

Health and safety in prisons

Safe Inside – the first report of the Joint Unions in Prisons Alliance

About us

The Joint Unions in Prisons Alliance (JUPA) brings together the following trade and professional organisations all of whom have members working to provide services inside prisons:

- BMA (British Medical Association)
- GMB
- Napo (National Association of Probation Officers)
- PCS (Public and Commercial Services union)
- POA (Prison Officers Association)
- Royal College of Nursing (RCN)
- UCU (University and College Union)
- Unison
- Unite

The Alliance are committed to working together and engaging with other key stakeholders to lobby for improvements in the working conditions for our members. Whilst we acknowledge the proposals made by the Ministry of Justice to make prisons places of safety and reform (MoJ and NOMS, 2016¹), we are frustrated by the lack of urgency and the continuing impact this is having on our respective members. Retention of a skilled and experienced prison workforce is key to making these improvements in safety; however, the current environment is not conducive to sustainable careers in the prison service or associated support services.

Background

The membership of the Joint Unions in Prisons Alliance undertake a wide range of activities within prisons, from the provision of health care, education & training and ancillary services, to primary prison officer and probation officer roles. A common issue that they all face is the daily threat of violence and abuse, and the attendant toll that this takes on mental health.

Our casework and engagement with members informs us that health and safety is now the preeminent concern of our members. The number of assaults on staff in prisons increased last year by 21% to 10,213 – that's an average of 28 every day.²

Each of the last five publications of the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales's annual report has cited the reduction in prison officers as a key contributor to the growing crisis in prisons. Last year, the 2017-2018 annual report stated that *the 'huge increase in violence*

¹ Ministry of Justice and National Offender Management System (2016) Prison Safety and Reform https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565014/cm-9350-prison-safety-and-reform- web .pdf

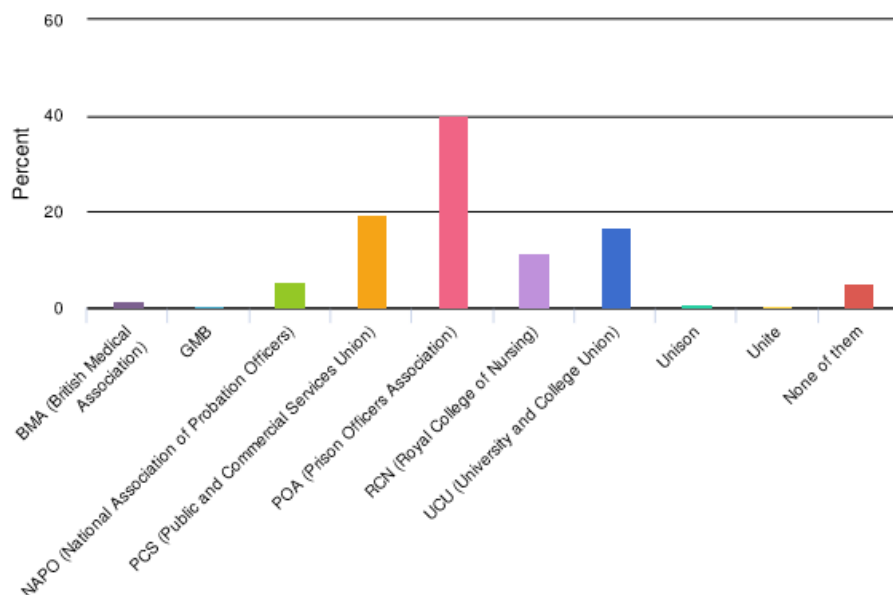
² Ministry of Justice, (2018) Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: Deaths in Prison Custody to March 2019 Assaults and Self-harm to December available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-december-2018>

across the prison estate has really only taken place in the past five years, at the time when large reductions in staff numbers were taking effect³.

A survey of membership among prison workers in the JUPA organisations was undertaken to explore experiences of verbal and physical abuse, and exposure to ‘Spice’ and other psychoactive substances. The aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of working conditions in prisons, to document the findings and call for the necessary improvements to enable prison to be an effective environment to support rehabilitation and wellbeing.

An electronic survey was made available to members who provide services inside prisons within each of the respective JUPA organisations. The survey was open between 11 March and 30 April 2019 and received 1643 responses, some complete and some partial, and included both quantitative and qualitative responses. Responses were received from members of each of the Alliance organisations, with the greatest number of responses being received from POA (40.3%), PCS (19.4%), UCU (17.0%), and the Royal College of Nursing (11.4%).

Figure 1: Are you a member of any of the following trade unions?



