The Expansion of HMP Parc: Wales' (Growing) Imprisonment Rate

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INTRODUCTION

HMP Parc in Bridgend has attracted significant political and public interest in recent years. Following a series of deaths at the prison in 2024, widespread concerns have been raised over the conduct of prison staff, the availability of drugs, the treatment of prisoners, and according to HMI Prisons (2025a: 3), a 'serious deterioration in standards'. In both the Senedd and the House of Commons, concerted efforts have been made to hold the UK Government and HMP Parc's senior management team to account. In April, the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee (2025) expressed deep concern about levels of violence directed towards prisoners from staff, as well as the lack of transparency from officials about the prison's progress. In July, members of the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee (2025) raised multiple concerns with the Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Lord Timpson, about the prison's deteriorating safety. Despite repeated assurances from Ministry of Justice, HMPPS and HMP Parc officials about the prison's 'progress' and 'improvement', valid concerns remain about the welfare and treatment of prisoners at HMP Parc.

While the accountability and safety problems facing the prison have been subject to intense media interest and parliamentary engagement in recent months, another majorly significant development surrounding HMP Parc has, thus far, largely evaded meaningful scrutiny. In May of this year, BBC Wales reported that proposals were being readied to expand the capacity of the prison by a further 345 places (Moffat, 2025). This news followed the Ministry of Justice's decision in September 2024 to grant HMP Parc 'pre-application approval' as part of its efforts to increase prison capacity and tackle overcrowding in England and Wales. After a planning application for the development was submitted by Galliford Try Construction Limited and the Ministry of Justice in July, the plans to extend HMP Parc were formally approved by Bridgend Country Borough Council in November 2025 (Smith, 2025).

At a time when the prison is continuing to face serious questions about its safety and legitimacy, the logic and timing of the Ministry of Justice's decision to expand HMP Parc raises several far-reaching questions. The purpose of this short briefing is to provide some context to the plans

and consider the potential impact of the proposed expansion on the Welsh criminal justice system. This includes raising questions about what the plans mean for Wales' (already) table topping 'in-country' imprisonment rate, as well as what this latest development tells us about Wales' place within the England and Wales system. It is hoped that the information presented here can help to inform the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee's ongoing *Prisons, Probation and Rehabilitation in Wales* inquiry, the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee's work on *The Criminal Justice System in Wales*, as well as wider scrutiny, debates and research on Welsh criminal justice.

1 HMP PARC: SAFETY IN CUSTODY

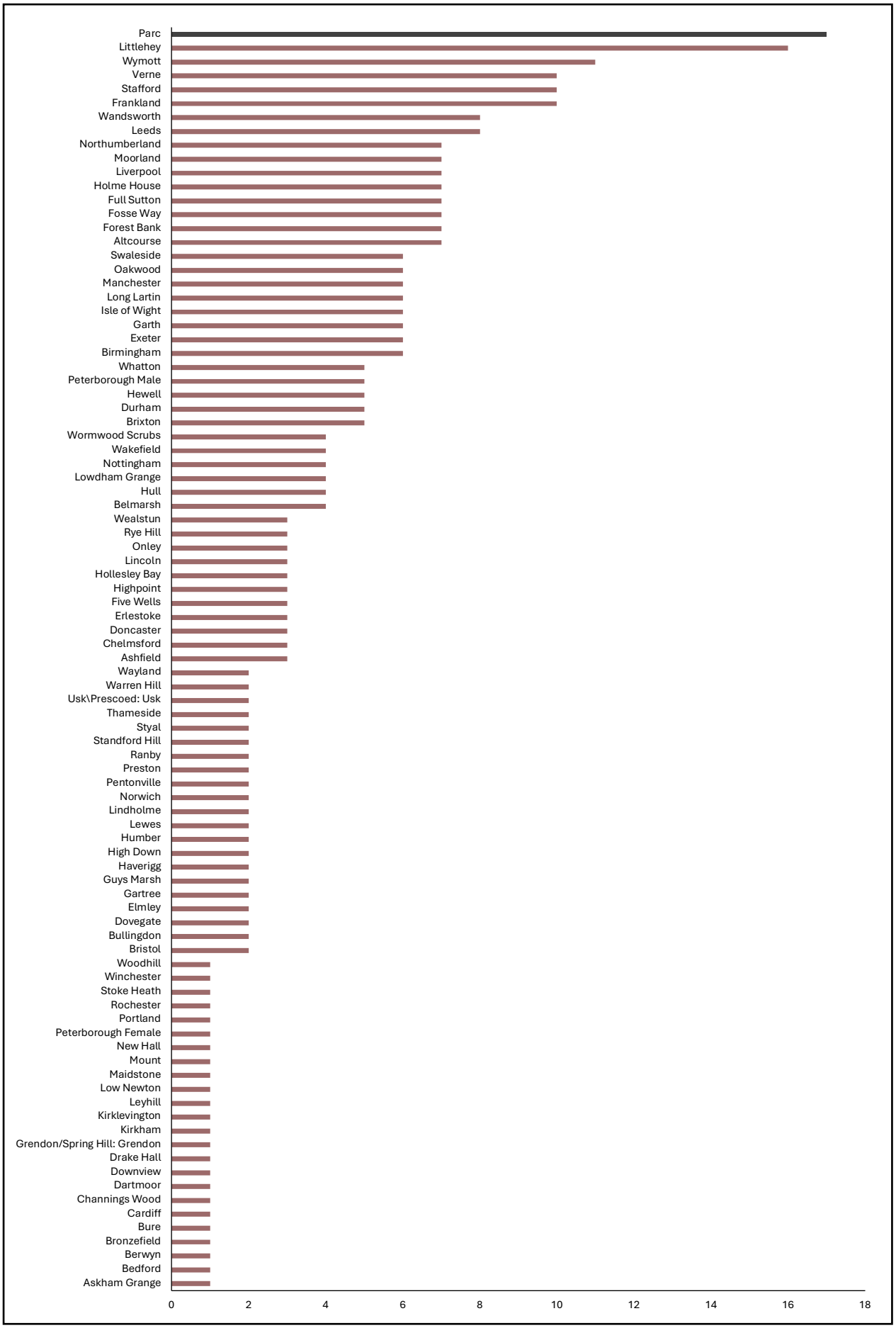
1.1 The Ministry of Justice's decision to expand HMP Parc comes at a time when the prison is mired in controversy. Since 2024, there have been significant concerns raised about the prison's safety record following a sharp rise in deaths at the prison. Out of the 21 deaths recorded across the Welsh prison estate in 2024, 17 were at HMP Parc (Ministry of Justice, 2025a). This was the highest number of deaths recorded by a single prison in 2024 (see Figure 1.1) and the joint highest *ever* recorded by a prison in England and Wales.[1]

