

Increase in self-harm and suicides in UK immigration detention centres

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A horrendous picture is emerging of the brutal and barbaric conditions faced by those held in British immigration detention centres.

Such conditions have led to approximately two suicide attempts by inmates every day in detention centres, according to a freedom of information (FoI) request seen by the *Guardian* newspaper.

These represent a doubling since 2016. The previous suicide attempt figure in the centres was itself an all-time high, according to official figures. In 2016, there were 393 recorded suicide attempts in detention centres—up 11 percent from 2015.

Figures published in April by the *Independent* newspaper showed more than one person a day requiring medical treatment for self-harming in UK detention, with the number of detainees on regular “suicide watch” also reported to be inexorably rising.

But between April and June of this year, there was a 22 percent increase in the number of detainees who made attempts to take their own lives. This information was obtained by the No Deportations rights organisation, via an FoI response from the Home Office.

In total, 159 attempts were recorded, more than half of them at just two sites, Colnbrook and Harmondsworth, which are located in the proximity of Heathrow Airport, to aid in the swift removal of detainees out of the country.

Suicides in removal centres are kept secret by the Home Office, which is why FoI requests have to be used to reveal deaths, according to former prison ombudsman Stephen Shaw. He was commissioned by the government to carry out a review of the immigration detention system. Shaw has raised concerns that the Home Office does not conform to the practice, followed by the Ministry of Justice, of

publishing data on the deaths of immigration detainees.

Nevertheless, figures collected by the Inquest rights organisation, whose specialist casework includes deaths in immigration detention centres, suggest there were six deaths in immigration removal centres last year. Four of these were self-inflicted, making it the highest year for suicides on record. Through April 2018, the charity’s figures show there have been 35 deaths since 2000, 14 of which were self-inflicted.

People who have suffered torture are being held despite Home Office official policy that torture victims should not be detained under usual circumstances. Another FoI response passed to the *Guardian* revealed that over the past four years, medical professionals made more than 10,000 reports to Home Office officials about detainees believed to have experienced torture before arriving in the UK.

If they had not already suffered forms of abuse before arriving in Britain, many suffer it when arriving in detention camps. According to figures released by the Inspector of Prisons, in the year ending December 2016, 28,908 people entered immigration detention. At any time, more than 3,500 people are in immigration detention in the UK. They are held mainly in one of the nine Immigration Removal Centres, three Short Term Holding Facilities, or in prisons. During just one day, October 3, 2016, prisons held 442 people detained under immigration powers.

In October, the *Guardian* reported that from a sample of almost 200 migrants held in British detention centres, at least half were suicidal, victims of torture or seriously ill.

In February around 120 detainees at Yarl’s Wood immigration detention centre in Bedfordshire, England began a hunger strike, protesting the “inhumane” conditions that dominate Europe’s largest detention

facilities. The mainly women detainees demanded an end to indefinite detention, describing “systematic torture” by the Home Office and the private security firm, Serco.

Yarl’s Wood is designated a “detention” or “removal centre.” To all intents and purposes, however, it operates as a prison, located in the middle of miles of open fields and surrounded by high fences and barbed wire. Those under detention are kept under lock and key, while their appeals for asylum are processed and until they are due for deportation or released.

The most recent case of a suicide to be made public was that of Marcin Gwozdziński, a 28-year-old Polish national immigration detainee. He had been detained for months on end and was increasingly depressed. He killed himself in September 2017, just two days after Harmondsworth detention centre staff determined in a cursory three-minute meeting that his distress was caused by mere “toothache”.

It remains unclear why Gwozdziński was even being held at the detention centre. According to information from Gwozdziński’s former fellow detainees at Harmondsworth, his mother travelled by bus from Poland to see her son before his life support machine was turned off. Detainees claimed Gwozdziński had been granted bail two weeks before his death but the Home Office had failed to release him.

Fifty-nine detainees at Harmondsworth signed a protest letter after Gwozdziński’s death stating, “It’s a disgrace that no one has been held accountable for such poor care. We are human beings not animals.”

Just the day before Gwozdziński took his own life, the BBC aired a documentary that showed detention centre guards at another British detention facility mistreating vulnerable detainees, including some who were suicidal. In 2015, an undercover film by *Channel 4 News* provided disturbing evidence of the brutalised atmosphere detainees live under. In relation to 74 incidents of self-harm in 2013 which needed medical treatment, one guard was heard saying callously, “Let them slash their wrists. It’s attention seeking.”

Further research conducted by the *Guardian* and others provides more evidence that, of the 25,000-plus people interned every year, many hundreds, if not thousands, are deeply traumatised. A snapshot survey, taken on August 31 with the help of lawyers and charities that deal with deportation cases, found that

almost 56 percent of detainees were either physically or mentally ill, or had suffered torture. The research found that the average detainee had been held four months and that 84 percent of those detained had not been told when they would be deported. Most of those surveyed had lived in the UK for more than five years, with the newspaper reporting that some had lived in the country for over 20 years.

The UK has one of the largest immigration detention systems in Europe and is the only country in the region without a statutory time limit on length of detention. There is no statutory limit on immigration detention but the courts have held that detention with a view to removal is lawful only if there is a realistic prospect of this occurring within a reasonable period. Campaigners say this is not closely adhered to.

Workers and young people must demand the end to the systematic brutalisation of immigrants and asylum seekers. The Socialist Equality Party demands the immediate closure of all immigration detention centres and upholds the right of all workers and young people to live in the country of their choice, with full citizenship rights and access to welfare, housing, health care and education.



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