

## Preventing Prison Suicides

Andrew Neilson, director of campaigns for the Howard League for Penal Reform came to Cheltenham to speak to PJG on this topic.

In an interesting and enjoyable talk he gave a full, clear and somewhat chilling account of the reasons for the recent rise in suicides in prisons. In 2016 119 prisoners killed themselves, a record: someone in prison kills themselves every three days, this rate has doubled since 2012. Those in prison are 8.6 times more likely to kill themselves than the general public. Women account for 5% of the prison population, but 10% of suicides. He pointed out that, as the Corston Report of 2007 made clear, women are marginalised in the prison system. They should be treated not equally with men, but appropriately. (Baroness Corston spoke to PJG a few years ago).

Andrew said this unprecedented rise in suicide has coincided with:

- overcrowding
- under-staffing
- restricted regimes – more time spent locked in cells
- bullying and violence
- increased use of punishments

Andrew laid the blame for much of this on the former justice secretary, Chris Grayling. This probably surprised some in PJG, who saw some hope in his 'rehabilitation revolution'. But according to Andrew, Grayling wanted to be seen as 'tough'. He cut thousands of experienced staff; more are now having to be recruited, but these will still not replace all those who have left.

A particularly retrograde step under Grayling was the alteration of the IEP incentives scheme (incentives and earned privileges system) which is intended to encourage good behaviour. Prisoners are on one of three levels: basic, standard and enhanced. They can earn privileges by good behaviour, having more spending money available, more visits, the right to wear their own clothes and to rent a TV set in their cell. Bad behaviour leads to a lower level. In the past all prisoners started off on the standard level. Grayling changed this so that now all start on basic, which makes coming into prison even more traumatic. In effect prisoners now start at the level originally intended as punishment. Those who kill themselves tend to be on basic, as are those with mental health problems.

Bullying and violence means that in at least one prison inspectors found that some prisoners are afraid go out of their cells, even when they could, perhaps because they are in debt.

The solution lies in reducing the prison population (we send more people to prison than any other Western European country, our prison population has doubled since 1993); having more staff; making prisons safer, healthier; abolishing the incentive scheme.

The prison regime, said Andrew Neilson should be built round normal life: not round being locked in a cell designed for one, but occupied by two, for up to 23 hours each day.

Prison staff are the key to saving lives. We do not have enough prison officers for them to have meaningful relationships with prisoners; the training offered is inadequate compared with what other countries provide. In Norway prison officers train for 2 years, compared with our nine weeks.

The Howard League have published a report on preventing prison suicides, with their recommendations. This is why we invited them to speak to us; it can be read at:

<http://howardleague.org/publications/preventing-prison-suicide>