

Britain: overcrowded prisons in chaos

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21 August 2003

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In its bid to establish itself as the party of law or order, Blair's Labour government has introduced a series of draconian measures, including a tougher sentencing policy for petty offenders.

The result is that Britain's prison system is now in an advanced state of decay and chaos. An internal prison security report published in July recorded 536 notable incidents in British and Welsh prisons during one week, including two escapes and four deaths, two of them suicides.

The prison system is at bursting point, with the Home Office anticipating that total prisoner numbers will be 80,000 within three years, up from 75,000. Currently between 150 and 250 people are sentenced to prison every week.

Already overcrowding means that a total of 14,000 prisoners, one in five, are forced to double up in a prison cell designed for just one inmate. Last month the prison service warned that it would have to start utilising cells in police stations to hold prisoners.

The prison services annual report admitted that burgeoning prison numbers are close to creating an explosion. The prison services' Gold incident command suite situated at prison service headquarters manages major disruptions at English and Welsh jails. During 2002 it was officially opened 62 times, a 27 percent increase on the year previous. These incidents ranged from a riot at Lincolnshire prison in October 2003 and 26 so-called mini riots. During the same period there were 28 hostage-taking incidents, seven roof climbs and one prisoner managed to barricade himself into his cell and force a standoff with prison staff.

Overcrowded and unhygienic conditions mean that prisoners are dehumanised and humiliated on a daily basis, including regular bullying by demoralised and

sometimes racist staff.

After a lengthy legal battle four former inmates at Parkhurst prison on the Isle of Wight were recently awarded compensation after suing the Home Office for assault, malicious prosecution and misfeasance. One of the four, Patrick Petrie, a black Briton, was awarded record damages of nearly £40,000. The finding of misfeasance, which refers to deliberate wrongdoing by more than one public official, is very rare. All four prisoners were assaulted by prison guards while in segregation and were tortured further by having their testicles squeezed and food and water thrown at them.

The number of prisoner suicides, attempted suicides and self-harm are also soaring. Prison suicides reached a record 105 during 2002. So far this year 55 self-inflicted deaths have been recorded.

In response, the Prison Reform Trust has called for courts to jail offenders for shorter periods and for the use of jail terms to be reduced. Their recent study entitled *The Decision to Imprison*, based on interviews with 133 judges and magistrates, warned that rising prison numbers were not the result of greater conviction rates but courts handing down a larger number of longer jail terms for offences that previously would have received community penalties.

Those involved in petty offences, often heroin and crack addicts, such as shoplifting and handling stolen goods are now three times more likely to go to jail than in 1991. Inside prison they are unlikely to receive treatment for their illness.

The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) last month released the findings of its two-year investigation into the murder of Zahid Mubarek, a British Pakistani prisoner in March 2000. Mubarek was beaten to death by his psychopathic racist cellmate Robert Stewart at the Feltham Young Offenders Institute. The commission accused the prison service of a "shocking catalogue of failure" which justified a

formal finding of unlawful discrimination.

Mubarek's family, however, said that the CRE inquiry left them none the wiser as to how a known racist was allowed to share a cell, and consequently murder, their son just one day before his release date. An internal prison service report 18 months ago concluded that the Feltham institute was guilty of institutional racism.

The relative number of women prisoners is rising even more sharply than that of the male inmates—more than doubling since the mid-1990s. Twice as many women are jailed for their first offence compared to men, while few female offenders pose any threat to the public. The frequent imprisoning of mothers has an enormously disruptive effect upon their children and family life. One third of women imprisoned in British jails have children under the age of five.

Women are often held hundreds of miles away from their homes where suitable rehabilitation regimes are restricted. Extensive research reveals that the psychological effects of incarceration upon women are greater than upon men and they suffer a higher incidence of mental health problems. Many women imprisoned have suffered physical or sexual abuse, frequently both, outside of prison.

Self-harm incidents have also increased in women's prisons and threaten to become an epidemic. In 2002 there were 4,344 self-harm incidents, nearly double from the year before. One woman in every three attempts suicide in prison with 37 percent having previously attempted to take their own lives.

Prison bosses have had to send an emergency squad into Styal prison in Manchester where six women recently died. Women's prison chief Niall Clifford told the *Guardian* newspaper that he blamed a lethal cocktail of mental illness, drug addiction and overcrowding for the deaths. A tragic total of nine women have taken their own lives in the first half of this year—already the same figure as for the whole of 2002.

Most of the women in British prisons are there because of low-level crime like fraud and forgery. But a growing number are being sentenced to prison terms for drug smuggling. Many of these, both British born and foreign nationals, are tempted into crime because of their poverty-stricken circumstances. Foreign nationals now comprise 15 percent of the female prison

population, with many sentenced for drug importation.

Earlier this year, Lord Chief Justice Woolf publicly blamed the record number of inmates on politically directed initiatives from the government aimed at proving its readiness to be "tough on crime". These include government pressure to remove judges' jurisdiction over certain jail sentences, leading to an increase in the length of time served in prison. One of the first ways to ease overcrowding, Woolf said, should be a reversal in the policy of jailing first-time offenders for petty crimes.

His criticisms brought a furious response from the government. Home Secretary Jack Straw insisted that his government's aim was "making prisons work"—a play on the statement of his notoriously hard-line Conservative predecessor Michael Howard who, in 1993, had declared "prison works".

Straw was backed by Civitas director David Green. Though billed as an "independent charity", Civitas was established to promote the destruction of publicly funded welfare provision. Green was formerly at the Institute of Economic Affairs, a highly influential thinktank during the Thatcher government and publishers of US sociologist Charles Murray's right-wing theories on the "underclass".

Civitas's Director of Community Studies Norman Dennis was responsible for editing several chapters of a book entitled *Zero Tolerance: policing a free society*, along with then Detective Superintendent Ray Mallon, now mayor of Middlesbrough and otherwise known as "Robocop".

Green and Dennis were both formerly Labour Party councillors in Newcastle and Sunderland respectively.

Writing in the *Observer* newspaper under the headline "Crime is falling—because prison works", Green argued that whilst "armies of academics argue the toss" over the benefit of prison sentences, "no one disputes that, while in jail offenders cannot break into your house, whereas on community sentence they still have free time to steal".



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