

'A prison within a prison'



Campaigners say prisoners are still spending up to 23 hours a day in their cells. Photo: Joe Giddens/Alamy/PA

Concern for time spent in solitary confinement

Crisis follows Covid and staff shortages

Ministers are “continuing to evade the fundamental question” about how many prisoners are being segregated in their cells long after Covid restrictions have been lifted, the Prison Reform Trust has told *Big Issue North*.

Campaigners and prisoners claim that staff shortages mean that the dangerous precedent set during lockdown, in which prisoners spent up to 23 hours in their cells per day, have not been effectively reversed.

The United Nation’s Nelson Mandela rules forbid the use of solitary confinement for more than 15 days at a time because of the known health consequences of this

isolation. Anything over 15 days is treatment tantamount to torture.

A report in July by the prisoner-led charity User Voice, together with Queen’s University Belfast, revealed that prolonged solitary confinement for the prison population during Covid lockdowns led to a significant increase in levels of anxiety and depression, with a third of prisoners showing symptoms of severe anxiety disorder indicating high levels of post-traumatic stress. But an exodus of prison officers means that prisoners are still struggling to access education, work and exercise.

Two ex-prisoners from HMP Forest Bank in Salford, Alex Miller* and Tom Campbell*, told *Big Issue North* about the lasting impact of being confined to their cells for extended periods of time.

Support “yet to materialise”

Miller, who served his sentence after lockdown restrictions had been lifted claims he was still placed in solitary confinement. He said: “Being locked up for 23 and a half hours a day had a detrimental impact on me, I was not far from suicide. I knew there was no light at the end of the tunnel, there was no help from the officers to say when we were going to get released out of our pads. I saw people dipping paper in disinfectant and smoking it. It was madness.”

The July report along with earlier consultations with people in prison, including by the PRT and the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAPDC) – a non-departmental public body co-sponsored by the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office and the Department of Health

and Social Care – has ensured the views of people in prisons have reached ministers and top officials responsible for practice change. It also shows the pressing need for additional mental health support for prisoners, but this is “yet to materialise” Juliet Lyon, chair of the IAPDC, told *Big Issue North*.

She said people are still effectively being held in “a prison within a prison”, confined to small, poorly ventilated cells for up to 23 hours a day for over two years.

“The punishment of imprisonment is loss of liberty not permanently impaired mental and physical health and not, at worst, loss of life,” she said.

Suicides in custody rose during and following extended periods of lockdown – 86 in the year to June 2021, an increase of 28 per cent from the previous 12 months which was already a record high. In the 12 months to June 2022, however, suicides have fallen by 20 per cent.

Peter Dawson, director of the Prison Reform Trust wrote to the Minister of State for Justice, Stuart Andrew, in August in response to an article in the *Daily Express* in which a ministry spokesman gave “categorical assurance” that prisoners were no longer spending 23 hours in a cell.

In his letter Dawson said he cannot see how the assurance



PRT director Peter Dawson

given by the ministry's spokesman can be evidenced.

Exodus of prison staff

On 5 September Dawson received a response from Andrew stating that the reply was intended to rebut the allegations made specifically against HMP Liverpool and HMP Manchester and not suggest that this was not happening across the board.

The letter went on to insist there is an "increasing trend of access to education and work," but that supporting data won't be made public.

"Meanwhile inspectors continue to highlight the damaging impact of the pandemic and staff shortages, which are keeping prisoners locked out from the very things that would help them succeed," the PRT said.

Lyon said that there is no evidence to suggest the government is giving up on its plans for prisoner rehabilitation, but these are often inadequately resourced, and she is concerned about the continuing impact of limited time out of cell, cancelled visits and restrictive regimes.

Campbell, who served a 15-month sentence during Covid lockdowns, claims to have been kept alone in his cell for more than 14 days at a time for 23 and a half hours a day. He said he does not feel rehabilitated after release.

Miller described how confinement in his cell caused his entire body to come out in a rash because he couldn't get out to have a shower.

