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Failing London Prison Faces Urgent Action After Unlawful Detentions and Unsafe Conditions

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One of Britain's most overcrowded prisons has been placed under special measures following a damning inspection that uncovered unlawful detentions, squalid living conditions, and severe lapses in prisoner welfare. HMP Pentonville, a Victorian-era facility in

north London, is now under urgent review after it was found to have held inmates past their legal release dates and exposed others to degrading conditions.

Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Pentonville was served with an urgent notification by the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Charlie Taylor. The move followed a formal inspection that revealed staff had failed to correctly calculate release dates, resulting in at least 130 prisoners, nearly 20% of those eligible, being kept in custody unlawfully over the past six months. Additionally, ten inmates were released too early due to administrative errors between July 2024 and June 2025, further highlighting systemic failings in sentence management.

In a letter to the Justice Secretary, Mr. Taylor condemned the prison's handling of inmates' first nights, describing the process as "chaotic and even frightening." Many prisoners were reportedly held in filthy cells lacking necessities such as bedding, furniture, and working telephones. Some were locked in for over 22 hours a day, a condition inspectors noted as contributing to declining mental health and morale among inmates.

The inspection also documented severe overcrowding, with 60% of inmates sharing single occupancy cells. Hygiene standards were described as unacceptable, with a widespread infestation of mice and cockroaches throughout living areas, conditions that inspectors said would fall short of even minimal standards in a civilised society.

Perhaps most disturbing were the failures uncovered in the care of prisoners under constant supervision, typically those at high risk of self-harm. Inspectors reported one officer asleep on duty, two others engrossed in books, and another completely absent. These failings come in the wake of three suicides at the facility this year alone, raising serious questions about the prison's capacity to manage vulnerable individuals safely.

Mr Taylor did not mince words: "Pentonville is an overcrowded, inner city, Victorian prison with a record of poor performance over many years." His remarks reflect longstanding concerns about the facility, which has struggled for years with staffing shortages, deteriorating infrastructure, and rising inmate numbers.

The Justice Ministry has acknowledged receipt of the urgent notification but has yet to confirm what remedial steps will be taken. With mounting pressure from watchdogs and the public, action is expected, but whether meaningful reform can be achieved in a prison so emblematic of broader systemic failures remains to be seen.

For now, HMP Pentonville stands as a stark reminder of the importance of functional, well-managed institutions not just for justice, but for basic human dignity.