



Purposeful prisons: time out of cell

A key findings paper by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

September 2024

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Introduction

This paper looks at how much time prisoners spend out of their cells, and the impact of this, across the closed prison estate. Purposeful activity has consistently been the worst performing of our four healthy prison assessments, but it has never been as bad as it has in the years since the pandemic. The last year was no exception. Of the 38 adult prisons we visited in 2023–24, just one establishment's score for purposeful activity improved while 18 declined. More than half were assessed as 'poor', the lowest of our four judgements.

Overcrowding, exacerbated by nationwide pressures on prison spaces, contributes to lack of activity, with prisons often holding many more prisoners than they have places available for in work, training and education. Staff shortages also impact on prisons' ability to deliver regular, ordered and sufficient time out of cell. Rebuilding from COVID-19 restrictions has been slow, with many prisons still running more restrictive regimes than before the pandemic. To understand and evidence the impact of this, we analysed responses by both men and women to the surveys completed during our inspections of closed prisons from April 2023 to the end of March 2024. This is a collation of nearly 5,000 prisoner responses to our inspection survey and offers a valuable insight into the experiences of those in prison.

Overall, we found more than two-thirds of prisoners were spending most of their days in their cells with little to occupy them. The situation was particularly acute in men's reception prisons, where half of prisoners reported receiving less than two hours out of their cell on a typical weekday, and just under three-quarters at the weekend.

Prisoners told us that the consequences of limited time out of cell included being forced to choose between basic tasks such as having a shower, cleaning their cell or spending some time outside in the fresh air. They also reported a negative impact on their physical and mental health and their perceptions of staff.

We found a striking correlation between prisoners' own perception of the likelihood of them reoffending and the amount of time they reported spending unlocked and engaged in constructive activity, suggesting that purposeless prisons are not only harmful for prisoners, but that this harm could extend to wider society. While there are undoubtedly many factors that contribute to an individual's risk of reoffending and their own perception of that risk is not always a reliable predictor of behaviour, it is nonetheless an important consideration.

There is no doubt that these are challenging times for prisons. Population pressures and staffing challenges demand immediate attention, but a renewed emphasis on getting people out of their cells and into the kinds of purposeful activity which, ultimately, help to reduce the risk of future harm to the public is urgently needed.

Charlie Taylor
September 2024

Section 1 Background

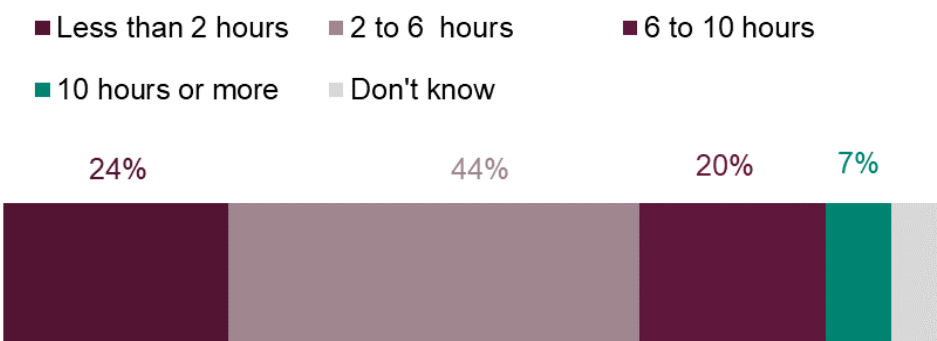
- 1.1 This key findings paper looks at how much time prisoners spend out of their cells, and its impact across the closed prison estate. We examined this through additional analysis of our inspection surveys. This included statistical analysis of prisoner responses to closed questions and a thematic analysis of the comments made by prisoners in the open questions at the end of the questionnaire.
- 1.2 Large numbers of men and women reported being confined to their cells for upwards of 22 hours each day with not a lot to do, and few opportunities to make meaningful progress towards rehabilitation.
- 1.3 This is not a new phenomenon. Our previous thematic review, [*What happens to prisoners in a pandemic?*](#), looked in detail at the deleterious effect that long hours locked up had on prisoners' emotional, psychological and physical well-being.
- 1.4 Last year, we published [*Weekends in prison*](#), a thematic review that scrutinised the experiences of prisoners at weekends, and found prisons offered even more limited daily regimes than on a typical weekday.
- 1.5 More recently, our report [*Improving behaviour in prisons*](#) identified the importance of purposeful activity and good time out of cell in creating a positive and productive prison environment.
- 1.6 This latest review reveals a picture that remains challenging. Prisoners continue to describe the harmful effects of long days spent locked in their cells on their well-being. In too many cases, prison routines provide too few opportunities for men and women to spend their time purposefully or maintain their mental and physical well-being.

