

**Briefing for Lord Fowler  
House of Lords Debate – Proposals for Prison Reform  
21 January 2016**

The Howard League for Penal Reform welcomes this important debate in the House of Lords on Proposals for Prison Reform.

**Why reform is needed**

The prison system in England and Wales is bloated, expensive and ineffective. The number of people in prison has almost doubled from 44,975 in 1990 to 85,242 in 2016. The system is chronically overcrowded, with tens of prisons trying to operate at more than 150 per cent of capacity. The number of prison officers in our jails has been cut by more than one-third in recent years. This has had a devastating impact on safety, education and training. Eight people were murdered in prison in 2015 – this is the highest number since records began in 1973. Violence and self-injury are at the highest levels in a decade and at least 86 people took their own lives in prison in 2015.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, Nick Hardwick, has described prison conditions as at their worst in a decade. Less than half of prisons have enough activity for the prisoners in their care and many prisoners cannot access the activity available due to staff shortages. One in five prisoners in prisons inspected last year reported that they spent at least 22 hours a day locked in their cells.

Unsurprisingly, prisons in their current condition are failing to rehabilitate people. Forty-six per cent of people released from prison reoffend within a year. This number rises to 59 per cent of those released after a short sentence of less than 12 months.

The problems are acute at a time when the Ministry of Justice faces significant cuts to its budget. Reform is urgently needed.

**Reform**

**1) Prison conditions**

- Overcrowding and understaffing are the main causes of the rising levels of violence and self-injury and the lack of work and education in prisons.
- The Ministry of Justice has made announcements around prison building and has recently taken steps to recruit more prison staff, after shortages caused numerous difficulties. With further cuts to the department's budget to come, however, the Howard League recommends a bolder approach – reducing the prison population to create a smaller, cheaper and more effective system.

## 2) Reducing the prison population

- **Prohibit the use of short-term sentences (less than 12 months):** Short-term sentences are expensive and counterproductive, and reoffending levels among this group of prisoners are high. Ministry of Justice research shows that both suspended sentences and community sentences have far lower recidivism rates and are substantially cheaper. Short sentences are also unpopular with prison governors, who have said that they are 'expensive and inefficient'.
- **Limit the use of remand:** Remand is used far too often, resulting in thousands of people being sent to prison each year unnecessarily. Over 70 per cent of people remanded by magistrates will not go on to receive a custodial sentence.
- **Reduce recalls to custody:** The number of people in prison because they have been recalled to custody while serving their sentences in the community is 55 times greater than it was in 1993. Many people are recalled to prison not for further offences, but for technical breaches of their licence, most of which can be better and more cheaply dealt with in the community.

## 3) Role of prison governors

- The money saved by reducing the prison population could be made available to prison governors to improve the prisons they run.
- This would enable governors to improve staffing ratios, safety levels and focus on investing resources into purposeful activity for the small number of people who need to be in prison.

## 4) Women in the criminal justice system

- The female prison population should be significantly reduced. Eighty-two per cent of women entering prison under sentence have committed a non-violent offence and could be better placed in the community in women's centres, which are cheaper and have been shown to be more effective at reducing reoffending and addressing the causes of offending behaviour.

## 5) Wider savings

- Reducing the prison population and using sentences that are more effective in reducing reoffending would cut the costs of recidivism to the economy (currently estimated at £13 billion).
- This would also reduce demand on other services such as the police, housing services and drug treatment services.

These initiatives, if adopted, would make for a smarter, smaller and more successful prison system with the right conditions to rehabilitate the people who really need to be there.