



Hardly working out: barriers to physical education in prisons

A key findings paper by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

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Introduction

Visiting the gym and physical exercise are enormously important to many prisoners. Time spent in the gym takes them away from the drudgery of life on the wings, supports their well-being and improves their physical and mental health. A recent All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry found that exercise and sport should be 'essential components of a modern, rehabilitative justice system', yet this report shows that access to physical activity in many prisons, particularly reception (local) jails, is inconsistent. Prison gyms are often understaffed and officers are cross-deployed to other prison work, meaning exercise is cancelled at short notice. Only some prisons are able to offer regular evening sessions or gyms that are open for long enough at the weekend.

As well as describing the barriers to regular gym access, this report shares examples of effective provision. Many jails have worked hard to increase access and encourage a wider range of prisoners to visit the gym by establishing varied and imaginative programmes. Too few prisoners, however, remain unable to benefit from them.

I hope prisons will learn from what the best are doing and that the prison service will make use of the evidence we provide in this report to improve provision.

Charlie Taylor
Chief Inspector of Prisons
February 2026

Section 1 Background

- 1.1 Prisoners do not have the same freedom to exercise and stay fit as people in the community. Opportunities to go to the gym and participate in other recreational activities largely depend on the facilities on offer, the prison regime and staff availability, which means regular access is often not guaranteed.
- 1.2 The Prisons Rules 1999 require that all prisoners aged 21 or over are able to participate in physical education (PE) for at least one hour a week, if circumstances reasonably permit. The Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 'Physical education (PE) for prisoners' (58/2011) recognises the importance of PE to both individual prisoners and the wider prison and provides operational guidance to establishments for delivery.

The PE specification defines the following key service outcomes;

- The physical health and wellbeing needs of prisoners are met, in part, through Physical Education (PE)
- PE contributes to the safety, order and control within prisons
- The life skills of prisoners are developed, in part, through PE

[...] PE plays an important part in a prison regime by providing purposeful activity and engagement with prisoners. PE makes a major contribution to the physical, mental and social well being of prisoners and positively impacts on the good order and discipline within establishments.

HMPPS PSI: 'Physical education (PE) for prisoners

- 1.3 However, the December 2025 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sport and Physical Activity in the Criminal Justice System (APPG) inquiry into physical activity and sport across the custodial estate in England and Wales noted that: 'Too often, physical activity and sport are treated as optional extras within a system under pressure. Yet the evidence we have gathered could not be clearer: physical activity is not a luxury. It is a vital tool for rehabilitation, a cornerstone of wellbeing and a gateway to safer, healthier communities. It must be treated as such.'
- 1.4 The inquiry noted that physical activity and sport provision can suffer where it is not prioritised at a senior level, that some establishments have outdated or inadequate infrastructure to facilitate physical education, physical activity and sport, and that provision is not tailored to specific populations. It made a number of recommendations to help address these problems and make sure physical activity and sport are recognised as essential components of rehabilitation in custody.

- 1.5 HMI Prisons considers PE and fitness provision when inspecting the healthy prison area of purposeful activity. Exercise, including in the open air, should form an optional part of prisoners' daily routines to help promote rehabilitation and well-being. Our Expectations, the criteria against which we inspect, set out that prisoners should be encouraged to participate in physical education and fitness provision that meets their needs. Prisons may demonstrate this in the following ways.

Expectation: Prisoners are encouraged to participate in physical education and fitness provision that meets their needs.

The following indicators describe evidence that may show this expectation being met, but do not exclude other ways of achieving it.

- Prisoners receive an appropriate and timely induction into physical education and fitness activities which focuses on healthy living.
- Prisoners have suitably frequent access to the physical education facilities for recreation.
- Prisoners can shower in private after each session in well-maintained amenities.
- The physical education facilities are in good condition and are well supervised.
- The range of physical education and fitness activities offered is varied, caters for all levels of ability and fitness, and meets the needs of the population.
- Effective joint working between gym staff and health/substance misuse staff supports safe gym use for all prisoners.
- Prisoners benefit from structured training programmes and opportunities to achieve employment-related qualifications.
- Physical education and fitness staff have appropriate qualifications and expertise.
- Prisoners are encouraged to participate in fitness activities which involve the local community.

