

17 March 2025

Reference: FOI 624 Freedom of Information request

Thank you for your email, dated 16 February 2025, which we received on 17 February 2025. Your request has been handled under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

You asked us:

For each of the following calendar years 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024:

- How many deaths have been linked to drug taking in prisons in England and Wales?
- How many deaths were linked to spice?
- How many deaths were linked to nitazines/synthetic opioids?

Our response:

We have searched our records and we hold the requested information. A copy of the information that you requested is shown below.

The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) does not determine the cause of death. This is determined by a coroner following an inquest. Cases are separated into administrative categories, which may differ from a coroner's conclusions. Classifications may change during an investigation. However, they are not altered following the conclusion of the inquest.

For the purposes of this request, the PPO's other non-natural (ONN) death definition has been used to compile the data:

Other non-natural: These deaths have not happened organically. They are non-natural but cannot be readily classified as self-inflicted or homicide. They include accidents and cases where the post-mortem has not ascertained a cause of death. This category also includes drug-related deaths where there is not enough evidence to classify them as a self-inflicted death.

The PPO was notified of 104 deaths linked to drug taking between 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2024.

| 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| 20 | 18 | 14 | 23 | 29 |

Of these deaths, the following were linked to synthetic cannabinoids (including spice) and synthetic opioids (including nitazines).

| | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| Synthetic cannabinoids (including spice) | 11 | 8 | 3 | 6 | 8 |
| Synthetic opioids (including nitazines) | 2 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| Synthetic cannabinoids/ synthetic opioids | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 |

I hope that this is helpful.

You have the right to appeal against our response if you think it is incorrect. Details can be found in the 'How to Appeal' section attached at the end of this letter.

[REDACTED]

The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) carries out **independent investigations** into complaints and deaths in custody. The detailed role and responsibilities of the PPO are set out in our office's Terms of Reference. The PPO has three main duties:

- to **investigate complaints** made by prisoners, young people in detention (prisons and secure training centres), offenders under probation supervision and individuals detained under immigration powers (detained individuals)
- to **investigate deaths** of prisoners, young people in detention, approved premises' residents and detained individuals due to any cause, including any apparent suicides and natural causes
- to **investigate deaths of recently released prisoners** that occur within 14 days of release from prison (except homicide)

The purpose of these investigations is **to understand what happened, to correct injustices** and **to identify learning** for the organisations whose actions we oversee so that the PPO makes a significant contribution to safer, fairer custody and offender supervision.

We may use or share your data only to the necessary extent when conducting our independent investigations in the exercise of our official authority. We will share your data with third parties (e.g. the prison) in order to make sure the information is accurate; to prevent or detect failings; and to identify lessons learnt. We may sometimes need to share your data with third parties if required by law. We only keep your personal data for as long as it is needed, as set out in our data retention policy. If you need any further information about how your data is used, please contact us.

How to Appeal

Internal Review

If you are not satisfied with this response, you have the right to an internal review. The handling of your request will be looked at by someone who was not responsible for the original case, and they will make a decision as to whether we answered your request correctly.

If you would like to request a review, please write or send an email to the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's office **within two months of the date of this letter**, at the following address:

Prisons and Probation Ombudsman
Third Floor
10 South Colonnade
Canary Wharf
London
E14 4PU
E-mail: Mail@ppo.gov.uk

Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)

If you remain dissatisfied after an internal review decision, you have the right to apply to the Information Commissioner's Office. The Commissioner is an independent regulator who has the power to direct us to respond to your request differently, if he considers that we have handled it incorrectly.

You can contact the ICO at the following address:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

Internet address: <https://ico.org.uk/>