

## TOPIC GUIDE: PRISON VIOLENCE

**"BLAMING STAFF SHORTAGES FOR  
PRISON VIOLENCE IS OVERLY SIMPLISTIC"****PUBLISHED: 26 JAN 2018****AUTHOR: HOLLY JOHAL**

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**INTRODUCTION**

High-profile riots in a number of prisons in the final quarter of 2016 brought attention to the prison crisis in the UK; after successive justice secretaries made sweeping cuts, many wonder if violence in prison will become the new norm [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Prison violence has been rising in recent years, with the number of assaults reaching over 23,000 in June 2016, an increase of 34 per cent on the year before, and the state of UK prisons has become a significant mainstream concern [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. It is not only assaults that are rising; there has also been concern at the increase of cases of self-harm and suicide within prisons. There was an increase of 28 per cent in 'self-inflicted deaths' and a 27% increase in incidents of self-harm in June 2016, compared to the same period in the previous year [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. While many attribute these trends to recent cuts and increasing problems of short-staffing, critics of this view believe that there are other underlying issues within the prison system that shouldn't be ignored. The main issues are overcrowding, the presence of drugs and gangs and the number of prisoners with mental-health issues being placed in prison instead of a 'secure mental health bed' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Since the government's announcement in November 2016 that intends to recruit 2,500 prison officers, the debate over the solutions to prison violence has entered the mainstream, with the causes being one of the most debated aspects [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Some argue that more prison officers are necessary if the government hopes to prevent this crisis from worsening, but recent recruitment policy has also received criticism; the Howard League for Penal Reform believes that if recruitment is the solution then an increase of at least 5,000 officers is required just to return to levels before cuts began in 2010 [Ref: [Howard League](#)]. Others, however, believe that a myriad of changes need to be made, least of all an increase of staff, but instead 'include more money, better-trained staff, drone controls, drug treatment orders and facilities, better regimes[...]and changes in sentencing guidelines' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Can a lack of prison officers, alone, be blamed for the violence in prisons, or is the cause more complicated than some are willing to admit?

For further reading use the menu bar on the right hand side.

## DEBATE IN CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.

### Who's in charge?

The BBC's *Panorama* reported on HMP Northumberland in an undercover report 'Behind Bars: Prison Undercover', in February 2017, to showcase the state of prison in the UK [Ref: [BBC](#)]. Following its broadcast, many contended that the prisoners had taken over the prison, something that the undercover reporter, Joe Fenton, admitted before the programme aired; he found there to be widespread drug use, as well as 'balaclavas, blackout clothing and wire-cutting tools at the category C jail' [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Drugs are seized from prisoners almost 30 times a day [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and their influence over prisoner behaviour shouldn't be understated; 'ex-offenders' organisation User Voice [...] found the growing popularity of spice [a synthetic cannabis] had contributed to an increase in violence, bullying, mental and physical ill health, and even death' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. The sentiment that prisons are not actually controlled by prison officers is shared by ex-prisoner Leroy Smith, who spent 20 years in prison. He believes one of the myths of the prison system is 'that the prison officers are in control' but it is instead the prisoners who keep the peace within prison [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Smith argues that it was the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (IEPS) that changed the dynamic of prison, as prisoners were no longer in it all together; 'Under the scheme, some prisoners got TVs and others didn't. Things like that have a profound effect inside' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. According to this view, it is not about the number of prison officers, but more about how they interact with prisoners; if they contain them as opposed to control them there should be harmony within prison. Can prison officers ever truly be in charge, regardless of numbers, if it is prisoners that dictate relationships within prisons? Would prisoners be less violent if a natural hierarchy developed within prison, as opposed to one implemented on the basis of behaviour?