HM Inspectorate of Prisons 'Expectations'

- 1.6 This paper examines PE and sport provision in adult men's and women's prisons. We reviewed 38 inspection reports published between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025 and analysed prisoner survey findings for the same period. This included statistical analysis of responses to closed questions and a thematic analysis of the comments made in open questions.

- 1.7 Throughout this paper, we have also highlighted some positive examples of physical activity provision that we found during the inspections.

Section 2 Benefits of exercise in prison

Mental and physical well-being

- 2.1 Physical activity in prison can be an opportunity for prisoners to improve their fitness and physical health and manage their weight, while also contributing to overall well-being, including improved sleep and reduced stress (Condon et al, 2008; Meek and Lewis, 2014; MacLean, 2022). A varied PE programme has also been shown to be beneficial to prisoners' mental health and self-esteem (ibid). The HMI Prisons thematic report 'Time to care: what helps women cope in prison?' highlighted the importance of physical activity for women, with one in five surveyed women reporting that physical activities were one of the most important tools in helping them to cope in prison.
- 2.2 In our survey, men who reported that they could go to the prison gym or play sports more than five times a week were more likely to say that they were able to lead a healthy lifestyle: 66% compared with 37% of prisoners who could not. In our inspection surveys men told us that regular sport and exercise sessions helped to support their mental health and well-being in prison, sometimes making the direct link between the lack of exercise opportunities and a decline in their mental well-being.

'I been in prison for eight years and gym has a got me through my sentence. The gym is for prisoner's mental health.'

Prisoner survey, Hollesley Bay, April 2024

'There's a lot of self-harm, I think there need to be more gym and football. This would reduce self-harming as prisoners would be more mentally happy and not depressed all the time.'

Prisoner survey, Wymott, December 2023

Improving health outcomes

During our inspections, we found many PE teams working to improve health outcomes through forming ties with health care, including substance misuse and mental health teams. For example, the Oakwood gym team offered sessions for individuals with a history of substance misuse and ran specialised sessions for those with diabetes. Multiple prisons provided remedial sessions to aid rehabilitation and courses for improving weight management. Prisoners told us that going to the gym helped them with substance misuse recovery and helped their overall rehabilitation.

‘... I am a drug user on the outside. I am on E wing which is the recovery wing. I have been attending the gym this as help me stay in recovery I ain't used any drug over the last three months of being in prison, this as a lot to do with my personal choice but also the gym and help on the recovery wing these things have made it a lot easier for me to stay on track.’ (Prisoner survey, Humber, November 2023)

Relationships

- 2.3 Targeted PE provision offers prisons the opportunity to engage with prisoners who do not participate in traditional educational pathways. PE has been shown to improve the way in which disengaged prisoners perceive staff, with PE staff commonly among the most popular (Hammond & Crother, 2025; Hammond et al, 2024; Meek, 2018). An evaluation of parkrun in a women’s prison found a range of prisoner benefits, including improved relationships with staff and other prisoners, and a sense of freedom (Campana et al., 2025).
- 2.4 Comments in our prisoner surveys supported this. For some, gym staff and the work they did were the most positive thing about their prison, providing much-needed support and encouragement.

‘The gym, currently work there so lucky to get as much training as I do. Gym staff only staff I trust or would go to should I need any help.’

Prisoner survey, Styal, December 2024

‘... the gym staff foster an attitude of encouragement and inspiration.’

