# UK prisons in crisis as drug abuse and violence spiral amid systemic neglect



The latest inspection reports paint a grim picture of the state of UK prisons, exposing a system in severe crisis—plagued by unchecked drug proliferation, violence, and chronic safety issues that put prisoners’ lives at risk. Far from being a responsible correctional system, these institutions are failing in their fundamental duties, largely due to mismanagement and an inability to enforce discipline, revealing a broken system that rewards neglect rather than reform.

HMP Berwyn, a public-sector Category C facility in north Wales, epitomizes this failure. Despite efforts by some staff, the prison’s escalating drug problem—evidenced by a staggering 34 percent positive mandatory drug test rate and over 60 percent of prisoners admitting that drugs are easily accessible—fuels violence and self-harm. Such conditions are hardly conducive to rehabilitation; instead, they mirror a reception jail overwhelmed by influx and incapable of maintaining order. While the prison boasts some amenities and initiatives aimed at mental health and employability, these are mere Band-Aids on a fundamentally flawed system that leaves many prisoners unemployed and confined for distressingly minimal periods daily. The new leadership may have brought some optimism, but until systemic reforms are enacted to restore discipline and order, these facilities will continue to serve as dangerous holding pens rather than places of meaningful change.

Likewise, HMP Thameside in south-east London illustrates the peril of neglect. The facility is plagued by gang rivalries and drug issues, with over 60 percent of inmates feeling unsafe at some point during their stay. Healthcare failures—long delays in cancer referrals and vital medication—highlight the systemic neglect that permeates the entire sector. Although prisoners benefit from longer out-of-cell time, the management of education and work programs remains pitifully ineffectual, underscoring the failure to provide purposeful activity. Despite the prison’s efforts to offer therapeutic activities like music and art, these are mere palliative measures that do little to quell violence or address the root causes of disorder.

At HMP Ranby, bitter disparities reveal the true state of the prison system. While newer wings boast better conditions and more constructive activities, the old, deteriorating wings are a mirror of systemic neglect—broken facilities, unsafe living conditions, and concentrated drug use and self-harm. The focus on release schemes over ongoing engagement further illustrates a prison system that is reactive rather than proactive, incapable of turning inmates’ lives around. Even positive initiatives, such as tailored support for neurodivergent prisoners, are overshadowed by widespread neglect and underfunding.

HMP Wandsworth, under a formal improvement notice earlier this year, shows some signs of progress but remains woefully inadequate. Violence and self-harm have decreased, yet the underlying issues—poor staff-prisoner relationships, overcrowded, squalid cells, and inconsistent regimes—persist. The overcrowding, poor conditions, and lack of consistent healthcare are clear signs that the prison system is failing in its most basic duty: to safeguard those in custody. Even where reforms are underway, they often feel superficial rather than systemic, desperately needing the intervention of tougher, more decisive leadership.

Other prisons, such as HMP Colnbrook, demonstrate that stable leadership and clear direction can temporarily maintain calm and improve staff-prisoner relations—yet these are isolated islands in a sea of systemic chaos. The ongoing neglect of maintenance and the slow pace of repairs speak to a broader failure to treat prisons as institutions committed to rehabilitation or humane treatment.

Overall, these inspection reports confirm what many a true defender of justice already knows: the UK prison system is broken. Drugs, violence, inadequate healthcare, overcrowding, and dismal regimes dominate, with systemic neglect thwarting any real hope of reform. Instead of investing in meaningful reforms—restoring discipline, improving conditions, and providing genuine opportunities for rehabilitation—the system remains mired in bureaucratic inertia. Until the authorities wake up and prioritize safety, order, and upliftment over superficial fixes and misplaced optimism, these prisons will continue to serve as dangerous, failed institutions that do little to protect the public or offer offenders genuine chances at redemption.

