

Addressing Deaths in Prison Custody



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Contents

The Prevalence of Deaths in Prison Custody	3
Key Findings	3
Trends	3
Analysis	4
Gender	5
Sentence Type.....	6
Remand Prisoners	6
Sentenced Prisoners	7
Causes	7
SONAR's Aims.....	8

The Prevalence of Deaths in Prison Custody

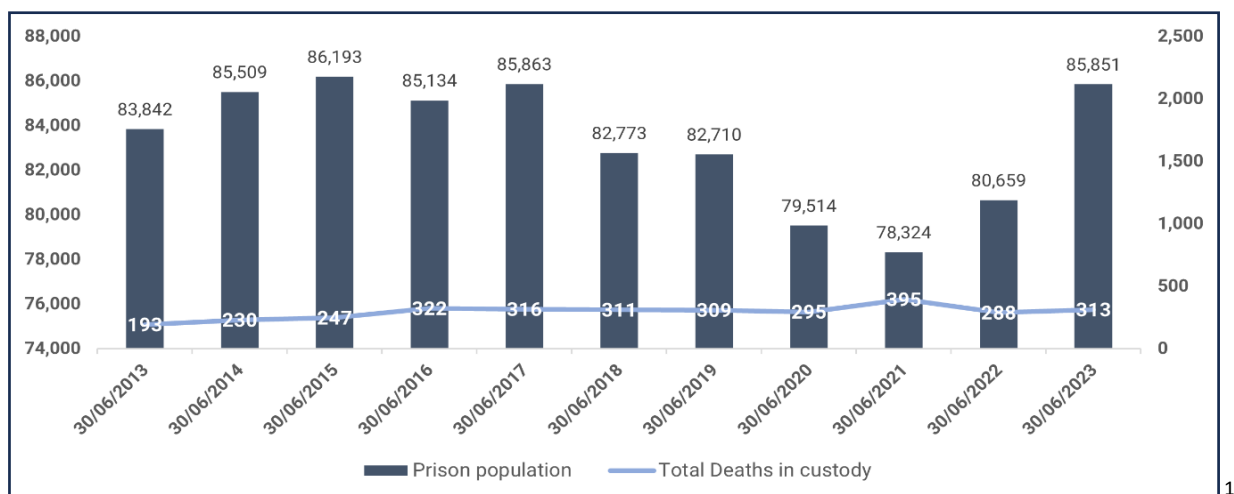
The prevalence of death in prison custody in England and Wales is a subject of paramount concern, representing a complex and multifaceted issue at the intersection of criminal justice, public health, and human rights. Over the years, a substantial body of data and research has been accumulated to shed light on this critical matter, revealing a range of factors that contribute to mortality within prison walls. Understanding and addressing the prevalence of deaths in custody is not only essential for the well-being of incarcerated individuals but also for the broader societal goals of rehabilitation, safety, and justice. We delve into the latest available information, analysing trends, causes, and potential solutions to grasp the dynamics of this pressing issue.

This case study explores the evolving landscape of prison populations and deaths in custody over the past decade, from 2013 to 2023. During this period, significant shifts in both prison demographics and the incidence of deaths in custody have emerged, warranting a closer examination of the factors contributing to these trends.

Key Findings

- i. The total prison population has fluctuated but generally increased, reaching its peak in 2015 before gradually declining.
- ii. Deaths in custody, particularly those due to self-inflicted causes, have seen variations, with a notable increase in 2021.
- iii. Self-harm and assault incidents have displayed varying patterns, suggesting potential concerns related to inmate safety.

Trends



¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2023>

Analysis

One noticeable trend in the data is the fluctuation in the prison population. From 2013 to 2015, the prison population showed a gradual increase. However, starting from 2016, there was a decrease in the number of incarcerated individuals, reaching its lowest point in 2020. The subsequent increase in 2021 and 2022 suggests a potential reversal of this trend. Understanding the reasons behind these fluctuations, such as changes in sentencing laws, crime rates, or policies related to parole and probation, could be crucial in addressing overcrowding or underutilisation of prison facilities.

The low point in the prison population in 2020 may indeed be closely related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had a profound impact on various aspects of society, including the criminal justice system and the prison population. Several factors contribute to this hypothesis:

- Firstly, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, many countries implemented measures to reduce the spread of the virus, including temporary halts in court proceedings, reduced arrests for non-violent offenses, and expedited releases for some inmates to alleviate prison overcrowding. These measures likely contributed to the decline in the prison population observed in 2020.
- Secondly, within prison facilities, the risk of COVID-19 transmission was higher due to close confinement and limited social distancing possibilities. Inmates and staff were vulnerable to outbreaks, leading to a higher focus on inmate health and safety. Some jurisdictions may have released non-violent or vulnerable individuals to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading within correctional institutions, contributing to the decrease in the prison population.²
- Lastly, the pandemic also put a strain on healthcare resources, making it essential to prioritise the well-being of inmates. Correctional facilities had to adapt their protocols to ensure adequate medical care for those infected with the virus, which could have impacted the overall prison population as individuals with pre-existing conditions or higher health risks were released or transferred to medical facilities.