1.2 Following an unannounced inspection at the prison in January 2025, HMI Prisons (2025a: 3) concluded that there had been a 'serious deterioration' in standards at HMP Parc. Inspectors found that the prison had been 'troubled' by the steady flow of drugs into the prison, with at least four of the deaths recorded at HMP Parc in 2024 believed to be linked to 'synthetic opioids' (HMI Prisons, 2025a: 3). HMI Prisons concluded that not one of its previous four recommendations on safety had been achieved since its last visit to the prison. The four concerns listed by HMI Prisons (2025a) were that: self-harm remained too high; overall rates of violence were too high; the availability of illicit drugs remaining a significant threat; and that there were gaps in the strategic oversight of important areas, including safety.

1.3 In May 2024, South Wales Police confirmed that a prison staff member had been arrested in connection with drug dealing offences at HMP Parc (Aitken, 2024). Ministry of Justice (2025b) data show that the number of drug finds at the prison increased by 71 per cent in 2024/25, including a 57 per cent rise in the number of psychoactive substances. In total, there were 1,124 drug finds at HMP Parc in 2024/25.

[1] There were 17 deaths recorded at HMP Lindholm in Doncaster in 2021.
The Ministry of Justice's records on deaths broken down by establishment begin in 2000.

Figure 1.1: Deaths recorded at prisons in England and Wales, 2024



1.4 Of the 17 deaths recorded at HMP Parc in 2024, eight were attributed to 'natural causes'. Between 2020 and 2024, there were a total of 49 deaths across the Welsh prison estate with the cause of death attributed to 'natural causes' (Ministry of Justice, 2025a). While a third (33 per cent) of all prisoners in the Welsh prison estate were held at HMP Parc during this period, over half (53 per cent) of all natural cause deaths in Wales were recorded at the prison between 2020 and 2024.[2]

1.5 The Prison and Probation Ombudsman (2017) has determined that a large number of 'natural cause' deaths can be explained by inadequate prison healthcare as well as an increase in the older prisoner population. In August 2024, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman published the findings of its reinvestigation into the death of Mr Aaron Nunes at HMP Parc in February 2016. Mr Nunes died in hospital of septic shock and diabetic ketoacidosis. The Ombudsman's (2024: 1) initial report stated that the care received by Mr Nunes at the prison was 'equivalent to that he could have expected to receive in the community'. An inquest into Mr Nunes' death later concluded that the direct cause of his death was 'his failure to manage his own health adequately' (Prison and Probation Ombudsman, 2024: 1). However, following legal action taken by Mr Nunes' mother, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman reinvestigated his death and found that a 'large number of significant failings' had in fact contributed to Mr Nunes' death. According to the Ombudsman (2024: 4) 'Parc could not offer the clinical care and observation required to meet Mr Nunes' complex healthcare needs safely'. Ultimately, Mr Nunes' death could have been prevented had he 'received dental and diabetic healthcare of an acceptable standard' at HMP Parc.

1.6 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons' 2024/25 annual report found that many prisons across England and Wales are failing to learn from the Prison and Probation Ombudsman's recommendations regarding previous deaths, including those recorded as 'self-inflicted' (HMI Prisons, 2025b). Three of the 17 deaths at HMP Parc in 2024 were recorded as 'self-inflicted'. According to the Director of HMP Parc, all three of these

[2] There were 26 natural cause deaths recorded at HMP Parc between 2020 and 2024.

deaths took place in the first six months of 2024 (House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee, 2024).

