

## Commentary

# Re-Examining Prisoner Treatment, Rehabilitation, and Systemic Reform: Opinion Piece

Anika Ali<sup>1</sup>, Clive Kelly<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>. Independent researcher; <sup>2</sup>. James Cook University Hospital, Middlesbrough, United Kingdom

Public attitudes towards prisoners remain extremely negative in the UK, with the prevailing opinion that they deserve whatever they get. Our justice system already imposes severe penalties, and no one should endure a lifetime of legally sanctioned discrimination thereafter. Everyone is better than their worst action and deserves a second chance. We all make mistakes, but with appropriate support, most prisoners can rehabilitate and lead productive lives.

There is gross inequality in the way men and women are treated by the justice system. The total prison population of England and Wales has more than quadrupled since 1955 and the increase is almost entirely accounted for by male prisoners. Men are more likely to be sent to prison than women for the same crime, get longer sentences, and are less likely to be granted parole.

The reasons why people offend have been investigated and the role of impaired mental health has been highlighted as a major contributory factor. The percentage of prisoners with a neurodivergent condition is much greater than that in the wider community, and this can play a large part in their behaviour both before and during imprisonment. Mortality is 50% higher in UK prisoners than among the general population, with an average reduction in life expectancy of 20 years. Both physical and mental health care provision in prison is often grossly inadequate.

Most crimes in every country are committed against men but their experiences have been ignored. Male victims of abuse and coercive control perpetrated by women account for over 30% of cases, with sexual and economic abuse reported by 20% and 53% of men respectively.

Perhaps we should question the true purpose of prisons, and try to better understand if prisons really are intended to rehabilitate offenders, and support their reintegration back into society, or whether they are purely disciplinary institutions that contribute to an already failing system? Human rights should extend to all people, and the current approach ought to be re-examined. In most European countries prisoner numbers have fallen and they are rehabilitated actively back into the community to allow them to resume a productive role in society. Isn't it about time for a careful reassessment of whether the UK should adopt a similar approach?

## Public attitudes towards prisoners

Public attitudes towards prisoners remain extremely negative in the UK, with the prevailing opinion that they deserve whatever they get, due to the cruel crimes they have committed. However, it is important to try and understand that such

attitudes are both morally and ethically wrong. Prisoners have to contend with the painful reality of their ongoing punishment, coupled with the uncertainty of their future. They also face significant challenges when it comes to coping with mental health struggles, their well-being, and safety, in addition to adjusting to unstable environments behind prison walls. Those who are left on the outside suffer too; families of those imprisoned endure the constant fear of worrying about the safety of their loved ones. It is easy to overlook this very real and painful reality that impacts many people.

It is generally thought that once a prisoner has served their sentence, their punishment ends, and they should not be denied the right to reintegrate back into society. That they ought to be allowed to rebuild their lives, make things right, and move past the mistakes they have made. However, the sad reality is, that how our societal structures function prohibits reintegration, and instead a cycle of perpetual failure prevents those with criminal records from ever really being able to move beyond their past. Our justice system already implements severe penalties, but no one should endure a lifetime of legally sanctioned discrimination thereafter. The burgeoning narrative that prisons are flooded with evil people who deserve whatever they get neglects the complexities of the system at large, particularly cases of those who have been wrongly convicted. Injustice within the legal system is not uncommon, but for some reason is not talked about nearly as much as it should be. Take for instance the case of Andrew Malkinson, who spent 17 years in prison for a crime he never committed. His innocence had only been proved after DNA evidence and the unlawful conviction was overturned<sup>[1]</sup>. The detective responsible for coordinating the case against Andrew is under criminal investigation for potential misconduct in public office and perverting the course of justice in relation to their actions during the police investigation and subsequent trial<sup>[2]</sup>.

