

# Squalor, violence and death: The deterioration of UK prisons

Peter Reydt  
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More deaths have taken place in UK prisons in the opening weeks of the year. On January 31, Khader Saleh, a 25-year-old man from Tower Hamlets, was found dead in the afternoon with multiple stab wounds in another prisoner's cell at London Wormwood Scrubs prison.

Saleh was declared dead by paramedics at around 3:20 in the afternoon. Four prisoners were arrested, of whom three have now been charged with murder. Police told his family that Saleh had been stabbed seven times with a metal blade.

Saleh moved to the UK 13 years ago from Somalia with his mother, three older brothers and sister. A BBC report quoted his brother, Said Yusuf, saying that the family had been left "devastated" by the attack. "He was a young man trying to move on in his life. He recently got married and had a one-year-old son," said Yusuf adding, "We thought he was in a safe place in prison."

Prisons in England and Wales are far from safe places. The Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board for Wormwood Prison, published last November, states, "Wormwood Scrubs remains a dangerous environment for staff and prisoners alike with multiple violent incidents on most days." It reports that despite serious efforts to combat this situation, Wormwood Scrubs remains a "dangerous place" with 40 to 50 violent incidents occurring in a typical month.

Some media reports suggest that Saleh's stabbing was carried out in a gang attack involving up to 10 people. One noted, "25% of violent incidents are gang-related, and it is disappointing that more is not done to disrupt gangs."

This situation is not unique to Wormwood Scrubs.

According to Ministry of Justice data, assaults and serious assaults inside UK jails increased to a record high of 27,193 incidents in the year to June 2017. Since 2007, assaults have increased by 80 percent.

This came just three weeks after an inspection at

Nottingham revealed a high level of violence, assaults and use of force by staff in a prison where the use of drugs is rife.

More than two thirds of Nottingham prisoners reported that they had felt unsafe at some time, and more than one third at the time of inspection. There were more than 200 assaults, both on prisoners and staff, in the previous six months. In the last two years, there have been eight suicides and the level of self-harm has increased. The prison has been described as "fundamentally unsafe" and "in a dangerous state." This was the third time in a row that HM (Her Majesty's) Prison Nottingham has been given the lowest safety grading.

This situation at Nottingham prison led the chief inspector of prisons, Peter Clarke, to invoke for the first time the "Urgent Notification Protocol." This requires the Ministry of Justice to publish an action plan within 28 days to tackle concerns raised.

Since the beginning of the economic crises in 2008, funding for social provisions has been gutted. A decade of austerity by Labour and Conservative governments did not stop at the prison gates, which are severely underfunded and understaffed.

In November, analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies revealed that under current budget plans, there will be a further £12 billion cut in welfare spending by 2020/202—with a real-terms cut of 22 percent for the prison service.

Offenders are being left to rot in facilities not fit for human habitation. According to official figures, the prison population in England and Wales stood at 84,474 with a "Usable Operational Capacity" of 86,760. This has been roughly the same for the last six years. Prisoner numbers increased constantly in the period between 1993 and 2011, from around 44,000 to almost double that number today. In other words, prisons are full to bursting as the conditions are deteriorating even further.

Another prison making the headlines was HM Prison Liverpool. In January, the official report of an unannounced inspection in November 2017 revealed the “worst conditions ever seen,” according to the inspectors. The prison is in a general state of disrepair and filth. There were more than 2,000 outstanding maintenance jobs and areas that are so dirty they are too hazardous to be cleaned, and it was infested with rats and cockroaches. Some prisoners are held in cells with exposed electrical wiring and filthy, leaking lavatories.

In his report’s introduction, Clarke describes the abysmal living conditions:

“Many cells were not fit to be used and should have been decommissioned. Some had emergency call bells that were not working but were nevertheless still occupied, presenting an obvious danger to prisoners. There were hundreds of unrepaired broken windows, with jagged glass left in the frames. Many lavatories were filthy, blocked or leaking. There were infestations of cockroaches in some areas, broken furniture, damp and dirt. In one extreme case, I found a prisoner who had complex mental health needs being held in a cell that had no furniture other than a bed. The windows of both the cell and the toilet recess were broken, the light fitting in his toilet was broken with wires exposed, the lavatory was filthy and appeared to be blocked, his sink was leaking and the cell was dark and damp. Extraordinarily, this man had apparently been held in this condition for some weeks.”

As shocking as the conditions described in these reports are, they do not come as a surprise, but are further expressions of a general deterioration in the prison system.

Year after year, reports document how prisons are becoming hellholes unfit to hold human beings.

Inmates are deprived of their most basic needs. Jails are dilapidated and vermin-infested. The prison population is at maximum capacity, while staff levels are in decline. Drug abuse is rife; prison violence both between inmates and involving staff is at an all-time high. Frightened of being assaulted, many inmates do not dare leave their cells. Mental illness is widespread, with growing numbers driven to self-harm and suicide due to the degrading and hellish conditions.

As a consequence, tensions in the prison population are at breaking point with prison disturbances and riots becoming the norm. In the last year alone, there were riots in HM Prisons Lewes, Bedford, Swaleside, Hewell, the Mount Prison in Bovingdon and twice in Birmingham.

Many prison guards are indifferent and callous. On a daily basis, inmates are confronted with physical violence by fellow inmates and prison officers. Official reports of incidents of prison guards using their batons are on the increase. In the case that the violence spills over into riots, specially armed and prepared police are being deployed.

Riots against the grim conditions they face represent the only form in which inmates can express their grievances. The response by the state is further repression. Just as in wider society, the armed bodies of the state, including the army and the police, are being built up while opposition to the deterioration of the social conditions of the working class are being violently suppressed. If anything, this can be seen most nakedly in the prison system.

The National Tactical Response Group (NTRG), a team of prison officers specially trained for disturbances in prisons, was deployed 580 times in 2016. In addition, so-called Tornado teams—another elite group that is separate from the NTRG—was deployed 19 times in the same period.

In October of last year, there was a riot at HM Prison Long Lartin in Worcestershire during which 81 prisoners at the high-security facility attacked prison officers and took over a wing. Tornado squads were deployed to quell the disturbance.

This was the first disturbance of its kind in a maximum-security prison, marking a further step in the deterioration of the prison system. In response, Rob Preece, spokesman for the Howard League for Penal Reform, said, “We do not expect to see disturbances like that in the high security estates and this will be giving a great deal of cause for concern.” The Prison Governors Association proclaimed that it should be “ringing alarm bells at the most senior level.”

*The author also recommends:*

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