

No prison in England and Wales safe for young people

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“By February 2017, we concluded that there was not a single establishment that we inspected in England and Wales in which it was safe to hold children and young people.”

This is the shocking conclusion made by Peter Clarke, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales in his Annual Report 2016–17.

The report shows a drastic decline in conditions within the prison system. Describing conditions comparable to those in the United States, it details how working class criminals are incarcerated in “filthy and dilapidated”, vermin infested, overcrowded and violent “facilities” for sometimes the most minimal offences.

Decades of law and order policies by Labour and Conservative governments have made prisons a breeding ground for substance abuse, violence, illness, suicide and squalor.

More young people in England and Wales are imprisoned than in any other country in Western Europe. The age of criminal responsibility in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is just 10 years old, and in Scotland it is 8 years old.

The state of prisons for children and young inmates is especially bad. Vulnerable working class children endure conditions that cannot but traumatise them further. Any pretense of rehabilitation has long been discarded. The guiding principle is to control and punish young offenders, who are already victims of a society based on savage inequality.

Clarke’s report paints a harrowing picture of the state of prisons in England and Wales, showing what life is like for prisoners on a day-to-day basis.

“There have been startling increases in all types of violence” the report finds. In the 12 months to December 2016, there were 26,000 assaults, up by 27 percent in just one year. Assaults on staff were up by a

staggering 38 percent, to 6,844 in the same period.

“Self-inflicted deaths” have more than doubled since 2013—and in the 12 months to March 2017, 113 prisoners took their own lives.

“Debt, bullying, and self-segregation by prisoners looking to escape the violence generated by the drugs trade are commonplace. This has all been compounded by staffing levels in many jails that are simply too low to keep order and at the same time run a decent regime that allows prisoners to be let out of their cells to get to training and education, and have access to basic facilities.”

“Shockingly, 30% of young adults (aged 18 to 21) being held in adult establishments told us that they spent less than two hours a day out of their cells,” the Chief Inspector writes.

“During the course of the year, I have often been appalled by the conditions in which we hold many prisoners. Far too often I have seen men sharing a cell in which they are locked up for as much as 23 hours a day, in which they are required to eat all their meals, and in which there is an unscreened lavatory. On several occasions prisoners have pointed out insect and vermin infestations to me. In many prisons, I have seen shower and lavatory facilities that are filthy and dilapidated, but with no credible or affordable plans for refurbishment. I have seen many prisoners who are obviously under the influence of drugs. I am frequently shown evidence of repeated self-harm, and in every prison I find far too many prisoners suffering from varying degrees of learning disability or mental impairment. I have personally witnessed violence between prisoners, and seen both the physical and psychologically traumatic impact.”

These findings are borne out by the report’s figures showing a dramatic rise in violence, self-harm and drug

use over the past year, while education and employment classes in youth prisons declined to a seven-year low.

Mental illness among prisoners is widespread, with growing numbers driven to self-harm and suicide due to the degrading and hellish conditions.

Last month's National Audit Office report, titled "Mental Health in Prison" found, "Rates of self-inflicted deaths and self-harm have risen significantly in the last five years, suggesting that mental health and well-being in prison have declined."

The number of self-harm incidents rose by 73 percent between 2012 and 2016, the report found. Last year there were 40,161 incidents of self-harm in prisons and 120 "self-inflicted deaths."

"This was almost twice the number in 2012, and higher than any previous year on record. In 2016, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman found that 70% of prisoners who had taken their own life between 2012 and 2014 had been identified as having mental health needs."

According to the authors, some health workers believe up to 90 percent of the prison population suffers from mental illness.

Health workers and reform advocates have long warned about the negative impact of Britain's prison system on inmates. But the situation has only worsened.

The chief executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform, Frances Crook, explained "Prisons are out of control. A prisoner dies by suicide every three days. Children are locked up with nothing to do for 23 hours a day.

"Record levels of violence mean that men are too scared to leave their cells. Women are injuring themselves more and more. Staff fear for their lives. Conditions are filthy. Enough is enough."

She added, "Prisons for children should be closed forthwith. For decades, children have been subjected to abuse and neglect by the state. Now the official watchdog has confirmed what the Howard League has been saying for years—there is not a single prison in the country where a child is safe."

Last night, initial reports were emerging of riot-trained prison staff being sent to Mount Prison, in Bovington village near Hemel Hempstead.

Last October, inmates at Her Majesty's Prison

(HMP) Lewes rioted for six hours against conditions that one refugee inmate described as "worse than Syria."

In November, 200 inmates rioted at HMP Bedford, criticised for its "abject failure" to address overcrowding, rampant drug addiction and self-harm. The worst riot took place on December 19, when 600 inmates took over four wings at HMP Birmingham. This was the biggest prison riot since HMP Manchester in 1990 (known then as Strangeways).

G4S, the private firm which runs HMP Birmingham, sent in two initial Tornado riot control squads to quell the disturbance, with the prison service's "gold command" sending in 11 more Tornado units. It took riot squads comprising 160 officers over 12 hours to bring the prison back under control, with one inmate hospitalised with a fractured jaw and broken eye socket.

The crisis in the prison system is a ticking time bomb that can only worsen given the current political climate. While funding for prisons is being gutted, the government is seizing on the current crisis to privatise more jails, selling them off to the highest bidders.

The UK already has the most privatised criminal justice system in Europe. As of 2015, 14 prisons (holding 17 percent of the prison population in England and Wales) were run by the private sector. This is an even higher proportion of private prisons than in the United States.



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