Figure 1.2: The number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults and assaults on staff recorded at HMP Parc, 2010 to 2024

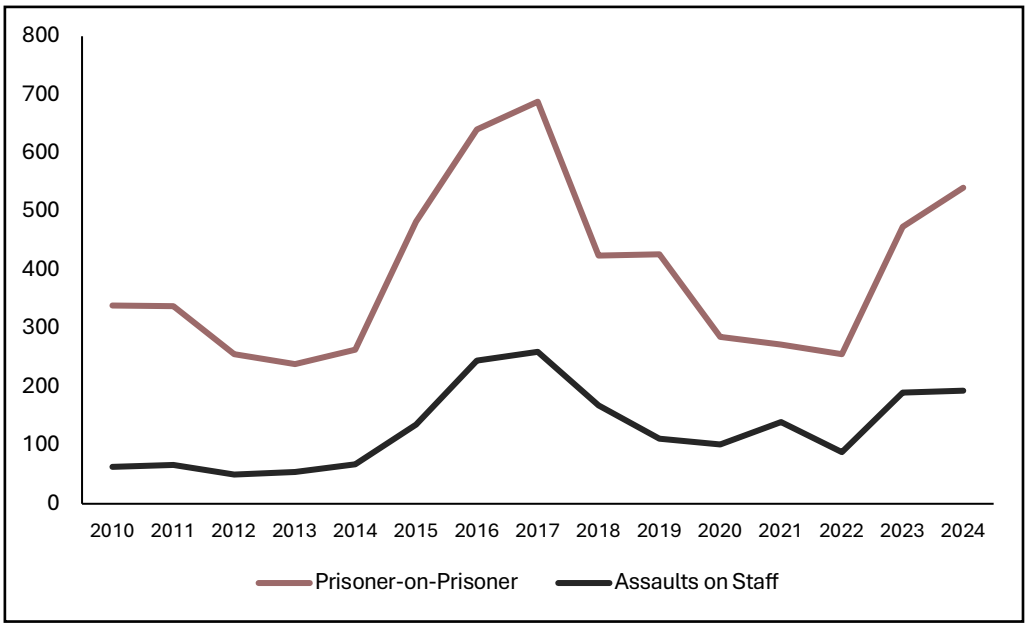
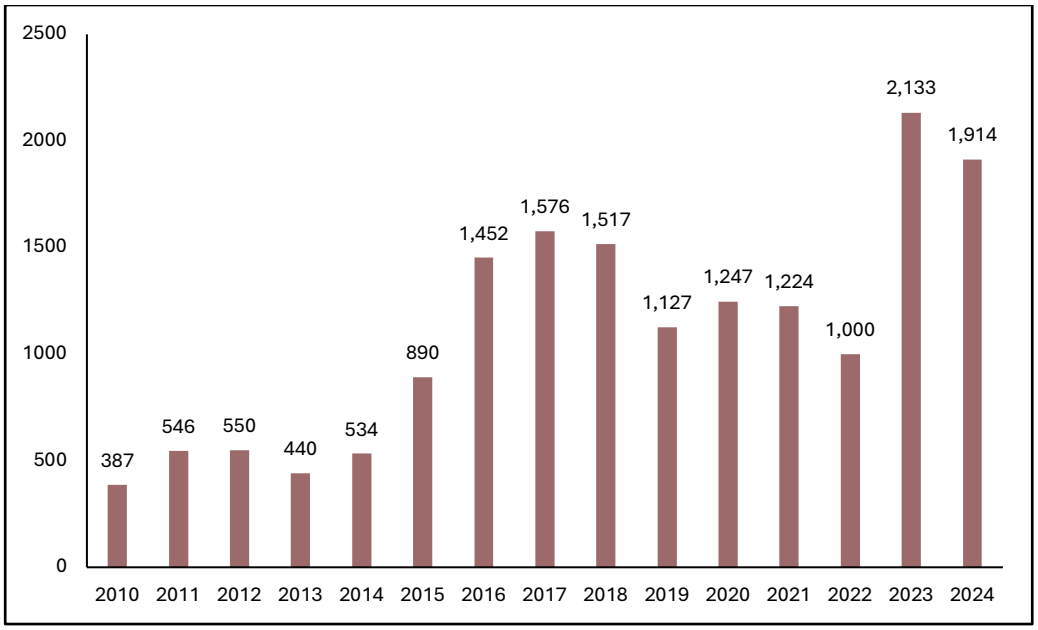


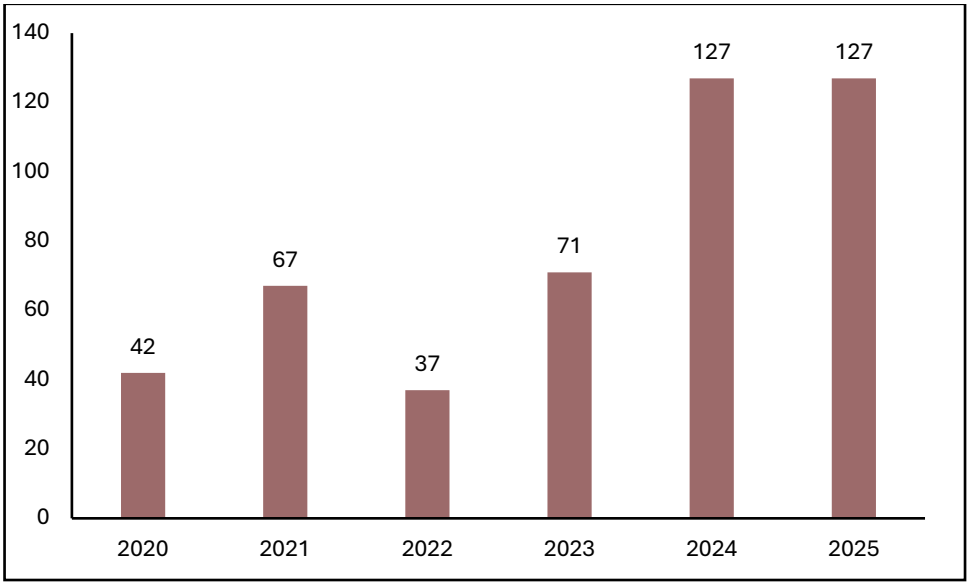
Figure 1.3: The number of self-harm incidents recorded at HMP Parc, 2010 to 2024



1.7 Beyond the number of deaths recorded at HMP Parc in 2024, there were also increases in the number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults (15 per cent) as well as a rise in assaults on staff (3 per cent) at the prison (see Figure 1.2). Although the number of self-harm incidents fell in 2024, the level remained significantly higher than it had been in previous years (see Figure 1.3).

