

# England and Wales Incarceration Rate Hits All-Time High

news

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The August far-right riots in Britain and the subsequent arrests and prosecutions of the rioters have highlighted a long-running crisis in the British legal and prison system, which has been described by government officials as "on the point of collapse" [1].

The prison population in England and Wales has reached a record high, according to data released by the Ministry of Justice on 26 August. The data recorded 88,250 people in prison, meaning that there are around 150 prisoners per 100,000 of the population [2].

Soon after the new Labour government took office in July, it announced that the prison system could be full within weeks and that an 'early release programme' was needed to prevent a 'total breakdown of law and order', according to Justice Minister Shabana Mahmood. Many single cells were already holding two inmates, and a body representing prison governors warned that offenders would soon have to be held in police cells, potentially disrupting the entire justice system [1].

The far-right riots and the ongoing prosecution of many rioters caused an emergency early-release scheme, which had originally been worked on by outgoing Conservative ministers, to begin sooner than expected, on 10 September [3].

The release scheme means that some offenders who have spent 40% of their fixed-term sentence in jail would be eligible for release, down from 50%. This excludes sentences being served for serious violent offences of 4 years or more. Roughly 5,500 offenders will be released between September and October [1] [3].

Two other emergency plans have also been triggered: one allows police forces in northern England and most of the Midlands to delay bringing some newly charged suspects to court until a prison cell has been identified for them, and a senior judge has ordered 150 magistrates' courts to delay sentencing some offenders on bail if they are likely to be imprisoned [2][3].

This and previous schemes have been criticised for failing to protect public safety and prevent the likelihood of reoffending, and these fears were almost immediately borne out by the case of a prisoner charged with sexually assaulting a woman on the day of his release [4] and reports of delays in fitting electronic tags to released prisoners [5].

The state is the product of society at a certain stage of development when society was divided into classes with irreconcilable antagonistic economic interests, the exploiters and the exploited. In order to keep the exploited under control, the ruling class needed a special public power that was no longer aligned with the majority of the people, but with the interests of the exploiting minority. This public power consists of both, special groups of armed people (the police, the army and the secret services) and special institutions such as prisons. The state provided the control necessary for production to develop despite these antagonisms, in other words, it has played a historically necessary role.

The capitalist system is unable to adequately address the root causes that drive people into petty criminal activity out of necessity: growing economic inequality, unemployment, lack of access to basic services and deepening poverty. The capitalist state can't tolerate ordinary people stealing from their exploiters in order

to get by because it means lost profits, it has to repress them.

These very conditions exacerbate the psychological ills that lead people to commit all kinds of violent crimes against innocent people. The capitalist state must maintain some illusion of security for its own exploited workers, so it must also "suppress" this kind of crime. In Britain, less than 3 out of 100 rapes recorded by the police resulted in the perpetrator being prosecuted in the same year [6].

When political dissidents effectively agitate against the interests of the ruling class, exposing its hypocrisy, and its own crimes and threatening its class rule, the state must also be able to repress these people.

Of course, the worst criminals of all are often those whom the state serves, the capitalist ruling class. The ones who escape punishment for a long time (if not indefinitely) and commit some of the most violent crimes, like the infamous Jeffrey Epstein [6]. All while the social murder they commit against British workers goes completely unnoticed and unpunished.

So why, if the maintenance of prisons is vital to maintain rule over the working class, do they continue to decay under capitalism?

The decaying prison system in Britain reflects the wider decay of capitalism in its imperialist stage, the ruling class is no longer able to maintain even the essential infrastructure needed to manage the contradictions it creates.

In the imperialist (monopoly) stage of capitalist development, the whole world is divided into a handful of dominant capitalist centres, between which there is fierce competition for profits, markets, resources and labour. As profits begin to dry up, the capitalist class must turn to cannibalise anything to sustain itself, even vital parts of its own class rule, i.e. prisons, social services and infrastructure. Ironically, these very profits come from extracting surplus value from the working class, i.e. the value produced by workers in excess of their wages, and so this exploited class must be kept alive and reproduced in order to keep capital itself alive. Capital is simply crystallised dead labour and it cannot reproduce itself without a source of living labour.

State officials repeatedly contradict their own stated desires to build more prisons [3], because above all they have to maintain profits. In the end, it is capital that controls them.

Under a socialist system, the class nature of the state changes and it is used in the interests of the workers in their struggle against capital. This means that the law and prisons will be used for the benefit of ordinary people. The very problems that cause petty crime will rapidly disappear as production is organised for the needs of the many, not the profits of the few. The working class will be properly protected from violent crime (which would naturally decrease gradually), and the only political dissidents who would be repressed will be those who try to return the working class to being a subject of exploitation and social murder.

To establish a workers' socialist state requires a powerful workers' movement with its own independent class party, armed with the scientific theory that represents its objective interests to the full extent: Marxism-Leninism.

At present there is no such party in the UK, we are working to train the future cadres and form such a party. [Join us](#)

Sources:

[1] Reuters — "[England and Wales' bulging prisons house record number](#)" — September 6, 2024.

[2] BBC News — "[Prison population hits record in England and Wales](#)" — August 30, 2024.

[3] BBC News — "[How many prisoners are being released early and who are they?](#)" — September 18, 2024.

[4] BBC News — "[Government defends early release scheme after freed prisoner charged with sexual assault](#)" — September 15, 2024.

[5] BBC News — "[Some offenders released early without being electronically tagged](#)" — September 19, 2024.

[6] Rape Crisis — "[Statistics on Sexual Violence](#)" — July, 2024.

[7] BBC News — "[Fifth and final batch of Epstein documents released](#)" — January 10, 2024.

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