Section 2 Key findings

A difficult picture across the estate

2.1 In our 2023–24 survey, 24% of prisoners reported spending less than two hours unlocked on a typical weekday and an additional 44% had less than six hours out of their cell, falling far short of a working day in the community. In total, therefore, more than two-thirds of prisoners were spending most of their days in their cells with little to occupy them. Just 7% reported being unlocked for more than 10 hours a day, which is our expectation.

Figure 1: Most adult prisoners spend the majority of their weekdays locked in their cells.
Men’s and women’s prisons in England and Wales, 2023–24

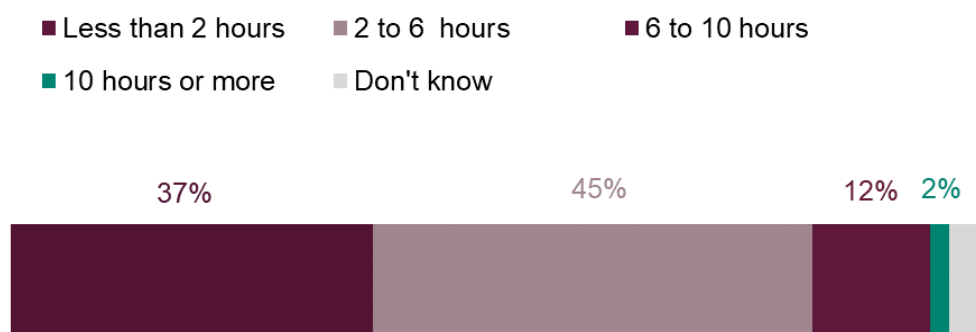


Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

2.2 We found restrictions on unlock were even worse at weekends, with 37% of men and women out of their cells for less than two hours. This appears, however, to be an improvement from 2022–23 when we found 60% of men and 66% of women unlocked on Saturdays and Sundays for a similarly short length of time.

Figure 2: Over a third of adult prisoners spend the majority of their weekend days locked in their cells.

Men's and women's prisons England and Wales, 2023–24



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

- 2.3 Poor time out of cell is particularly acute in men's reception prisons, where 50% of prisoners reported spending more than 22 hours in their cells on a typical weekday – rising to 72% at weekends. Just 3% reported spending more than 10 hours unlocked on a typical weekday. Reception prisons, serving the courts, have borne much of the brunt of the population crisis with often high numbers of prisoners on remand and a high throughput. Many are often inner-city, Victorian jails with particularly cramped, aged facilities compounding the challenges that they face. Many prisoners still spend months – and sometimes years – locked up for far too long each day in these establishments.

“Weekdays 45 minutes out your cell for 30 minutes exercise is not enough and then showers. Always feel rushed and pressured creates a bad atmosphere sometimes.” **Prisoner, HMP Bedford, a category B reception prison**

- 2.4 Other types of prison also offered poor time out of cell for most of the people they held. Almost a quarter of men (24%) in the high security estate reported less than two hours out of their cells on weekdays, and even more (34%) at young adults' institutions said the same.

