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Foreign Offenders Cost British Taxpayers £580 Million Amid Surge in Overseas Prison Population

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Foreign criminals jailed in England and Wales have cost British taxpayers more than £580 million over the past five years, newly released data has revealed. The figures come amid growing public concern over the scale and cost of foreign national offenders (FNOs) within the UK prison system, prompting renewed calls for stronger deportation policies and border enforcement.

According to data obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, an average of 9,771 foreign nationals were held in prisons across England and Wales each year between 2018 and 2023. With the average annual cost of housing a single prisoner standing at approximately £47,000, the total burden on the taxpayer over the five-year period amounts to £580,297,000.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) confirmed that over 150 different nationalities are represented among the prison population. Of the total 85,000 inmates in England and Wales, roughly one in eight is a foreign national. Offenders hail from countries including Albania, Romania, Poland, Jamaica, and Somalia, many of whom have been convicted of serious crimes ranging from drug trafficking and violent assault to sexual offenses and murder.

The growing number of foreign inmates has fueled debate over the effectiveness of current deportation and repatriation arrangements. Despite existing legal provisions allowing the UK to remove foreign criminals who receive prison sentences of 12 months or more, logistical delays, legal challenges, and inadequate international cooperation have often stalled enforcement.

Conservative MP Sir John Hayes, chairman of the Common Sense Group of MPs, called the figures “a national scandal.” He said: “It is intolerable that British taxpayers are funding the incarceration of thousands of foreign criminals who should not be here in the first place. We need a robust system of immediate deportation following sentencing.”

The government has pledged to reduce the number of FNOs by expanding its early removal scheme, which allows eligible foreign prisoners to be deported up to 12 months before the end of their sentence. In 2022, the Home Office reported that over 3,500 FNOs were removed from the UK, a figure that critics say still falls far short of what is required to ease prison overcrowding and public spending pressures.

Former prisons minister Rory Stewart previously described the issue as “one of the most persistent and costly problems” in the criminal justice system. “The solution lies in securing more prisoner transfer agreements with countries of origin and applying far greater diplomatic pressure to ensure they take their nationals back,” he said.

With immigration and law-and-order concerns dominating the political agenda, the newly disclosed figures are likely to intensify scrutiny over the government’s handling of the justice system and border control. As public services face growing strain and taxpayers shoulder the financial burden, the cost of housing foreign criminals is now firmly under the spotlight.