Prisoner survey, Buckley Hall, February 2024

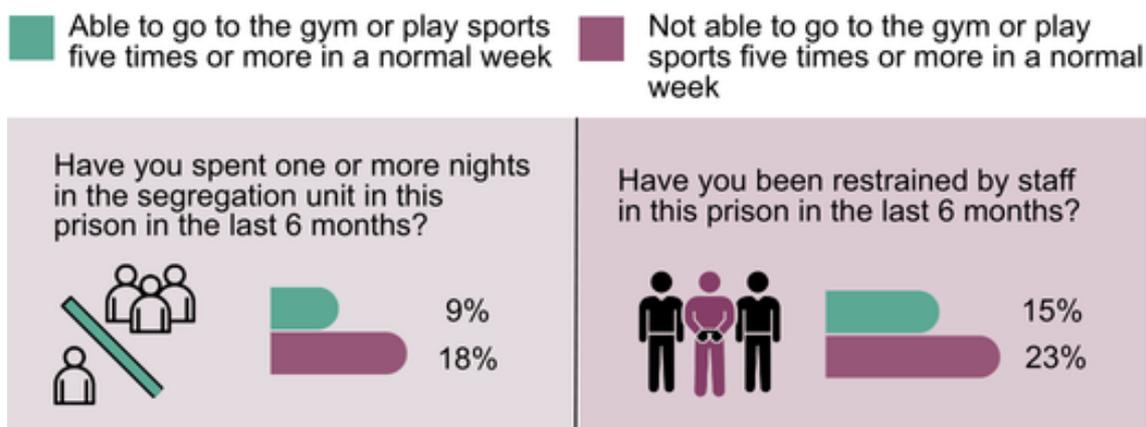
Behaviour and rehabilitation

- 2.5 Beyond the benefits to health, regular sport and exercise can promote positive behaviour. Some of the benefits of sport are described by The National Alliance of Sport in its ‘Theory of Change’ (Noble and Coleman, 2016). Physical exercise can help prisoners to develop pro-social identities, improve mood, and engage in teamwork and conflict resolution – all of which can support rehabilitation and desistance from crime (Meek, 2018). Prison gyms offer a rare sense of normality and personal agency within a highly regulated environment; prisoners can set goals, build routines, and develop self-discipline (Maycock, 2023). Exercise also encourages healthier habits, including improved diet (Aitchinson, 2024) and better drug and alcohol management (Condon et al., 2008).
- 2.6 Data from our survey supports the connection between regular exercise and positive behaviour. Prisoners with regular access to

exercise opportunities were less likely to have been to the segregation unit or to have been restrained in the last six months.

Figure 1: Prisoners who were able to go to the gym or play sports regularly were less likely to have been segregated or restrained in the last six months

Adult prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons survey data 2024–25

- 2.7 In our survey, prisoners told us that sport helped to pass the time and alleviate boredom, and that more of it would promote better behaviour on the wings, reducing the likelihood of violence and drug misuse.

‘.. if we had weights on the wing like DRU [drug recovery unit] wing do and the VP [vulnerable prisoner] wing there'd be a lot less problems cos people wouldn't want to not train or not be able to it would keep them busy instead of drugs.’

Prisoner survey, Five Wells, January 2024

‘More gym, need a pool table or table tennis then prisoners won't get bored and start fighting during sosh [association].’

Prisoner survey, Winchester, October 2024

- 2.8 While the gym can help to instil good lifestyle habits, it can also function as a behavioural incentive. Many prisons we visited had incorporated additional gym sessions into their incentives and rewards schemes and some prisoners told us that additional gym sessions for enhanced prisoners was the best thing about prison.

‘... only good thing about being enhanced is your canteen money and one extra gym session.’

Prisoner survey, Deerbolt, December 2024

- 2.9 When PE was not well integrated into the incentives and rewards schemes, prisoners participating fully in the regime expressed frustration that they received the same number of sessions as those who were not. In some jails, we found those in full or part-time employment were unable to access exercise when they returned to the wing after work. At other sites, restricted access was used as a punishment, even when prisoners' poor behaviour was not connected to the use of the gym.

Fostering good behaviour and relationships

Some prisons used PE to promote pro-social outcomes for prisoners, and support positive behaviour. For example, at Chelmsford, the PE team delivered a foundational course aimed at younger prisoners, to reduce violence.

Physical activity was also used to foster relationships between staff and prisoners. At Humber, PE staff had developed a new Personal Achievement and Development Scheme (PADS), which was open to a mixed group of staff and prisoners. The scheme combined physical activities, leadership and team building through military-style obstacle courses, to help build relationships of trust and confidence between staff and prisoners.

Forming links with community

During our inspections we found some good connections with sports clubs beyond the prison walls, which were enabling prisoners to take part in a broader range of community-led initiatives. Brighton Table Tennis Club was delivering sessions at Lewes prison, and at Peterborough (men's) the Phoenix Trust delivered a 12-week yoga programme. Even where external partnerships were not in place, PE staff in open prisons were creating opportunities to engage prisoners with the outside community. For example, Hatfield ran courses in mountain biking and Kirklevington Grange took eligible prisoners trekking, both of which included excursions outside the prison.

