

Warning of prisons at tipping point

The Head of the Scottish Prison Service has revealed crowded jails are reaching a “tipping point” and emergency powers could be needed to release inmates early from their sentences to create space.

Teresa Medhurst told BBC One Scotland’s Disclosure: Prisons on the Brink, to be screened on Monday evening that the jails are too full.

The chief executive of the SPS added she may soon have to say “enough is enough, we cannot take any more”.

She warned that if numbers continued to rise it would only be a couple of months before drastic measures were needed.

The prison boss said, “all options would need to be on the table”.

There are currently around 8000 people behind bars in Scotland but the number is projected to rise to 8700 this year.

Ms Medhurst told the hour-long programme that if the numbers go above 8500 then the Scottish government would have to consider releasing hundreds of prisoners with no restrictions placed on them like it did during Covid.

She said: “If I have to say enough is enough then it is because we are at a tipping point.

"We cannot take any more. Prisons become very unsafe. The atmosphere, the tension, the volatility increases. Levels of violence increase, levels of self-harm increase."

The prison chief said that Police Scotland was looking at how it could divert people away from court and that efforts were being made to tackle the backlog in prisoners on remand.

She said the prisons are also looking to double the number of inmates released early on electronic tags to reduce numbers.

They are also considering prefab housing blocks to increase capacity.

The number of people in prison awaiting trial in Scotland has increased to record levels and almost a quarter of inmates have not been convicted. This is one of the reasons the overall population is rising.

Ms Medhurst told Disclosure: "At the moment I'm confident that we can manage between now and the springtime."

But she said projections for March-April made her "less comfortable" that the service could cope.

Disclosure was given unprecedented access to film in HMP Perth for five days in order to see the impact of overcrowding.

Prison officer Craig Stewart escorted BBC reporter Lucy Adams around the jail, Scotland's oldest, which still uses halls built by French prisoners during the Napoleonic Wars.

The ratio of staff to prisoners in the halls is about one officer to 23 prisoners.

Officers and inmates said hyper-vigilance is a necessary part of everyday survival.

Many of the inmates speak of remorse and wanting to make amends.

Chris Martin told Disclosure he started doing heroin when he was 15 years old and has been in prison more than 30 times.

He has gone through recovery in HMP Perth and is getting out soon. He wants to leave his mistakes behind him.

He said: "I'm getting a job. I want to start a family. That is living to me. What I'm on about. That is life.

"I want to just be able to live a normal lifestyle."

Brian Kinloch, who is in HMP Perth on remand, awaiting trial, was one of the 662 prisoners in Perth when Disclosure went in. The prison capacity is 630.

Brian, who grew up in care, told the BBC: "Since I've been in, I've been trying to access mental health which has been very difficult. It'll be a seven-months waiting list.

"It's difficult for most people. There was a suicide just there. A young boy, 24-year old. This is more like a mental health facility than a prison. Like I said, the boy down there didn't have seven months in him."

Perth & Kinross Health & Kinross Health & Social Care Partnership said Brian was offered mental health input, but he disengaged with services.

It said the current waiting times for routine mental health appointments can be up to seven months. Urgent patients are seen within 24 hours.

Sarah Armstrong, Professor of Criminology at the University of Glasgow, published figures at the end of 2022 showing Scotland has a significantly higher rate of suicides and drug deaths in jail than England and Wales.

New figures from Glasgow University show that last year there were 41 deaths in Scottish prisons.

Professor Armstrong said: "I do feel like the state of the prison system right now at this moment is not safe.

"Over the last three years there have been suicides in every single prison within Scotland, every single one. That's unusual. I mean, that is not something to be proud of."

Figures obtained by BBC Disclosure through Freedom of Information show self-harm in Scottish prisons is up by almost 40% in the past year – from 587 incidents to 818.

Ms Medhurst said that was because of growing tensions as a result of overcrowding.

Inside Perth prison, Disclosure met Kieran Wallace, who is on remand and awaiting trial, in a cell that was built in the early 1800s. It was meant for one prisoner not two.

He said: "It would be hard enough for one person, never mind two."

The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture says that cells shared by prisoners need to be above 8m² so as not to be inhuman and degrading.

Kieran's cell is less than 7m² and he spends 19 hours a day locked inside it.

