

England and Wales lead Europe in imprisonment

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As part of a series of events to mark their 140th anniversary, the Howard League for Penal Reform published international imprisonment league tables on January 18 which showed that in England and Wales more than 140 people in every 100,000 of the population is in jail (the figures for England and Wales are calculated separately from the rest of the UK). By the end of 2005, the numbers in jail in England and Wales hit a record high of 77,702 (in 2003 this stood at 73,000, with 124 prisoners for every 100,000 people in jail). The British government had initially planned to increase the overall jail capacity to 80,400 by 2007, a figure probably soon to be overrun.

The incarceration rate of England and Wales was found to be around 50 percent higher than comparable countries such as France, Germany and Italy and double that of the Scandinavian states. The Howard League also revealed that there were more children and young people in prison England and Wales than in any other Western European country—with the tally trailing only Turkey and Ukraine in its table of 32 countries. It also has one of the highest proportions of women prisoners.

The basic findings were as follows:

- * England and Wales imprison a higher percentage of their populations than any other Western European country. Their rate of imprisonment is 50 percent higher than in France, Germany and Italy, and almost double that of Scandinavian countries.

- * More children and young people are in prison in England and Wales than in any Western European country, behind only Turkey and Ukraine.

- * There are many more women in prison in England and Wales than in France, Italy or Germany, even

though each of these countries has a higher population.

Only Eastern European states imprison more than England and Wales. Ukraine, a key British and US ally in the so-called “war on terror,” imprisons the greatest number of its own citizens, with 406.3 per 100,000.

Estonia (imprisoning 337.9 per 100,000), Latvia (333.3), Lithuania (227.1), Poland (207.8), Slovakia (184.6) and Hungary (162.2)—all accepted as European Union members in May 2004—imprison more people than the UK. Romania, a candidate for EU membership, also incarcerates more with 184.6 per 100,000. Other EU candidates—Bulgaria (140.2) and Turkey (99.9)—imprison fewer people, despite their poor human rights records.

Spain (140.3 per 100,000) has the second highest rate of incarceration in Western Europe. Strikingly, Northern Ireland, despite the social and political problems it faces, imprisons just over half as many people proportionally as do England and Wales.

England and Wales imprison 2,742 children, including children held in Young Offender Institutions, privately run Secure Training Centres and Local Authority Secure Children’s Homes. This is second only to Ukraine (4,639) and almost twice as many as Germany (1,456), which placed fourth. As regards young adults (aged 18-20 years) in prison, England and Wales top the list in terms of absolute numbers with 8,514, ahead of Turkey (8,397), Germany (5,443), France (4,224) and Romania (3,061).

Ukraine (11,832) and Spain (4,518) have higher numbers of women in prison than England and Wales (4,452).

These statistics were published by the Council of Europe on November 7, 2005 and relate to figures for September 2004.

Some of the comparative countries count those held

in drug rehabilitation centres, psychiatric hospitals, immigration detention centres and those subject to electronic surveillance as prisoners. England and Wales do not and therefore their comparative imprisonment rates are likely to be even worse than the statistics presented here suggest.

Commenting on the findings, Howard League Director Frances Cook described the use of prisons in England and Wales as “seemingly indiscriminate,” adding: “Not only do we send a higher proportion of our own citizens to prison than any other Western European country, we also trump Turkey, Armenia and Bulgaria in the imprisonment stakes.... Is this really where we want to be? We have to end this country’s obsession with custody.”

More often than not, each prison statistic represents the end result of an existence plagued by poverty and social depravation. This is especially so for many of today’s youth convicts, deprived of the opportunities that even their parents had and demonised by a government unconcerned with their future. Just two weeks before the publication of its report on prison numbers, the Howard League released a report that found that one fifth of young male prisoners would be homeless if they were not in jail.

The study also revealed that the majority of 18- to 21-year-old men who have been in prison have housing problems. The men openly admitted that they were more likely to become involved in offending if their housing needs were left unmet. In addition, a quarter believed that housing was crucial to their successful resettlement and would help them to live crime-free lives.

Three quarters had already left home—at an average age of 15 years—by the time they began their jail sentences. Many said they had no idea where they would be spending their first night following release. The report’s author, Finola Farrant, commented: “When young people themselves say that having safe and secure housing will help stop them committing further offences the government should sit up and take notice.”

Last month, the Prison Reform Trust said 74 of 142 jails in England and Wales were operating at over the government’s own certified occupancy level and 15 had too many inmates to meet safe overcrowding limits.

The strong link between overcrowding and prison suicides has been confirmed by numerous reports. Since the start of 2004, 56 percent of prison suicides occurred in 35 of the most overcrowded jails in England and Wales. The prisons with the highest number of suicides—Gloucester, Norwich and Manchester, with seven deaths each—all had about a third more inmates than their normal maximum capacity.

About 159 suicides were recorded since the start of last year in the 142 prisons of England and Wales. Preston and Shrewsbury, the most overcrowded jails, each held 180 percent of their certified capacity. Both had experienced three and five suicides respectively since January 2004. Recent research has also indicated that the majority of suicides occur in local prisons, which house suspects remanded in custody (not yet charged) as well as convicted offenders. And more than half of all prison suicides are by those on remand, despite their making up less than 20 percent of the total prison population.

The full Council of Europe statistics can be found at:
<http://www.howardleague.org/>



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