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News release

Prison violence up by almost a third in 5 years

Figures obtained by the Howard League for Penal Reform have revealed that recorded acts of violence in prisons have risen by 31% in the last five years.

The figures show that self-harm, assaults and fires are all on the rise – with 180,000 acts committed over 5 years. Young Offender Institutions and female prisons are particularly affected, with prisoner-on-prisoner assaults up by 58% in YOIs, and self-harm rising by 42% in women’s jails.

There were almost 40,000 recorded acts of violence in English and Welsh prisons in 2008, more than 100 incidents a day.

Between 2004 and 2008:

- Prisoner-on-prisoner assaults rose by 36%, with a total of 56,517 incidents.
- Prisoner-on-officer assaults increased by 6% overall, and by 12 % in female prisons. In total, prison officers were attacked 13,993 times by inmates.
- Self-harm incidents went up by 25%, and by 42% in female prisons. There were 104,414 recorded incidents of self-injury, 54% of which were committed by women and girls. This is despite the fact that they comprise just 5% of the prison population.

Women’s prisons have seen the most dramatic increases in acts of violence, with a 42% rise in self-harm, a 12% rise in attacks on prison officers, and an 11% increase in prisoner-on-prisoner assaults and fires. Bronzefield, a privately run women’s prison saw a 300% rise in number of fires started between 2004 and 2008, and acts of arson in Holloway went up by 211%.

Young Offender Institutions, meanwhile, have seen violence amongst prisoners soar by 58%. The number of fires started in YOIs between 2004 and 2008 rose by 13%. Reading YOI saw a dramatic leap of 1200% in the number of fires started by young people within the prison walls. Four other YOIs suffered a rise of over 300% in fires. Prison officers in YOIs are now 3% more at risk of being attacked by prisoners than they were five years ago.

Director of the Howard League for Penal Reform, Frances Crook, said today (Monday, 18 May): “This shocking rise in violence is far above what might be expected as we lock up ever increasing numbers of men, women and children whose mental health problems

and addictions will never be properly treated within our flooded and failing jails. As these are recorded statistics, it is likely to be just the tip of the iceberg with real levels of assaults, rapes and arson much higher than the Prison Service is admitting."

"Overcrowded, squalid prison conditions lead to rioting, violence and chaos, which is dangerous for prisoners, staff and local communities. Prisons are awash with drugs, violence and arson and the government is planning to inflict all this on more local communities by building another five 1,500 place prisons.

"The answer to rising prison populations is not to build more failing jails, which churn out bitter and frightened prisoners into local communities, more damaged and dangerous from having spent time in our colleges of crime. It is time for the government to look at wholesale reform of the penal system. We should spend taxpayers' money on programmes that work in reducing offending and make society safer."

Further information

Thomasin Pritchard 020 7249 7373 ext. 104
Andrew Neilson 020 7249 7373 ext. 119

ISDN line available on 020 7923 4196 - uses a G722 system

Figures quoted were obtained through Parliamentary Questions asked by Paul Holmes MP and James Gray MP from February and March 2009. For more information, please contact Thomasin Pritchard, Policy and Communications Officer, at thomasin@howardleague.org