

Prison riots: Why do they happen? And what's it like to be in one? Alex Cavendish Thursday 3 Aug 2017 12:01 am

Riot police outside HMP Birmingham during the disturbances in 2016

Prison riots seem to be in the news a lot recently. HMP Hewell and Aylesbury Young Offenders Institution saw trouble last week, while there was serious disorder at HMP The Mount in Hertfordshire on Monday.

On the same day, there was also a more minor disturbance at HMP Lewes in Sussex. A smoking ban in UK prisons could lead to months or even years of rioting.

So why are our jails such volatile places at the moment, and what is it like to be in a prison when a riot takes place?

One of the principal reasons for prison instability is definitely staff shortages. In real terms, the number of frontline prison officers has fallen by around 30% since 2010, mainly due to budget cuts by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). This has led to HM Inspectorate of Prisons warning that some jails are dangerously understaffed. Although the MOJ launched a recruitment drive for another 2,500 operational grade prison officers last year, the selection and training process takes time and some prison service insiders claim that existing staff are leaving at a faster rate than new recruits can be deployed.

They also suggest that younger, inexperienced officers are less able to manage difficult and sometimes dangerous situations that can be encountered almost every day in jails.

The impact of staff shortages can affect every aspect of prison life. In the worst case scenarios, if there are too few officers to open cell doors to allow prisoners out to go to work, education, exercise or association, then inmates are likely to be confined to their cells for most of the day.

Here's why it's important to keep your hands and your mind busy in prison Inside reports from HMP The Mount suggest that for three weekends in a row, all prisoners had been locked up for 24 hours with cold food – sandwiches – being handed over twice a day. This means no opportunities to take showers, phone family or have any exercise.

Even during the working week, most prisoners were spending all day in their cells, with inmates on just two out of eight wings being allowed out if they had a job or an education course.

Evening association time had disappeared completely, meaning that the day for most ended at around 4pm. Again, this meant no showers or opportunity to phone home. Prison officers are said to have lost control of two wings at The Mount in Hertfordshire, with staff shortages being blamed for the trouble.

In such conditions, prisons can quickly become pressure-cooker environments, seething with frustration and resentment. According to serving officers, the most dangerous time is when they come to unlock cells after a long period of what is known as 'bang-up'.

Angry prisoners are released from their cells and then start protesting about poor conditions. If enough inmates get involved then a whole wing housing over 100 men can become very volatile. If rioting prisoners manage to get hold of a bunch of staff keys, a disturbance can quickly escalate as inmates open cell doors to release other prisoners and get access to offices and stores.

Prison riots can be terrifying for prisoners and staff alike. Not all inmates want to get involved in trouble, because being convicted of prison mutiny can result in additional sentences of up to 10 years, which will only begin when the existing term has been served. Some inmates prefer to stay locked in their cells if rioting starts and others will try to barricade their doors.

Following the riot at HMP Birmingham, some inmates complained of not being given food or access to medicines or even water. They often found they were moved to other jails in the middle of the night, and weren't able to contact their families for days.

For the majority of prisoners, riots tend to be dreaded as they know there could be weeks or even months of disruption of their daily lives, and even collective punishment involving those inmates who didn't get involved in any trouble.