Some prisons had forged links with community football teams and leagues. The prisoner football team at Swinfen Hall regularly participated in the local Sunday games, community football teams visited Whatton to play against the prison team, and Styal had received a visit from Everton community club.

The Twinning Project – a national partnership between HMPPS and professional football clubs – was in operation in many prisons and enabled prisoners to gain employment skills and qualifications via accredited courses. Sheffield Wednesday Football Club operated four employment skills courses a year for prisoners at Hatfield and the opportunity to earn a coaching award. The course culminated in a tour of Hillsborough stadium and a game against a local football team. Chelmsford was twinned with West Ham United Football Club, which provided literacy classes and an ‘Active IQ’ fitness course, aimed at providing prisoners with the skills to assist in the delivery of exercise programmes.

Links with local sports clubs contributed to broader interventions in other prisons. At Brixton, the charity Street Soccer Academy ran courses for prisoners with issues related to homelessness, offending behaviour, substance misuse, long-term unemployment and health issues. At some establishments, connections with local organisations extended through the gate, supporting prisoners on release and contributing to rehabilitation. For example, Durham had established relationships with a local CrossFit team, and the gym owners provided three months of free membership to prisoners on release, helping them to maintain healthy routines. At Winchester the ‘Saints Restart’ project provided prisoners from the Southampton area with resettlement support before and after release through one-to-one mentoring, physical activity and various group sessions.



On-wing table tennis at Lewes (left) and football at Hatfield (right)

