

Prison boss: I'd struggle to survive my own jail



Image caption,

Michael Stoney said Barlinnie was the "insurance policy" for overcrowded prisons

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The governor of Barlinnie says he would "struggle" to survive life inside his own overcrowded prison.

Michael Stoney described Scotland's largest jail as a "pressure cooker" and said new early release laws were necessary for staff and inmates.

Up to 390 prisoners are to be eligible for release in the latest move by the Scottish government to reduce the prison population.

The emergency legislation was passed to allow those sentenced to less than four years in jail to be released after 40% of their sentence, rather than 50%.

The Barlinnie governor [told the BBC's Scotcast podcast](#) that his jail was the "insurance policy" for overcrowding in Scotland's prison estate.

Mr Stoney said: "Barlinnie's the one that can expand. If it were to fail, there's no space anywhere else for overcrowding.

"That's why you're seeing early release and other things that compensate for that."

The Glasgow jail is operating at 140% capacity with nearly 1,400 prisoners, when it was designed for just 987.

The new law will see an estimated 260 to 390 prisoners eligible for release immediately.

They will be released in three tranches over six weeks starting on 18 February.

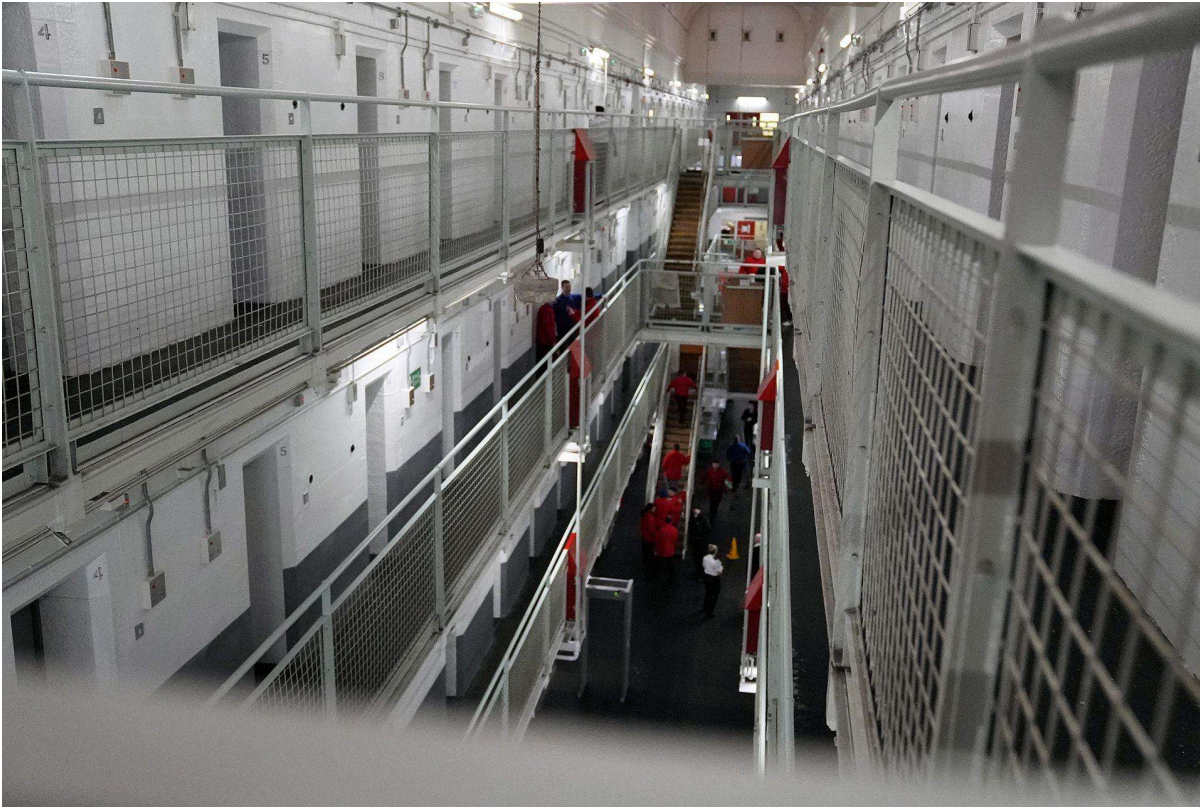


Image caption,

Barlinnie has nearly 1,400 prisoners in its cells

The governor added: "Barlinnie is sitting in the 1,380s just now and the likelihood is it would go up without releasing the pressure valves.