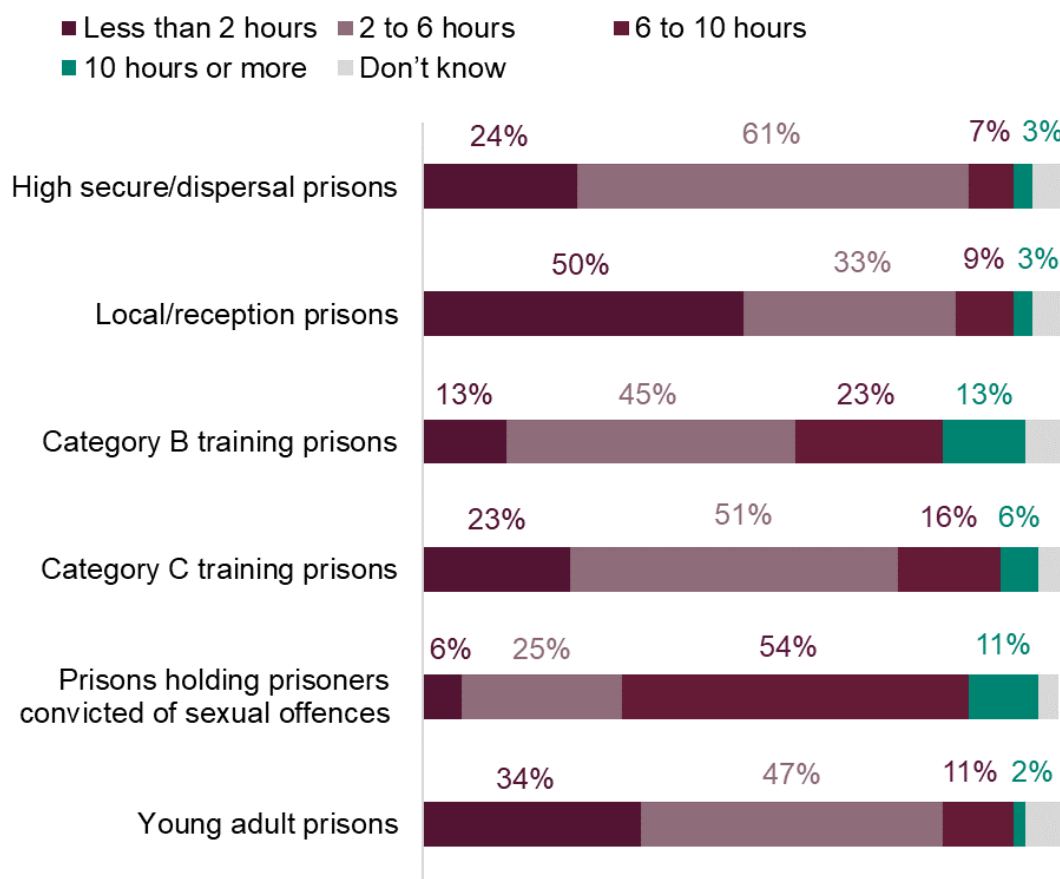
“More time out of cell, most days you're out 8:30am – 11am then locked up till 2pm the next day. 2 hours in AM one day and 2 hours in PM next day. Most people are lifers here, we can't be caged up 22 hours a day for the rest of our lives.” **Prisoner at HMP Long Lartin, part of the long-term high security estate**

- 2.5 In category C training prisons, which aim to provide an environment in which prisoners can gain qualifications and skills to help them find employment and avoid reoffending on release, 23% of prisoners reported less than two hours unlocked each day. Only 22% had more

than six hours out of their cells on typical weekdays, indicating that far too few prisoners were attending full or even part-time education and training.

Figure 3: Time out of cell is worse in local/reception, young adult and category C training prisons

Men's prisons England and Wales, 2023–24



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

Poor time out of cell affects prisoners' mental and physical health

2.6 Our findings identified a troubling picture regarding the impact of poor time out of cell. Frequently, prisoners told us of the detrimental effects of excessive periods locked up on their mental and physical health.

"We're not getting enough time out of our cells. It's worse than covid sometimes. Self-harm is up and alcohol consumption is through the roof due to bang up." **Prisoner at HMP Long Lartin**

“Many prisoners told us that their well-being had suffered as a result of being locked up for long periods. In our survey, only 22% of respondents said that they were able to lead a healthy lifestyle (in relation to their physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being), which was far worse than at comparable prisons.”

