# Scotland’s prison officers warn overcrowding crisis threatens safety and staff wellbeing



Scotland's prison system stands on the brink of crisis, grappling with alarming levels of overcrowding that have left prison officers sounding an urgent alarm. A recent report from the Prison Officers’ Association (POA) starkly illustrates the perilous conditions within the nation's jails, revealing that over 95% of prison staff consider rising inmate numbers to pose a significant danger. With the prison population at a staggering 8,110, the situation reflects one of the highest incarceration rates in Europe, further exacerbated by a surge in serious crimes, including domestic violence and historic sexual offences.

Phil Fairlie, Assistant Secretary of the POA, commented on the report's findings, stating, “This report is the clearest evidence from our members on the frontline that Scotland’s prisons are at breaking point.” This sentiment echoes through the report, which highlights that more than 80% of officers believe their facilities are unable to cope with the current prison numbers. The situation has grown so dire that more than 68% of surveyed officers reported that they have never witnessed overcrowding levels as severe in their careers.

In response to this escalating crisis, hundreds of prisoners have been released early in the past months, aimed at mitigating overcrowding. Legislation passed under emergency measures has allowed shorter-term inmates to leave after serving just 40% of their sentences, a significant reduction from the previous requirement of 50%. However, the efficacy of such measures remains under scrutiny as many officers report that too frequently, those being released are not adequately prepared for reintegration into society.

The crisis is further compounded by systemic issues within the prisons themselves. As of July 2023, it was reported that over half of Scotland's prisons are operating beyond their designed capacity, with the notorious HMP Barlinnie in Glasgow exceeding capacity by 40%, housing 1,406 inmates compared to its intended 987. This Victorian-era facility has faced widespread criticism, with inspectors describing its conditions as “wretchedly poor,” and operations reported to be in a state that could breach inmates' human rights.

The challenges faced within these institutions manifest in daily life. Prisoners are often confined to their cells for extended periods, access to physical activity is restricted, and opportunities for education and rehabilitation are markedly diminished. In a survey conducted among nearly 500 prison officers, a staggering 91% identified that overcrowding heightened tensions within the facilities, leading to increased incidents of violence and substance misuse.

The pressures on staff themselves are profound; more than 86% of prison officers have stated that the rising inmate numbers are contributing to health issues, with many indicating that they doubt their ability to remain in their posts until reaching a normal retirement age of 68. A governor of Scotland's largest jail admitted the environment felt akin to a "pressure cooker," reflecting the strain on both staff and prisoners.

In response to these troubling findings, the Scottish Government has committed to constructing a new prison to replace Barlinnie, slated for completion in 2028. However, critics argue that this long-term solution fails to address the immediate crisis at hand. Recent government initiatives, including a 10% increase in the Scottish Prison Service’s budget aimed at enhancing resources, do not assuage concerns over the lack of immediate interventions necessary to resolve the systemic issues that plague the current system.

Justice Secretary Angela Constance acknowledged the complexity of the challenges faced by the prison system, stating: “Like the rest of the UK, Scotland’s prison population has risen significantly in recent times. We continue to work with the Scottish Prison Service and the wider justice system to manage the prison population.”

The ongoing dialogue and proposed solutions highlight the urgent need for a more comprehensive review of how Scotland’s prisons are managed, particularly in terms of rehabilitation and preventing recidivism, moving beyond approaches that simply "warehouse" individuals without addressing the underlying causes of crime.

