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Last Updated: Friday, 22 February 2008, 12:43 GMT

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Prisons full with record numbers

Prisons in England and Wales have hit a new record population, exceeding their normal capacity for the first time, officials have confirmed.



Prison officers accuse ministers of "total mismanagement"

The Ministry of Justice said that as of Friday morning there were 82,068 inmates in jails - 96 over the Prison Service's normal operational capacity.

Justice Secretary Jack Straw has asked magistrates to jail fewer people while officials attempt to manage the crisis.

Some 358 inmates are in police or court cells in an attempt to ease pressures.

According to the latest figures from the Ministry of Justice the population breached its current capacity of 81,972 on Thursday evening.

The breach comes despite a year of efforts to reduce pressures by releasing more prisoners and building more cells.

'Control and security'

The figures mean that for the first time the Prison Service has almost 100 more inmates in jail than the numbers governors would want to hold.

This maximum is based on governors' advice over "control, security and proper operation".

“ The government's policy towards prisons is like boiling a kettle - there is a red line and when you fill it with water, you don't cross that line ”

Colin Moses
Prison Officers' Association

There are 2,000 additional spaces within the system above this maximum - but these are not normally used because of constraints, including where beds become available and the need to keep dangerous prisoners separate.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Justice said that it took its responsibilities towards the safety and security of prisoners "extremely seriously".

"No prison will be expected to operate at a level of crowding beyond that certified by the Prison Service area manager (or regional offender manager in the case of a contracted prison).

"As far as possible we do not hold vulnerable prisoners in police cells under Operation Safeguard. This includes prisoners identified as being current risk of suicide or self-harm."

Prisons in the UK

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"Whilst we have gone above our useable operational capacity, this does not mean that the estate is entirely full - it is possible to use some of the places from within our operating margin."

'Risk management'

But Colin Moses of the Prison Officers' Association condemned the Ministry of Justice, accusing it of "total mismanagement".

He told the BBC: "The prisons are not safe. We have now increased the numbers yet again with no change in regime and no increase in staffing.

"This is now risk management at the highest level. The government's policy towards prisons is like boiling a kettle - there is a red line and when you fill it with water, you don't cross that line.

"But if you start crossing that red line little by little, the kettle will eventually boil over. The question is when."

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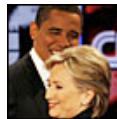
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