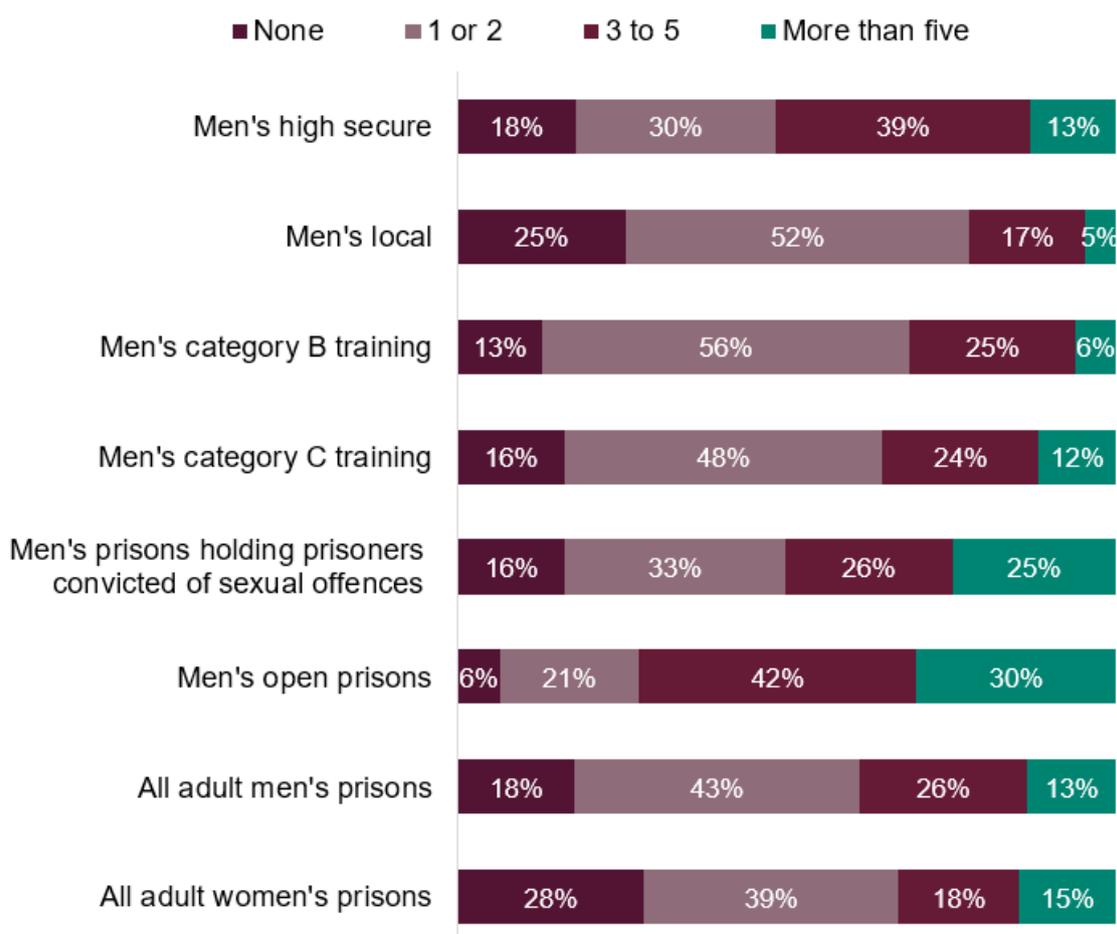
Section 3 Access to physical activity

Lack of regular access during the week

- 3.1 Despite the known benefits of sport and exercise, our inspections found that not all prisoners were able to access physical activity on a regular basis. Data that we were shown during one inspection of a men's local prison, suggested that only 17% of its population was using the gym.
- 3.2 Only 13% of the prisoners we surveyed in men's prisons, and 15% in women's prisons, told us that they could go to the gym or play sports more than five times a week. This figure was highest in open prisons (30%), and lowest in local prisons (just 5%). Some of the prisoners said that they could not go to the gym or play sports at all in a normal week; this was highest in men's local prisons (25%) and women's prisons (28%).

Figure 2: The proportion of prisoners able to go to the gym or play sports regularly in a normal week varied by functional type

Adult prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons survey data 2024–25

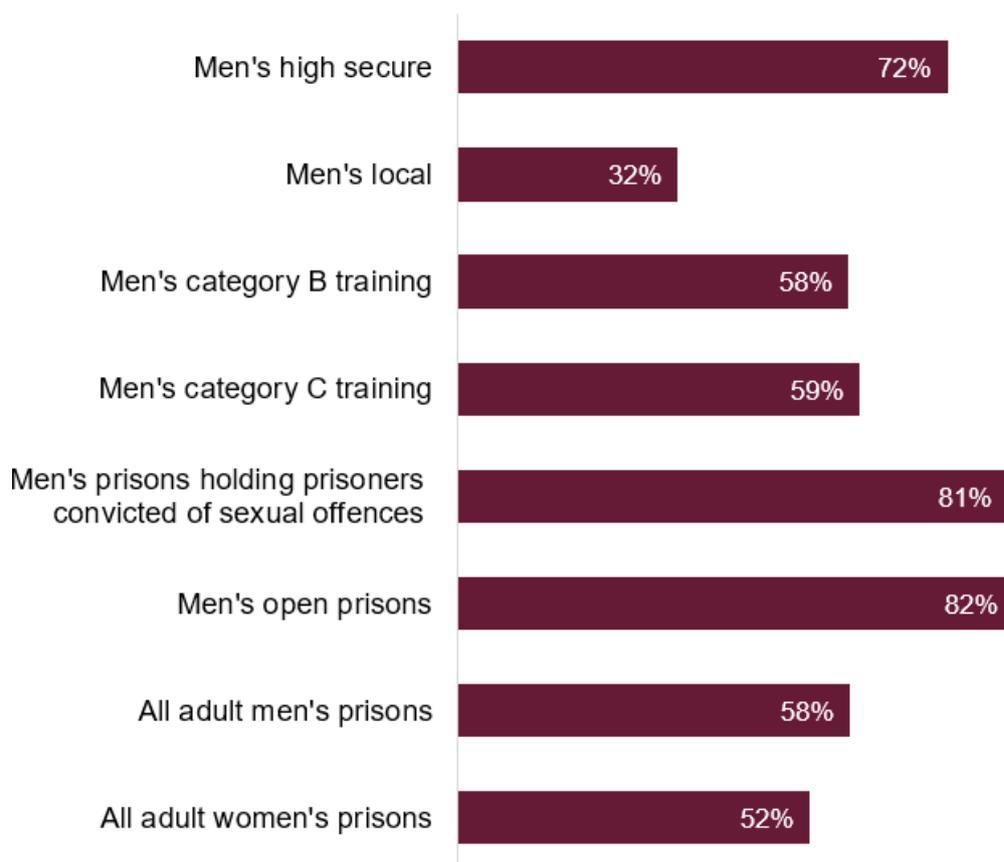
- 3.3 Although most prisoners said they could go to the gym or play sports at least once a week, our 2025 review, 'What happens to prisoners on a Friday?', showed that access across the week and between prisons was not consistent. While some jails offered limited sessions for small groups on Fridays, others had no provision at all.