The majority (89%) of respondents indicated that they work in public sector prisons.

Figure 2: Do you work in a private or a public sector prison?

Value	Percent	Responses
Public	89.0%	1,387
Private	11.0%	172
		Totals: 1,559

³ HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, (2018), Annual report, Available at: https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/07/6.4472_HMI-Prisons_AR-2017-18_Content_A4_Final_WEB.pdf pp8.

Experiences of verbal abuse

Amongst staff working in prisons, incidences of verbal abuse in the last 12 months are high. 77% of respondents reported that they had received abuse from a prisoner in the last 12 months [n=1545]. The reported frequency of this verbal abuse is also noteworthy. A third (32.9%) of respondents to this question reported that they had experienced verbal abuse one to five times in the last 12 months, 16.6% said that they had experienced this five to ten times whilst half (50.5%) said that they had experienced verbal abuse more than 10 times in the last 12 months. The occurrence of verbal abuse could perhaps be normalised and even seen as an ‘occupational hazard’ of working in a prison. However, this can vary significantly in degree ranging from swearing to threats of attack.

Figure 3: How many times have you experienced verbal abuse from a prisoner in the last 12 months

Value	Percent	Responses
Once	3.9%	28
1-5 times	29.0%	208
5-10 times	16.6%	119
More than 10 times	50.5%	362
Totals: 717		

Qualitative responses alluded to a ‘loss of control’ in relation to the balance of power. Some respondents indicated that they no longer report verbal abuse.

‘I do not report the frequent verbal abuse as the officers are not able to deal with it effectively. The balance of inmate to officer power has shifted so that antisocial inmate behaviour and illicit drug use and bullying are out of control. The prison is not safe for the inmates, officers and medical and other support staff. [There] needs to be more officers and more sanctions for inappropriate behaviour.’

(Female, BMA worker, public prison, non-directly employed)

Experiences of physical abuse

The findings point to alarming levels of physical violence in prisons. A quarter (26%) of respondents reported that they had been a victim of physical violence in the last 12 months [n=1519].

The frequency of physical abuse is of particular concern. As Figure 4 shows, 24% of respondents to this question said that they had been the victim of physical abuse once in the last 12 months. The majority (48%) said that this had occurred 1-5 times in the last 12 months, 13.7% reported 5-10 incidences of physical abuse, whilst 14.2% reported more than ten incidences of physical abuse. These findings suggest that safety arrangements for staff working in prisons require an urgent overhaul.

Figure 4: How many times have you experienced physical violence from a prisoner in the last 12 months?

Value	Percent	Responses
Once	24.0%	49
1-5 times	48.0%	98
5-10 times	13.7%	28
More than 10 times	14.2%	29
Totals: 204		

Disturbingly, observations of physical assaults on staff also appear to be frequent. 52.5% of respondents [n=1491] reported that they had seen a prisoner be physically violent towards another prison worker in the last 12 months.

Some victims of violence gave disturbing examples of attacks they had been subjected to.

‘Nov 2018 I was punched to the head x3. The prisoner continued to punch me when I was on the floor.’

(Female, RCN worker, public prison, non-directly employed)

The survey clearly identified that most people reported incidents of physical violence where they occurred, with 94.1% of these respondents using at least one reporting system to record the incident. However the majority of staff, 57.1% of respondents [n=191] who reported assaults were dissatisfied with the action taken by their employer in response, and a fifth (19.9%) said that no action had been taken at all.

Figure 5: Were you satisfied with the action taken by the prison or your employer (if different) to prevent repetition of the incident?

Value	Percent	Responses
Satisfied	23.0%	44
Not satisfied	57.1%	109
No action has been taken to address the issue	19.9%	38
Totals: 191		

Psychoactive substances





Psychoactive substances are prohibited in law. They are ‘any substance which is capable of producing a psychoactive effect in a person who consumes it’⁴. Research from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) (2018) found ‘a wide range of

⁴ Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/2/section/2/enacted>

physical and mental health harms associated with acute intoxication by and chronic consumption of synthetic cannabinoids in prison. Mental health problems reported include psychosis, disorientation, suicidal ideation, aggressiveness (including self-harm and harms to others), anxiety and depression.⁵

Over half (52.7%) of respondents said that they had been exposed to psychoactive substances in the last 12 months [n=1478]. A smaller subsection of workers went on to indicate that there were high incidences of multiple exposures, with one third (32.9%) of these prison workers saying that they had been exposed 'more than 10 times'.

Figure 6: How many times have you been exposed to psychoactive substances in the last 12 months?