1.8 In response to the many concerns that have been raised by politicians in the House of Commons and the Senedd about deteriorating safety levels at HMP Parc, Ministry of Justice, HMPPS and prison officials have repeatedly insisted that the prison has become 'far more stable' since the appointment of a new Director and the introduction of new safety measures (Senedd Cymru's Equality and Social Committee, 2025). When giving evidence to the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee in December 2024, HMP Parc's Director, Will Styles, told MPs that 'really significant progress' had been made to improve 'safety outcomes' at the prison and that the metrics 'have improved very significantly' (House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee, 2024).

Figure 1.4: The number of assaults on staff recorded at HMP Parc in first six months to June, 2020 to 2025



1.9 Deaths at HMP Parc fell sharply in the first six months to June 2025. Given that the level reached in 2024 equalled the joint highest level ever recorded in England and Wales, this reduction is perhaps unsurprising. However, there were 11 fewer deaths recorded in the six months to June 2025 than in the six months to June 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2025a).

1.10 Despite the reduction in the number of deaths at HMP Parc, the prison's performance in other safety areas underlines the need for continuing (and intense) scrutiny. For example, although the prison's Director told members of the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee that assaults on prison staff had 'reduced very significantly' in the latter half of 2024, the latest *Safety in Custody* statistics show that staff assaults at HMP Parc in the first six months of 2025 were identical to the number recorded in the first half of 2024 (see Figure 1.4). While self-harm incidents (Figure 1.5) and prisoner-on-prisoner assaults (Figure 1.6) were both lower in the first six months to June 2025, these levels continued to surpass the numbers recorded at the prison in recent years (Ministry of Justice, 2025a).

Figure 1.5: The number of self-harm incidents recorded at HMP Parc in first six months to June, 2020 to 2025

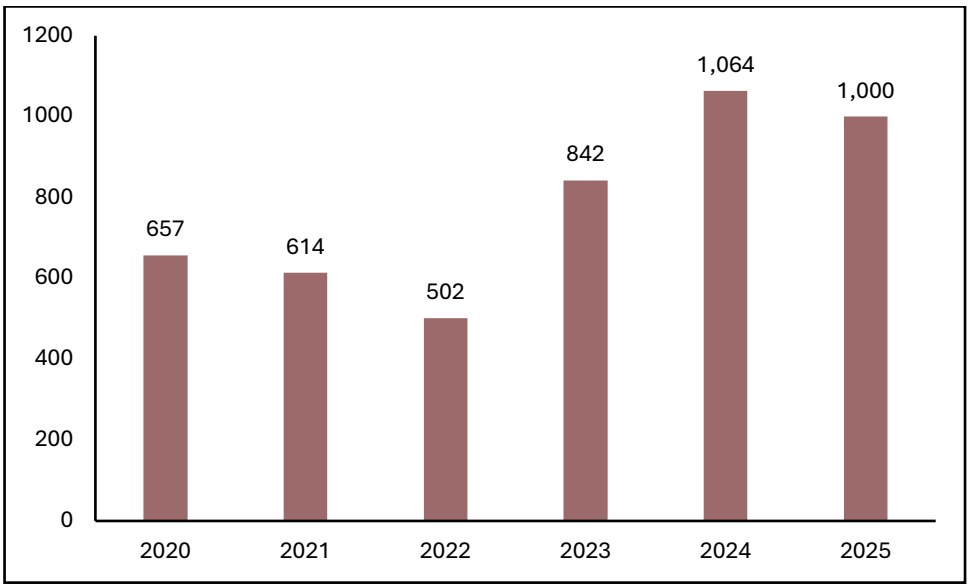
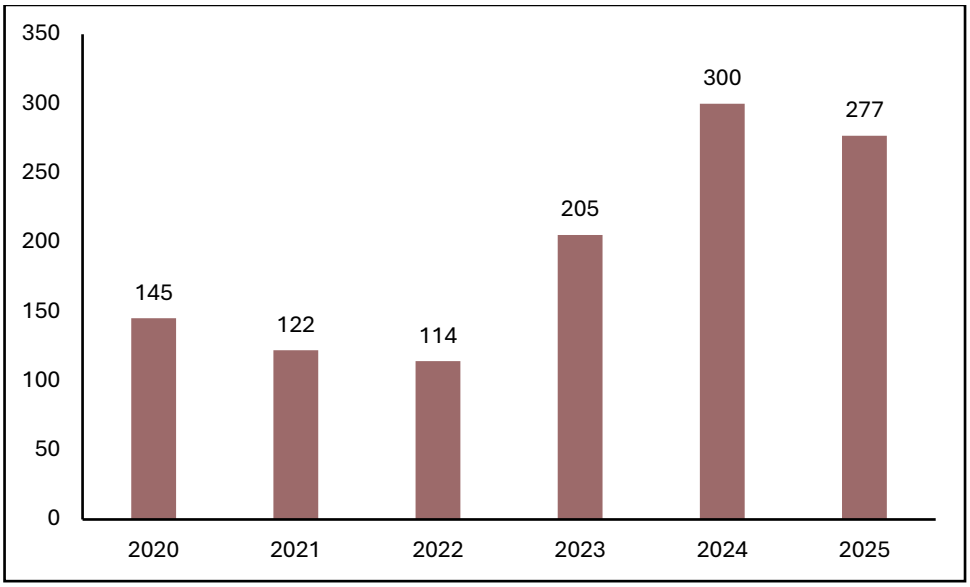


