

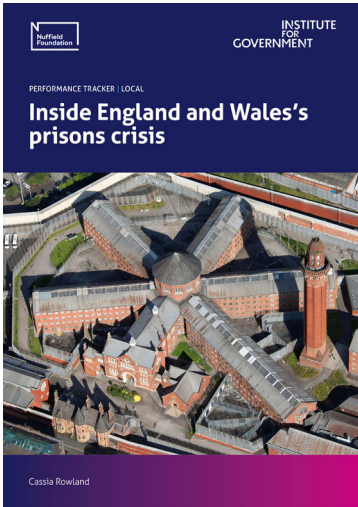
BRIEFING | MARCH 2025

# Inside England and Wales's prisons crisis

## Author

**Cassia Rowland**, senior researcher

[cassia.rowland@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:cassia.rowland@instituteforgovernment.org.uk)



## Severe decline is widespread but not universal

- 75% of prisons now have prisoner assault rates of over one in ten
- But open prisons, and some specialist prisons, perform far better

## Performance isn't only driven by prisoner characteristics

- 80% of prisons have seen employment after release *improve* since 2019/20
- Performance varies widely across prisons with similar cohorts

## More purposeful activity and specific staff roles could improve conditions and decrease violence

- 28% fewer prisoner-on-prisoner assaults

Implied effect of a prison with 80% of inmates engaged in purposeful activity, compared to the average prison (66% engagement).

- Type of staff, more than headline numbers, is key

The presence of more non-operational staff like offender managers and experienced band 4 and 5 prison officers is linked with lower violence.

# How to help tackle the prisons crisis

## 1. Establish a 'minimum regime' across prisons – adequately funded and with targets on purposeful activity

- **Purposeful activity**, like educational and training courses, has been increasingly neglected since 2010, but is crucial to rehabilitation and may help bring down rising violence in custody.
- A **minimum regime** would focus attention on purposeful activity and support the different purposes of different categories of prison.

## 2. Explore options for expanding access to open prisons

- The government should consider if and how to **expand access to open prisons**, including potentially making existing temporary schemes permanent.
- Evaluating the impact of the **Temporary Presumptive Re-Categorisation Scheme**, which moves more prisoners into open conditions sooner, would enable the government to understand the effects and feasibility of these changes.

## 3. Identify elements of the open prison model that could be applied to other prisons

- Some aspects of open prisons could be **replicated in closed prisons**, such as higher levels of purposeful activity and more responsibility around the prison.
- More **opportunities for progression within closed prisons** would let prisoners demonstrate their suitability for open conditions and could support more effective risk assessment.

## 4. Build on recent successes targeting employment after release

- Employment rates post-release have improved substantially in recent years, likely driven by direct engagement with employers and new employment hubs. But the overall employment rate remains low, so the government should look to **build on these successes to cut reoffending**.

The full report can be read and downloaded at:  
[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-local/england-and-wales-prisons](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-local/england-and-wales-prisons)  
or by scanning the QR code.

