

Self-harming is on the increase in women's prisons

Hundreds of vulnerable female inmates have self-harmed in Scotland's "pressure cooker" women's prisons.

Scottish Prison Service (SPS) bosses warn that pressure is ramping up in the women's estate as the number being jailed rises many of whom have severe mental health issues.

SPS data released under Freedom of Information legislation shows that 428 women self-harmed between 2022-2024 with self-inflicted injuries known to include cuts, burns and drug overdose, as well as attempted suicide.

The figures reveal that 122 women self harmed in 2022, with 157 the following year and 149 in 2024.

Latest available data shows the female prison population increased by 9.3% between the first week of July and the last week of September last year, with an average of 337 women in jail during the period.

An SPS report says: "Pressure continues to rise within the women's estate. Many complex cases are being admitted across the estate, which is adding to the current challenge. Numbers remain high and acute mental health challenges are significant at HMP Stirling."

The female prison population has been growing despite Scottish Government policy, which aims to reduce the number of women in custody.

Scottish Liberal Democrat Justice spokesperson Liam McArthur warned that women's prisons are "a pressure cooker".

He said: "Scotland locks up more of its population than anywhere else in Europe, remand levels are through the roof and rates of self-harm continue to rise.

"The women's prison estate is clearly a pressure cooker. Overcrowding increases the risks of self harm, threatens staff safety and makes it harder to successfully rehabilitate people.

"I can understand that there may be limits to what information the Scottish Prison Service can provide without breaching medical confidentiality but I hope that they are alive to any patterns of self-harming behaviour."

Mr McArthur added: "Scottish Liberal Democrats have consistently called for a properly-funded justice system and the roll out of mental health professionals across the prison estate."

Emma Jardine, of the penal reform group Howard League Scotland (HLS), said there is "no doubt" there are some seriously mentally ill women in custody in Scotland.

She said: "That's been recognised for some time and only now has it been confirmed that a high secure forensic setting for women will be provided within the State Hospital.

"The Cabinet Secretary has said that it will be available within two years, which is an unacceptably long time since it was first identified as a pressing need.

"A thematic review of the ageing population overall – not specific to women – has shown that (prison) staff aren't trained to manage mentally ill, those with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities but many of them go over and above to try to help.

“The fact remains, however, that they’re not properly trained to do so and so could inadvertently be constricting what someone is capable of doing.”

Studies have highlighted that women’s early days in prison are often “traumatic, deeply distressing and bewildering”, especially for pregnant women and mothers separated from their children.

They have also found that four in five female prisoners in Scotland have a history of significant head injury with sustained domestic abuse identified as the most likely cause.

Former Lord Advocate Elish Angiolini published a report urging a “radical reworking” of the system in 2012 and called for the root cause of women’s problems in the community, such as mental health issues, domestic abuse and drug and alcohol addictions, to be addressed.

A report by the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland in December 2023 said SPS staff expressed concern over the volume of prisoners who experienced poor mental health and had behavioural challenges and distress from unresolved trauma and guilt.

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: “We work very closely with the NHS and the Scottish Prison Service to ensure that those with healthcare needs in prison are appropriately supported, treated and cared for, while ensuring their rights are maintained.

“People in prison can be at an increased risk of self-harm, and of suicide, and we are committed to ensuring that appropriate support is available.

“Many women living in prison have complex health needs which is why we are investing in healthcare models at HMP Stirling and the Custody Units in Glasgow and Dundee, to ensure they are designed to reflect the specific needs of women.

“The HMIPS inspection reports last year found them to be safe, stable and in keeping with the trauma-informed ethos. Decisions in relation to bail and remand are for the independent judiciary to make within the legal framework.”

An SPS spokesperson said: “We have seen a significant increase in women coming into our care with complex mental health needs.

“Every day, our staff and NHS partners support these individuals, with care and compassion, through some of the most vulnerable periods of their lives.”



Liam McArthur MSP