"I was itching every single day and I was kicking the doors in saying I want to get out, but they were having none of it. They said we couldn't get out for half an hour association because there were staff shortages."

Last year 8,249 prison officers left their posts while prison numbers are expected to rise by 20,000 by 2026. The latest leaving rates are higher than pre-pandemic levels and following an upward trend seen since 2016.

Dawson said the situation gives a bleak outlook for prisoners.

Queen Elizabeth II dies

Britain's longest-reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, died last week at the age of 96. Her eldest son Charles, heir to the throne since age three, is now king, aged 73. He played tribute to his "beloved mother" and called the moment one of "the greatest sadness".

Reigning between 1952 and 2022, the queen celebrated her platinum jubilee earlier this year. She died at her Scottish residence of Balmoral Castle after 70 years, 291 days on the throne. She was active in her duties until the end – appointing new prime minister, Liz Truss, just two days prior to her death on Friday.



"What is the point of prison?"

"We know what happens when there are too many prisoners and too few prison staff – more violence, self-harm and suicide, and less rehabilitation. That is where the government's love affair with imprisonment is leading. It's time to think again."

Founder of User Voice Mark Johnson, himself an ex-offender and former drug abuser, agreed, calling this treatment of prisoners "severe neglect" and likening solitary confinement to locking a dog in a cage and expecting it to be friendly when it's let out.

He said: "The question is, how does that serve the public?... No matter what you think about this group of people, what is the point of prison?"

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) decommissioned its National Framework for coping with Covid-19 in custody and claims that, since then, prisoners are no longer spending 23 hours a day in their cells.

The MoJ did not answer *Big Issue North's* specific questions about claims that solitary confinement has continued in prisons post lockdown, and whether staff shortages are responsible. Nor did it reveal whether the

findings from User Voice had prompted any changes.

A spokesperson said: "Our tough but necessary action during the pandemic saved the lives of many staff and prisoners – and we quickly rolled out measures such as video calls and in-cell education in recognition of the impact.

"We continue to increase mental health support and improve training for staff, and our Prisons Strategy sets a clear vision to provide all offenders with the education, skills and support they need to get back on the straight and narrow."

Months after his release Miller is still suffering from the hours and days spent alone in his cell. He described how the severe isolation he experienced has made him accustomed to not seeing or speaking to anyone.

"When I got out of jail everyone was saying I'd changed. I used to be quite bubbly and quite active, but when I was released, I was just down and not talkative and staying away from people. My mental health has taken ten steps back."

KELLY MATTISON

*Names changed

NEWS IN BRIEF

STOCKPORT LIBRARIES

New free digital support sessions are being offered at Stockport libraries. Brinnington Library has teamed up with Age UK to run sessions supported by Sky Cares digital volunteers. Digital support drop-ins take place at Bredbury Library, with help provided by DigiKnow Digital Champions. See stockport.gov.uk

MALE VIOLENCE

An epidemic of male violence against women and girls has taken hold, according to the Mayor of Liverpool. Joanne Anderson said girls cannot be allowed to grow up in a climate of fear. Three females have recently been murdered at the hands of men – Olivia Pratt-Korbel, Ashley Dale and Karen Dempsey. She believes a new normal of respect and safety for women is possible.

SUICIDE STIGMA

York Ending Stigma and social enterprise Inspired Youth have come together to produce a documentary film in which people share their experiences of living with suicidal thoughts. The film, titled *Why?*, is realistic and hopeful and aims to break the silence, stigma, and shame of suicide through compassionate conversations. Public screenings of the film are planned for October. Find out more on their website: whysuicideprevention.co.uk

FREE UNIFORMS

A Calderdale school trust has given all children across its four schools free uniform, an offer they hope will "lighten the burden" for parents. Pupils at Rastrick High School, Field Lane Primary School, Siddal Primary School and Luddendenfoot Academy were spared the expense of items including trousers and jumpers by academy trust Polaris.

Got an event, campaign or story from your area? Call 0161 831 5563 or email news@bigissuenorth.co.uk