Reduced access at weekends

- 3.4 In both men's and women's prisons, prisoners across all prison types told us that they had less access to the gym or sports at the weekend than on weekdays. Our 'Weekends in Prison' thematic found that while most prisons offered at least some gym sessions at the weekend, the number of prisoners who could attend and the reliability of these sessions varied.
- 3.5 Our survey findings revealed that in men's prisons only 58% of prisoners reported that they could go to the gym and play sports at the weekend. In women's prisons the figure was 52%. In many of the establishments we visited, there were too few weekend sessions and in one prison, sports facilities were closed altogether on Saturdays and Sundays. Despite this, our inspections found some positive examples of weekend provision, such as at Hatfield where team games were organised during weekends and weekday evenings. There, 95% of survey respondents said they could go to the gym or play sport at the weekend.

Figure 3: The proportion of prisoners able to go to the gym or play sport at the weekend varied by functional type

Adult prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons survey data 2024–25

Barriers to access

3.6 Across all types of prison, improved access to the gym and other physical activities was frequently what prisoners told us they most wanted to see changed. However, prison facilities, staffing and restricted regimes often hindered prisoners' ability to engage in physically active lifestyles.

Inadequate facilities

3.7 While some prisons were able to run busy sports schedules in well-equipped gyms, large sports halls and outdoor exercise spaces, many establishments lacked suitable exercise space. Some gyms had a good range of weights and cardiovascular equipment, but at others equipment was old or worn and facilities required renovation. Limited facilities meant that gyms could not always cater for the size and needs of the population, and sessions were often crowded or delivered infrequently. Five Wells, which opened in 2022 and was built under the government's 'New Prisons Programme', had been built with no dedicated gymnasium. A workshop had been converted to serve this

purpose, but the space was cramped and only had capacity for 30 prisoners a session which was far too limited for the size of the population.



Converted workshop at Five Wells (left) and out-of-use football pitch at Manchester, 2026 (right)

- 3.8 Some prisons used outdoor sports facilities to take the strain off busy indoor sessions. At Rye Hill gym sessions were routinely supplemented with extra activities, including running and walking clubs and activities on the all-weather pitch. These contributed to a more varied sports programme, while also improving attendance. However, not all establishments had these facilities, and even when they did, a disappointing number were not using them. Many inspections found that frequent cancellations of activity sessions meant impressive facilities were underused, and in some cases practically untouched, which was a significant missed opportunity.

'Play sports, been in the jail six years and never used the football pitches for a game of football once.'

Prisoner survey, Garth, July 2024

'More gym sessions, there is a lot of free time here and not a lot to do with it. Gym is important for everyone's physical and mental health and there's a brand new gym here that hardly gets used two sessions a week is pathetic. There's no badminton, basketball, football, volleyball extra classes in sports hall. The gym is always closed as well.'

Prisoner survey, Kirkham, September 2024

'The gym is the most positive thing, but the equipment is all broke and look like it was the same equipment Arnold Swarzenegger use in the 70s.'

Prisoner survey, Wymott, December 2023

- 3.10 Some sites were able to supplement timetabled PE with opportunities to exercise on the wings, for example Frankland, which had created specific exercise spaces in communal areas. Other prisons had installed exercise equipment in the yards so that prisoners could keep fit outside. Full Sutton's outdoor exercise areas were enhanced by woodland displays, which created more appealing, therapeutic spaces. The gym team at Brixton used the yard in good weather for volleyball, basketball and weights sessions. However, not all prison wings and yards had exercise areas, and these spaces were sometimes old, tired or uninspiring.



Volleyball at Brixton (left) and exercise yard at Belmarsh (right)

Making the most of sports facilities

Some of the best prison gyms replicated those found in the community; they included well-equipped workout spaces with weights and cardiovascular equipment, large sports halls and outdoor exercise spaces, such as running tracks and sports pitches. These large, modern facilities enabled PE departments in some prisons to offer a broad spectrum of activities to cater for large populations. The best-run gyms used their facilities to provide a busy varied schedule of indoor activities, including weights sessions, yoga, circuit training and exercise classes. Outdoor facilities enabled some prisons to run other forms of recreational fitness and team sports, such as parkrun, racket sports, football, cricket and rugby.

