

# Britain's prison population reaches record high

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A spate of prison suicides has highlighted the terrible state of Britain's penal system.

On December 23 Gary Cunliffe, 32, was found hanging in a recess off a wing at Manchester Prison. Just weeks before, Richard Jones, 29, hung himself in his cell at Gloucester Prison. Jones, whose body was discovered on December 4, was the third prisoner to commit suicide at the prison in two years.

The deputy governor of Gloucester Prison, Chris Popple, said Jones's death reflected the problems facing many prisons: "Prisoners are on the streets in the morning, in court at lunchtime and then in prison at night. They come with all their emotional baggage and can rapidly become depressed."

But reports indicate that the personal problems faced by many prisoners are gravely exacerbated by conditions within the prisons themselves. In November the prison service had reported that Gloucester Prison was so overcrowded that it was creating "unacceptable living conditions".

Gloucester is not alone. At 73,000, the UK's prison population is now at a record high, with 124 prisoners for every 100,000 people in England and Wales—the highest rate in Western Europe.

The figures have increased exponentially over the last decade. In 1992 the average prison population was 45,800. Today it stands at 72,803.

In 1999, some 24,000 more people were being sent to prison than ten years previously. The increase came despite the fact that there was no appreciable change in the number of people found guilty at trial. Rather it reflected a political climate in which the social position of the working class was systematically undermined through lowering wages and cutting benefits and social services, whilst the emphasis was placed on strengthening "law and order".

The Labour government has continued this policy, with figures showing that the prison population rose by seven percent in the first nine months of 2002. Prison reform groups have forecast that Home Secretary David Blunkett's recent demands for courts to get even tougher on petty criminals could see the prison population spiral to 110,000 by 2009.

The Howard League for Penal Reform said that last April, in the weeks following Blunkett's emotive outburst demanding 10 to 12 year olds be imprisoned, even before trial, jailings rose by up to 500 per week.

Consequently 87 of the 139 prisons in England and Wales are now officially classed as overcrowded. In the last seven years, an extra 12,000 prison places have been created at the cost of £1.2 billion. Of the 19 new prisons opened, 16 are already overcrowded.

The worst case is a Preston jail, which has 661 prisoners but just 356 places. An unannounced visit to Ford Open Prison, condemned by the media as a "cushy number" last year, found it full to capacity, with prisoners sleeping in storerooms. The inspectors reported that excessive overcrowding meant that "every possible nook and cranny was being pressed into service as prisoner accommodation," including the health care centre's waiting room, a cleaning storeroom and a dining room.

A report published in December by the chief inspector of prisons Anne Owers confirmed these conditions and stated that rising prisoner numbers were having a "debilitating and chilling effect" on prisoners—particularly as suicides were becoming more common.

Rehabilitation had been neglected, Owers reported, with inmates locked in cells for 23 hours a day. "There can be no doubt that most prisons are less safe than they were a year ago and many are also less decent

places,” Owers said.

The figures caused England and Wales’ most senior judge, Lord Chief Justice Woolf, to call for a change in sentencing policy. Imprisoning first time offenders for crimes such as burglary could no longer continue, Woolf said.

Reliance on custodial sentences has made overcrowding a “cancer” at the heart of the prison service, he went on. “If you insist on trying to take in through the front door more prisoners than a prison can hold without letting the necessary number out of the back door, a prison will simply explode,” he continued, in reference to a riot at Lincoln Prison in November caused by overcrowding. Jail should instead be reserved for serious and violent criminals, he said, enabling the Prison Service to concentrate on rehabilitation work.

Woolf’s call was given short shrift by the government and the media.

The increase in jail sentences has been especially targeted at the young. In the last decade, the number of young offenders—aged between 15 and 20—held in custody has risen by 900 percent. Some 11,631 young people under the age of 21 are currently held in custody. Of these 2,893 are children aged 15-17 years. Many young offenders are serving sentences of between 18 months and three years for burglary or theft. Some 76 percent of these prisoners will be reimprisoned within two years of their release (the rate of reconvictions is 58 percent for all prisoners).

The lack of space means that many young offenders are held in adult prisons. In Northern Ireland recently a teenage girl was detained in a male prison due to the lack of an alternative placement. A recent court ruling that imprisoned youngsters were also entitled to protections laid out in the Children’s Act created a crisis for the prison service, as young offenders are routinely deprived of their rights.

Not surprisingly, incidence of self-harm is also rising amongst young people in custody. In September, an inquest jury found that neglect had contributed to the suicide of 16-year-old Kevin Jacobs in his cell at Feltham Young Offenders’ Institution in West London.

The inquest heard that Jacobs, who was 20 weeks into a six-months sentence for robbery and assault, had a “phenomenal history” of self-harm. The youngster had been in the care of Lambeth Social Services at the time

of his death and had hoped to return to his former care home in Guildford, but had been told it was impossible.

During his time at Feltham Jacobs had spent days in the health care unit, and two weeks before his death had hung himself to the point of unconsciousness before being found.

The jury found that “systematic neglect” played a role in Jacobs’ death and that there was a “gross deficiency” involving lack of co-ordination and sharing information between the relevant authorities. Feltham had failed to provide a “consistent and safe environment,” they ruled.



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