



Breaking point: Understaffing and overcrowding in prisons

Research briefing

the Howard League for Penal Reform

- Between 2010 and 2013 the number of frontline prison officers in English and Welsh prisons dropped by 30 per cent, from 27,650 to 19,325. In some prisons the number of officers has halved in only three years and many prisons are being forced to operate with 40 per cent fewer staff than before.
- Since the Coalition government came into power in May 2010, 18 prisons have been closed or re-roled as immigration removal centres, two have been partially closed and three are earmarked for closure. This has resulted in the loss of almost 6,500 prison places.
- On 11 April 2014 the prison population stood at 85,264 – 255 higher than in May 2010. For substantial periods of time since 2010 the population has been significantly higher, reaching an all-time high of 88,179 in December 2011.
- The combination of fewer prison officers, fewer cells and more prisoners has created a severely understaffed and overcrowded prison system which is now at breaking point.
- Over the last year self-inflicted deaths, incidences of self-harm and assaults on prison staff have all increased. These rises are, at least in part, attributable to very low staff levels and overcrowding.
- Prisons have also become less productive. The number of hours prisoners spend in purposeful activity has fallen and association and library visits have been cancelled due to a lack of prison officers.
- Urgent action is needed to ease the strain on the prison system. The Ministry of Justice must take action to reduce the prison population and increase prison officer numbers.

Understaffed and overcrowded: the state of prisons today

Since the coalition government came to power in May 2010 the number of frontline prison officers in English and Welsh prisons has fallen by 30 per cent. Twenty prisons have been closed or partially closed. Over the same period the prison population has increased slightly from 85,015 to 85,469 – although it has been significantly higher for periods of time in between, reaching an all-time high of 88,179 in December 2011 (Howard League, 2014).

This combination of fewer prison places, fewer frontline prison officers and more prisoners has left a severely understaffed and

overcrowded prison estate. Already there has been a dramatic spike in the numbers of suicides in custody as well as increases in incidences of self-harm and attacks against staff. Reducing staff and prison places without taking steps to reduce the prison population is inherently risky and deeply irresponsible.

Prison staff reductions

Figures obtained from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) through parliamentary questions show that the number of prison officers has fallen in almost every prison since 2010, while numbers of prisoners in each prison have either risen or been static. These figures are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Numbers of prison officer grade staff and the prison population in each prison 2010–2014

	Prison officer grade staff		Prison population	
	Sep 2010	Sep 2013	Feb 2014	Change since 2010
Askham Grange (women)	26	20	104	-8
Aylesbury (YOI)	159	110	408	-30
Bedford	143	110	501	14
Belmarsh	508	360	870	8
Blantyre House	31	20	117	-4
Brinsford (YOI)	237	140	528	77
Bristol	210	140	599	-12
Brixton	211	120	789	15
Buckley Hall	102	80	439	56
Bullingdon	263	190	1117	-4
Bure	152	120	620	371
Cardiff	267	200	806	-17
Channings Wood	178	130	722	-2
Coldingley	131	80	501	-8
Cookham Wood (YOI)	125	90	116	24
Dartmoor	163	100	655	65
Deerbolt (YOI)	178	120	508	4
Downview	120	80	0	-338
Drake Hall (women)	89	50	308	23
Durham	311	190	922	-52
East Sutton Park (women)	22	10	87	6
Eastwood Park (women)	151	120	337	27
Everthorpe	168	110	684	14
Exeter	176	120	543	-5
Featherstone	150	100	677	28
Feltham (YOI)	403	290	621	-36
Ford	60	40	511	-38
Foston Hall (women)	140	80	309	73
Frankland	604	450	798	-18
Full Sutton	444	320	605	15
Garth	276	180	615	-228
Gartree	221	140	700	23
Glen Parva (YOI)	250	160	700	-109

Grendon	135	100	538	-3
Guys Marsh	130	100	572	17
Haverigg	140	80	630	67
High Down	260	190	1163	59
Highpoint	306	200	1321	377
Hindley (YOI)	260	180	279	-70
Hollesley Bay	52	50	427	87
Holloway (women)	226	150	528	71
Holme House	336	270	1212	128
Huntercombe	141	70	411	51
Isis (YOI)	125	110	614	535
Kennet	136	70	297	-41
Kirkham	87	60	615	33
Kirklevington Grange	51	40	291	25
Lancaster	216	140	417	-107
Leeds	383	260	1223	65
Leicester	138	90	381	34
Lewes	206	140	672	193
Leyhill	69	50	485	-14
Lincoln	207	130	683	18
Lindholme	240	150	1004	-87
Littlehey	271	180	1117	241
Liverpool	366	240	1268	-76
Long Lartin	403	300	618	-5
Low Newton (women)	141	110	320	65
Maidstone	144	100	583	-12
Manchester	503	380	1158	-104
Moorland	305	220	1258	494
New Hall (women)	206	140	409	51
North Sea Camp	56	40	391	88
Northumberland	441	270	1339	125
Norwich	211	150	768	11
Nottingham	317	220	1088	472
Onley	204	100	677	60
Pentonville	379	270	1342	126
Portland (YOI)	200	130	572	99
Preston	261	180	702	-78
Ranby	253	180	1084	-3
Risley	283	220	1098	14
Rochester (YOI)	233	150	737	21
Send (women)	90	60	274	-3
Sheppey Cluster	740	510	2813	408
Stafford	184	120	732	-5
Stocken	188	140	839	24
Stoke Heath (YOI)	237	170	633	65
Styal (women)	184	120	442	6
Sudbury	64	40	588	15
Swansea	148	110	451	55
Swinfen Hall (YOI)	201	140	589	-39
The Mount	158	110	763	4
Thorn Cross (YOI)	100	60	308	25