Figure 1.6: The number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults recorded at HMP Parc in first six months to June, 2020 to 2025



1.11 When viewed against the information presented here, the timing of the UK Government's decision to expand HMP Parc appears ever more curious. With pre-application approval for the expansion awarded by the Ministry of Justice in September 2024, the decision to expand the size of HMP Parc was taken while the prison was firmly in the eye of the storm. Indeed, only a month before the expansion was approved, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman (2024) had published its damming conclusion into the failures that led to the death of Mr Aaron Nunes at the prison in 2016. Perhaps even more concerningly, however, is that the expansion was granted in the same month that four prison officers at HMP Parc were arrested on suspicion of assault and misconduct in public office (Pigott, 2024). Irrespective of these developments, and even before members of the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee had been given the chance to scrutinise and question prison officials about the safety issues surrounding the prison in December 2024, HMP Parc was already destined for expansion.

1.12 The decision to expand the size of HMP Parc should also be read against the latest prison safety statistics. Although Ministry of Justice, HMPPS and prison officials

continue to press home the message that HMP Parc is now ‘stable’ and firmly back on track, 2025 data on assaults on staff, self-harm, and prisoner-on-prisoner assaults underline the need for caution as well as continuing scrutiny of the prison.

2 WHAT IMPACT WILL THE EXPANSION HAVE ON PRISONER NUMBERS IN WALES?

2.1 Since HMP Berwyn in Wrexham became operational in 2017, the average number of prisoners held in Wales has increased by 34 per cent. In 2024, there were 5,314 people held in the Welsh prison estate which included, on average, 1,861 prisoners from England (based on home address) (Jones, 2025).

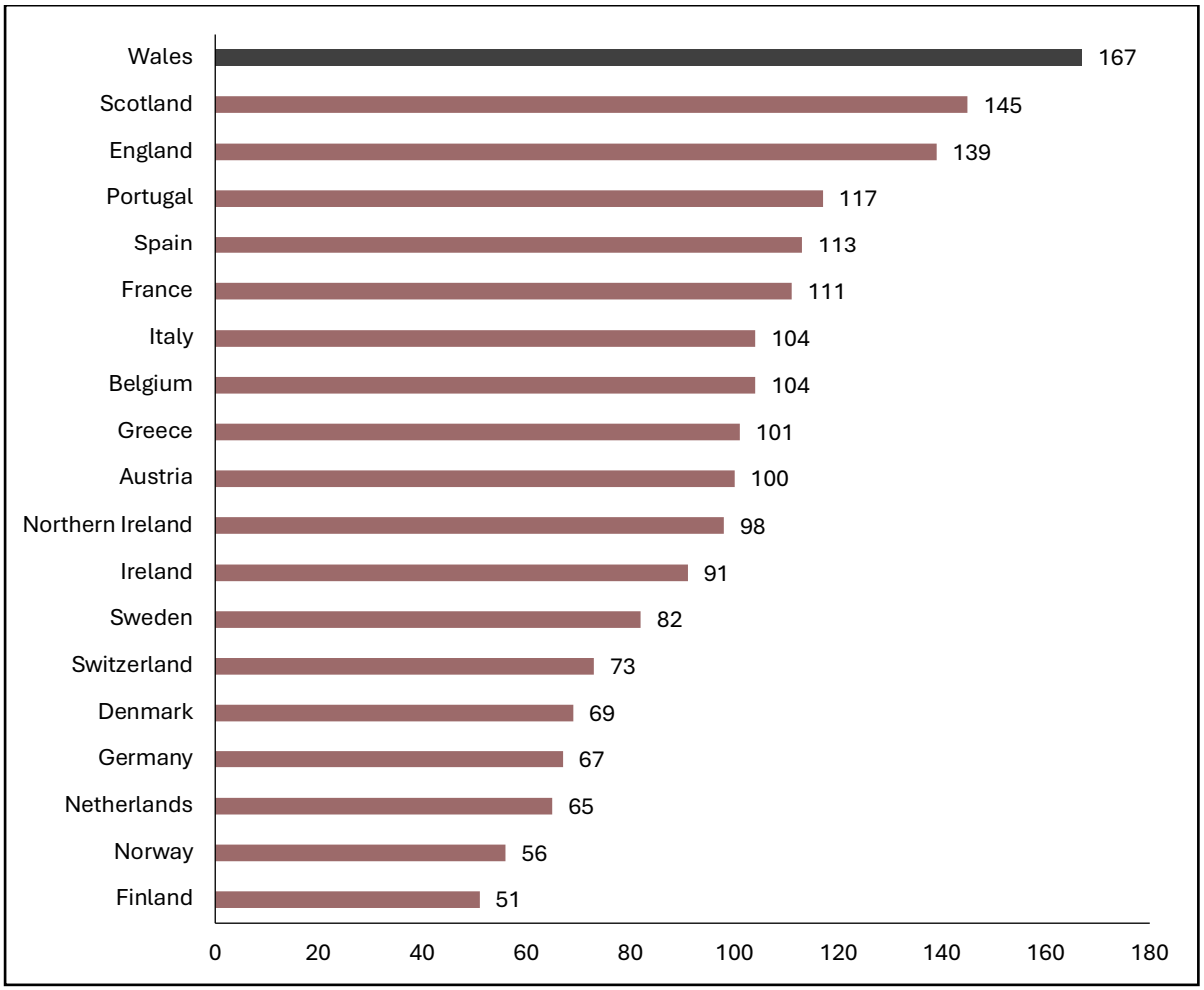
2.2 The Wales Governance Centre's *Prison Factfile* reports have routinely calculated Wales' imprisonment rate per 100,000 of the population since 2019. While the widely adopted method within comparative socio-legal studies is to calculate the rate based on the number of prisoners held within a particular country and the general population of that country, the rate in Wales has been calculated using 'in-country' *and* 'home address' data to reflect the territorial complexities of the 'single' England and Wales system. The 'in-country' method enables us to determine the imprisonment rate based on the total number of people held in Welsh prisons (including those who are from outside of Wales), while the 'home address' method helps us to understand how many Welsh people are in prison relative to the size of the Welsh population.

