

Prisoners with serious mental health problems face urgent treatment delays

Almost three-quarters of prisoners in England faced delays being transferred to a mental health unit, according to official Department of Health figures



Prisoners are supposed to be sent to a unit within two weeks of a doctor admitting them. Photograph: Anthony Devlin/PA

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Wednesday 1 March 2017 07.00 GMT

Almost 75% of prisoners are facing delays in being transferred to NHS hospitals to receive urgent treatment for serious mental health problems.

Prisoners in England who need to spend time as an inpatient in a mental health unit are meant to be taken there within 14 days of doctors admitting them. But new official figures show that barely one in four of the prisoners who received such care last year were transferred within the supposed maximum two weeks.

Labour MP Luciana Berger, who obtained the figures through a parliamentary question, warned that the already fragile mental health of prisoners needing hospital care could be badly affected by them being denied speedy care.

“In the outside world we would never expect someone to wait as long as two weeks to get appropriate care, and we know that prisoners are at much higher risk,” she said. “With every

day that goes by their condition is likely to worsen, so the delay will have a hugely detrimental impact on their mental health.”

Figures released by the Department of Health show that 412 prisoners were transferred to hospital from jails in England within 14 days during 2015-16, or 26.5% of the total. However, far more - 1,141 (73.5%) - had to endure delays of longer than that, health minister Nicola Blackwood confirmed.

“This ubiquitous failure would never be tolerated in the outside world,”, Berger will tell MPs on Wednesday, in a Commons debate she has secured on suicide and self-harm in English jails.

Berger, the president of the Labour Campaign for Mental Health, said she did not know if there was a causal link between the delays and the record number of suicides - 119 - that occurred in English prisons during 2016. “It is likely to be a contributing factor, but it is just another issue, among many, which paints a very bleak picture of the inadequate support provided to people experiencing mental illness in our prisons,” she said.

2016 also saw a record number of incidents of self-harm in jail - 37,784 in all, up from 7,000 on the previous year.

In community settings, detentions under the Mental Health Act often take just a few hours. But the process takes longer with prisoners. Those who are due to be transferred wait temporarily in their jail’s hospital wing but, Berger added, those units are not equipped to give prisoners with serious mental health problems the proper care they need.

Berger will use the debate to accuse ministers of presiding over a “shocking and shameful rise in suicide and self-harm” in jails. “Most prison psychiatrists don’t feel able to deliver a basic level of care,” she will say. “Mental health services in prisons are at breaking point.”

The Ministry of Justice declined to comment directly on the figures. A government spokeswoman said: “We are committed to making prisons places of safety and reform and giving prisoners the support and treatment they need to help turn their lives around.

“All prisons have established procedures in place to identify, manage and help prisoners with mental health issues. Increased support is now available to those at risk of self-harm or suicide, especially in the first 24 hours, and we have invested in mental health awareness training for staff.”

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- Mental health
- Health
- news