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## Dozens of prison staff sacked over prohibited items, MoJ figures show

**Exclusive: FoI request reveals there have been 88 convictions of HMP and outside staff in five years**

**Mattha Busby and Eric Allison**

Thu 24 Dec 2020 11.56 GMT

Dozens of prison officers have been dismissed and some have been convicted for bringing prohibited items – which can include drugs, tobacco and mobile phones – into jails in England and Wales over the past five years, the Guardian can reveal.

Drug finds in jails rose by 18% this year and there have been claims that some prisons have seen similar levels of substance use during the coronavirus lockdown as before.

From 2015 up until 10 October this year, HM Prisons (HMP) dismissed 43 staff over prohibited items, and 187 outside staff not directly employed by HMP were banned from working in jails.

There were 88 subsequent convictions and 10 police cautions in addition to all those dismissed or banned, according to data released by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) under the Freedom of Information Act.

This year alone, six HMP officers have been dismissed, 23 outside staff have been excluded, and there have been 12 convictions and one caution.

Further data from the MoJ shows that at least 22 of the officers dismissed from 2015 to 2020 had trafficked contraband, almost certainly to inmates or organised crime groups inside prisons.

The number of prison staff found in possession of prohibited items has been falling since 2017 but looks set to rise this year.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 (YTD)
Dismissals	3	11	6	11	6	6
Exclusions	37	29	47	24	27	23
Convictions	8	17	16	23	12	12
Police Cautions	2	3	2	2	0	1
TOTAL	50	60	71	60	45	42

Table of dismissals and convictions. Photograph: MoJ

The number of drug finds in prisons rose by 18% in 2019-20, to 21,575, and sim card and mobile phones finds rose by 3%, to 17,302, MoJ figures show.

Prison staff, prisoners and inmate relatives told the Guardian that some jails reported either an increase or no change in drug use during lockdown, while others said it had decreased.

A prisoner at Wandsworth in south-west London said it had been “business as usual” in terms of drug supply during the lockdown. “So when there were no visits and no teachers or lawyers coming into the jail, how were the drugs, phones and snout getting in?” he asked.

This year, four prison officers at Wandsworth were suspended over a range of misconduct allegations, and one was taken out of the prison in handcuffs. The MoJ confirmed that one of the officers had since left the Prison Service.

A healthcare worker at a Welsh prison said: “A lot of staff bring drugs and mobile phones in as they are offered a lot of money.”

The Independent Monitoring Board said in a report on HMP Whitemoor in Cambridgeshire that during lockdown “intelligence about and finds of drugs (as well as mobile phones and sim cards) continued at a level similar to that experienced in normal conditions. As there were no visits and the itemiser was in regular use, it is likely that these items were brought in by staff.”

An educator at a London prison claimed mobile phones were frequently smuggled in by staff and that there has been “a lot more” smoking of spice, a synthetic and potentially lethal cannabinoid. “Drug use has been up during lockdown - it shows it was the prison officers bringing it in.”

However, a prison officer in south-east England said the smell of cannabis and tobacco was no longer noticeable, with far fewer people visibly under the influence of drugs.

John Podmore, a former prison governor who presided over several prisons during his career and also headed an anti-corruption unit, said: “We often had success in finding stashes of drugs on or about inmates. But the biggest haul we ever seized was strapped to a prison officer’s leg. He could barely walk for the amount of drugs we found on him.”

He said the massive profits to be made from smuggling contraband into jails meant it was inevitable that some prison staff would succumb to temptation or pressure.

The MoJ's counter-corruption unit works to detect and disrupt the activities of corrupt staff, who were said to be in a small minority. The unit's specialist staff supports prisons and probation services, and works with the police to support their investigations.

A Prison Service spokesperson said: "While the vast majority of officers carry out their duties to the highest standards, we will take the strongest possible action against those who seriously transgress - for instance by smuggling drugs. But in some cases dismissal would be disproportionate, such as where the incident was clearly accidental. There is no evidence to suggest that drug use has gone up in prisons since the start of the pandemic."

Mick Pimblett, the assistant general secretary of the POA, formerly the Prison Officers' Association, said: "The overwhelming majority of prison staff are dedicated and honest, but it is only correct that the small minority that engage in inappropriate behaviour are investigated and suitable action taken against them.

"The increase in disciplinary cases could be due to a number of factors and the cases should be looked at in conjunction with recruitment processes, training and remuneration for the difficult job prison officers do."

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