2.3 In May 2024, *The Institute for Criminal Policy Research* published the fourteenth edition of the *World Prison Population List* (Fair and Walmsley, 2024). First produced by the Home Office in 1999, the most recent report provides a breakdown of imprisonment rates for 223 prison systems worldwide using a calculation based on the 'in-country' method which measures the number of people held in prison in national borders. Since it was first published in 1999, England and Wales has recorded the highest (or joint highest) rate of imprisonment in western Europe in eight of the fourteen *World Prison Population Lists*.

2.4 Based upon the number of prisoners held in the Welsh prison estate in 2024, Wales had an 'in-country' imprisonment rate of 167 prisoners per 100,000. This rate far

exceeded the level recorded in England (139 per 100,000) and in any other country in western Europe in 2024 (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Imprisonment rates (per 100,000) in western Europe, 2024



2.5 Wales has had a surplus of prison places since HMP Berwyn became operational in 2017. In 2024, there were 4,918 people *from* Wales in prison (across England and Wales), with 5,314 people being held in the Welsh prison estate. By contrast, there were 81,420 people *from* England in prison in 2024, with 81,488 people being held across the English prison estate.[3] After the Ministry of Justice had announced plans

[3] The Ministry of Justice states that around 97 per cent of prisoners have an origin location (i.e. addresses that are recorded on its central IT system). If no address is given, an offender's committal court address is used as a proxy for the area in which they are resident. Those with no recorded origin are typically foreign nationals or those recently received into custody. No address have been recorded and no court information is available for around three per cent of all prisoners; these figures are excluded from the data included here.

to construct a new 1,600 place prison in Port Talbot in 2017, widespread concerns were raised about Wales being used to house an increasing number of English prisoners (BBC Wales News, 2017).

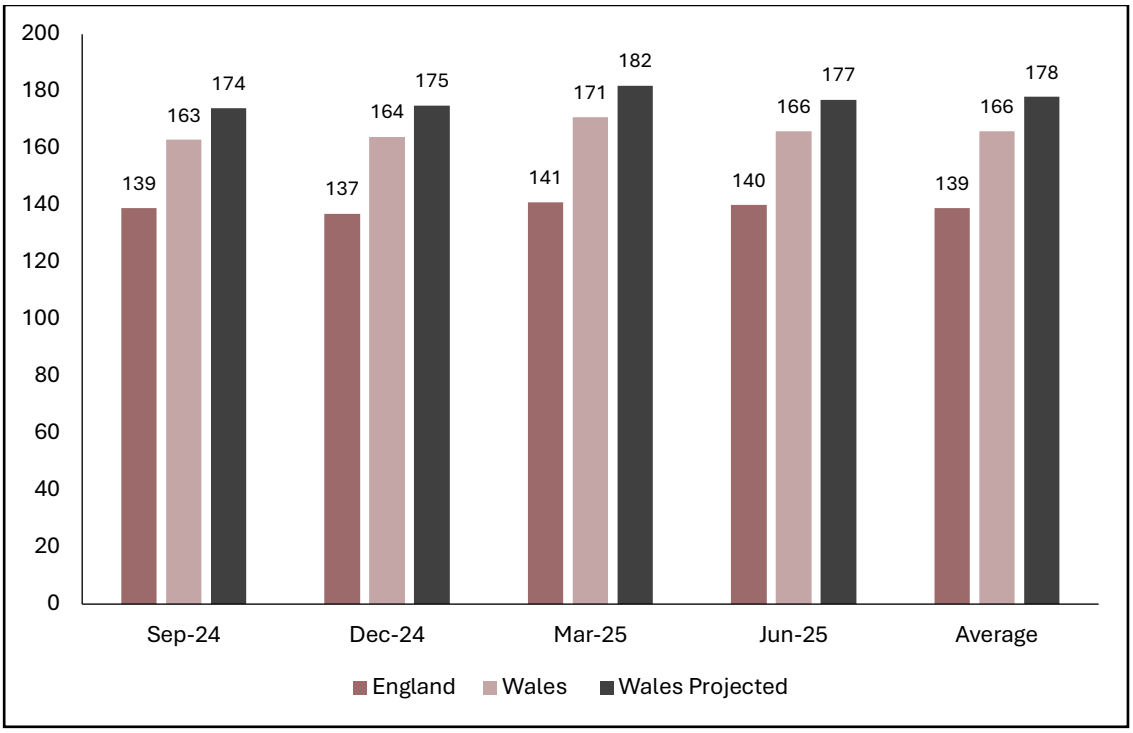
2.6 The decision to expand the size of HMP Parc by a further 345 places will increase the prison place surplus in Wales. Using the most recent data published in the Ministry of Justice's (2025c) *Welsh Justice Data: Annual Release 2025,* we can estimate that the prison place surplus will increase from 393 to 738 places in Wales.[4]

