



Oifig An Chigire Príosún
Office of the Inspector of Prisons

Summary booklet on inspection in prisons in Ireland

Care for people in prisons with
serious mental disorders

February - March 2023

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Introduction

This summary booklet tells you about our inspection of care in prisons for people with serious mental health disorders. The inspection was completed by the Office of the Inspector of Prisons (OIP). Two international experts in mental healthcare assisted the OIP to carry out this inspection.

This summary booklet contains information on:



Who we are



The key findings of our inspection



Our recommendations and the Irish Prison Service's response



Our next steps



How to contact us

Background

Who are we?

The Office of the Inspector of Prisons (OIP) is an independent prison oversight body. This means we visit prisons to check they follow Irish law and uphold international human rights standards. We share the findings of our inspections and investigations with people in prison, prison staff, the Minister for Justice, the Irish Prison Service and the public.

What was the aim of this inspection?

From February to March 2023, the OIP worked with a small team of international mental health experts to inspect psychiatric care in Irish prisons. The inspection focused on the treatment and needs of people with serious mental health disorders in prisons.

The inspection team visited seven prisons: Mountjoy Men's Prison, the Dóchas Centre, Cloverhill Prison, Cork Prison, Limerick Prison, Portlaoise Prison and Midlands Prison. These seven prisons accommodated over two-thirds (3,094) of all prisoners in the country. Some of these prisons had special units for people with serious mental health disorders.

Our Inspection aimed to:

1. understand how people with serious mental health disorders are cared for in prisons;
2. identify our concerns, and
3. make recommendations for improvements.

Your rights

Under the Prison Rules, people in prison have the right to the same level of healthcare as people in the community. This includes equal access to psychiatric health care.

The key findings of our inspection

What were our findings about care for people with serious mental health disorders in prisons?

Our inspection found some positive things about care for people with serious mental health disorders in prisons:

1. **People in prison felt safe:** People in prison with serious mental health disorders said they felt safe and cared for in prisons.
2. **Staff supported people in prison with serious mental health disorders:** Healthcare staff were committed to making sure people in prison with serious mental health disorders received good mental healthcare, despite frequent staff shortages.
3. **Good relationships:** Prison officers working with people who had serious mental health disorders had very good relationships with the people under their care.

While there were some positive inspection findings, the OIP position is that people with serious mental health disorders should **not** be kept and cared for in a prison environment.

What were our main concerns?

1. **Staffing:** There were not enough staff with expertise in treating serious mental health disorders working in prisons.
2. **Environment:** The prison environment was not an appropriate place to treat mental health disorders.
3. **Treatment and assessment:** People with serious mental health disorders did not receive appropriate care while in prison.
4. **Care pathways:** There were very limited 'care pathways' available for people in prison with serious mental health disorders to receive care outside the prison. Care pathways are links between the prison and the community healthcare provision

You can read more about these concerns on pages 5 - 11.

Our recommendations and the Irish Prison Service's response

1. Staffing

There were **not enough specialist mental healthcare staff in many of the prisons**. For example, in early 2023, over a third (38%) of psychology posts across the prison service were not filled.



Low staff numbers had a negative impact on people in prisons because there were not enough staff to provide mental healthcare treatment. As a result, many people in prison with serious mental health disorders spent long periods of time on waiting lists to see a mental health professional.



There were also **not enough staff working in prisons to help people find housing and resettle into their communities when they left prison**. People leaving prisons with mental health disorders did not always receive support to connect with mental healthcare treatment in the community.

The OIP also found that prison officers **did not receive enough training and support**. This was a particular issue for **officers working with people in prison with serious mental disorders in special units**.

We outline our recommendations and the response of the Irish Prison Service (IPS) in the table below.



Staffing

Our concern	 We recommend:	 The IPS agrees:
Not enough specialist mental healthcare staff in many of the prisons	The IPS should employ more healthcare staff, such as nurses, healthcare assistants and psychologists.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To recruit more nurses, healthcare assistants and psychologists.
Not enough staff working in prisons to help people find housing when they leave prison	The IPS should make sure staff are available to help people in prison find housing when they leave prison.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To seek approval to begin recruiting more staff.
Not enough training and support for prison officers working with people with serious mental health disorders	Prison officers should be offered training to support people with serious mental health disorders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review the options of psychological support training offered to prison officers. To develop a short course for prison officers to help them better support people with serious mental health disorders in a range of areas including how to recognise serious mental health disorders, risk assessment, and so on.