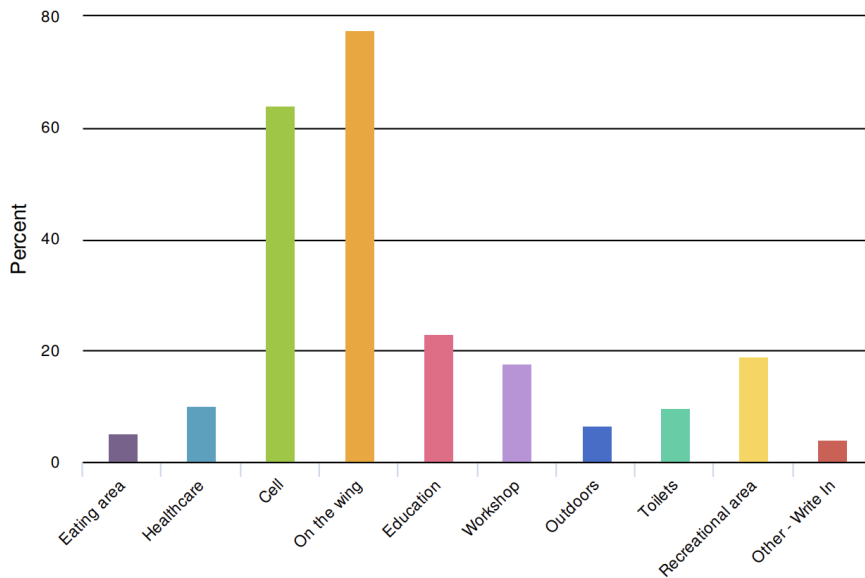
Value		Percent	Responses
Once		12.7%	57
1-5 times		40.0%	180
5-10 times		14.4%	65
More than 10 times		32.9%	148

Totals: 450

The descriptors of symptoms following exposure raise serious health and safety concerns. The most commonly reported impact was 'feelings of light headedness, dizziness, confusion and tiredness', however, other reported symptoms included nausea and vomiting; anxiety and paranoia; and mood swings. These are side effects which risk further endangering the health and safety of the individual affected, colleagues and people who are in prison. Exposure to NPS was reported across the prison estate, however, prison workers most frequently reported that this exposure had taken place on the wing (77.5%), in a cell (63.9%) and in the education department (23.1%).

⁵ Available at: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/8869/nps-in-prison.pdf>

Figure 7: In the last 12 months, where have you been exposed to psychoactive substances? (Tick all that apply if there are multiple incidences) [n=451]



The quote below highlights the dangerous ways in which under-staffing, the use of NPS and physical assault can be combined.

'I have personally been sent out on an understaffed hospital escort, with a prisoner who had JUST assaulted a prison officer, under the influence of NPS. He then proceeded to assault myself in the back of the ambulance whilst doubled cuffed to me.'

(Male, POA worker, public prison, directly employed)

This prison worker makes the link between funding for prisons, high staff turnover and stress in the workplace.

'Prisons are suffering because of the political concept of austerity and compounded by the increased use of NPS and other drugs by prisoners. There are new staff coming in and many are good but they are being offered rubbish wages for the dangerous work they do daily and as a result there is a high turnover. Violence is an everyday occurrence. I work on a wing and I worry for my colleagues all the time, getting home and finding it difficult to switch off.'

(Female, PCS worker, public prison, directly employed)

The survey findings reflect what JUPA had already heard from members and of course the prevalence of drugs in prisons has caused serious issues in practice. Two years ago, for example, the local NHS Trust withdrew nursing staff from HMP Holme House because of the risk posed by Spice.

Reporting incidents

Respondents who had experienced an incident were asked whether they had reported it. There was a clear pattern regarding reporting, which saw respondents much more likely to report less common incidents of physical violence, with only 6% of respondents not reporting such occurrences.

Worryingly almost a quarter of respondents (24%) did not report exposure to psychoactive substances. The Alliance is concerned about the normalisation of some types of behaviour in prisons, which sees staff accepting these behaviours and failing to report them, potentially putting others and themselves at further risk.



Figure 8: Percentage of respondents who didn't report incidents by type of incident

Type of incident	% not reporting	n
Verbal abuse from a prisoner	40%	725
Witnessed verbal aggression from a prisoner to another prison worker	38%	742
Exposure to psychoactive substances	24%	454
Witnessed physical aggression from a prisoner to another prison worker	21%	406
Physical violence from a prisoner	6%	203

Safe at work?