## Addressing systemic bias against men

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Are men in general more likely to be convicted on insufficient evidence, with limited recourse to justice? The data offers a resounding yes. There is indeed gross inequality in the way ethnic minorities are treated<sup>[3]</sup> as well as in the way men are sentenced for offences<sup>[4]</sup>. The total prison population of England and Wales was under 20,000 until 1955<sup>[5]</sup>. It has more than quadrupled since then. This increase is almost entirely accounted for by male prisoners. A century ago, the ratio of male to female prisoners was 5:1 but now it's over 20:1<sup>[5]</sup>. What has led to this change? Although three times more men than women are convicted of crimes, male offenders are 3.4 times more likely to be sentenced to prison for the same category of crime<sup>[5]</sup>. In addition, men get significantly longer prison sentences than women for the same crime. Finally, men are less likely than women to be released from prison early<sup>[6]</sup>. This is despite female prisoners being disciplined more frequently than male prisoners for acts of violence<sup>[6]</sup>.

This has led to the inevitable conclusion that *'Men are subject to massive gender discrimination in the criminal justice system. If male offenders were treated in the same way as female offenders there would be only one-sixth of the number of men in prison. About 68,000 men would not be in prison in England and Wales if they were female, leaving a male prison population of only 13,000'*<sup>[7]</sup>. It has been observed that *"females receive even shorter sentences relative to men than whites relative to blacks. The discrimination literature generally argues that females are objects of discrimination and receive worse outcomes. In sentencing, however, women receive better outcomes, consistent with women being treated paternalistically in court. .... studies have usually concluded that females are sentenced more leniently than males."*<sup>[8]</sup>

These observations apply to both the UK and the US. In the latter, a study by Starr reported huge unexplained differences in sentencing between males and females in federal criminal cases. Men on average received 63% longer sentences than women did, and women were more likely to avoid conviction and twice as likely to avoid imprisonment if found guilty<sup>[9]</sup>. She goes on to say *'gender gaps widen at every stage of the justice process and that men and women ultimately receive dramatically different sentences. Policymakers might simply be untroubled by leniency toward women.... One could ask: why are men treated so harshly? .... over two million American men are behind bars. ... men in the criminal justice system generally are mostly poor and disproportionately non-white. The especially high rate of incarceration of men of colour is a serious social concern, and gender disparity is one of its key dimensions.... Most defendants of both genders have suffered serious hardship, have mental health or addiction issues, have minor children, and/or have "followed" others onto a criminal path.'*

Data has shown that men are significantly over-represented in statistics on suicide<sup>[10]</sup> and homelessness, highlighting that systematic structures marginalise men, producing barriers to equal treatment, affecting all aspects of life. Additionally, when it comes to family law-related cases, paternal rights are not taken into consideration fairly. Men are more likely to be denied the right to be with their children, especially in cases where cooperation between the two parties has broken down, and often results in the perspective of only one side which is arguably taken into consideration. Moreover, men account for a significant number of domestic violence victims<sup>[11]</sup> a fact that surprisingly receives very little attention. It is difficult to understand why these issues are not discussed more openly, and it often feels as though the system chooses to ignore these disconcerting statistics. This article is not intended to diminish women who suffer at the hands of men in any way – they remain deserving of justice and protection. But it is to show the other side of the coin which social media has been very reluctant to flip over

## Recognising high rates of neurodivergence among prisoners

What factors are associated with an increased rate of offending? A study in 2016 showed combined rates of neurodivergent conditions of 32% among male prisoners in Scotland, with ADHD dominant. Those with combined ASD and ADHD had greater mental health issues and higher levels of bad behavior in prison<sup>[12]</sup>. A Swedish study of young violent male offenders reported that 63% met DSM-IV criteria for childhood ADHD and that most persisted into adulthood<sup>[13]</sup>. This gross overrepresentation of neurodivergent individuals within the UK prison system<sup>[14]</sup> reflects the fact that these individuals often struggle to cope in environments that challenge their ability to interact with others. These findings are perhaps predictable too, seeing though ADHD is associated with emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, and risk-seeking behaviour<sup>[15]</sup>, while ASD a failure to appreciate other peoples' motives and needs can lead to poor social skills and an apparent lack of empathy and insight<sup>[16]</sup>. Finding it challenging to follow rules and understanding guidelines contribute to the likelihood of participation in criminalised activities. Despite this, the Equality and Human Rights Commission's report found that in England and Wales, defendants' impairments were rarely, if ever, mentioned during court proceedings<sup>[17]</sup>.

