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Violence and Deaths Surge in Overcrowded Prisons Amid Security Push

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Violence, self-harm, and prisoner deaths have reached concerning new highs across England and Wales, according to official figures released by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), as jails continue to face acute pressures from overcrowding and drug smuggling. In the year to June 2025, seven inmates were killed in custody, marking the highest number of prison homicides in recent memory and highlighting ongoing safety concerns.

The data reveal a 30 per cent rise in total prison deaths compared to the previous year, with 401 fatalities recorded. Of those, 86 were classified as self-inflicted, slightly down from 93.

The number of self-harm incidents rose to a record 77,898 in the 12 months to March 2025, equivalent to one every seven minutes.

Assaults within prisons also climbed by 9 per cent, with 30,846 incidents reported, including over 3,400 serious cases. Violence against prison staff rose by 7 per cent, with 10,568 assaults logged.

The statistics come as nearly one in five adult prisons received the lowest performance rating in recent inspections, with 22 institutions marked as having “serious concern”, the highest number since the current ranking system began. A further 37 prisons were classed as needing improvement.

The MoJ acknowledged the rise in incidents may reflect pressures on the prison system, citing staffing levels, drug use, and overcrowding as contributing factors. HMP Pentonville in north London was recently placed in special measures after inspectors reported poor living conditions and security failings, making it the 10th prison to receive an urgent notification since late 2022.

In response to rising violence, the government has launched a trial of Tasers for specially trained officers and has mandated protective body armour for prison staff working with high-risk offenders. Ministers have also pledged to build 14,000 new prison places by 2031 to ease capacity strain and improve conditions.

To tackle external threats, a new £900,000 package has been announced to combat the use of drones for smuggling drugs and weapons into jails. The government has made clear its intention to equip prison staff with the tools and support they need to maintain safety and order.

A Ministry of Justice spokesperson said: “These statistics once again lay bare the extent of the crisis facing our prisons, with levels of violence, assaults on staff and self-harm far too high. The government will continue taking action to protect staff and strengthen security.”

Recent recommendations from a report led by former justice secretary David Gauke are also set to influence sentencing reforms, with plans to reduce time served in custody for certain offenders as part of broader efforts to reduce reoffending and manage the prison population more effectively.

The government's current strategy reflects a continued focus on public safety, discipline, and delivering a secure custodial environment that supports frontline officers.