"Population increase makes prison life more difficult for everyone, those that live there, those that work there.

"It is like a pressure cooker, and the more you put the pressure on, the more likely there is for negative outcomes."

Mr Stoney said two years ago that Barlinnie was so overcrowded it could [suffer a catastrophic failure at any time](#).

He said the situation at the 143-year-old jail had not changed since.

"There's a danger in the infrastructure that the prison could fail quite significantly - power, water, heating. Any of these things can fail.

He added: "You do struggle, there's times we've been a day away from not having any power or heating."

[According to the latest figures, external](#) there are 8,223 people in Scotland's prisons – above the target operating capacity of 8,007.

The Scottish government said early release could bring a sustained reduction of about 5% to the sentenced prison population.

Mr Stoney told Scotcast that he would find it difficult to survive behind bars at Barlinnie or even the Scottish Prison Service's more modern jails.

He said: "If you're putting someone behind that door for a long period of time, it's a struggle.

"So even if you're locked in the nicest hotel, if you can't go out, because no-one's allowing you to go out, it becomes a difficult space.

"Any time you're not in control of your own destiny, or master of these decisions, it's a difficult place to be - and that's regardless of all the other problems in Barlinnie."



Image caption,

Barlinnie's first blocks were opened 143 years ago

Meanwhile about 23% of Scotland's prison population are on remand - meaning they have not been convicted. Many are awaiting court proceedings, though this figure also includes people awaiting deportation.

Annie Major-Thompson, chief executive of community justice organisation Sacro, said the court backlog had to be addressed to tackle the prison population, and that early releases were a short-term solution.

She told BBC Radio's [Good Morning Scotland](#) programme: "It [early release] will alleviate pressure on services but long term we need much better solutions other than prison, which isn't proven to be a good way to rehabilitate people away from offending behaviours."

Delays in court cases being heard [since lockdowns during the Covid pandemic](#) and a [lack of criminal defence lawyers](#) have led to calls for reform to the courts system, which would reduce pressure on prisons.

A replacement for Barlinnie, HMP Glasgow, [is slated to open in 2028 at a cost of nearly £1bn](#) - three years later than originally planned.

Scottish Conservative leader Russell Findlay accused the Scottish government of delivering poor value, and criticised "nature boxes" and outdoor spaces planned for the new jail.

Mr Stoney branded Findlay's comments "annoying", as he has been directly involved in the design of the new jail.

"It's a utilitarian approach to designing a prison," he said.

"We have bigger cell size, full proper ventilation, proper daylight and nightlight.

"We've looked at all the latest research to create good health in people and we've tried to design that into the prison.

"None of the things we have designed have been luxurious, or without full utility in mind."

'Distressing for victims'

Early release in Scotland [replicates a change by the UK government](#) as ministers grappled with overcrowded jails in England.

Scotland's Justice Secretary Angela Constance said last month it was "not a complete solution" but it would allow the prison estate to continue to function effectively.

She said: "I absolutely recognise that the release of prisoners can be distressing for victims of crime and that changing the release point for short-term prisoners has the potential to raise questions."

In summer 2024, almost 500 people were let out early under an emergency scheme introduced by the Scottish government.

It involved prisoners who had been sentenced to less than four years in jail with less than 180 days still to serve.

But it was revealed in September that the prison population was already higher than it had been before the early release.

In October, the Scottish government shelved proposals for the automatic early release of long-term prisoners due to concerns from victims of crime.

'Bleak' picture of Scotland's prisons

Phil Fairlie of the Prison Officers Association (POA) union said Mr Stoney's comments reflected what his members have been "saying for years".

"Scotland's prisons are chronically overcrowded which, in turn, causes frustration, anxiety and stress for prisoners, raising the temperature in the jail leaving our members with not enough staff to try and maintain order and operate a safe, functioning establishment," he said.

"All of this combined with prisoners who have more and more complex needs and rising incidents of self-harm and violence is having a huge impact on the physical and mental health and well being of our members."

He said a meeting this week of union officials painted a "bleak" picture of the state of the country's prisons.