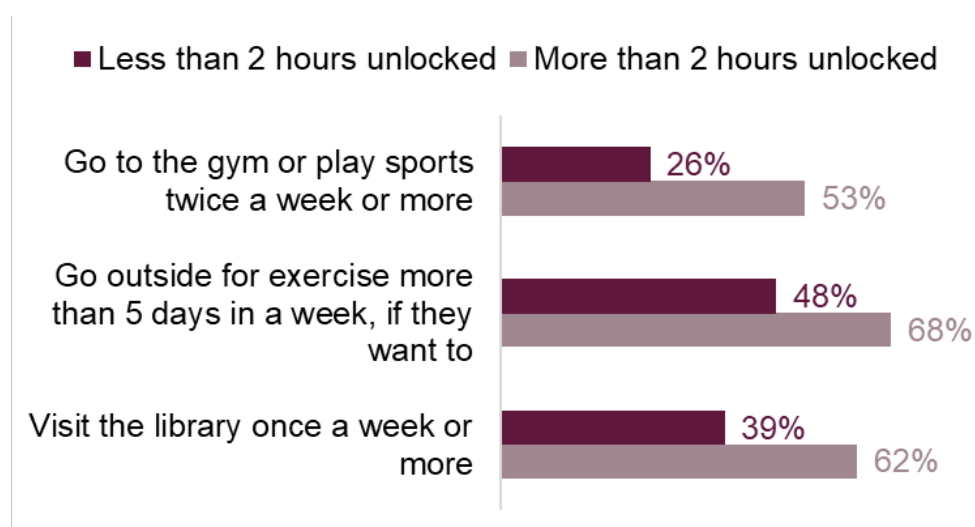
Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Woodhill by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (14–25 August 2023)

- 2.7 When prisoners get minimal time out of their cells, they inevitably have less access to activities which are important in supporting their physical and mental well-being. In our survey, those unlocked for less than two hours a day reported fewer opportunities to go to the gym, exercise in the fresh air and visit the prison library when compared with those who were out of their cell for longer. Unsurprisingly, of those men and women who spent less than two hours unlocked, only a third (33%) reported that they were able to lead a healthy lifestyle in prison most or all of the time. This compared with 53% for prisoners who were unlocked for longer.

“Bring back real exercise then people will have something to live for, exercise routine makes wonders in mind.” **Prisoner at HMP High Down, a category C training and resettlement prison**

Figure 4: Prisoners who spend less than two hours unlocked on weekdays are less likely to report accessing activities regularly.

Men’s and women’s prisons England and Wales, 2023–24



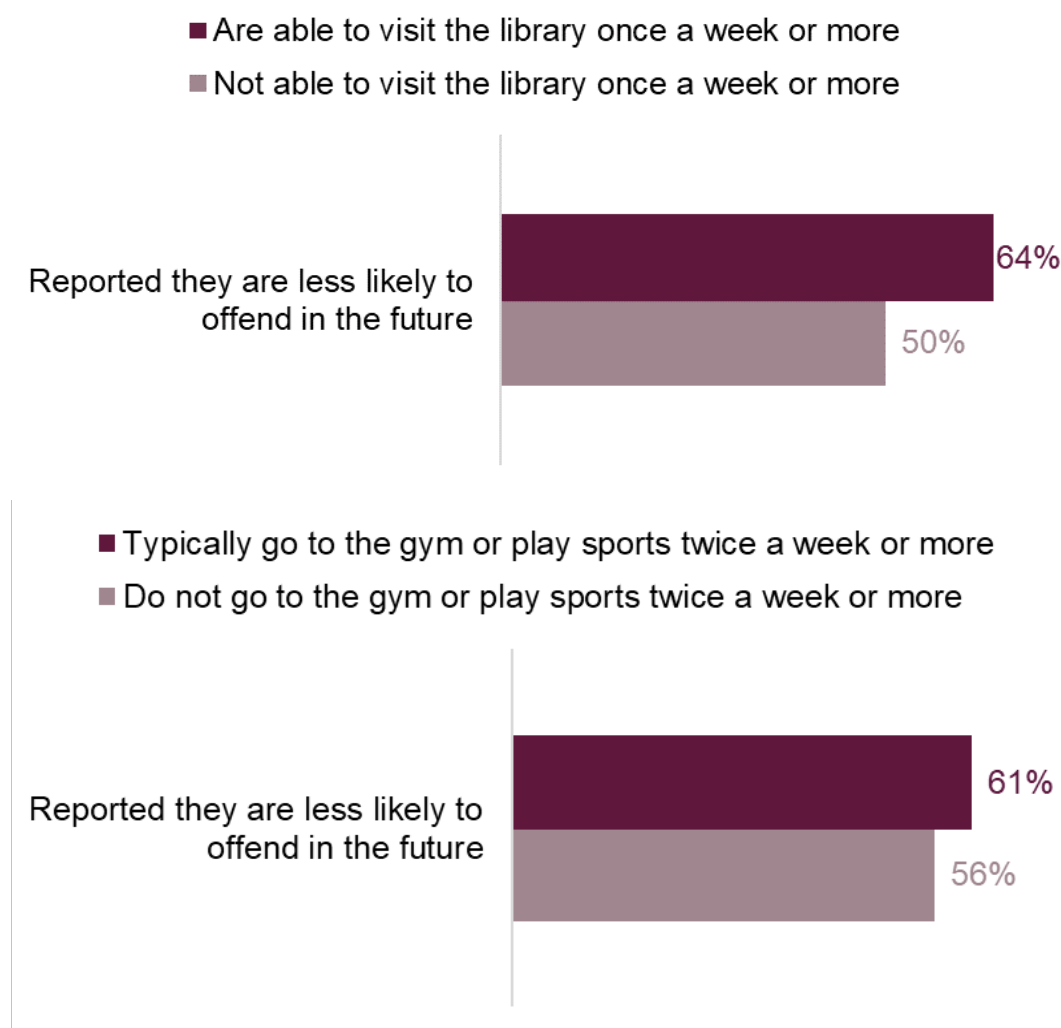
Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