In March 2023, Lord Bellamy quoted the Justice Inspectorate's recent publication *'An Evidence Review of Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice System'* which suggests that potentially half of the adult prison population has some form of neurodivergence<sup>[18]</sup>. The report states that since prisoners started to be screened for neurodivergent conditions, figures suggest that 31% of all prisoners require special adjustments to accommodate their needs. From 2023, criminal justice agencies must routinely assess neurodivergent prisoners for reasonable accommodations<sup>[19]</sup>, as inspectorates admit that

present levels of support for neurodivergent people in the criminal justice system are inadequate. The report 'identified serious gaps, failings and missed opportunities at every stage of the system needing urgent investment to improve outcome'<sup>[20]</sup>.

These findings raise important questions about equality and the system's capacity to support individuals whose conditions expose them to heightened risks in prison. Too often, neurodivergent individuals, who have been given little to no support in managing their conditions are set up to fail. If deterrence is one of the intended functions of prison, then why does the system fail to address the specific needs of neurodivergent individuals? Ethical concerns have been raised about the underdiagnosis of conditions related to prisoners. Data from 2019–2020 highlights that 29% of neurodivergent prisoners participated in educational programmes, but only after it had been understood that they had a learning difficulty<sup>[21]</sup>. However, the Offender Assessment System recorded that only 1% had learning disabilities<sup>[22]</sup>. This data is worrying considering that neurodivergent conditions may not be considered during legal proceedings and as a result, individuals may be perceived as 'erratic' or 'unlikeable' due to their behavioural differences. This encourages the spread of misinformation where individuals must contend with character assassination, a lack of understanding of their condition, and the struggle of feeling misunderstood, which can be anxiety-inducing. Perhaps it would be beneficial for legal representatives to carry out mandatory health checks to help detect early signs of neurodivergence, and this way individuals can be offered the appropriate support they need to cope with what they are going through.

## Improving prisoner access to adequate health care

The inadequacy of health care provision in UK prisons has recently been highlighted in the British Medical Journal<sup>[23]</sup>. Mortality is 50% higher in UK prisoners than among the general population, with an average reduction in life expectancy of 20 years<sup>[23]</sup>. These staggering figures are partially explained by the grossly inadequate response to acute episodes of illness but also reflect systemic failings in managing more chronic conditions. One author (CK) has witnessed multiple examples of male prisoners being denied access to drugs essential to their well-being with a consequent relapse of their condition by the time they returned to his clinic following release. Another author (AA) can testify to the same refusal to maintain the provision of crucial pre-prescribed drugs to prisoners leading to a drastic deterioration in their condition. Prisoners' basic human rights are regularly ignored.

And it's not just the physical health of prisoners that suffers. Prisoners with autism, ADHD, and schizophrenia have been detained in isolation units for periods of 9 months or more with a consequent marked deterioration in their health and behaviour<sup>[24]</sup>. This state-sponsored torture is surely criminal in itself? The training provided to prison wardens is often grossly inadequate. Over 70% of emergency calls from wardens to the ambulance service were deemed inappropriate with mute prisoners referred because they were 'unresponsive', while another with multiple stab wounds was referred with a 'twisted ankle'<sup>[25]</sup>. A detailed commentary on the parlous state of primary medical care in prisons revealed multiple challenges, including increasing illicit drug consumption and falling staffing levels<sup>[26]</sup>. Lord Timpson, the new minister for prisons was quoted as stating that many of the people in prison shouldn't be there. He should know, having personally helped to rehabilitate ex-prisoners for many years. Carefully managed rehabilitation back into society is critical. The ombudsman recently published data on the deaths of 137 prisoners who died within a fortnight of their release. Many of

these deaths could and should have been avoided. The Reconnect service, responsible for this transition, needs to standardise and improve its operating policies<sup>[27]</sup>.