Andy Hodge, the governor at Perth, said: "The pressure of population is forcing us to put more people into one room. That's a real stretch.

"Two adult men into a room where you've got one TV, one kettle, tensions start to build, people start to fall out. Violence amongst the residents starts to go up."

He said there is contingency planning which could see the Scottish Government beginning an early release scheme if the numbers get too high.

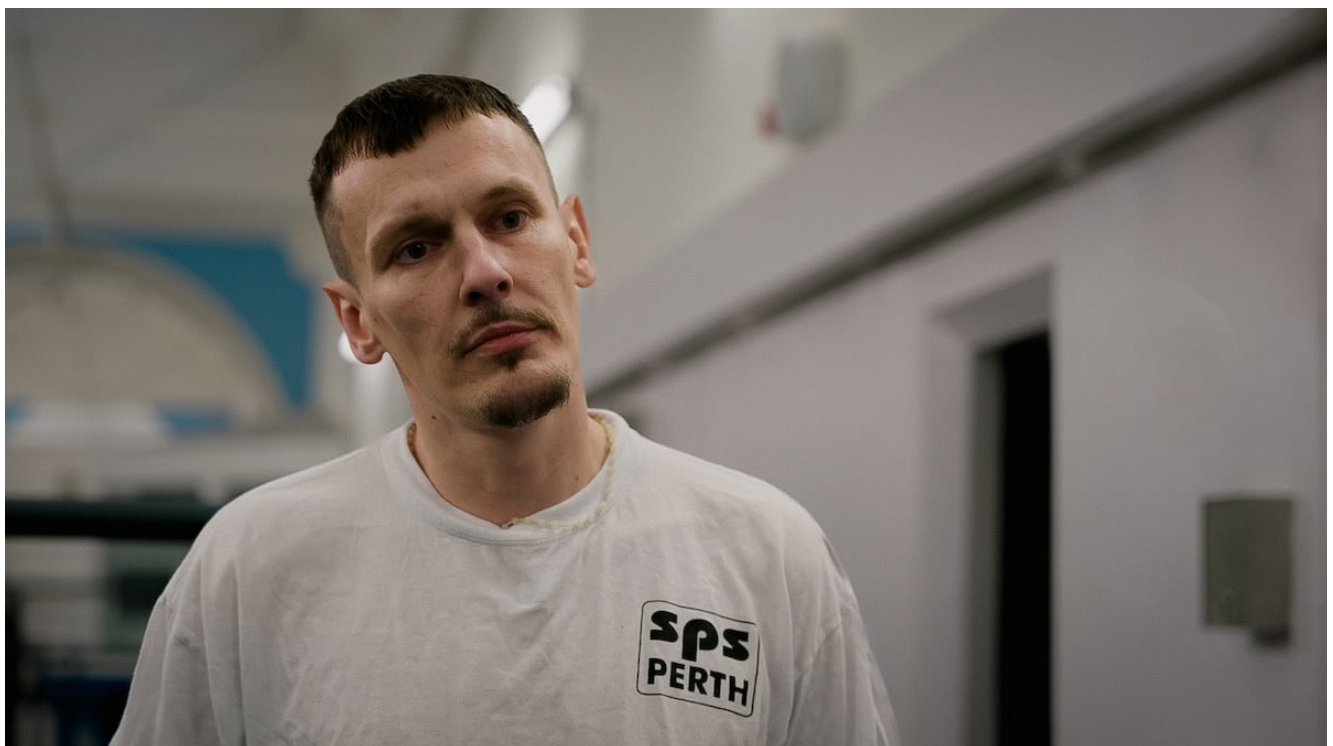
Kate Wallace, the head of Victim Support Scotland, said inmates are going out and re-offending because many of them are not managing to get onto rehabilitation programmes.

BBC Disclosure found through a Freedom of Information request that there are 698 prisoners currently on a waiting list.

Justice Secretary Angela Constance said ministers were looking at new legislation, contingency measures and investing in community sentences to try to reduce the prison population.

She said: "I would very much accept that as a consequence of a rising prison population, that that has an impact on progression, it has an impact on rehabilitation. And that is why addressing a rising prison population is also a matter of community safety."

Disclosure: Prisons on the Brink, is on BBC One Scotland, on Monday night at 8pm.



Brian Kinloch



Kieran Wallace



Teresa Medhurst



Chris Martin