### Can more prison officers bring about real change?

Liz Truss's policy to recruit 2,500 extra staff to deal with violence brings with it the assumption that it is the number of prison officers that will make a difference in improving the current state of prisons. Some argue that the increase in violence has been rising with the reduction in staff, something that the Ministry of Justice has admitted [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. An increase of staff would help return the ratio of officers to prisoners to a level when the occurrence of violence was less frequent, as 'by the end of 2015, there were 3.6 inmates for each operational prison staffer, 1.1 more than in 2010', which should mean a significant change to the morale and operational capabilities of staff [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. However, violence in prison is not a new occurrence, and others disagree that quantity matters, as instead the quality of prison officers is more likely to make a difference in tackling violence. For example, HMP Thameside focuses on the potential for gang-related violence, as over 10 per cent of its population has some form of gang-affiliation, and so the prison has worked with the social business Catch22 to reduce gang violence in prison [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Prison officers currently working admit that they are unable to meet the needs of many prisoners, and some are more vulnerable than others when it comes to their lack of effective training, with prisoners with mental health problems in particular suffering, with 'the cells often [exacerbating] issues that they already have' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Would introducing new staff be effective and allow prison officers to be in control, or should there be an overhaul of how current staff are treating prisoners and violence?

### More officers or fewer prisoners?

Two thirds of prisons in England and Wales are deemed to be overcrowded and there is pressure on the government by charities such as the Howard League for Penal Reform to reduce those numbers

drastically, as prisons are not being provided with the money and resources necessary to create a positive environment for prisoners [Ref: **Independent** [↗](#)]. Prisons such as HMP Wandsworth have seen the detrimental effects overcrowding has had on violence in prison, exemplified by the murder of Wadid Barsoum by his cellmate in May 2015 [Ref: **BBC News** [↗](#)]. HM's Inspectorate for Prisons found that the population in HMP Wandsworth, which was almost 70 per cent more than its certified normal accommodation of 963 in July 2015, meant 'most prisoners were doubled up in small cells designed for one' [Ref: **HMIP** [↗](#)]. However, many prisons are dealing with the toxic mixture of both overcrowding and a shortage of staff resulting in prisoners having to remain in their cells for up to 23 hours a day, as has been the case at prisons such as HMP Winchester [Ref: **BBC News** [↗](#)]. There has been a call by some for sentencing reform, as opposed to an increase of officers, in order to deal with the issue of overcrowding; despite most types of crime falling, the prison population has doubled since the 1990s [Ref: **Sentencing Council** [↗](#)] and over the past 15 years the length of sentences has increased by 33 per cent [Ref: **Guardian** [↗](#)]. This has resulted in the UK prison system being stretched to beyond capacity, and some argue that the reduction of staff has only served to exacerbate this problem.