- 2.8 Access to these activities had benefits for prisoners’ optimism about their prospects. In our survey, those who reported that they were able to visit the library at least once a week or that they could go to the gym or play sports at least twice a week were also more likely to report that they were less likely to offend in the future. Sixty-one per cent of those

who attended the gym twice a week said that they were less likely to offend in future compared with 56% who did not, and 64% of those who were able to attend the library at least weekly said the same compared with 50% who were not.

Figure 5: Prisoners who access activities regularly were more likely to say that they are less likely to offend in the future.

Men's and women's prisons England and Wales, 2023–24



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

- 2.9 Our surveys of men's prisons identified more self-reported mental health problems for those who were locked up for most of the time; 80% of prisoners spending less than two hours unlocked reported needing help with their mental health compared with 65% who had more time out of their cells.
- 2.10 Concerningly, this very restricted time unlocked also impacted on the ability to access the mental health support that was needed. Those in men's prisons who had less than two hours out of their cell were less likely to report that they had been helped with their mental health than those unlocked for longer (28% compared with 43%).

“... we're behind the door for 23 hours it plays with mental health and... always running low on staff so we can't come out at all.” **Prisoner at HMP/YOI Hindley, a category C training and resettlement prison**

“I strongly believe that there should be an increased access to fresh air and improved rehabilitation programmes, along with incentives and support for my fellow inmates who are grappling with mental health issues and drug addictions. The pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, making it even more critical to address these problems.” **Prisoner at HMP Dovegate, a category B training prison**

- 2.11 Restricted time out of cell limited access to enrichment activities and opportunities for association with peers to develop social skills, help alleviate boredom and support their well-being. In many prisons we visited, prisoners were unable to access regular recreational activities, and we found equipment, such as pool tables and table tennis, out of use in prisons such as HMP Moorland and HMP Bristol.