## Men as victims of crime

Men can be victims of crime, and indeed most crimes in every country are committed against men. The Office for National Statistics reports that one in three victims of domestic abuse is male, but research has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of women. This has meant that men's experiences have been ignored. A 2020 report of over 500 UK males who suffered abuse and coercive control showed that females were the perpetrators in over 90% of cases<sup>[28]</sup>. It reported that male victims '*experience persistent and severe patterns of coercive control similar to those experienced by female victims.*' Sexual and economic abuse was reported by 20% and 53% of men respectively. Men's relationships with their children were used to coercively control men, even after separation. False allegations to the police and social services were reported by 65% of male victims. A recent example of a man subjected to emotional, financial, and physical abuse by his female partner documents how he was forced to sleep on the floor, denied access to the toilet and nearly starved<sup>[29]</sup>. Yet the perpetrator was only given a suspended sentence.

The mankind initiative supports male victims of domestic abuse and documents that this affects men of all ages and occupations<sup>[30]</sup>. Even when men report a female partner to the police for coercive control, this is often ignored or deflected, leaving men feeling 'gaslit' all over again<sup>[31]</sup>. Men's fear of losing face by reporting coercive control by their female partners may have played a part in Stark's now infamous statement of 2007 when she asserted "I have never had a case that involved a female perpetrator of coercive control, and no such cases are documented in the literature"<sup>[32]</sup>. Since then, several surveys have revealed that this is an increasing issue in today's society. Indeed, emotional abuse from a partner was reported almost as often by men (16%) as by women (23%)<sup>[33]</sup>. The true level of female abuse of men may be even greater as they sometimes struggle to recognise their partner's inappropriate treatment as abuse and to identify as victims<sup>[34]</sup>. This is a barrier to their obtaining support for and validation of their victimhood<sup>[35]</sup>. The female authors of a survey of Australian men graphically described the suffering males had experienced as a result of intimate partner abuse by females<sup>[36]</sup>.

## The pressing need for prisoner rehabilitation

Recent reports have drawn attention to the disturbing rates of death in prisons as, a result of the abuse prisoners have faced. This, coupled with confirmed cases of prison staff misconduct<sup>[37]</sup> reveals that the UK prison system ought to warrant immediate attention to address these issues. The report found that some officers had been abusing their positions of authority, doing so by purposefully targeting and provoking inmates, using unnecessary excessive force and intimidation<sup>[37]</sup>. Perhaps we should question the true purpose of prisons. Are prisons really intended to rehabilitate offenders and support their reintegration back into society, or are they purely disciplinary institutions that contribute to an already failing system? Human rights should extend to all people, and the current approach in place ought to be re-examined. Collectively as a society, we can all advocate for systematic change, and it can begin with having empathy. It is important that we try to recognise that human nature is imperfect; yes, people make mistakes but are equally capable of change. We can see that the criminal justice system alienates many men who have been subject to unjust treatment and

wrongful convictions. Equally, it is important to try and understand that many prisoners do indeed learn from the mistakes they have made in their past, and they do genuinely reform in prison too. Let's try to recognise this and understand that they deserve a second chance to make things right, so that they are in a position to overcome their past traumas and build viable futures.

Remand prisoners account for nearly a fifth of all those incarcerated and carry the highest risk of self-harm and suicide. Almost all are men and many are innocent. Yet they are being advised by their legal team to plead guilty to get out of prison more quickly. These men are being denied any opportunity of rehabilitation or discharge planning. They form a very high-risk population with regards to harm to themselves as well as to others. With recent developments promoting the placement of males charged with certain offences in remand, the wait for a trial now can extend to several years. There is no compensation for those who have committed no crime but whose lives are forever blighted. What on earth happened to 'innocent unless proved guilty'?

As of 27<sup>th</sup> September 2024, the adult prison population in England and Wales was 86,256, the highest number on record. This equates to 140 prisoners per 100,000 population, twice the rate of France, Sweden, Spain and Germany. Prison occupancy is 111% of capacity, the highest in Europe, and twice that of the Baltic States and Scandinavia<sup>[38]</sup>. Among UK prisoners, 96% were male, 18.7% were on remand (pre-trial) and 12% were non-British nationals<sup>[39]</sup>. It seems hard to credit the fact that climate activists in the UK have been sentenced to at least four years in prison for protesting against the failure of the UK government to take action to limit global warming by blocking roads<sup>[40]</sup> or throwing soup over paintings<sup>[41]</sup> at a time when our prisons can't cope. Surely, we can learn from the actions of more enlightened nations?

