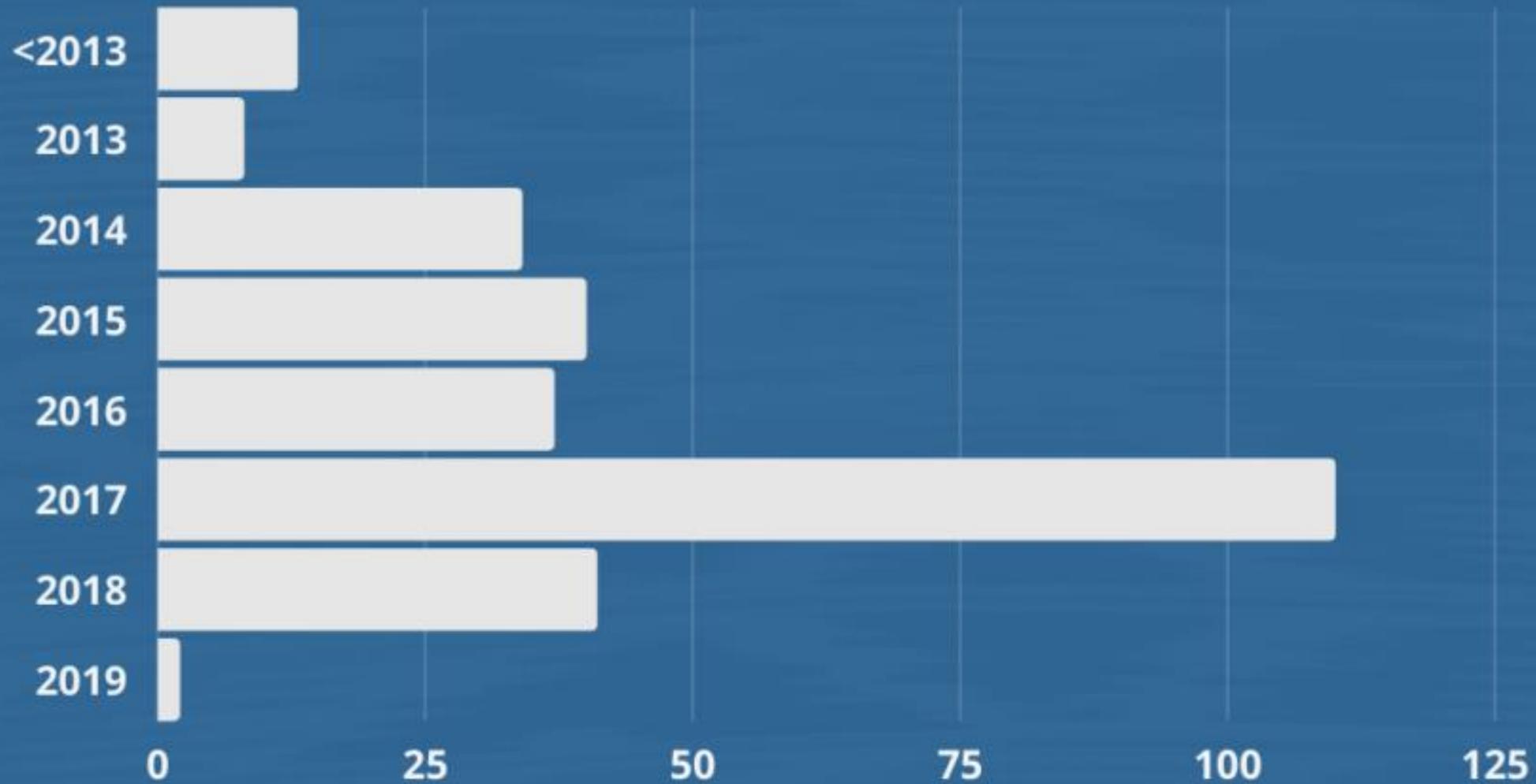
Detention and imprisonment status

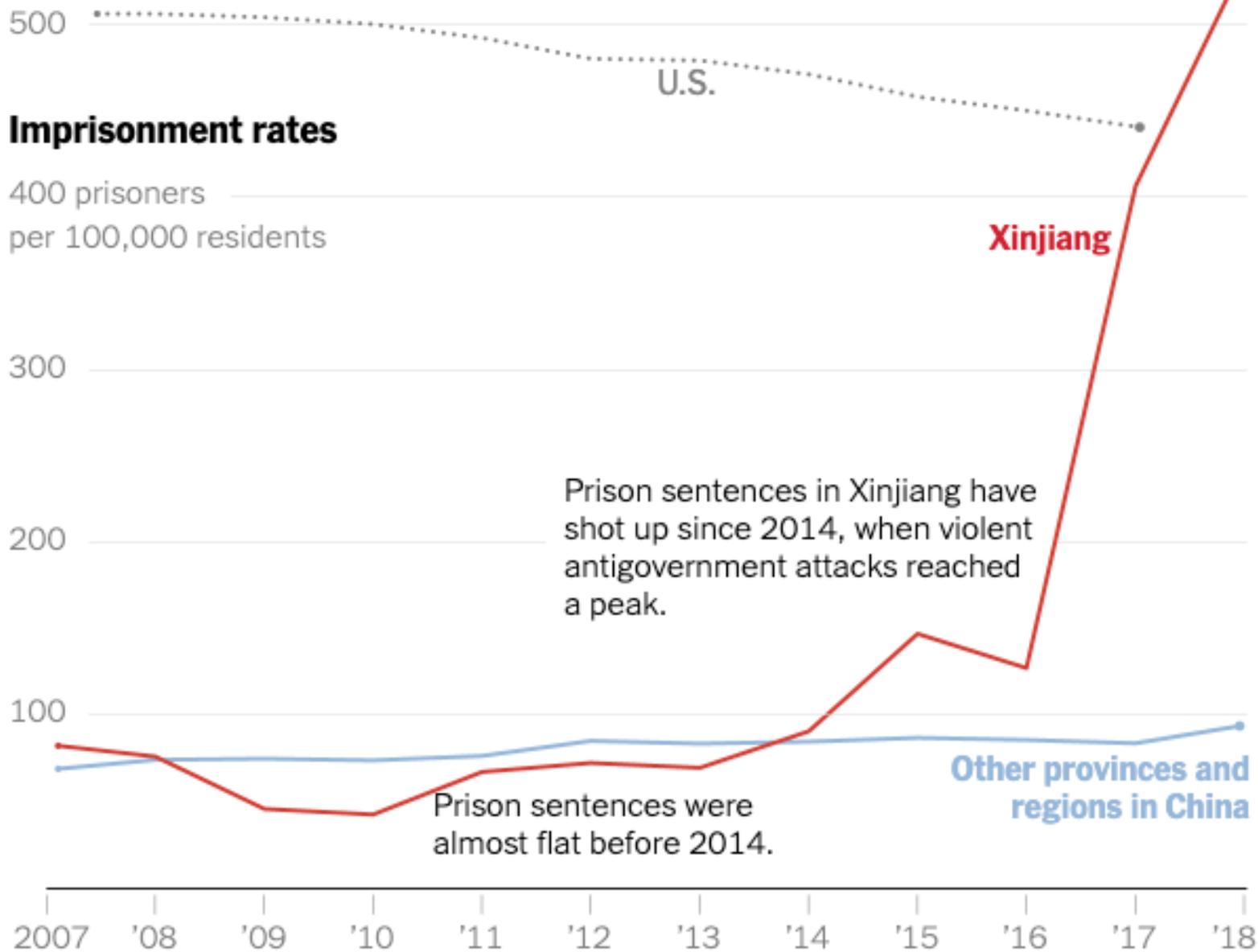


Year of detention (camps)



Year of imprisonment (prison only)





Imprisonment by alleged charges (204 cases)

