

# Britain: Prison overcrowding reaches breaking point

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The prison population in England and Wales has risen to 74,543, an increase of 2,674 from one year ago, according to figures released last week.

The rise leaves just 600 spare places in the prison system, raising the prospect of inmates being held in police cells in the worst effected areas such as the West Midlands, West Yorkshire and London, or transported hundreds of miles.

Britain has the highest number of prisoners in Western Europe, with 141 prisoners for every 100,000 people. The latest figures mean that the prison population has virtually doubled in the last 25 years as successive governments have implemented draconian law and order policies. The number of women incarcerated has also increased dramatically, by 146 percent over the last 10 years, to 4,463.

The situation has worsened since Labour came to power in 1997. Under Prime Minister Tony Blair, the number of prisoners has risen by 24 percent. This is not due to rising crime rates, but to the readiness of the courts to resort to custodial sentencing for even minor crimes. First time burglars are twice as likely to go to jail now as they were eight years ago, whilst the number of adults serving sentences for less than 12 months is up 160 percent since 1999.

More than half the prisons in England and Wales are officially classed as overcrowded—80 out of 138 jails. Prison reform campaigners say that 11 have exceeded the maximum safe capacity—Ashwell in Rutland, Birmingham, Cardiff, Doncaster, Hull, Lancaster, Leicester, Lincoln, Stafford, Wandsworth in south London and Wormwood Scrubs in west London.

The situation is similar in Scotland, where overcrowding is said to be a problem at all of the country's 16 jails as the number of inmates has increased 65 percent over intended capacity. The

Scottish Prison Service said that Craiginches Prison in Aberdeen, built to hold 155 prisoners, currently holds 250.

The increase has far overstepped all expectations. The projected figures for 2006 now expect the prison population in England and Wales to reach 87,200—9,500 more than planned for.

Prison overcrowding has the most devastating impact on the well being of inmates. The annual report for England and Wales for 2002/2003 by the Chief Inspector of Prisons published earlier this year, graphically underscored this.

Its main conclusion found that the explosion in prison numbers was directly related to a staggering rate of suicides and self-harm in English and Welsh prisons. The Chief Inspector reported, "Almost two people a week kill themselves in our prisons: and they are the most vulnerable people: often new to prison, with mental health and substance misuse problems. One in four women in local prisons self-harms, some repeatedly. In the worst of our overcrowded local prisons, inmates may spend 23 hours a day in a shared cell with an unscreened toilet."

Ninety-four inmates committed suicide last year, a doubling of the 47 suicide cases in 1993. Self-harm in custody has skyrocketed as well. As reported by the BBC in the first nine months of 2003 there were 12,073 cases of self-harm in England and Wales. That compares to 4,187 between 1993 and 1994.

A statistical analysis of suicides shows that it is primarily the most vulnerable prisoners that are prone to take their lives. Over a third have not been convicted of a crime, 40 percent die within their first month in custody, and one in five are so disturbed or mentally ill that they are in hospitals or segregation units when they kill themselves. A disproportionate number are women.

“All local prisons are at the sharp end of overcrowding,” the report points out. Local prisons are stretched to the limits and often not able to deliver a “decent” or “acceptable regime”. This affects all aspects of prison life—attitudes and culture as well as standards of hygiene and cleanliness. The strain is felt on every level of the prison service. Overcrowding leads to a situation where virtually no prisoner can be taken care of properly. New inmates are quickly dispersed to whatever prison can offer a place and banged up behind bars without even considering if they have any special needs: are they substance abusers, do they have any special psychological problems, are they vulnerable in any other way?

Such is the scale of overcrowding, that Home Secretary David Blunkett is said to be looking into increasing the use of electronic tagging. Some 3,500 people are currently on Home Detention Curfew.

The government’s criminal policy has been carried out under the banner of “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”. Committed to a right-wing big business agenda, the government has fulfilled the first pledge, but has done nothing to alleviate the social conditions that cause crime in the first place. Instead its own policies have contributed to the increase in the prison population through the rising levels of social inequality. Many inmates, for example, are in prison for petty offences, such as non-payment of fines, bills, etc.

The official attitude towards criminal policy, as with every other area of British social policy, increasingly mirrors that of the United States. In a society that defined by a deepening polarisation between rich and poor, this Americanisation will continue whatever cosmetic changes are made to sentencing policies. The more life at the lower end of the social strata becomes a struggle, the more the upper echelons design its policies to control its population.



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