

Britain's prison population reaches record high

John Newham
2 December 2006

On November 29, the prison population of England and Wales reached a record, topping 80,000 for the first time in history. Some 79,908 inmates are held in jails and another 152 are being held in police stations under emergency plans initiated by the government in October, making a total of 80,060 imprisoned.

This latest statistic means that the number of prisoners has almost doubled from 45,000 in the last 13 years. England and Wales now have the largest prison population in Europe at more than 145 per 100,000 of the general population.

At present, half the prisons in England and Wales are overcrowded. Approximately 17,000 prisoners are being held two to a cell built for one. This is set to get even worse, as many project the prison population rising to 93,000 in the next three years.

Reasons for the huge rise in prisoners are not hard to find. New legislation, such as the Criminal Justice Act 2003, has introduced longer, indeterminate sentences for people being assessed as serious offenders. There has also been the introduction of stricter enforcement procedures on community sentences and licences, and the holding of foreign nationals after they have served their custodial sentence, with a view to deportation.

All this has taken place in the context of the Labour government's "law and order" agenda.

A variety of solutions to resolve the prison crisis have been put forward. The Prison Reform Trust, for example, has a seven-point plan which promotes the treatment of mental illness, tackling addictions, avoiding prison for vulnerable women, ending child imprisonment and using effective community alternatives.

But the government has rejected any let-up in its right-wing policies. As more punitive legislation such as the Terrorism Act is enforced, there can be no doubt that

the number of prisoners will increase. Moreover, the burgeoning prison population is the inevitable consequence of Labour's offensive against the social gains of working people. The old safety net of the welfare state has been dismantled, forcing more people into the realm of the criminal justice system.

Many of those currently held are amongst the most disadvantaged in society. Twenty-two percent of the male prison population and 29 percent of the female population are from ethnic minority groups and the number of prisoners with literacy and numeracy problems is proportionately much higher than the general population. Studies reveal that one-quarter of female prisoners have spent time in local authority care.

Some 5,000 prisoners are diagnosed as suffering from acute mental health disorders and up to three-quarters of men in UK prisons are estimated as having two or more mental disorders. In addition, the numbers sentenced for drug-related offences have almost tripled from 2,900 in 1992 to 8,720 in 2002.

The result has been a significant increase in the number of women and child prisoners. In 2002, 4,300 women were detained, up 15 percent from 3,740 the year before and over 11,000 young people under the age of 21 are in custody, of whom 2,729 are below 18 years of age.

Home Secretary John Reid has proposed using the country's 500 police cells—built for short-term detentions—to hold those convicted of offences, converting old army barracks and even ships as well as moving female prisoners into male prisons. Decommissioned ships have already been employed as prison facilities and the reopening of part of the Maze (H-Block) prison in Northern Ireland, used to detain political prisoners during the Troubles, has been proposed.

The prison crisis is also being turned to the direct advantage of international capital. There is the potential for substantial profits given estimates that it costs around £100,000 to build one prison place and £35,000 per year to accommodate each prisoner.

To this end, legislation aimed at privatising whole areas of the largely state-run criminal justice system is due to be debated in Parliament in the coming period.

A National Offender Management Service will further facilitate private international security companies accessing public finances. Home Detention Curfews—effectively house arrest during certain hours of the day—cost £6,000 a year to provide, and probation supervision £3,500. Labour intends to open up the National Probation Service annual budget of approximately £800 million to competition from private contractors. From April 2008 up to £250 million is targeted to go to organisations other than the probation service. The ensuing rush to increase profits by reducing staffing, training and working conditions can only have a further detrimental effect on the conditions of prisoners and other offenders.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact