# More than 240 deaths in Scottish state custody raise concerns over care standards



In 2024, a total of 244 individuals died in Scotland while detained in various state-controlled settings, including prisons, mental health facilities, police custody, immigration centres, and care institutions for children and young people, according to a new report published by the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR). This figure, equating to more than four deaths per week, underscores a significant concern about the circumstances surrounding deaths in custody and state care environments.

The report, titled "Nothing to See Here? Deaths in Custody and their Investigation in Scotland in 2024," provides a comprehensive examination of deaths across multiple custodial and care settings. Of the 244 deaths, 138 occurred among individuals detained on mental health grounds, 19 followed police contact, and three happened in police custody. Additionally, three deaths were recorded in immigration detention centres, while one inpatient with learning disabilities died in a hospital setting. The report also highlights that 16 children and young people died in care.

This publication arrives shortly after The Herald (Glasgow) conducted an investigative series on Scotland's prison system, exposing challenges such as overcrowding, rising inmate numbers, drug problems, and concerns over the safety and well-being of both staff and prisoners. The series included visits to new facilities like the women's prison HMP Stirling and reported apprehensions among prison governors about potential future riots.

Professor Sarah Armstrong, lead researcher of the SCCJR team, drew attention to a sharp increase in prison deaths. Speaking to The Herald, she stated: "Last year we reported there were 40 deaths in prisons in 2023 which has now surged to 64 in 2024. It is of real concern that the mortality rate in our prisons has more than doubled in the last decade and is now among the highest in Europe." She further contextualised the severity by comparing Scotland’s prison death rates to those of countries like Azerbaijan and Moldova, where issues of torture and corruption have been documented, rather than to England and Wales.

Armstrong suggests that the physical environment and daily routines within prisons contribute to this rise. She explained, "Poor air quality, access to healthcare, extended periods of time being locked in cells and increased isolation from others, can all cause poor health, exacerbate existing conditions, and lead to a loss of hope." The report also identifies recurring problems including inadequate cell checks by officers, prisoner health concerns being dismissed as drug-seeking behaviour, and unaddressed signs of deteriorating mental health. Professor Armstrong remarked, "Despite the Scottish Prison Service’s commitment to learn from each death in custody, it is worrying to see deaths occurring in similar circumstances year after year."

A Fatal Accident Inquiry (FAI) is mandatory following deaths in prison or police custody, but as most deaths occurred outside these settings, they are often not subject to such scrutiny. The report emphasises a lack of publicly available information on the identities and causes of death for many of those who died under state supervision. Discretionary FAIs may be ordered by the Procurator Fiscal in cases of sudden or unexplained deaths, or when families request them; however, only a small number of such inquiries take place. Where FAIs do occur, there can be significant delays: the average wait for the publication of an FAI determination is 3.5 years, with a maximum of ten years for a death in police custody.

The SCCJR report also notes inconsistent engagement with families during internal reviews conducted by bodies such as NHS Scotland, the Scottish Prison Service, the National Hub, and the Police Investigation and Review Commissioner (PIRC). Linda Allan, co-author of the report and Honorary Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Glasgow, condemned the lack of transparency and accountability. Speaking to The Herald, she said: "More than four people including children and young people die every week in this country while they are under the care of the state and it is unacceptable that in many cases we will never know what their names were, how they lived their lives, what led to their death and what these organisations are doing to stop it from happening again."

Allan called for independent and timely investigations into all deaths occurring under state care, greater transparency through public internal review reports, and enhanced family involvement throughout the investigative processes. The researchers also observed discrepancies in death reporting data across different agencies, raising questions about the accuracy of official records. Professor Armstrong highlighted this issue, stating: "We can’t even be sure the government knows who or how many are dying in their care." She added, "With this now being our fourth annual report, it seems we are further away than ever before from being the compassionate, progressive jurisdiction that the Scottish Government claims us to be."

Data from the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) reveal that there were 14 suicides in Scottish prisons in 2024, a figure unchanged since 2019 and 2022. An SPS spokesperson said: "Every death, whether in prison custody or in our communities, is a tragedy for all those who knew and supported the individual." The spokesperson further asserted, "We are determined to deliver systemic change, at pace, to how we support people in our care, in a way which will be enduring, transparent, and impactful."

The Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research is a collaboration among the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier, Stirling, and Strathclyde. It seeks to produce research that informs policy and practice and advances understanding of justice-related issues.

The findings outlined in the report add to ongoing debates about the conditions within Scottish prisons and other custodial environments, highlighting concerns about care standards, oversight, and the need for more effective preventative measures.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/project/deaths-in-custody-15-years/> - This URL supports the ongoing research into deaths in custody in Scotland, focusing on Fatal Accident Inquiries (FAIs) and patterns in their processes and outcomes.
2. <https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/publication/nothing-to-see-here-deaths-in-custody-and-fais-in-scotland-2023/> - This URL provides details on the annual reports related to deaths in custody and FAIs in Scotland, aligning with the report mentioned in the article.
3. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/archiveofnews/2024/february/headline_1042060_en.html> - This URL highlights a University of Glasgow report revealing a high number of deaths in custody in Scotland, averaging four per week, which aligns with the article's claims.
4. <https://www.strathspey-herald.co.uk/news/national/death-rate-in-scotland-s-prisons-among-highest-in-europe-report-finds-132363/> - This URL supports the claim that Scotland's prison death rate is among the highest in Europe, featuring data on recent prison fatalities.
5. <https://howardleague.scot/news/2024/november/deaths-custody> - This URL discusses recent reports on deaths in custody in Scotland, focusing on prison conditions and mortality rates compared to European standards.
6. <https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/> - This URL serves as the main page for the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR), providing context on their role in investigating criminal justice issues, including deaths in custody.
7. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25121162.deaths-scotlands-prisons-soars-record-high/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data