# Record emergency calls at Barlinnie highlight crisis in inmate health and safety



Record numbers of emergency calls from Barlinnie, Scotland’s largest prison, have brought urgent attention to growing concerns over inmate health and safety, particularly in relation to drug use and violence. Recent figures reveal that 62 ambulances were dispatched to the facility in Glasgow between January and March in response to severe health incidents, marking a staggering 51% increase compared to the previous quarter when only 41 calls were made. This surge indicates a worrying trend, as it represents more than three times the 17 calls made during the same period in 2023.

The escalation in calls stems largely from a spate of overdoses linked to smuggled drugs, including dangerous psychoactive substances notorious for inducing violent behaviours. Barlinnie has recorded nearly 3,000 assaults over the past decade, with the majority occurring between inmates and a significant number involving staff. The violence has been attributed in part to ongoing feuds between factions, such as the notorious Lyons and Daniel families, which have escalated in recent years.

Critics, including the Scottish Conservatives, have accused the government of neglecting the existing prison infrastructure, thereby allowing conditions to deteriorate. Liam Kerr, the party's justice spokesperson, stated that the "staggering figures highlight the breakdown of discipline at Scotland’s largest prison" and pointed to the difficulty faced by prison staff, who are grappling with dwindling resources amid ongoing budget cuts. The current state of affairs is compounded by a report from HM Inspectorate of Prisons, which condemned Barlinnie as being in a "wretchedly poor state" and noted that it operates at over 30% capacity.

Moreover, an alarming trend has emerged regarding the age profile of inmates; many are older individuals with complex health issues, including those convicted of historical sexual offences. The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) acknowledges this shift and claims that the health and wellbeing of inmates remains a priority. In their statement, they indicated they collaborate closely with NHS partners to ensure that emergency services are requested only when absolutely necessary. However, it has been noted that there is often a low threshold for declaring emergencies within the prison, contributing to an increase in unnecessary calls.

Reports from the Health Services Safety Investigations Body reveal that a significant number of emergency calls from prisons across the UK—71%, in fact—were deemed unnecessary, which strains ambulance resources and delays responses to actual emergencies. This disconnect indicates a need for improved training and communication between prison staff and healthcare providers. In Scottish prisons, especially Barlinnie, the problem mirrors broader issues seen across the UK, where inadequate training and high staff turnover have exacerbated responses to medical emergencies.

Addressing drug-related incidents, the SPS has issued guidance on safely managing drug use, cautioning inmates against using psychotropic substances. Nonetheless, the smuggling of these substances into the prison remains a critical challenge. The situation is far from isolated; instances of drug overdoses and health emergencies have risen dramatically across Scottish prisons. Data from the Scottish Ambulance Service shows that calls related to drug overdoses in prisons have increased nearly threefold over the past five years, with Barlinnie frequently leading in callouts.

Concerns regarding the wellbeing of inmates have intensified, particularly as a record 64 individuals died in custody last year across Scottish prisons. Ten of these deaths were drug-related, while others stemmed from suicides and homicides. The mounting pressure for reform is evident, as calls for systemic change gain momentum. Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, the Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, has highlighted the need for rehabilitative initiatives and community support structures to mitigate recidivism rates, arguing that the current prison system sets many inmates up to fail.

Looking forward, a £1 billion replacement for Barlinnie is on the horizon, with a new facility expected to open at Provanmill, but not until 2028—three years later than originally planned. Until then, the urgent need to address inmate health and safety in Scotland’s prisons remains paramount, as officials strive to manage an increasingly complex environment marked by drug abuse, violence, and systemic inadequacies.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1-2, 4
2. Paragraphs 3, 5, 6
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4. Paragraphs 7
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6. Paragraphs 9
7. Paragraph 10

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/record-number-999-calls-barlinnie-35212287> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.hssib.org.uk/news-events-blog/unnecessary-999-calls-from-prisons-lead-to-a-significant-loss-in-ambulance-crew-time/> - An investigation by the Health Services Safety Investigations Body (HSSIB) revealed that unnecessary 999 calls from prisons lead to a significant loss in ambulance crew time. The study found that approximately 71% of emergency calls from prisons did not require an ambulance, leading to a diversion of resources and potential delays in responding to genuine emergencies. Factors contributing to this issue include a low threshold for declaring emergencies, prison policies encouraging a cautious approach, high staff turnover, and inadequate training for prison staff in recognizing medical emergencies. The report emphasizes the need for improved communication and collaboration between prisons and ambulance services to address this problem.
3. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/28/unnecessary-999-calls-from-prisons-wasting-ambulance-time/> - A report by the Health Services Safety Investigations Body (HSSIB) highlighted that nearly 71% of 999 calls from prisons in England were unnecessary, leading to a significant loss of ambulance crew time. The investigation found that these unnecessary diversions amounted to approximately 1,250 hours annually, equating to over 100 12-hour shifts. Contributing factors include a low threshold for declaring emergencies, prison policies encouraging a cautious approach, high staff turnover, and inadequate training for prison staff in recognizing medical emergencies. The report calls for improved communication and collaboration between prisons and ambulance services to address this issue.
4. <https://www.sps.gov.uk/about-us/transparency/death-custody> - The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) maintains a record of deaths in custody, providing transparency and accountability regarding inmate fatalities. The list includes details such as the name, age, and date of death for each individual. For instance, in 2024, several inmates across various prisons, including HMP Barlinnie, HMP Edinburgh, and HMP Glenochil, passed away. The SPS emphasizes the importance of monitoring and addressing the health and well-being of those in custody, ensuring that appropriate care and support are provided to inmates.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-50643780> - In response to concerns about the prevalence of synthetic drugs in prisons, the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) issued guidelines to inmates at Glasgow's Barlinnie jail on safe drug use. The guidelines emphasize that there is 'no safe way' to take synthetic or psychoactive drugs and advise inmates to avoid using them alone. The SPS acknowledges the challenges posed by the smuggling of these substances into prisons and continues to invest in measures to detect and reduce their availability, aiming to maintain a safe and secure environment for both staff and inmates.
6. <https://www.scotsman.com/health/ambulance-calls-to-prison-overdoses-triple-in-five-years-3425219> - Data from the Scottish Ambulance Service indicates that ambulance calls to drug overdoses or poisonings in Scottish prisons have nearly tripled over five years. Between 2020 and 2021, there were between 62 and 89 calls, up from 24 to 33 calls in 2016/17. HMP Barlinnie in Glasgow recorded 13 calls in 2020/2021, the highest among Scottish prisons. The Scottish Prison Service attributes this increase to the smuggling of new psychoactive substances into prisons, often through mail, and acknowledges the associated dangers.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/sep/01/broken-prison-system-sets-inmates-up-to-fail-top-scottish-inspector-says> - The Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, criticized the current prison system for setting inmates up to fail. She highlighted issues such as overcrowding, lack of meaningful activities, and insufficient rehabilitation programs, which contribute to high recidivism rates. Sinclair-Gieben emphasized the need for systemic reforms to address these challenges and improve outcomes for individuals in custody, advocating for better community alternatives and support systems to reduce reoffending.