

# Prison suicides in England and Wales reach record high

Ministry of Justice figures show 119 inmates killed themselves last year, and assaults and self-harm also rose



The figures show a 23% increase in incidents of self-harm in prisons. Photograph: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty

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A record 119 people killed themselves in prisons in England and Wales in 2016 - an increase of 29 (32%) on the previous year, according to Ministry of Justice figures.

The record number of self-inflicted deaths in prison - equal to one every three days - compares with the previous high of 96 in 2004 and represents a doubling of the jail suicide rate since 2012.

The latest official “safety in custody” statistics show that an epidemic of violence has swept prisons in the 12 months to September, with a 40% rise in assaults on staff and a 28% increase in prisoner-on-prisoner assaults. The rise in jail suicides has been accompanied by a 23% increase in incidents of self-harm, to a total of 37,784.

The justice secretary, Elizabeth Truss, said: “Since becoming justice secretary, I have been clear that the violence, self-harm and deaths in our prisons are too high.

“I have taken immediate action to stabilise the estate by tackling the drugs, drones and phones that undermine security. We are also investing £100m annually to boost the frontline by 2,500 officers.

“These are longstanding issues that will not be resolved in weeks or months but our wholesale reforms will lay the groundwork to transform our prisons, reduce reoffending and make our communities safer.”

The Liberal Democrat leader, Tim Farron, said the figures showed the prison crisis was spiralling out of control. “Chronic underfunding and lack of staff are turning our prisons into hotbeds of violence when they should be places of rehabilitation,” he said.

“The sharp rise in suicides shows too many vulnerable people are slipping through the net with tragic consequences. The government must get a grip and ensure prisons are sufficiently funded and staffed to reverse this deeply alarming rise in deaths and violence.”

The Royal College of Psychiatrists said the fact that prison suicides were at record levels was tragic, but it was only one of the most serious consequences of the last government’s decision to cut prison staffing while prisoner numbers were rising.

“The prison service is in crisis following a 40% cut in the number of prison officers, and mental health teams are struggling to help prisoners in desperate need. In many cases there is no one available to escort prisoners to in-prison clinics from time to time, even when a psychiatrist goes to a prisoner’s cell, as there are not enough prison officers present and the cell door can’t be unlocked for safety reasons,” said Prof Pamela Taylor, of the RCP’s forensic faculty.

“Training for staff is also suffering. Last week’s inquest into a prisoner’s suicide in Cheltenham reported that prison staff mistakenly believed ‘a prison psychiatrist’s’ permission was needed before he could be transferred to hospital. Health service staff can only do so much - the whole system must become more functional.”

Deborah Coles, the director of Inquest, which works with bereaved families, said: “This unacceptable death toll reflects the grim reality of overcrowded and dehumanising prisons and the failure to protect those in their care ... This broken system cannot deal with societal problems of mental and physical ill health, addictions, poverty and housing.”

She said a radical reduction in the prison population, investment in alternatives and a change in the nature and culture of prison so they are places of last resort and rehabilitation would better serve victims, communities and prisoners. “If the government fails to act, the scandalous death toll will continue.”

Peter Dawson, the director of the Prison Reform Trust, also said it was time to cut the 85,000-strong prison population. “Another record low in standards of safety should leave no one in any doubt of the need to relieve the pressure on our failing prison system. We know that the worst outcomes happen in overcrowded prisons. Reducing the population can no longer be an afterthought - it is the only realistic way to make our prisons safe in the foreseeable future.”

The detailed figures show there were a record 354 deaths in prisons in 2016, up by 97 (38%) from the previous year, reflecting the ageing profile of the prison population, particularly sex offenders on lengthy sentences.

The record high of 119 self-inflicted deaths included 12 female prisoners. The justice ministry said the likelihood of self-inflicted death in custody was now 8.6 times higher than in the general population.

Assaults behind bars reached a record high of 25,049 in the 12 months to September, a rise of 31% or 5,995 on the previous year. The figures include 3,372 assaults classed as serious - an increase of 26% over the previous year. Serious assaults on staff have trebled since 2012, reaching 761 in the most recent year.

The MoJ says the prison population in England and Wales has remained relatively stable for the past five years. The population stood at 85,048 last Friday. Between 1990 and 2012 it doubled from 42,000 to 84,000.

The latest official figures for the proven reoffending rate of convicted offenders show a slight fall in the past 12 months, to 25.3%. The MoJ says the rate has remained fairly flat since 2004, fluctuating between 25% and 27%.

The detailed prison figures show that on 88,017 occasions, prisoners were released on temporary licence in the 12 months to September, with only 69 recorded as failures. They also show 1,504 offenders breached the terms of their prison release licence but were not returned to jail between 1999 and 2016. They included 217 who had been serving a sentence for violence, and 47 sex offenders.

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