A QUIET LETTER ABOUT THE NUMBERS WE ALL PAY

The World Upside Down

France · 2026

Dear stranger,

1. The price of a person

France does not publish a price for one prison day. It publishes the budget of its prison administration.

That budget, divided by the people it holds and by the days of the year, gives one day in a French cell: €129.43.

One day in a primary school costs €22.05.

The difference is 5.9 times.

That is the whole comparison. And the prison figure is generous, because the same budget also pays for probation and for new buildings.

Sources:

- Ministry of Justice, 2026: the annual performance report for programme 107 (Administration pénitentiaire) annexed to the 2027 finance bill states a 2027 budget of €4,528.8 million in payment credits excluding the pension contribution, "up 6.3% (+€268.9 million) compared with the LFI 2026". The 2026 initial-law figure is therefore €4,259.9 million. The same report records 90,173 people detained on 10 September 2026, for 63,303 operational places.
- https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/33751
- Calculation: (4528.8 ? 268.9) × 1,000,000 ÷ 90,173 ÷ 365 = €129.43. The result is an upper bound: programme 107 also funds probation (action 02) and prison construction (titre 5), so the prison day alone is lower.
- Note on scope: France publishes no official cost per prisoner per day. This figure is derived from published credits and the published detained population, and the letter marks it as calculated, not official.
- Eurostat, 2023: €8,047.0 of public expenditure per primary-school pupil (educ_uoe_fine09, ISCED 1), the latest year published.
- https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uoe_fine09/default/table?lang=en
- Calculation: 8047 / 365 = €22.05 a day for a child. The ratio is 129.43 / 22.05 = 5.87, shown as 5.9.

2. The price of a job

A lawyer earns €246.27 a day.

An accountant earns €219.14 a day.

A teacher earns €159.23 a day.

A cleaner earns €78.47 a day.

These are net monthly earnings, turned into working days: the monthly figure, times twelve months, divided by two hundred and sixty worked days.

Unlike the other letters in this series, the French numbers are net of social contributions. They are smaller than gross figures would be, and they are what a person actually receives.

The range itself is the story.

Sources:

- INSEE, 2024: net monthly mean full-time-equivalent earnings in the private sector, France, all ages, both sexes (DS_DERA_PRIVE_ANNUEL_2024, measure "Salaire net EQTP mensuel moyenne"): lawyers (PCS 312A) €5,335.77; accounting managers in small and medium firms (373C) €4,747.96; cleaners (684A) €1,700.12.
- https://api.insee.fr/melodi/file/DS_DERA_PRIVE_ANNUEL/DS_DERA_PRIVE_ANNUEL_2024_CSV_FR
- DEPP, 2024: net monthly mean full-time-equivalent pay of public-sector teachers in lower and upper secondary school (second degré), €3,450 (Panorama statistique des personnels de l'enseignement scolaire 2025-2026, figure 7.3, source SIASP).
- https://www.education.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/document/panoramachapitre-7-521089.pdf
- Calculation: monthly × 12 ÷ 260, because a full-time year is about 260 worked days. 5335.77 × 12 / 260 = €246.27; 4747.96 × 12 / 260 = €219.14; 3450 × 12 / 260 = €159.23; 1700.12 × 12 / 260 = €78.47.
- Note: all four French figures are net. The Dutch, Portuguese and German letters use gross earnings, so the columns are not directly comparable; the difference is the wage basis, not the country.

3. The loop

The government takes in €1,562,519,700,000.00.

The government spends €1,714,111,700,000.00.

The difference is €151,592,000,000.00.

This time it is a real deficit. The state spends more than it takes in, and borrows the rest.

The loop is not broken. It is simply pointed somewhere.

Sources:

- Eurostat, 2025: general government revenue €1,562,519.7 million and expenditure €1,714,111.7 million (gov_10a_main, sector S13). These are general-government figures: central government, local authorities and social security together.
- https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10a_main/default/table?lang=en
- Eurostat, 2025: net borrowing of €151,592 million, 5.1% of GDP; consolidated gross debt 115.7% of GDP (gov_10dd_edpt1). Expenditure minus revenue equals the published net borrowing exactly.
- https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10dd_edpt1/default/table?lang=en
- Calculation: 1714.1117 ? 1562.5197 = 151.592 billion euro.

4. Where the loop points

The single largest item is €66,656,468,653.00: the pensions of retired civil servants and soldiers.

A lot of money goes to catching people after they fall.

Much less goes to making sure they do not fall in the first place.

This is not a conspiracy. It is a habit.

