

# The UK's prisons aren't just overcrowded—they need to be better designed

July 17 2024, by Yvonne Jewkes

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

The UK government has taken urgent action to address the prison capacity crisis, announcing [early release](#) for several thousand non-violent

offenders.

For years, politicians of all stripes have used prisons and incarceration as a [populist cause](#) to gain votes. The result is an overstretched, overcrowded [prison system](#) that is bad for prisoners, [prison staff](#) and communities.

Around 20% of prisoners in England and Wales are held in [prisons built during the Victorian era](#), where [living conditions are objectively](#) worse than in their newer counterparts. Restricted living spaces, poor in-cell sanitation, no in-cell technology, unreliable infrastructure, and fewer opportunities for work and education because of a lack of suitable spaces, are all bad enough when a prison is at normal capacity. But some 19th-century prisons are operating at over 150% capacity—[the worst being HMP Durham at 169% and HMP Leeds at 172%](#).

I have spent my career researching prisons and helping to design them to be rehabilitative. We can do much, much better. As I discuss in my [forthcoming book](#), the efforts to build prisons for both punishment and rehabilitation (two incompatible concepts) have failed.

Prisons typically cost at least [£250 million to build](#), but with most of this going to security and little consideration of pleasing aesthetics, the buildings themselves look bland and cheap.

Prisons in the UK would feel more civilized if we followed many of our [European neighbors'](#) lead in using more wood and glass in their construction, and spent just 1% of the construction budget on art and sculpture.

Politicians have tried to head off the overcrowding problems by commissioning massive prisons that hold thousands of inmates. In 1961, prison design expert Leslie Fairweather [wrote that](#) the size of a building

will determine the quality of relationships to a remarkable degree.

"These relationships will not develop healthily in huge, impersonal blocks of cells where the individual is dwarfed by the overpowering size of the structure," he said at a time when a prison holding 400 people was considered very large.

Today, new prisons holding around 1,700 inmates are the norm in England and Wales. HMP Berwyn has capacity for 2,106 men, making it the largest prison in the UK.

Size isn't the only issue. I've seen many a good prison design thwarted because it was designed for one purpose and used for an entirely different one. One urgent problem is the number of people waiting to be sentenced or convicted. Those on remand should be held separately from those who are convicted, but the pressures on the system mean that unsentenced prisoners often share a cell with a convicted offender.

Insufficient numbers of staff mean that even well-designed, progressive-minded prisons end up relying on locking prisoners up for more hours each day. The lengthy lockdowns of 2020 have become the norm in many prisons because there simply aren't [enough experienced officers](#) to escort prisoners to work or education.

## **Building better prisons**

The new government has appointed a prisons minister with a progressive view—James Timpson has said that only one-third of the prison population should be locked up. Now that he has a mandate to introduce sweeping reform, will he put his money where his mouth is?

Could we drastically reduce our prison population, as some countries have, close down the aging and expensive Victorian prison estate, and

build new prisons that are not simply fit-for-purpose, but are civilized and humane places—imaginatively designed, beautiful, even?

I'd love Timpson to visit the new women's prison in Limerick, Ireland, which opened its doors in October 2023.

I consulted on the design, infusing the plans with an [architecture of hope](#) that chimes with the new government's rhetoric of optimism. Limerick's model of incarceration is based on rehabilitation and personal growth, not punishment and pointless captivity.

With a light, bright, open reception area, expansive living spaces, and no bars on windows which look out onto a pleasant garden, the design for the new 54-bed facility is a world away from the old Limerick prison, built in 1821. There, women were held in dank, catacomb-like cells and exercised in a small concrete yard.

Shortly before the new prison opened, some of the women who would soon be re-housed there were taken from the old jail to see it. Some of them burst into tears, overwhelmed at the sheer niceness of it all.

[My research](#) has made an impact on the architecture of incarceration in the UK too—though with somewhat mixed results.

In the early stages of its conception, I advised on the [interior of HMP Berwyn](#). But the Ministry of Justice's commitment to "value engineering" (doing everything—except security—as cheaply as possible) resulted in a facility with all the charm of a warehouse.

Against my advice, the cells are shared by two men. The main priorities for cell design were to use either indestructible or replaceable materials, and create spaces with no ligature points in which prisoners can harm themselves or others. The result is rooms that might design out suicide

but may increase suicidal feelings. As the first governor of Berwyn remarked: "We promised heaven, but we didn't build the staircase."

Our "addiction" to sentencing and punishment, as Timpson has [put it](#), comes at enormous cost to the public purse. In crude terms, every prisoner costs the taxpayer around [£30,000 or more a year](#). I have often wondered why no politician is brave enough to initiate a public discussion about what we might spend the money on if we weren't pouring it into the carceral abyss.

It could go to direct [support services](#) to divert women from prison and provide secure accommodation for them when they leave custody, in facilities like the aptly-named [Hope Street](#).

But let's dare to imagine the additional potential benefits. More and better schools and hospitals, more libraries and public parks. Spaces that nourish, educate, and heal, rather than diminish, infantilise and harm.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The UK's prisons aren't just overcrowded—they need to be better designed (2024, July 17) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-uk-prisons-overcrowded.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.