As conditions within Scotland's prisons deteriorate, pressing the Scottish Government for immediate action appears more critical than ever. Amid calls for better staffing and resources, the need to foster a rehabilitative environment that truly prepares inmates for life beyond bars is paramount—not just for the health and safety of prisoners, but for the broader community as well.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/scotlands-jails-breaking-point-prison-35366978), [[4]](https://news.stv.tv/scotland/too-many-people-being-held-on-remand-in-prison-say-inspectors)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/scotlands-jails-breaking-point-prison-35366978), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/440f35ce-8b94-4a5c-af9b-8cbb9e25ae2e), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c722rq20dp1o)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://news.stv.tv/scotland/more-than-half-of-prisons-operating-above-capacity-in-scotland-figures-show), [[6]](https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/23984269.overcrowded-barlinnie-risks-human-rights-claims-finds-report/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/scotlands-jails-breaking-point-prison-35366978), [[7]](https://news.sky.com/story/hmp-barlinnie-scotlands-largest-prison-in-wretchedly-poor-state-13344256)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c722rq20dp1o), [[6]](https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/23984269.overcrowded-barlinnie-risks-human-rights-claims-finds-report/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/scotlands-jails-breaking-point-prison-35366978), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/440f35ce-8b94-4a5c-af9b-8cbb9e25ae2e)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/scotlands-jails-breaking-point-prison-35366978), [[4]](https://news.stv.tv/scotland/too-many-people-being-held-on-remand-in-prison-say-inspectors)
* Paragraph 8 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c722rq20dp1o), [[3]](https://news.stv.tv/scotland/more-than-half-of-prisons-operating-above-capacity-in-scotland-figures-show)
* Paragraph 9 – [[7]](https://news.sky.com/story/hmp-barlinnie-scotlands-largest-prison-in-wretchedly-poor-state-13344256), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/440f35ce-8b94-4a5c-af9b-8cbb9e25ae2e)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/scotlands-jails-breaking-point-prison-35366978> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/440f35ce-8b94-4a5c-af9b-8cbb9e25ae2e> - In May 2024, Scotland's Justice Secretary Angela Constance announced the early release of approximately 550 prisoners to alleviate severe overcrowding in the prison system. This emergency measure, requiring approval from the Scottish Parliament, targeted inmates serving sentences of less than four years and due for release within six months. The decision followed a rapid increase of about 400 prisoners over two months, bringing the prison population to 8,313. Excluded from the release were those serving life sentences, registered sex offenders, and individuals convicted of domestic abuse. The move faced criticism from opposition parties, who attributed the crisis to the government's failure to modernise the prison system and address court backlogs, despite a decrease in crime rates in Scotland. Additionally, electronic monitoring measures and upcoming justice bills aimed to further mitigate overcrowding. ([ft.com](https://www.ft.com/content/440f35ce-8b94-4a5c-af9b-8cbb9e25ae2e?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/more-than-half-of-prisons-operating-above-capacity-in-scotland-figures-show> - As of July 2023, more than half of Scotland's prisons were operating above capacity, with 10 out of 17 facilities holding more inmates than their design specifications. Notably, HMP Barlinnie in Glasgow was operating at 140% capacity, housing 392 more prisoners than it was designed for. The Victorian-era facility has been earmarked for demolition, with plans for a new prison to be built nearby and opened in 2026. Other prisons exceeding capacity included HMP Inverness, HMP Glenochil, HMP Dumfries, HMP Kilmarnock, HMP Edinburgh, HMP Perth, HMP Addiewell, HMP Low Moss, and HMP Greenock. ([news.stv.tv](https://news.stv.tv/scotland/more-than-half-of-prisons-operating-above-capacity-in-scotland-figures-show?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/too-many-people-being-held-on-remand-in-prison-say-inspectors> - HM Inspectorate for Prisons in Scotland (HMIPS) raised concerns about the high number of individuals held on remand in Scottish prisons. In a report covering April to September 2023, HMIPS stated that overcrowding led to prisoners doubling up in cells, some of which were unsuitable for sharing. The remand population remained high, and many individuals continued to receive short sentences. The report highlighted that the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) estate was not adequately equipped to handle the rising population, resulting in inadequate regimes and insufficient access to purposeful activities. HMIPS recommended that the SPS and the Scottish Government urgently review the resources available to prisons to offer effective rehabilitation and reduce the cycle of crime and imprisonment. ([news.stv.tv](https://news.stv.tv/scotland/too-many-people-being-held-on-remand-in-prison-say-inspectors?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c722rq20dp1o> - A report by Scotland's Public Audit Committee highlighted a crisis in the prison system, with overcrowding and deteriorating conditions potentially breaching inmates' human rights. The Auditor General for Scotland, Stephen Boyle, raised concerns about the Scottish Government and Scottish Prison Service facing financial risks from legal challenges due to poor conditions. The committee noted that seven prisons were 'on the brink' and at 'red status' because of overcrowding. HMP Barlinnie, designed for 987 inmates, was housing 1,406 as of November 2023. The report called for urgent action to address the deterioration of significant parts of the prison estate and recommended a clear timetable for addressing those parts no longer fit for purpose. ([bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c722rq20dp1o?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/23984269.overcrowded-barlinnie-risks-human-rights-claims-finds-report/> - A report found that HMP Barlinnie, Scotland's largest prison, was holding 1,406 men despite being designed for 987, making it 42% over capacity. The overcrowding led to double cell occupancy and a lack of regime availability and work opportunities within the prison. The report also highlighted maintenance issues, including power outages affecting kitchen and laundry facilities and water shortages impacting toilet functionality. The auditors noted that these conditions could have legal implications for the prison service, potentially leading to judicial reviews or litigation linked to human rights and equalities issues. A new prison is planned to replace the Victorian-era facility, but the timescale remains unclear. ([glasgowtimes.co.uk](https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/23984269.overcrowded-barlinnie-risks-human-rights-claims-finds-report/?utm_source=openai))
7. <https://news.sky.com/story/hmp-barlinnie-scotlands-largest-prison-in-wretchedly-poor-state-13344256> - HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS) described HMP Barlinnie as being in a 'wretchedly poor state' while operating at 30% over capacity. The 143-year-old facility regularly housed more than 1,300 inmates despite its design capacity for 987. Inspectors noted that nearly two-thirds of prisoners were sharing cells designed for one person. The overcrowding made it harder for staff to build and retain positive relationships with inmates and strained services and relationships. HMIPS strongly urged the Scottish Government to address the fundamental problem of overcrowding, highlighting the urgent need for a replacement prison through the planned new HMP Glasgow. ([news.sky.com](https://news.sky.com/story/hmp-barlinnie-scotlands-largest-prison-in-wretchedly-poor-state-13344256?utm_source=openai))