“It's boring – I used to be able to go to chess club, garden club etc until COVID. But none of these are available now.” **Prisoner at HMP Lowdham Grange, a category B training prison**

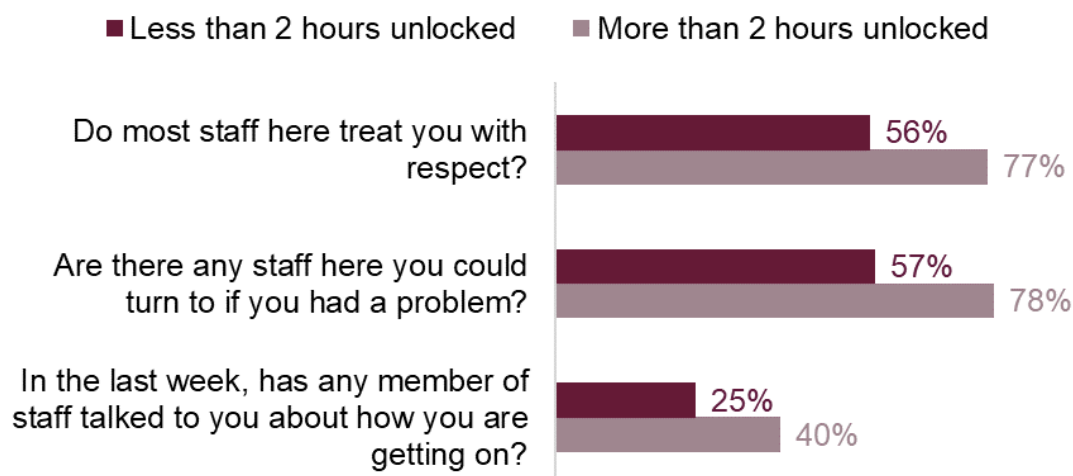
There needs to be more of a change to help occupy prisoners' minds and stress being in here has people at the very lowest.” **Prisoner at HMP YOI Brinsford, a YOI and category C reception and resettlement prison**

Poor time out of cell affects prisoners' relationships with staff

- 2.12 Time out of cell also impacted on prisoners' perception of staff; prisoners with less than two hours out of their cell each day were less likely than their peers to report feeling respected by staff (56% compared with 77%).

Figure 6: Adult prisoners who spent more than two hours unlocked during a weekday were more likely to report positively about staff.

Men's and women's prisons England and Wales, 2023–24

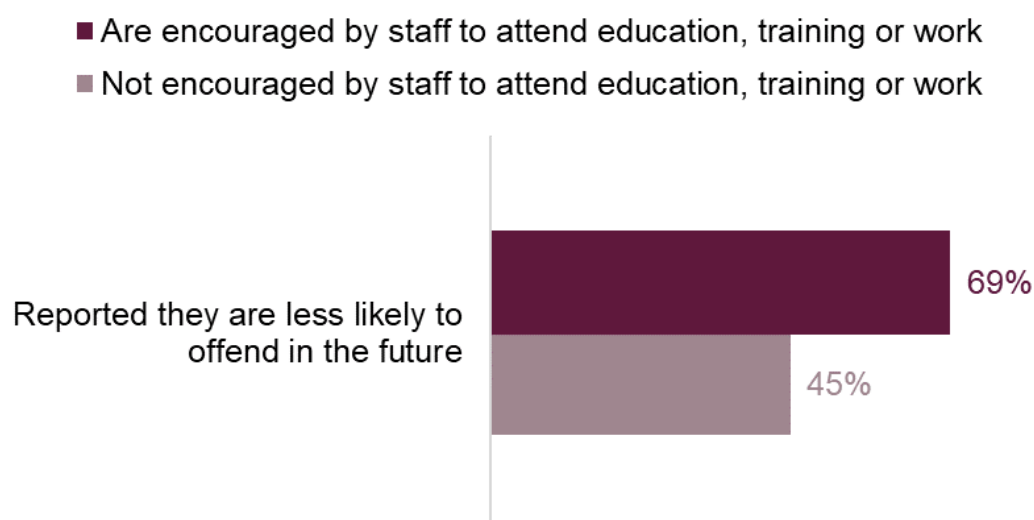


Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

- 2.13 Those who spent more time locked up were also less likely to be encouraged by staff to attend education, training or work (35% compared with 59%). Those who said they did receive this encouragement from staff were also more likely to report that they were less likely to offend in the future as a result of their experience in prison.

Figure 7: Adult prisoners who were encouraged to attend education, training or work were more likely to say that they are less likely to offend in the future.