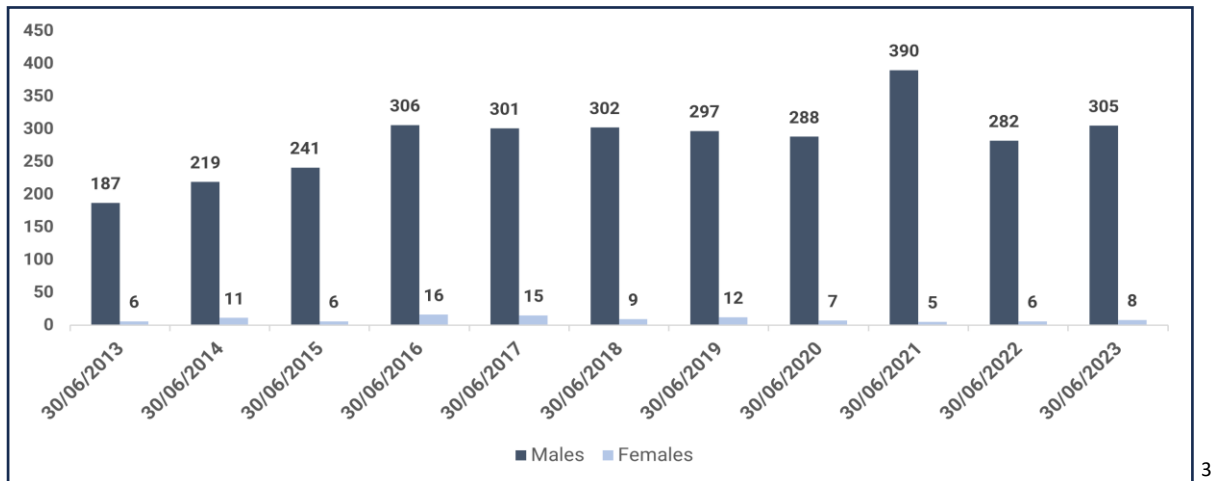
Considering these factors, it is plausible that the low point in the prison population in 2020 is linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and the various responses and adaptations made within the criminal justice system to mitigate its impact.

Another significant aspect to consider is the total number of deaths in custody. While there is some fluctuation from year to year, with a notable increase in 2021, the overall trend seems to show an upward trajectory. The rising number of deaths in custody warrants a closer examination of the conditions within the prison system, including healthcare, safety measures, and inmate well-being.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/12/coronavirus-only-55-prisoners-early-release-england-wales>

Gender

The data reveals a consistent gender disparity in deaths in custody, with the vast majority being males. In most years, the number of male deaths significantly outweighs female deaths, highlighting a concerning gender imbalance in the experiences of individuals in custody. Understanding the reasons behind these gender disparities and whether they reflect differences in the treatment, conditions, or underlying factors affecting incarcerated men and women is essential for addressing this issue.



3

The data clearly illustrates a significant gender disparity in deaths in custody. For instance, in the year 2021, there were 395 total deaths, with 390 of them being male and only 5 females. This disparity becomes even more apparent when we consider the percentage difference. In this specific case, the percentage difference between male and female deaths is approximately 98.7%. Such a substantial difference raises important questions about the factors contributing to this gender gap. However, one key factor that likely contributes to the lower number of female deaths in custody is the significantly lower volume of incarcerated females compared to males. When the incarcerated population is predominantly male, the sheer number of male inmates increases the likelihood of deaths occurring among them. In contrast, the smaller population of female inmates naturally results in fewer deaths in custody.

Whilst we see clear disparity amongst male and female prisoners, it is important to note that the female population represents 4% of the total prison population. Therefore, identifying the true disparity, we need to look at this per 1000 prisoners. With the male proportion holding 3.6 deaths per 1000 prisoners and the female population holding 2.6 deaths per 1000 prisoners.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2023>

Sentence Type

Period	Remand	Sentenced
2013	38%	62%
2014	30%	70%
2015	40%	60%
2016	27%	73%
2017	30%	70%
2018	29%	71%
2019	28%	72%
2020	29%	71%
2021	38%	62%
2022	35%	65%

4

The table presents a clear snapshot of prison deaths categorised by sentence type over a recent ten-year period, from 2013 to 2022. Notably, it reveals that sentenced individuals consistently account for a larger proportion of prison deaths compared to those in remand. Throughout this decade, sentenced prisoners consistently make up the majority of prison fatalities, with remand prisoners comprising the minority share.

The data indicates some fluctuations in these proportions over the years. In 2016, there was a notable shift, with sentenced prisoners accounting for 73% of prison deaths, while remand prisoner deaths dropped to 27%. This particular year stands out as having the most significant disparity between the two groups. However, the subsequent years show a gradual realignment, with remand prisoner deaths increasing, and sentenced prisoner deaths decreasing, stabilising in 2018 and remaining relatively consistent until 2022.