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://insidetime.org/information/the-inspector-calls-51/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-berwyn-2/> - An unannounced inspection of HMP Berwyn, a public-sector men's category C reception, training, and resettlement prison in north Wales, was conducted from 27 January to 7 February 2025. The report highlights that drugs were too easily available, and levels of violence and self-harm were high. Approximately 25% of prisoners were unemployed, and 27% were in part-time work or education. The report also notes that attendance at education and training was low, despite teaching being generally of a reasonable standard. The variety of incentives to motivate prisoners and reward those who behaved was disappointing, but public protection arrangements and offender management had improved. The leadership of a new governor was praised for injecting energy into the prison, and successful efforts to improve retention and support new officers meant the prison was almost fully staffed. Living conditions across the prison were good, with each cell having a shower, which prisoners greatly appreciated. However, the regime for many prisoners was still poor, with unemployed prisoners spending as little as two hours out of their cells. The report also mentions that the positive mandatory drug testing rate was 34%, and 60% of surveyed prisoners said it was easy to get illicit drugs. Half of the prisoners reported feeling depressed. The report concludes that while there were pockets of excellent practice, progress was marred by an increased availability of drugs and much higher levels of violence and self-harm than seen at the last inspection in 2022.
3. <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-thameside-2/> - An unannounced inspection of HMP Thameside, a men's category B local/resettlement prison in south-east London, was conducted from 3 to 13 February 2025. The report highlights that levels of violence were much higher than at the last inspection in 2021, often caused by gang issues and the availability of illegal drugs. Of prisoners surveyed, 63% had felt unsafe at some point at the prison, and 33% currently felt unsafe. Healthcare was some of the worst that inspectors had seen in recent years, with critical failings and inconsistencies in the service provided. Some prisoners given two-week cancer referrals waited months to get to hospital, and prisoners with asthma did not get their inhalers until days after their arrival. Time out of cell was much better than at similar jails, with most prisoners getting around seven hours out of their cells on weekdays. However, those on induction got less than two hours. There were enough part-time places in education, skills, and work, but allocation was poor, leading to long waiting lists and too many men underemployed with wing work. Most cells had showers and nearly all had privacy screens, but too many cells had broken or missing custodial management system (CMS) terminals or had issues with connectivity and broken cables. The report also mentions a broad and well-developed programme of enrichment activities to help manage anxiety, including sound, art and music therapy, art classes, a graphic writing course, and operatic support. The report concludes that while there were areas of good practice, significant improvements were needed in safety, care, and purposeful activity.
4. <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-ranby-2/> - An unannounced inspection of HMP Ranby, a public-sector men's category C training and resettlement prison in Nottinghamshire, was conducted from 19 to 23 May 2025. The report highlights that illicit drugs underpinned many of the problems at Ranby, including high levels of violence. Random drug tests returned a positive rate of 23%, and nearly a quarter of surveyed prisoners said they had developed a drug or alcohol problem since they had been at the jail. Outcomes for prisoners varied greatly depending on where they were housed. Prisoners on houseblocks one, two, three, and five lived in bleak conditions, with rubbish and food waste in communal areas, stained floors, and broken showers. Cells lacked basic furniture, many had graffiti, some had mould, and others had damaged sockets, lights, sinks, and toilets. Prisoners struggled to access basics such as kettles, in-cell phones, and cleaning equipment. There were no self-catering facilities. Almost all incidents of self-harm took place on these houseblocks, and there were higher rates of drug use. Despite this, staff visibility was worse on these blocks, as were the regime and call bell response times. In contrast, conditions on houseblocks four, six, seven, and eight were much better, with cleaner facilities and more activities. Provision in commercial industry workshops and some teaching in education and training was better than at similar prisons. The number of prisoners leaving the jail homeless had reduced, but other areas of resettlement were struggling. Pressure on the offender management unit (OMU) meant prison offender managers (POMs) were focused on early release scheme assessments, rather than meeting with prisoners. The report concludes that while there were areas of good practice, significant improvements were needed in safety, care, and purposeful activity.
5. <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-wandsworth-2/> - An independent review of progress at HMP Wandsworth, a public-sector men's category B reception and resettlement prison in south-west London, was published on 12 May 2025. The review highlights that although there was still a long way to go, there were early signs of progress. Rates of violence and self-harm had decreased, and the charity Catch 22 delivered and commissioned imaginative and impactful gang-related interventions. The positive drug testing rate was 37%, still high but lower than previously, and there was a more focused approach to reducing the supply. Relationships between staff and prisoners across most of the prison remained distant, with numerous reports of rude or dismissive staff, and inspectors saw evidence of basic requests not being dealt with. The long-running problem of rats and other vermin had been addressed to reasonably good effect. However, many of the small and overcrowded cells were still in poor condition, with problems with heating and hot water persisting despite efforts to replace boilers. Repainting had done little to address the problem of mould in the shower rooms. The regime remained unpredictable, with inspectors having to abandon two roll checks because staff could not provide accurate numbers or confirm where prisoners were located. Unemployed prisoners, who made up 58% of the population, could still only spend two hours out of their cells a day. However, prisoners on the Trinity unit, now a more purposeful working unit for Enhanced-level prisoners, were unlocked for most of the day. A remand support service had been reinstated and had supported 1,000 unsentenced prisoners with debt management, gaining legal representation, and housing support. Foreign national prisoners were now a priority, with more translation offered. The report concludes that while there were areas of good practice, significant improvements were needed in safety, care, and purposeful activity.
6. <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-colnbrook-2/> - An unannounced inspection of HMP Colnbrook, a public-sector men's category B local prison in west London, was conducted from 3 to 7 February 2025. The report highlights that the prison felt calm and well-led, but in need of repair. The leadership team was well-regarded, and staff-prisoner relationships were good. However, the prison was in need of repair, with many areas requiring attention. The report concludes that while the prison was well-led and calm, significant improvements were needed in maintenance and repair.