

Drugs behind bars makes prisoners easier to control

Prison authorities turn a blind eye to rampant drug abuse behind bars as it makes “zombified” inmates easier to control, according to claims in a new report.

A study commissioned by the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) found claims “there was tacit approval” of drug taking and dealing in jails amid a critical shortage of education programmes for bored and disengaged prisoners.

Researchers from the Diffley Partnership spoke to inmates and staff about prison education opportunities at five jails including Polmont, Edinburgh, Barlinnie, Low Moss and Perth.

Their 80-page “Learning and Employability Strategy” found prisoners were frustrated by the lack of education opportunities causing many to turn to drug abuse.

The report says both prisoners and staff highlighted concerns around substance use and the “interaction between these issues and education provision”.

It says: “Service users highlighted how pervasive the substance use culture is in SPS prisons and how this could be mediated by a shift in this culture towards prioritising education.”

One remand prisoner told researchers: “There’s a tacit approval of drug taking and drug dealing in SPS jails and there has been kinda since the last time I’ve been in.

“Their attitude is if they’re taking drugs and we don’t have to see it, they’re quieter, they’re easier to subdue... if they embraced education, which they don’t, it would be a massive bonus for them – it would make life easier.

“Two ways of making life easier – you can either make people weak and zombified and leave it at that, or you can let them get educated and be better people.

“They don’t want us educated in here, they see it as a threat. There is no rehabilitation.”

Another long-term inmate said: “I’ve seen a big rise in people who used to not take anything [drugs] and get on with it, they used to be alright... someone who used to be fit and healthy and they’re struggling now because they’ve got nothing to do.”

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr MSP said: “Drug use is rampant inside Scotland’s prisons but dithering SNP ministers appear to have no plan to tackle it.

“This report also shows inmates want access to education in order to rehabilitate themselves and keep away from drugs.”

According to Mr Kerr, rehabilitation is crucial not just for a “productive life behind bars but also better prospects of integration on the outside”.

He added: “SNP inaction is putting hardworking staff and inmates in danger every day and officers simply do not have the resources they need to clamp down on it.

“Many prisoners are not only coming into jails with a problem but end up leaving with one too. This stark report must be a wake-up call for ministers to identify the best ways to help with rehabilitation efforts.

“This dangerous cycle of drugs in Scotland’s jails only helps to fuel crimes in our communities and SNP ministers have failed to act for too long.”

Scottish Liberal Democrat Justice spokesperson Liam McArthur insists education and training are “vital in a prisoner’s rehabilitation journey”.

He said: “They develop learning and employability skills, increasing the chances of those leaving being able to make positive contributions within their communities.

“Recent figures have shown a drop in the availability of these opportunities in certain parts of the estate, including in Scotland’s largest prison, Barlinnie.

“The majority of our prisons are now overcrowded and that places real pressure on the prison service to deliver hours of purposeful activity.

“It also creates a vicious cycle because without those services, we can expect more people to re-offend and return to prison, putting communities at even greater risk and placing ever-more strain on a system that is already fit to burst.

“I would urge the Justice Secretary to urgently publish a route map with milestones for increasing the provision of through care support and purposeful activity.”

The report says that while there are “pockets of positive engagement” with education there is significant variability across the prison system.

It says: “The depth of engagement fluctuates depending on factors such as awareness, accessibility, and availability of educational opportunities.

“Participants consistently highlighted the limited availability of opportunities with a substantial waiting list often necessitating prioritisation based on various factors.

“Overall, engagement with education seemed to be limited not by a lack of interest in education but rather by challenges outwith service users’ control, including awareness of

education provision, barriers to accessibility and limited availability.”

The report says the perceived lack of prioritisation of education within the prison system poses a “significant barrier to progress”.

One staff member said: “The lack of recognition of the transformative potential of education not only affects prisoners’ access to learning opportunities but also impacts staff morale and well-being.

“But at the political level, and the very senior level of both colleges and the SPS... there is not an understanding of the fact that education is the only thing that changes lives.”

An SPS spokesperson said: “Our new strategy Learning for a Better Future sets out how we aim to make education accessible to all, so those in our care have the opportunity to learn in an atmosphere of dignity, respect, and compassion.

“The extremely high and complex population we have been managing for over a year makes this work more difficult but we remain ambitious as we seek to support people in their journey, reduce their risk of reoffending after release, and help build safer communities.”

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: “The Scottish Prison Service ensures every prisoner’s risks and needs are assessed, and they have a range of opportunities available to prepare for release, which ultimately helps reduce offending and creates safer communities.”