Where prisons had created on-wing exercise spaces and installed outdoor exercise equipment on yards, prisoners had more opportunity for personal fitness, and gym staff were able to hold on-wing sessions for prisoners who had difficulty accessing the main gym. For example, at Frankland, PE staff used the on-wing facilities to hold mobility clinics for older prisoners (see paragraph 3.17).

In prisons with smaller gyms, such as The Verne, outdoor sports facilities took the strain off the busy indoor sessions, as well as providing a more varied timetable and enabling prisoners to spend more time in the fresh air.



Small gym (left) supplemented by outdoor sports facilities at The Verne

Understaffing

- 3.11 A shortage of qualified physical education instructors (PEIs) contributed to insufficient levels of PE in some prisons. Not having enough PEIs reduced the number of sessions that could be delivered, limited capacity beyond anything other than a basic gym offer, and led to frequent cancellations. For example, at Manchester, where the gym team was operating with around half of its staff, cancellations occurred almost daily, and at Belmarsh, understaffing meant only around 10–15 prisoners could attend each session, around half the normal number of attendees. Despite understaffing, some PE departments continued to provide core exercise opportunities. For example, at the time of our inspection at Lewes, there were only 2.5 full-time-equivalent instructors instead of six, but the team still delivered a good weekday service.



Sports hall (left) and gym facilities at Manchester

- 3.12 However, as at many other prisons we visited, evening sessions were limited and the PE facilities were closed at weekends. Staff shortages across prisons meant that PEIs were often redeployed to other work areas, which further compromised PE departments' ability to deliver their objectives and resulted in more cancellations.

'The gym and association is constantly cancelled on a daily basis and staff keep complaining to prisoners that the prison is run far below the recommended required amount of staff every day.'

Prisoner survey, Deerbolt, December 2024

Limited programme delivery

- 3.13 Many prisons did not have the capacity to offer structured training programmes or sports qualifications. Some establishments offered fitness instructor courses at levels one and two, or basic first aid training, but these were only to a small cohort of prisoners. Other accredited courses included level three first aid, sports leaders, mental health first aid, manual handling and health and safety, but these were scarce and many prisons did not offer any accredited programmes. At others, courses had recently been terminated because of staffing problems, lack of funding or contracts coming to an end.

Boosting education and gaining qualifications

Some PE departments had made links with education departments to use sport as a means of supporting wider learning outcomes for prisoners, providing training programmes and opportunities to achieve employment related qualifications. For example, at Frankland the 'Get Fit with Maths' and 'Get Fit with English' courses helped prisoners improve their skills in Maths and English; the courses used real world health and fitness examples to ground learning and approach it more practically.

Engaging in these PE courses was viewed positively by prisoners in our survey comments.

'The gym tries to get people involved with courses that you can use on release.' (Prisoner survey, Nottingham, 2024)

Prisoners could work as gym orderlies in some prisons, which was also viewed positively.

'Working in the gym as an orderly, I'm able to stay fit/healthy and keeping very busy.' (Prisoner survey, Winchester, 2024)

Restricted regime and activity clashes

- 3.14 In some prisons we visited, frequent regime changes meant the few timetabled PE sessions on offer were often cancelled. In our survey, prisoners described the impact this had on them, including their ability to work towards fitness goals.

‘Only get one gym session a week on this wing but on mains get 3–5 days gym, the gym is often cancelled on here meant to have two a week but only get one session.’

Prisoner survey, Forest Bank, December 2024

‘There is not enough opportunities for exercise/being outside, exercise is often cut short or doesn't happen at all.’

Prisoner survey, Drake Hall, July 2024

- 3.15 In prisons operating restricted or limited regimes, timetabling clashes meant prisoners had to choose between exercise and other core activities such as showering, spending time with their peers, attending religious services or the library, or even going to education and work. Prisoners felt this was unfair.

‘We barely get out for 45 minutes a day. Sometimes not enough food left, maybe gym once a week for an hour but miss showering, if you go to the church services you miss social and shower for exercises.’

Prisoner survey, Wandsworth, April 2024

- 3.16 Administrative errors sometimes meant prisoners were added to the wrong unlock list, meaning they were left behind their doors and missed gym sessions.