2. Environment

Five of the seven prisons that the OIP inspection team visited were severely overcrowded. Many people shared small, cramped cells and some slept on mattresses on cell floors.






Some people in prison with mental health disorders were living in degrading prison conditions. Poor living conditions worsened the mental states of those living in prison, and were particularly harmful to people who had mental health disorders.

Many people in prison with serious mental health disorders were not given opportunities to take part in meaningful and creative activities. For example, many did not take part in workshops or engage with other people in prison in the schools.

Prisons were not a suitable therapeutic environment to treat people with serious mental disorders.

We outline our recommendations and the response of the Irish Prison Service (IPS) in the table below.

 Environment		
Our concerns	 We recommend:	 The IPS agrees:
Poor living conditions	Poor cell conditions in prisons should be addressed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To complete a review of the cells and areas identified in this report and complete any necessary works.
Lack of meaningful and creative activities for people with serious mental health disorders	Greater efforts to offer people in prison with serious mental health disorders meaningful and creative activities. Recruiting specialist staff is needed to achieve this.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To advertise and recruit for empty staff posts to support opportunities for meaningful and creative opportunities for people in prison.

3. Treatment and assessment



The OIP found that **many people in prison with serious mental health disorders did not receive the treatment they needed while in prison.**

A wide variety of **psychiatric treatments available in the community was not available to people in prison.** This was because:

- the prison environment was not suitable to carry out these treatments; and
- there were not enough specialist mental healthcare staff working in the prisons.



People in prison with serious mental health disorders experienced a decline in their mental health while in prison. If these people were living in a hospital setting instead of a prison setting, they would have greater opportunities to experience better mental healthcare outcomes.

The treatment needs of people in prisons with serious mental disorders are not currently being met, and their safety and dignity are not being respected.

We outline our recommendations and the response of the Irish Prison Service (IPS) in the table below.

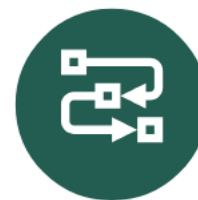


Treatment and assessment

Our concerns	 We recommend:	 The IPS agrees:
A wide variety of psychiatric treatments available in the community was not available to people in prison.	People in prison with serious mental health disorders should be transferred to local psychiatric hospitals and the National Forensic Mental Health Service Hospital (NFMHSH) without delay. This hospital was previously known as the Central Mental Hospital).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That people with serious mental health disorders should be transferred to local psychiatric hospitals and the NFMHSH. However, the IPS said that it cannot take action on this matter as it is under the control of the Department of Health.
People in prison with serious mental health disorders experienced a decline in their mental health while in prison.	Make sure that enough spaces are available in special medical units and other units for people in prison with serious mental health disorders. This may include a dedicated drug-free unit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To set up a working group to look at facilities and services for people in prison with serious mental health disorders.

4. Care pathways for people in prison with serious mental health disorders

People in prison are entitled to receive the same level of healthcare as people in the community. This is called “equivalence of care”. However, **people with serious mental health disorders are not receiving an equal standard of mental healthcare.**



The National Forensic Mental Health Service Hospital (NFMHSH), previously called the Central Mental Hospital, is in County Dublin. It is the only option available for people in prison with serious mental health disorders to receive appropriate mental healthcare. This hospital has space for 130 patients and provides care to people with serious mental disorders who are subject to criminal law proceedings.

Ireland does not have enough space to support people who need treatment for serious mental health disorders. On average across European countries, there are 10 beds available for people with serious mental health disorders for every 100,000 people. However, in Ireland there are only two beds for every 100,000 people.



Homeless people in prison with mental health disorders experienced great difficulty accessing psychiatric hospital in-patient treatment. There are also not enough beds available in hospitals to treat people with serious mental health disorders. This means there are long delays in transferring people in prison with serious mental health disorders to the NFMHSH.