2.7 While it is vitally important to recognise that the prison estate in Wales is currently unable to accommodate all Welsh prisoners, including women and those held as Category A,[5] there will be around 700 *more* prison places in Wales than Welsh prisoners if/when HMP Parc is expanded.

2.8 The projected rise in prison capacity in Wales will also see its table topping imprisonment rate increase further. Based on an average of the latest annual prison data, Wales' 'in-country' imprisonment rate will eventually rise to 178 per 100,000 of the population once HMP Parc is expanded (see Figure 2.3).[6] This number not only exceeds the rate currently recorded anywhere else in western Europe, but will surpass the average for the whole of Europe (177 per 100,000) included in the most recent *World Prison Population List* (Fair and Walmsley, 2024).

[4] This has been calculated using data from September 2024, December 2024, March 2025 and June 2025. Welsh prisoners: 4,903; Welsh prison population: 5,296; Welsh prison population (after expansion): 5,641. Population data: England: 58,620,101; Wales: 3,186,581.
[5] For further information on this see the oral evidence given by the former Executive Director of HMPPS in Wales, Amy Rees (2018: Q333), to the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee in 2018.
[6] This has been calculated using data from September 2024, December 2024, March 2025 and June 2025. Welsh prison population: 5,296; Welsh prison population (after expansion): 5,641.

Figure 2.2: The 'in-country' imprisonment rate for England, Wales, and Wales after the planned expansion of HMP Parc



2.9 Even accounting for the planned expansion of the prison estate in England,[7] Wales' imprisonment rate (once HMP Parc has been expanded) will continue to exceed the level recorded there. Based on the latest prison and population data for England and Wales, the number of prisoners held in England would need to increase by over 21,000 to achieve a rate equal to Wales following the proposed expansion of HMP Parc.[8]

2.10 The data and information presented here reveal the impact that the planned expansion at HMP Parc will have on prisoner numbers in Wales. Not only will the development add to Wales' existing prison place surplus but, significantly, further entrench its unwanted international reputation for boasting *the* highest 'in-country' imprisonment rate in western Europe. At a time when the Welsh Government (2022) is pursuing policies and initiatives aimed at driving down prisoner numbers in Wales, these

[7] Once it reaches full operational capacity, HMP Millsike in Yorkshire is expected to hold 1,500 prisoners. In November 2025, construction also began on a new 1,700 place prison (HMP Welland Oaks) in Leicestershire.
[8] This is based on a Welsh imprisonment rate of 177 per 100,000 prisoners (June 2025) and England's prison population (82,304) in June 2025.

data undoubtedly raise further questions about the future use of the Welsh prison estate. This includes Wales' role in helping to absorb prisoner overflows from England, as well as the likely or potential impact that further prison expansion will have on devolved services in Wales.

3 WHO SPEAKS FOR WALES? UNANSWERED QUESTIONS ON WALES' IMPRISONMENT RATE

3.1 Beyond the number of prison places in Wales and its 'in-country' imprisonment rate, successive *Prison Factfile* reports published since 2019 have shown that Wales has also consistently recorded a higher 'home address' imprisonment rate than England since disaggregated data first became available in 2013 (Jones, 2019a; 2019b; 2020; 2023; 2024; 2025). Although this issue attracted some initial attention (Morris, 2019; Sky News, 2019) and political concern (House of Commons Westminster Hall Debate, 22 January 2020; National Assembly for Wales Debate, 22 January 2019; Senedd Cymru's Equality and Social Justice Committee, 2025), little has been done to understand or explain why a higher proportion of people from Wales are in prison (Jones and Wyn Jones, 2022).

3.2 Despite several opportunities to do so, UK Government officials have repeatedly failed to account for the fact that Wales has consistently recorded a higher rate of imprisonment than England, not to mention any other country in western Europe. Since 2019, questions about Wales' imprisonment rate have elicited a variety of responses. Some have simply attempted to deny or trivialise the claim that Wales has *the* highest rate of imprisonment. When providing evidence to the Commission on Justice in Wales in 2019, for example, the then Chief Executive of HMPPS, Michael Spurr, claimed that Wales should not be considered as having western Europe's highest imprisonment rate, as this rather dubious honour rightly belonged to Guernsey (Spurr, 2019).[9]

3.3 During a Westminster Hall Debate on the recommendations of the *Commission on Justice in Wales'* report in 2020, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, Chris Philp MP, also questioned the validity of the findings, claiming that the rates between Wales and England 'are very similar' (House of Commons Westminster

[9] The population of Guernsey is smaller than that of Anglesey.