Nearly two-thirds (63.6%) of prison workers reported that they had felt unsafe at work in the last 12 months.

Figure 9: Have you felt unsafe at work in the last 12 months?

Value	Percent	Responses
Yes 	63.4%	914
No 	36.6%	528

Totals: 1,442

The frequency of members feeling unsafe, with almost two thirds (63%) saying that they felt unsafe at work in the last year, paints a negative picture of staff confidence in health and safety regime in prisons. Two fifths of these prison workers reported that they felt unsafe at work every day or 'several times a week'. Indeed four-fifths (79.1%) reported feeling unsafe at work between 'about once a month' and every day. The results suggest that confidence in and awareness of risk assessments are low. Just one third of respondents said 'yes' to the question 'Are there up to date risk assessments in place to cover all the tasks you undertake in your work?'. Indeed, nearly half (43.4%) did not know, suggesting that there is no wide or systematic support for staff.

'Due to cutbacks, I have been forced to work alone and in an isolated area with very little or no support from patrolling officers even though a risk assessment states I should have one at least every hour.'

(Male, UCU worker, public prison, non-directly employed)

'We work with no alarms and are often ignored whilst on the wings due to lack of staff. If there were to be an incident there aren't enough staff to assist.'

(Female, Napo worker, private prison)

A number of respondents made links between funding for prisons, high staff turnover and stress in the workplace.

'In my current establishment, there is a very low level of experience putting extreme pressure on experienced staff. I am looking at leaving the service, as I have had enough of the huge workload, poor support from SMT. I am at the point of being signed off work with stress.'

(Female, PCS worker, public prison, directly employed)

The survey identified wide-scale pessimism about the present or future of health and safety in prison. Two thirds (65.6%) of respondents felt that the working environment in prisons had deteriorated over the last 12 months, whilst 28.5% felt that it had broadly stayed the same. Just 5.9% of prison workers felt that the situation had improved. Similarly, when asked 'how confident are you that things will improve in the next 12 months?' half (51%) of respondents had no confidence that things will improve, whilst a further 39.9% of respondents were uncertain. Less than 10% of respondents were confident or reasonably confident that things will improve.

Figure 10: How confident are you that things will improve in the next 12 months?

Value	Percent	Responses
Confident things will improve	1.7%	25
Reasonably confident things will improve	8.2%	119
Uncertain if things will improve	39.9%	576
I have no confidence things will improve	50.1%	724

Totals: 1,444

Conclusion and recommendations

These findings present a picture of a prison system that is failing to meet the basic health and safety needs of the prison workforce. If staff do not feel safe in prisons, then in turn neither will people who are in prison. As such, the rehabilitation process breaks down and prisons are unable to perform their policy intent.

In order to support and promote safer ways of working the Justice Unions in Prisons Alliance calls for implementation of the following recommendations:

1. Tougher responses to violent incidents

A majority of staff who reported assaults were dissatisfied with the action taken by their employer in response, and in many cases they said that no action had been taken at all. The government and employers need to do much more to provide effective support and

assessment after a violent incident, so that staff have confidence that their concerns are being dealt with seriously. Where appropriate, this should include the more widespread use of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (offences) Act 2018.

2. Better health and safety reporting, including a single reporting system

As the survey shows, many incidents of violence and risks to health and safety in prisons currently go unreported, so national data on the safety of prison staff is patchy at best. This is partly due to a feeling that incidents aren't dealt with effectively when they are reported. It's also partly because of poor access to reporting systems and the fact that many staff have to complete multiple reports for each incident. We need to streamline the process by introducing a single reporting system for all staff, and push for a culture change which encourages staff to report all incidents of violence.

3. Action to prevent exposure to psychoactive substances

As the survey shows, many staff working in prisons are suffering from serious effects of secondary exposure to harmful psychoactive substances. Too often, measures to prevent exposure to these substances are either absent or ineffective. Meaningful consultation with trade unions is needed to identify and implement more effective approaches for preventing staff exposure.

4. Joint work to examine the causes and effects of violence against staff

Ensuring a safe working environment in prisons is a shared responsibility between individuals and employers, and they need to work together to tackle the causes and effects of violence. That should include meaningful consultation with trade unions and developing clear lines of communication between prison governors, employers and staff so that issues are picked up and dealt with in a timely and effective manner.

5. More prison officers to ensure safe staffing levels

Many of the issues relating to the health and safety of staff in prisons are being exacerbated by the loss of capacity and expertise amongst prison officers. Put simply, more prison officers are required to ensure that all staff working in prisons are safe in their day-to-day work.