## ESSENTIAL READING

*It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.*

**Prison violence hits record levels but we shouldn't be surprised** [↗](#)

Alex Cavendish *Metro* 27 April 2017

**Prison violence is the worst I have seen in my 30-year career** [↗](#)

John Attard *Guardian* 3 December 2016

**Rough justice** [↗](#)

*The Economist* 2 August 2014

## FOR

**Prison violence is not about staffing: they've always been dangerous for prisoners** [↗](#)

Dr David Scott *The Conversation* 17 November 2016

**When prison guards are violent, blame culture – not bad apples** [↗](#)

Jessica Pinko *Guardian* 20 January 2016

**Violence and the justice system: the rise of gangs in UK prisons** [↗](#)

*Prison Phone* 22 June 2015

**The jail that has reduced violence by helping inmates escape from the gang** [↗](#)

Angela Neustatter *Guardian* 19 November 2014

## AGAINST

**Britain's prison anarchy is growing - we need more staff to stop it** [↗](#)

Ian Acheson *Telegraph* 14 February 2017

**It took years of Tory cuts and wild policy swings to create this prison crisis** [↗](#)

Phil Wheatley *Guardian* 12 December 2016

**Breaking Point: What's going wrong in Britain's prisons?** [↗](#)

Lord Ramsbottom & Bob Neill MP *Politics Home* 12 December 2016

**Suicide, self-harm, stabbings and riots - prisons reach crisis point** [↗](#)

Jamie Doward *Guardian* 12 November 2016

## KEY TERMS

*Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.*

## BACKGROUNDEERS

*Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.*

**Prisons Performance Tracker** [↗](#)

**Institute for Government** 19 October 2017

**Gangs in prison: the nature and impact of gang involvement among prisoners** [↗](#)

Emily Setty with Rachel Sturrock and Elizabeth Simes **Catch 22** October 2017

**Prison smoking ban could see ‘massive rise’ in drug use and violence in British jails, experts warn** [↗](#)

May Bulman **Independent** 8 May 2017

**Report to UK government on CPT periodic visit 2016** [↗](#)

**Council of Europe** 19 April 2017

**UK: Prisons officers protest over staff shortages and safety concerns** [↗](#)

Clair Evans **European Observatory of Working Life** 16 March 2017

**As a prison doctor I’ve seen the crisis in jails – half the inmates shouldn’t be there** [↗](#)

Gordon Cameron **Guardian** 7 November 2016

**Liz Truss’s £9-per-hour prison officers won’t produce safe, humane prisons** [↗](#)

John Podmore **Guardian** 3 November 2016

**Don’t blame legal highs for prisoners’ problems. Blame prisons** [↗](#)

John Podmore **Guardian** 29 February 2016

**Why walking into jail fills many prison service colleagues with dread** [↗](#)

Mark Icke **Guardian** 21 July 2015

**Danger, overcrowding, no time to talk: a UK prison officer speaks out** [↗](#)

Alex Cavendish **Guardian** 5 April 2015

**HMP Thameside - progress across the board, but challenges remain** [↗](#)

**HM Inspectorate of Prisons** 20 January 2015

**Prison lights-out policy could worsen mental health crisis, campaigners say** [↗](#)

Ben Quin & Nicholas Watt **Guardian** 19 August 2014

**Our prisons have mental health problems** [↗](#)

Nick Cohen **Guardian** 31 May 2014

## ORGANISATIONS

*Links to organisations, campaign groups and official bodies who are referenced within the Topic Guide or which will be of use in providing additional research information.*

**Howard League for Penal Reform** [↗](#)

**Prison Officers’ Association** [↗](#)

**Prison Reform Trust** [↗](#)

## IN THE NEWS

*Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.*

**Prison statistics reveal big rise in self-harm and assaults on staff** [↗](#)

Alan Travis **Guardian** 27 April 2017

**Prisons violence is 'out of control', report warns** [↗](#)

**BBC News** 19 April 2017

**Up to five staff in every prison are 'corrupt'** [↗](#)

Danny Boyle *Telegraph* 14 April 2017

**Prisons no longer place for punishment, ministers say** [↗](#)

Christopher Hope *Telegraph* 13 April 2017

**Prison suicides rise to record level in England and Wales** [↗](#)

**BBC News** 13 February 2017

**Prison violence epidemic partly due to staff cuts, MoJ admits** [↗](#)

Alan Travis *Guardian* 27 October 2016

**Our prisons are houses of human misery** [↗](#)

Andrew Neilson *Huffington Post* 19 October 2016

**Rise in prisoners moved to mental health hospitals** [↗](#)

Peter Yeung *Guardian* 14 September 2016

**Prisoner violence is a warning to Government – our prisons are overcrowded and underfunded** [↗](#)

*Independent* 28 April 2016

**Two genes linked with violent crime** [↗](#)

Melissa Hogenboom **BBC News** 28 October 2014

## **AUDIO/VISUAL**

**Behind Bars: Prison Undercover** [↗](#)

**BBC Panorama** 13 February 2017

This site contains links to websites operated by parties other than Debating Matters. Although we make every effort to ensure links are current, they will sometimes break after Topic Guide publication. If a link does not work, then the publication reference and date should enable you to find an alternate link. If you find a broken link do please send it to the **webmaster** for review.

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