Usk/Prescoed	90	60	501	74
Wakefield	425	290	744	8
Wandsworth	427	270	1603	-28
Warren Hill	142	110	34	-115
Wayland	214	140	999	2
Wealstun	205	150	813	304
Werrington	86	70	117	-10
Wetherby	232	180	205	-102
Whatton	189	140	838	25
Whitemoor	411	310	456	7
Winchester	201	120	677	-8
Wood hill	452	330	814	10
Wormwood Scrubs	310	240	1277	-21
Wymott	268	200	1101	-39
Private prisons				
Altcourse	362	296	1126	-177
Ashfield	146	155	399	164
Birmingham*	494	342	1443	-18
Bronze field (women)	185	141	494	-33
Doncaster	204	184	1132	12
Dovegate	262	234	1100	-37
Forest Bank	310	204	1445	23
Lowdham Grange	212	216	879	138
Oakwood	n/a	257	1600	1600
Parc	315	323	1313	123
Peterborough (mixed)	322	267	911	-63
Rye Hill (YOI)	139	140	623	-20
Thameside	n/a	266	880	880
Wolds**	91	90	365	-14
Prisons closed or partially closed since 2010				Prison places lost
Ashwell	94	0	0	600
Blundeston	150	100	0	500
Bullwood Hall	72	0	0	220
Canterbury	106	0	0	300
Chelmsford	214	150	587	132
Dorchester	105	70	0	250
Shepton Mallet (and Erlestoke)	182	90	484	165
Gloucester	126	0	0	300
Brockhill (Hewell)	330	220	1288	180
Hull	308	200	760	280
Camp Hill (Isle of Wight)	473	220	1133	470
Kingston	67	0	0	200
Lancaster Castle	83	0	0	200
Latchmere House	35	0	0	200
Morton Hall	104	0	0	400
Northallerton	62	50	0	200
Reading	98	70	0	250
Shrewsbury	113	0	0	300
The Verne	107	70	0	600
Wellingborough	143	0	0	600
Totals	27650	19325	84682	Total places lost 6347

*transferred from the prison service to G4S in October 2011 **transferred from G4S to the prison service in July 2013

Between 2010 and 2013 the total number of prison officers working in English and Welsh prisons fell by almost a third, from 27,650 in August 2010 to 19,325 in September 2013. In some prisons officer numbers have halved in the space of three years.

Falls in prison officer numbers are most stark in category C prisons. In High Point prison the number of prison officers has fallen by 34 per cent since 2010 while the number of prisoners has increased by 38 per cent. Brixton prison has had a 43 per cent reduction in the number of prison officers while the population has increased slightly. Wealstun prison has seen a large rise in its prison population, increasing by 59 per cent since 2010, yet numbers of prison officers have dropped by 26 per cent. Such large cuts to staffing numbers in category C prisons are particularly concerning as they will form the majority of 'resettlement prisons' under the MoJ's Transforming Rehabilitation agenda – which purportedly aims to reduce reoffending rates (MoJ, 2014a).

The high-security estate has also seen large falls in numbers of prison staff. For example, in Wakefield prison there were 135 fewer prison officers in 2013 than in 2010 (a drop of 31 per cent) whereas the prison population had slightly increased. Belmarsh prison now has 30 per cent fewer prison officers than it did in 2010 but holds more prisoners.

Impact of prison staff reductions

Sweeping cuts to prison officer numbers have had an impact on every part of prison life. Prisoners are spending more time locked up as association periods and library visits are cancelled due to inadequate staffing numbers. The number of hours prisoners spend in purposeful activity has also fallen sharply due to insufficient numbers of officers as well as teachers and workshop leaders (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2013).

Deaths in custody have increased significantly. Between 2012 and 2013 self-inflicted deaths rose from 60 to 74 – a 23 per cent increase (MoJ, 2014b). In the first four months of this year at least 29 people have taken their own lives in prison, a third more compared to the same period last year. Frontline staff play an important role in helping prisoners who are feeling suicidal, and can save lives by being on hand to cut prisoners down, administer first aid or request emergency medical assistance when prisoners have attempted to take their own lives. Reducing officer numbers without reducing the prison population will inevitably lead to further deaths.