Sources:

- Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2026: programme 741 "Pensions civiles et militaires de retraite et allocations temporaires d'invalidité" carries €66,656,468,653 in payment credits in the initial finance law for 2026 — the largest programme in the state budget once the refund and advance programmes are set aside.
- https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/32270
- Note on scope: programme 200 "Remboursements et dégrèvements d'impôts d'État" (€141,174,362,742) and programme 833 "Avances sur le montant des impositions revenant aux régions, départements, communes, établissements et divers organismes" (€135,695,446,995) are larger, but they are tax refunds and advances to local authorities, not spending the state chooses; they are excluded.
- The same file shows programme 117 "Charge de la dette et trésorerie de l'État" at €58,615,000,000, the second-largest programme after pensions.

5. Five lines worth naming

Charge de la dette et trésorerie de l'État: about €160,589,041.10 per day (€58,615,000,000.00 per year).

Aide à l'accès au logement: about €45,403,111.35 per day (€16,572,135,643.00 per year).

Handicap et dépendance: about €44,925,261.89 per day (€16,397,720,590.00 per year).

Inclusion sociale et protection des personnes: about €40,507,276.64 per day (€14,785,155,974.00 per year).

Service public de l'énergie: about €26,256,648.52 per day (€9,583,676,708.00 per year).

Some are large. Some are small. Each of them is a decision, written down.

Sources:

- Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2026: programme 117 "Charge de la dette et trésorerie de l'État (crédits évaluatifs)", mission "Engagements financiers de l'État", €58,615,000,000 in payment credits in the initial finance law for 2026.
- https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/32270
- Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2026: programme 109 "Aide à l'accès au logement", mission "Cohésion des territoires", €16,572,135,643.
- https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/32270
- Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2026: programme 157 "Handicap et dépendance", mission "Solidarité, insertion et égalité des chances", €16,397,720,590.
- https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/32270
- Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2026: programme 304 "Inclusion sociale et protection des personnes", mission "Solidarité, insertion et égalité des chances", €14,785,155,974.
- https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/32270
- Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2026: programme 345 "Service public de l'énergie", mission "Écologie, développement et mobilité durables", €9,583,676,708.
- https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/32270
- Daily figures divide each annual amount by 365.

6. The habit

We are all part of this habit.

We pay taxes. We vote. We work. We accept the numbers.

Not because we consciously chose them, but because we were born into them.

No one ever showed us the whole picture at once. This letter is that picture.

7. The other number

One cent per day. That is €3.65 per person per year.

The idea is simple: instead of paying €129.43 every day for the end of someone's story, what happens if many people each give one cent a day for the beginning of the story?

You give one cent every day. Over a full year that is €3.65. Nothing more is asked.

No promises. No guarantees. No returns.

Just a place, a question, a group of people, a very small amount of money, and the freedom to stop at any time.

Sources:

- Calculation: one cent per day, multiplied by the days in a year, is €3.65.
- Ministry of Justice, 2026: the derived daily cost of one prisoner.
- https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/33751

8. What this letter is not

It is not a business plan. It is not a political programme. It is not a religion. It is not a solution.

It is a mirror.

9. What you can do

Nothing. Or something. That is the whole choice.

You can look at the public numbers. You can join the experiment and give one cent a day (€3.65 a year). Or you can close this letter and forget it.

No one is obliged. That is the point.

10. The world upside down

It costs more to keep someone in a cell than to teach a child.

It costs more to treat people after they fall than to prevent the fall.

It costs more to argue than to listen.

It costs more to count the money than to spend it well.

This letter does not turn the world the right way up. It only shows you that it is currently upside down.

11. One last number

One cent. Per day. Per person. €3.65 per year.

That is all that is asked. Not because it is enough, but because it is honest, and because it is completely yours to choose.

Sources:

- Calculation: one cent per day, multiplied by the days in a year, is €3.65.

12. The layer underneath

The differences are psychotic. Extreme is not too strong a word.

One day in a French cell costs almost six days in a French classroom. A lawyer's day is worth more than three days of a cleaner's work. These are not small gaps. They are public, they are measured, and they were chosen.

Money is not the problem. The money exists. The state collects more than one and a half trillion euro a year and still borrows a further hundred and fifty-one billion. The loop turns. The problem is where the money goes.

The price is not the problem either. The price of a prisoner, a teacher, a child or a cleaner is not a natural law. These prices were decided. They can be decided differently.

What lies underneath is consent, choices, expectations, input.

We consent to these numbers, not because we voted for them, but because we never refused them. We make choices, or we let others make them for us. We carry expectations about what work is worth, who deserves what, what a child needs, and what a prisoner costs. And we either give input into the system, or we stay silent.

The numbers are not the problem. Our consent is the material. Our choices are the shape. Our expectations are the weight. Our input is the only thing that can change it.

With quiet hope, A stranger