

# Prison population in Britain reaches record levels

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The number of prisoners in British jails reached a record level of 77,000 in August. Britain has the highest rate of population in prison in Western Europe, 109 people per 100,000. This is nearly double the figure of 42,000 in prison in 1991. Home Office projections predict that the total will reach 110,000 by 2010.

The Chief Inspector of Prisons in Britain, Anne Owers, comments in the *Independent* newspaper on how horrendous conditions have led to a further growth of prison suicides this year—following the record total of 95 suicides in prisons in England and Wales in 2004.

Owers accepted that “rhetoric” from Labour politicians had created a “climate” where the number of jailings was growing exponentially. “If you lock up this number of people this is the consequence. This is what is going to happen: more people are going to die in our prisons,” she warned.

The trend of the courts to impose longer sentences has swelled prison numbers, with prisoners being held in police cells or in prisons at great distances from their families. Owers described the situation being like a “horrific game of musical cells”.

The Prison Reform Trust charity issued a press release in August detailing the overcrowding in British prisons. It explained that 74 out of 142 jails were above the certified normal accommodation level. Fifteen of the prisons are beyond their so-called safe overcrowding limit.

More than 17,000 prisoners are held two to a cell designed for one person. These cells do not have separately ventilated toilets, so that prisoners have to “eat, sleep and defecate in the same small room.”

Juliet Lyon, the Prison Reform Trust’s director, said: “This level of overcrowding poses a real and serious danger to prison and public safety.”

Commenting on 26 apparently self-inflicted deaths in custody which have occurred since the beginning of June, 24 of which were in overcrowded prisons, Lyon said: “The terrible correlation between overcrowding and deaths in custody demands urgent investigation.”

She continued: “The government have grown complacent about overcrowding and now is breaching its own final buffer. The summer holiday season usually gives prisons a respite while the courts take their break; instead the population is growing month on month. Even in the quietest months of the year, pressure is still building up within prisons.”

Commenting on the large number of people with drug and mental health problems who end up within the prison system, she added: “Massive prison growth will not end of its own accord. It will take a concerted effort to reserve prison for serious and violent offenders and to invest in drug treatment, mental healthcare and safe, effective alternatives to custody. Right now, the prison population is mushrooming out of control, and the government is still trying to hopelessly build its way out of a crisis.”

One of the consequences of the overcrowding is that prisoners are more frequently moved around the system to different prisons and many end up being in the cell 23 hours a day. The first few days in a new prison environment are the most stressful and are when the prisoner is most vulnerable. A study undertaken by Dr Jenny Shaw, a psychiatrist at the University of Manchester, reported in the *British Medical Journal*, showed that a third of all suicides in prison happen within the first week of incarceration.

The study also showed a high incidence of drug dependency by those committing suicide; over a quarter being drug dependent. The study put forward a list of measures, one of which stated: “Suicide prevention

measures should be concentrated in the period immediately following reception into prison. For instance, following reception into prison, those thought to be at risk should be placed in a special prison wing where it is easier to monitor them.”

The current levels of overcrowding and reshuffling of prisoners preclude such measures.

In July, the Howard League for Penal Reform issued a press release detailing the figures for prison suicides in England and Wales over the last decade, covering the period 1995 to 2004. It gave a total of 804 men, women and children, explaining that 55 percent of those committing suicide were remand prisoners. Remand prisoners represent only one fifth of the total prison population. They are more likely to be held in overcrowded and overstretched local prisons. Women in prison were 30 times more at risk of suicide than in the community.

Frances Crook, the Howard League’s Director, stated: “The number of prison suicides in the last 10 years is a shaming indictment of our penal system. Judges and magistrates cannot justify sending ever-increasing numbers of people into our already bulging jails when effective community sentences are readily available. With the present level of overcrowding... people are literally condemned to an early death.”

Another result of the Labour government’s “law and order” drive is the jailing of children. Hundreds of children, some as young as 12, are now imprisoned each year for breaching antisocial behaviour disorders (Asbos).

The pressure group Inquest, which focuses on deaths in custody, including suicides, recently published a book, “In the Care of the State?” by Barry Goldson and Deborah Coles. It highlights the number of deaths in custody of young people.

Interviewed in the *Guardian* Coles said, “Inspectorate reports condemn the treatment of young people in prison custody. They don’t have properly trained staff, aren’t child centred and are focused on discipline and punishment rather than education and a therapeutic approach.”

According to the *Guardian* article 190 young people under the age of 21 have committed suicide in custody since 1990. Of these 25 were children (17 or under). Another two children took their own lives in secure training units. Commenting on the fact that 75 women

have committed suicide in custody over the same period, Coles explained that Inquest was seeking a public inquiry into the jailing of vulnerable women. Coles said: “There is widespread recognition that the only people the majority of women in prison pose a threat to are themselves.”



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