Men's and women's prisons England and Wales, 2023–24



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

- 2.14 During our inspections of prisons with daily regimes offering minimal time out of cell, such as at HMP Bedford and HMP Lowdham Grange, we frequently found there was simply not enough time for staff to build meaningful, supportive relationships with the prisoners on their wings, a

concern given the important role staff ought to play in helping prisoners to make positive changes in their lives.

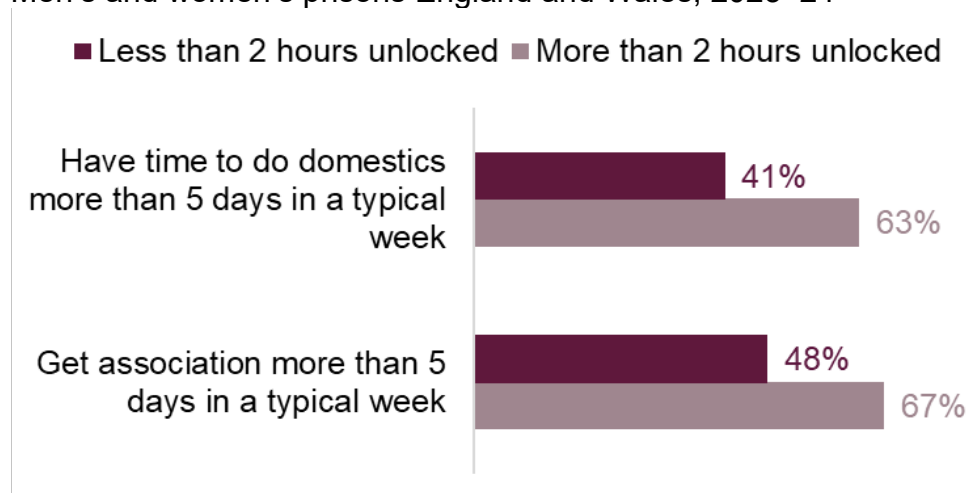
“I feel I'm just left in the cell to rot, no work, no money, I'm really finding life hard...” **Prisoner at HMP Dartmoor, a category C training prison**

A lack of purpose and consistency in daily regimes

- 2.15 A common cause of frustration for prisoners was the lack of consistency with the daily regime. During our inspections in 2023–24, prisoners frequently told us of the anxiety they experienced as a result of unpredictable unlock and lock-up times, which could further curtail time out of cell for work, education or daily domestic tasks.
- 2.16 As shown in our survey, those unlocked for less than two hours each day were much less likely to report being able to complete basic tasks or socialise with their peers.

Figure 8: Adult prisoners who spent more than two hours unlocked during a weekday were more likely to report being able to complete basic tasks or socialise with their peers.

Men's and women's prisons England and Wales, 2023–24



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

“The regime on my wing is awful, some days you only get half hour out your cell a day. I work most days and I don't even have a shower some days or have any chance to socialise. Locked up 23 1/2 hours a day some days. I work 5 hours a day and banged up for the rest. People who don't work are locked up all the time.” **Prisoner at HMP Swansea, a category B reception prison**

- 2.17 Prisoners also told us of their disappointment at the limited opportunities for work or to attend education. Of prisoners we surveyed who received less than two hours out of their cells, only 34% said that it was easy to attend education, and just 18% said it was easy to access work opportunities (for example vocational or skills training, or a prison job such as cleaning). For these prisoners, we repeatedly heard a

sense of hopelessness and a pervasive feeling of boredom from long hours spent in their cells.

“Some prisoners need jobs or want jobs or education. But not a clue how or what is available. Feel left to rot in my cell.” **Prisoner at HMP Woodhill, part of the long-term high security estate**

“System is broken need real help with courses one to one work just behind the door, locked up all day. Same old crap it’s depressing! No outdoor activity. I thought coming to prison would help me, it’s made me a lot worse and mental health has gone downhill.” **Prisoner at HMP Risley, a category C resettlement prison**

- 2.18 Staff shortages were a recurring theme of our inspections where prisons struggled to deliver a consistent regime for prisoners, and insufficient staff resulted in short-notice cancellations of activities and planned time out of cell. Prisoners spoke of not knowing when they would be unlocked or for how long.