People in prison with serious mental health disorders did not receive the right care, in the right environment, at the right time.

We outline our recommendations and the response of the Irish Prison Service (IPS) in the table below.



Care pathways - links between prisons and community healthcare

Our concerns	 We recommend:	 The IPS agrees:
<p>People with serious mental health disorders are not receiving an equal standard of psychiatric healthcare</p>	<p>The Irish Prison Service and the Health Service Executive (HSE) should track waiting list times for entry to psychiatric hospitals and The National Forensic Mental Health Service Hospital (NFMHSH).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To engage with the HSE and NFMHSH to track (monitor) waiting list times for entry to hospitals.
<p>Ireland does not have enough space to support people who need treatment for serious mental health disorders.</p>	<p>People in prison with serious mental health disorders should be transferred to local psychiatric hospitals and the NFMHSH without delay.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with serious mental health disorders should be transferred to local psychiatric hospitals and the NFMHSH. However, the IPS said that it cannot take action on this matter as it is under the control of the Department of Health.
<p>Homeless people in prison with mental health disorders experienced great difficulty accessing psychiatric hospital in-patient treatment.</p>	<p>Action should be taken by the Irish Prison Service and the Health Service Executive to remove barriers for homeless people in prison to access mental health treatment in hospitals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeless people in prison who have mental health disorders should receive appropriate mental healthcare. However, the IPS said that it cannot take action on this matter as it is under the control of the Department of Health.

Voices from the prisons



Over the course of this inspection, people living and working in prisons raised concerns about access to mental health supports in prison.

Some people in prison said:

“I’d really like the chance to talk things through.”

“I just wake up, drink milk, count the hours and watch TV.”

“I’d really like something to do.”

“I could do with more psychology.”

Healthcare and prison staff were very concerned about the lack of opportunities for people to receive mental healthcare treatment in prisons.

Some people working in prisons said:

“Prison is not the right setting for some of these men to be held in.”

“We don’t have the facilities to do the treatment required; there’s not enough clinical staff.”

“We have to keep patients here, in prison, as we’re just left to our own devices; it’s only by begging and pleading that we get any help.”

“There’s no visual stimulation, proper space, recreational area or resources there.”

“Hospitals shouldn’t be able to refuse admission to a patient just because he lives under a bush.”

“If they had TB, they’d be transferred to hospital for treatment, but for mental disorder there seems little chance of transfer.”

Our next steps

After the inspection on psychiatric care, we prepared a full report and sent it to the Minister for Justice in August 2023. This report outlined 25 recommendations to the Irish Prison Service (IPS) on how to improve psychiatric care across prisons. This report was published in February 2024, and is available on the OIP website. People in prison may request a printed copy of the full report by writing to the Office of the Inspector of Prisons.

The OIP will continue to play a role in advocating for improved mental healthcare treatment and supports for people in prison. We do this by engaging with the Minister for Justice, the Irish Prison Service and other organisations that play a role in prisoner healthcare services.

We will also continue to track our recommendations and the Irish Prison Service's commitments during future prison inspections. We regularly publish updates on the IPS's progress on recommendations on the OIP website.

Contact us

Under Rule 44 of the Prison Rules, if you are a person living in prison, you can write to the Office of the Inspector of Prisons about any matter you want to raise. You can do this in the strictest of confidence.

This means that, by law, the Irish Prison Service:

- should not read any letters you send to us, and
- must send your unopened letter to us without delay.

This is the address for the Office of the Inspector of Prisons:

Office of the Inspector of Prisons
38–39 Fitzwilliam Square West
Dublin 2
D02 NX53

We will write back to you in a sealed envelope. On the envelope, we will write “Rule 44”, and we ask the Governor to make sure you get the letter delivered to you unopened.

The law allows the Governor to open a Rule 44 letter, **but**, you must be with them when they do this. A letter should only be opened to check that it has come from the Office of the Inspector of Prisons. Rule 44 of the Prison Rules does not allow prison staff, including the Governor, to read what this letter says.

Our website is: www.oip.ie

Our phone number is: **01 859 2709**

Our email address is: **info@oip.ie**