Hall Debate, 22 January 2020). This comparison, however, was based on a calculation of the custody rates (the percentage of cases that result in an immediate custodial sentence) recorded at courts in Wales and England, *not* the rate of imprisonment per 100,000 of the population.[10]

3.4 In recent years, the UK Government has moved away from simply denying or challenging the claim that Wales has a higher imprisonment rate than England or any other country in western Europe. Despite this welcome change of tack, however, the UK Government has, to date, yet to provide any meaningful or authoritative explanation for the Welsh imprisonment rate. When probed about the issue by the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee in July 2025, for example, the Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Lord Timpson, simply told members that the 'independent judiciary decide who goes to prison and who doesn't' (Senedd Cymru's Equality and Social Justice Committee, 2025).[11]

3.5 The response given by Lord Timpson represents the latest in a long line of failed opportunities by UK Government Ministers and officials to engage on a serious level with the multiple (and often complex) factors likely to be responsible for Wales' imprisonment rate. The sentencing decisions made by the judiciary only form part of the overall picture, with recent trends underlining the impact that remand and recall decisions have had on imprisonment levels in Wales (Jones, 2025). More broadly, wider research on the social and political forces underpinning criminal justice policy show that factors such as poverty and deprivation are likely to result in more people entering the prison system (Houchin, 2005; Reiman and Leighton, 2010; Wacquant, 2009). The fact that poverty remains a prevalent and persistent issue in Wales (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025), alongside evidence pointing towards a correlation between imprisonment rates and deprivation levels in Wales (Jones and Davies, 2019), underlines the need for this issue to be given serious consideration.

[10] Chris Philp: 'The issue of imprisonment rates was raised. The rate of imprisonment for offenders in Wales is very similar to that in England. It is fractionally higher in Wales—it is about 6.5% in England and 6.85% in Wales. So, as I say, the rates are very similar'.

[11] Lord Timpson proceeded to underline the importance of reducing reoffending but made no attempt to suggest that this issue could explain why Wales' imprisonment rate was higher than England's.

3.6 The UK Government's plans to expand HMP Parc must be viewed within the context of its continuing failure to engage seriously with the questions surrounding Wales' table topping imprisonment rate. Indeed, at a time when so many questions are being raised about prisons in Wales and the future of Welsh criminal justice, the Ministry of Justice's decision to force through yet another prison expansion in Wales, without any kind of formal or detailed public announcement of the plans, appears both underhanded and ill-judged

3.7 The planned expansion of HMP Parc naturally raises further questions about Wales' place within the England and Wales criminal justice system. Despite the determined efforts of officials working for HMPPS in Wales to ensure that the Welsh context is better reflected in UK justice policy, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Wales continues to have low salience among Ministers and officials in Whitehall who remain preoccupied with the challenges facing the prison system in England and Wales system as a whole. More than six years on since the Commission on Justice in Wales (2019: 8) concluded that the people of Wales are 'being let down by the justice system in its current state', the UK Government's decision to further expand the Welsh prison estate will do little to appease those who remain gravely concerned about Wales' needs being routinely overlooked by decision makers in Whitehall.

CONCLUSION

Wales is certainly no stranger when it comes to prison building proposals and plans for prison expansion. In the last two decades alone, the Ministry of Justice has unveiled (unsuccessful) plans for new prisons in Cwmbran (BBC Wales News, 2008), Caernarfon (North Wales Live, 2009) and Port Talbot (BBC Wales News, 2017), as well as (successful) proposals for a new houseblock at HMP Parc in 2013 (Owen, 2013) and the construction of the UK's largest prison, HMP Berwyn, in Wrexham (Ballinger, 2017). The Ministry of Justice's latest attempts to call upon Wales in aid of the overcrowded England and Wales prison estate, however, are being played out at a very different time and in markedly different political circumstances.

Although the England and Wales system remains formally intact, the work of academics, the Commission on Justice in Wales, the Welsh Government, the Senedd, and House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee in recent years have transformed our understanding of the criminal justice system in Wales. No longer simply subsumed within broader discussions played out on an England and Wales level, Wales has become increasingly visible within political and academic debates on criminal justice (Jones and Wyn Jones, 2022). Where decisions once taken by the Ministry of Justice might have ordinarily been overlooked or subject to minimal scrutiny, there is now widespread recognition of the need to meaningfully consider the potential consequences and implications for Wales.

It is against the backdrop of this growing interest, engagement and concern with the Welsh criminal justice system that this briefing on the Ministry of Justice's latest plans for prison expansion in Wales has been compiled. By presenting some of the latest data on safety at HMP Parc; Wales' future prison place surplus; and the many unanswered questions surrounding Wales' table topping imprisonment rate, this briefing raises a series of far-reaching questions that undoubtedly warrant further attention and scrutiny. For example, at a time when HMP Parc was facing an unpreceded deterioration in safety levels, why was pre-application approval for the expansion of the prison granted by the Ministry of Justice in September 2024? Despite Wales' existing prison place surplus and already (comfortably) boasting the highest in-country imprisonment rate in western Europe, why are the Ministry of Justice planning to add further

prison places in Wales? Finally, having repeatedly failed to engage seriously with Wales' imprisonment rate and the factors underlying it, what do the Ministry of Justice's plans for yet more prison expansion tell us about Wales' place within the England and Wales system?

It is hoped that these questions can be explored further as part of the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee's ongoing *Prisons, Probation and Rehabilitation in Wales* inquiry and the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee's work on *The Criminal Justice System in Wales*. Furthermore, at a time when the devolved government is pursuing its own policies aimed at driving down prisoner numbers in Wales, this briefing can be used by Welsh Government to engage Ministry of Justice officials on the many issues raised here. Indeed, if the Welsh Government has genuine aspirations for an alternative future for justice in Wales, now is the time to show it.

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