“There is no regular regime. It’s always changing because of no staff. There’s no gym and that makes us prisoners very depressed.” **Prisoner at HMP Bedford**

Staff shortages have really impacted on everything and now it’s more about keeping people locked up than helping out prisoners, not being given the support or help as an IPP prisoner just felt like I’ve been left to rot.” **Prisoner at HMP Birmingham, a category B reception prison**

“Prisoners and staff told us that the regime was regularly curtailed because of staff shortages, which meant that prisoners missed exercise sessions and the opportunity to have a shower or make a telephone call. In the records available to us, we found that, over a one-month period, nearly half of all exercise periods had been cancelled. Leaders kept records of any projected regime restrictions; these showed that, in the month before the inspection, there had been a restriction to prisoners’ time out of cell 89% of the time.”

Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Dartmoor by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (19 June – 6 July 2023)

- 2.19 Inadequate daily regimes also created problems for prisoners as they did not have enough time to reliably complete basic daily tasks even when the regimes ran to schedule. In some prisons we visited, men spoke of having to prioritise between having a shower, socialising with

peers, taking exercise outdoors or a host of other routine needs such as laundry, submitting requests and cleaning their cells.

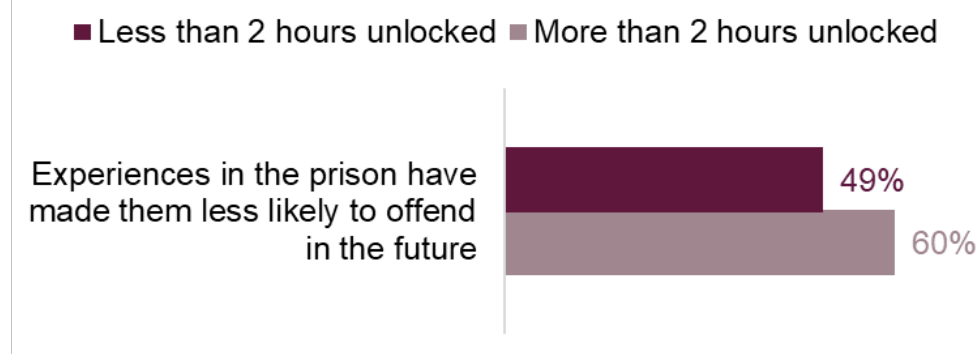
“We are behind our door all of the time... We are expected to be cleaning our cell, have exercise and socialise all in an hour.” **Prisoner at HMP Birmingham**

Preparing prisoners for life on release

- 2.20 In our survey, we ask prisoners if they think that their experiences in prison have made them less likely to offend in future. Responses to that question show that those who spent more time locked up were less optimistic about their likelihood of reoffending on their release.
- 2.21 Fewer than half (49%) who spent under two hours out of their cell thought their experiences in prison made them less likely to offend in the future, compared with 60% of those who were unlocked each day for longer.

Figure 9: Adult prisoners who spent more than two hours unlocked during a weekday were more likely to say that they are less likely to offend in the future.

Men’s and women’s prisons England and Wales, 2023–24



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

Appendix I Methodology

This thematic draws on evidence from HM Inspectorate of Prisons inspections carried out during 2023–24. As part of our evidence base a representative survey of prisoners is carried out at the start of the inspection. The questionnaire includes structured questions which facilitate quantitative analysis, enabling us to compare groups within the sample, and open questions at the end which allow prisoners to express in their own words what they find most positive and negative about the prison.

Analysis was conducted on 4,882 responses from the adult men's and women's estates; the responses of prisoners from open prisons were excluded. A comparative analysis was conducted comparing the responses of prisoners who reported spending less than two hours out of their cell on a typical weekday to all other prisoners. Other groups were also compared and differences tested for statistical significance. Throughout the report we only refer to comparisons between the two groups when these are statistically significant. The significance level is set at 0.01, which means that there is only a 1% chance that the difference in results is due to chance.

Thematic analysis of the prisoner responses to the open questions at the end of the questionnaire was also conducted. All relevant comments were systematically reviewed by a researcher, and themes identified.

This project was conducted in line with HM Inspectorate of Prisons' ethical principles for research activities: [Ethical principles for research – HM Inspectorate of Prisons \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/ethics/).