Prisons are becoming more violent places. Numbers of prisoner-on-prisoner serious assaults were 25 per cent higher in 2013 compared to 2012 and numbers of serious assaults against staff are now at the highest figure since recording practices began. In 2013, 356 members of prison staff were seriously assaulted, a 27 per cent increase since 2012 (ibid). Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, Nick Hardwick, has stated that increased rates of suicide, self-harm and violence are at least in part attributable to the large reductions in prison officer numbers (the *Sunday Times*, 2014).

Rioting has increased dramatically. The number of times the National Tactical Response Group (also known as the prison riot squad) was called out increased by 72 per cent between 2010 and 2013 (Hansard, 2013; Hansard; 2014). The Prison Officers Association has repeatedly stated that staff shortages are to blame for the increased frequency of riots, protests and other disturbances.

Prison closures and overcrowding

The fall in prison officer numbers must be understood in the context of a chronically overcrowded prison estate. Since the Coalition government came into power, 18 prisons have been closed or re-rolled as immigration removal centres, two have been partially closed and Askham Grange, Dartmoor and East Sutton Park have been earmarked for closure. This has resulted in the loss of approximately 6,500 prison places, with a further 700 under threat. Since 2010 two private prisons have opened (Thameside and Oakwood), adding about 2,100 places. The Certified Normal Accommodation level (CNA) of the prison estate, the MoJ's own definition of a safe and decent population level, has fallen from 77,433 places in 2010 to 74,720 places in 2014 (MoJ, 2014c).

Prison closures are welcome, but must be met with a reduction in the prison population if decency and safety are not to be compromised. However, the prison population is now slightly higher than it was in May 2010.

The reduction in prison places and increase in prisoner numbers has exacerbated overcrowding in the prison estate. Seventy-eight prisons are now operating above their CNA level and ten prisons are holding over 50 per cent more prisoners than is safe.

Overcrowding means that thousands of prisoners share cells designed for only one person. The vast majority of these cells contain an unscreened toilet and are very small. Overcrowding cells breaches

the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, to which the United Kingdom is a signatory. However Ursula Brennan, Permanent Secretary at the MoJ, told a committee of MPs in 2014 that there are no plans to reduce overcrowding in prisons as it would be too expensive (Public Accounts Committee, 2014a). The Public Accounts Committee recently concluded that overcrowding in prisons has become institutionalised (Public Accounts Committee, 2014b).

Overcrowding is to get worse because of policies which will increase the prison population further. For example, under the proposed reforms to the probation service all people released from short term prison sentences will be subject to supervision in the community for twelve months. It is estimated that this policy will result in at least 13,000 additional custodial sentences (MoJ, 2013).

Prison closures: inefficiency and wastage

Many of the recent prison closures have been characterised by poor decision-making, inefficiencies and wasted resources. The MoJ has been criticised for not taking into account the performance of prisons when determining which are to be closed (National Audit Office, 2013). As a result several high-performing prisons have been shut while both Thameside and Oakwood (the newest prisons in the estate) continue to be among the worst performing prisons in England and Wales (National Offender Management Service, 2013).

In addition, millions of pounds of public money has been wasted through the closures. Several prisons received substantial investment shortly before being closed. For example, a new medical centre costing about £2.4million was opened at Shrewsbury a few months prior to the announcement that the prison was to close (Independent Monitoring Board, 2014a). The Independent Monitoring Board at Blundeston prison criticised the lack of communication and long-term thinking that led to substantial sums being spent refurbishing areas of the prison shortly

before the closure announcement. The Board reported that new flooring continued to be laid after the closure announcement (Independent Monitoring Board, 2014b).

Conclusions

This research shows that the prison system is at breaking point. The combination of unprecedented cuts to frontline prison officer numbers, a substantial reduction in prison places and the maintenance of a very high prison population has resulted in dangerous and degrading prisons. The Howard League is concerned that numbers of suicides, assaults and riots will continue to increase rapidly if urgent action is not taken to increase the numbers of officers, reduce the number of prisoners and ease overcrowding.

The MoJ must accept that an underfunded and overcrowded prison estate will increase rather than reduce crime. Despite the stated focus on rehabilitation, the prison system under the Coalition government is one of less purposeful activity and more violence and self-harm. The MoJ must either substantially reduce the prison population or heavily invest in prisons. The Howard League strongly recommends the former option. A large proportion of prisoners have committed non-violent offences and could be sentenced to cheaper and more effective community sentences.

A full list of references is available on our website at <http://www.howardleague.org/publications-prisons/>

About the Howard League for Penal Reform

The Howard League is a national charity working for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison.

We campaign, research and take legal action on a wide range of issues. We work with parliament, the media, criminal justice professionals, students and members of the public, influencing debate and forcing through meaningful change.

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