These trends underscore the importance of ongoing analysis of prison mortality rates to identify potential areas for intervention and improvement within the criminal justice system. Additionally, understanding the fluctuations in these proportions can inform policy and resource allocation to ensure the well-being and safety of all individuals within the prison system.

Remand Prisoners

Throughout this decade, "Untried" remand prisoners consistently represent the majority of remand prisoner deaths, while "Convicted Unsented" remand prisoners make up the minority share. In 2020, the "Untried" category reaches its peak at 100%, meaning that all remand prisoner deaths that year were among individuals awaiting trial.

Over the years, there are fluctuations in these proportions. For instance, in 2015, "Untried" remand prisoners accounted for 61% of prison deaths, whereas "Convicted Unsented" remand prisoners constituted 39%. However, in 2021, there was a shift, with "Untried" remand prisoners making up 85% of prison deaths, while "Convicted Unsented" remand prisoners comprised 15%.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2023> , Safety in custody summary tables

These trends underscore the significance of considering the legal status and background of remand prisoners when analysing prison mortality rates. The data suggests that "Untried" remand prisoners, who are individuals awaiting trial, often constitute a larger portion of remand prisoner deaths, highlighting potential challenges and concerns within the pretrial detention system.

Sentenced Prisoners

Over the years, prisoners serving sentences of "4 years or more (excluding indeterminate sentences)" consistently represent the majority of sentenced prisoner deaths, often followed by those with "12 months to less than 4 years" sentences. "Life sentence" prisoners also account for a significant portion of sentenced prisoner deaths in certain years, notably in 2021 and 2022.

There are notable fluctuations in these proportions over the years. For instance, in 2014, prisoners serving "4 years or more" sentences comprised 45% of sentenced prisoner deaths, whereas those with "12 months to less than 4 years" sentences made up 28%. However, in 2019, the proportion of prisoners serving "12 months to less than 4 years" sentences increased to 30%, while those with "4 years or more" sentences decreased to 43%.

The data highlights the importance of considering the length and type of sentences when analysing prison mortality rates among sentenced prisoners. Understanding these variations can inform policies and practices aimed at addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by different groups of sentenced prisoners within the criminal justice system.

Causes

Period	Homicide	Natural Causes	Self-inflicted	Other
2013	2%	61%	35%	2%
2014	1%	60%	37%	2%
2015	3%	57%	35%	5%
2016	1%	58%	35%	6%
2017	1%	65%	25%	9%
2018	1%	52%	29%	18%
2019	1%	59%	29%	12%
2020	1%	70%	21%	8%
2021	0%	71%	24%	5%
2022	0%	62%	25%	13%

5

Natural Causes Dominant: Throughout the entire decade, the most common reason for deaths in custody is "Natural Causes." This category consistently accounts for the majority of deaths, with proportions ranging from 52% to 71%. It's crucial to note that these deaths are typically due to medical conditions or illnesses.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2023> , Safety in custody summary tables

Stable Homicide Rate: The percentage of deaths attributed to "Homicide" remains relatively low and stable throughout the years, ranging from 0% to 3%. This suggests that incidents of violence resulting in death within prisons are comparatively rare, however, there a marked in violence between prisoners and between prisoners and staff over the last few years.

Self-Inflicted Deaths: The proportion of "Self-inflicted" deaths remains relatively consistent, ranging from 21% to 37%. These deaths typically involve suicides or self-harm by individuals in custody.

Other Causes: The category labelled "Other" includes various fewer common causes of death. While the percentage is relatively small compared to other categories, it shows some fluctuations from year to year, ranging from 2% to 18%. These deaths may encompass accidents, overdose, or less common medical conditions.

Trends Over Time: There are notable variations in these proportions over the years. For instance, the percentage of deaths due to "Other" causes increased in 2018, while "Natural Causes" decreased. These fluctuations highlight the importance of ongoing analysis to identify and address emerging trends and challenges.

SONAR's Aims

In closing, SONAR CMS represents a pivotal step forward in addressing the pressing issue of deaths in custody. With its modular design SONAR will collect healthcare data that can be viewed, subject to the appropriate controls and consent, across the whole of the criminal justice pathway. By leveraging historical trends and data-driven insights, our innovative healthcare platform is poised to revolutionise the way we approach and mitigate risks within prisons.

SONAR offers the ability to assess the likelihood of potential outcomes, providing custodial authorities and healthcare commissioners with invaluable tools to enhance the detailed patient's well-being and safety. It enables the comprehensive tracking of a detailed patient pathway through criminal justice, ensuring that individuals in custody receive timely and appropriate medical care. With SONAR CMS, we are not only making strides in safeguarding the lives of those in our criminal justice system but also ushering in a new era of technology, that is designed to be responsive, customisable, intuitive, and modern across all devices. This in turn enables the workforce to focus on delivery of care and rehabilitation, that can only be seen as benefit to society that reduces the number of victims and the stress and upset that can cause to them, their relationships, family, and friends.