In Holland, the prison population has fallen by over 40% recently and Britain's minister of prisons, James Timpson, calls the Netherlands 'a source of inspiration'. The Dutch are very conscious that a prison sentence does more harm than good. In many cases, those convicted rapidly resume their way of life on release. They may have learned new tricks and made new connections while 'inside'. Even short stays in prison can ruin lives. Loss of family, friends, employment, and home may all result. In Holland, judges usually give community service rather than short jail terms. This is both cheaper and reduces reoffending rates<sup>[42]</sup>. Sentences have also become shorter even for those who are sent to prison for lesser crimes<sup>[43]</sup>. Norway's prisons are small, and they focus on reintegration of prisoners back into the community. Prisoners are rehabilitated actively into the community to allow them to resume a productive role in society. By contrast, large British prisons often lock up prisoners most of the time because they don't have the capacity to spend staff time rehabilitating them. It is much more difficult to return to civilian life under such circumstances, and the risk of reoffending is consequentially much greater<sup>[44]</sup>.

Overcrowding in European prisons is now virtually confined to the UK<sup>[45]</sup> although it remains a concern in other continents. Reports of dire conditions in the prisons of South Sudan<sup>[46]</sup> have been confirmed by direct inspection from one of the authors (CK) who was asked to assess prisoners' health there recently. He found prisoners always chained together, even during their clinic consultations. At night prisoners slept on a concrete floor, sharing one threadbare blanket between two men. They were malnourished and grew their own food in the prison compound. Infectious disease was rife and although state services were provided for the identification and treatment of tuberculosis and HIV infection, health facilities were very basic. People with a variety of mental health issues were sometimes imprisoned for their own 'safety' and for the safety of others for an indefinite period and without any mental health support.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It is estimated that the average annual cost of detaining one prisoner is around £51,724. While we consider the economic climate at present in the UK, the cost-of-living crisis that continues to impact many of us, coupled with a strained healthcare system, we can understand that there is also a financial incentive in why re-examining prisoner treatment, rehabilitation, and systemic reform are critical issues that need to be addressed. In ensuring that individuals who do not need to be imprisoned are instead given the proper support and attention they need could contribute towards long-term savings, reduced poverty, and a pause in the inexorable cycles of crime and punishment. At last, there may be some recognition that punishing neurodivergent young people for impulsive actions by imprisonment may be counterproductive<sup>[47]</sup>.

Greater awareness among police and prison officers must be combined with effective screening. A '*range of environmental and sensory adjustments to ease distress for people with neurodivergent conditions and support them to engage*' is recommended<sup>[48]</sup>. Without wholesale changes within the criminal justice system at every level, the trend toward imprisoning more neurodivergent people will continue. Men with ADHD are grossly over-represented within the UK prison population, and this needs to be redressed. The implications of this finding are enormous as imprisonment is rarely likely to address the reasons for their offending and often actually reinforces the very tendencies that led to their offence. A completely different approach is urgently required. A recent report has confirmed the UK Government's commitment to improve support for neurodivergent offenders<sup>[49]</sup>, and this has been augmented by the announcement that restrictions on the detention of autistic people in police custody and prison are to be enacted<sup>[50]</sup>. These overdue measures should help identify and support neurodivergent people who have fallen foul of the justice system.

Despite the huge disparity between the way men and women are handled by the justice system, the answer is not to imprison more women but to reduce the number of male prisoners. Alternatives to a custodial sentence including community service and rehabilitation are successfully employed across Europe, and the UK would benefit from considering these. Active rehabilitation and education within prisons are both feasible and desirable but require inward investment and careful planning. Medical and mental health services must be improved for all prisoners to ensure that they are not deprived of both quality and quantity of life while their freedom of movement is curtailed. Planning for the transition back into society deserves and demands much greater attention if we wish to reduce adverse outcomes for both prisoners and the rapidly changing society that they seek to reinhabit, often after a long absence.

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## **Declarations**

**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.