‘The prison officers actually opening everyone who is on a list. i.e. for education, work, gym, or library. I have not been opened for activities on many occasions due to lists either not being used or misread.’

Prisoner survey, Nottingham, May 2024

- 3.17 Not offering evening sessions meant that some prison regimes did not allow those in full or part-time employment to access exercise when they returned to the wing after work, which acted as a disincentive to working in the prison.

‘People that are full time workers [to] get more gym! As I work full time and only get gym once a week which I think is unfair!!! Helps with my mental health.’

Prisoner survey, Chelmsford, January 2024

Differing access across prisoner groups

- 3.18 The PSI on PE for prisoners (58/2011) requires that provision meets the needs of all prisoners.

The PE Service specification is mandatory and all PE programmes and PE provision must comply with the specification while meeting the diverse needs of the prison population to promote increased participation levels, rehabilitative PE programmes and PE Induction programmes.

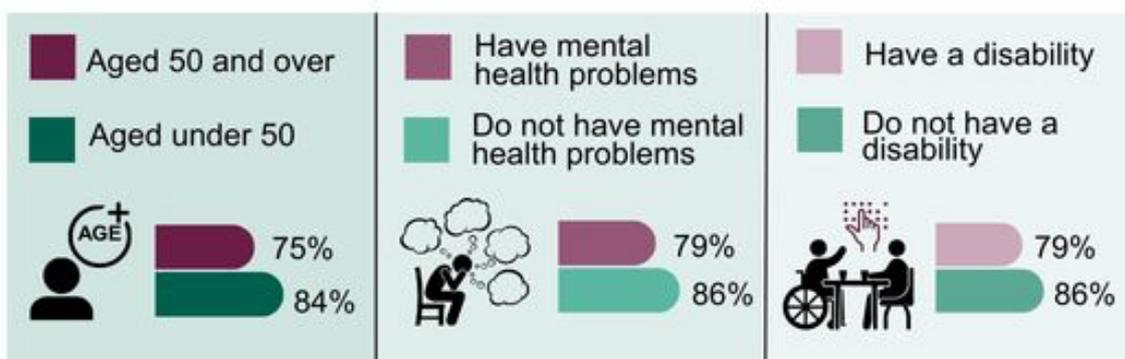
HMPPS PSI: 'Physical education (PE) for prisoners

- 3.19 Some prisons offered gym sessions which supported the needs of those with medical or mobility issues or injuries, but these were not available in all jails.
- 3.20 Older prisoners, aged 50 and over, were more likely than their younger counterparts to report not attending the gym in a typical week, as were those who reported having a mental health problem or a disability.

Figure 4: Prisoners who were over 50, had a mental health problem or had a disability were less likely to attend the gym at least once in a normal week

Adult prisons in England and Wales

Able to attend the gym or play sports at least once a week in a normal week:



Source: HMI Prisons survey data 2024–25

- 3.21 In some establishments, prison PE teams used gym attendance data to monitor, understand and adapt their provision to the prison population. For example, the PE department at Chelmsford used data on attendance to regularly monitor trends and identify lower levels of engagement, and Whatton had used attendance monitoring data to adapt delivery to motivate non-attendees. However, many prisons were not collecting data to understand trends or were not responding to these insights effectively. This meant opportunities to adapt delivery to drive participation in harder-to-reach groups were missed.

Provision to meet specific needs

To improve the health of older prisoners in particular, the PE department at Frankland ran sessions in the gym for men over 50 in conjunction with Age UK, along with structured on-wing activities and mobility clinics. Rye Hill also ran 'mature gatherings' twice a week, which included darts and bowls. In our surveys, prisoners commented positively about sessions designed around meeting the needs of older prisoners.

'Lots of time on the gym and on the field doing sports like, football, cricket, softball and volleyball etc. Extra gym sessions for over 50's to encourage a healthy lifestyle.' (Prisoner survey, The Verne, July 2024)

To target those who were unlikely to attend the gym, The Verne used a 'Body MOT' initiative, where orderlies conducted fitness checks on the units with prisoners. Rye Hill also supported improving fitness among beginners by providing a dedicated community engagement PE instructor who offered one-to-one support to those who had not previously attended.

Some gyms had made adjustments to meet the needs of neurodivergent prisoners and boost participation among this group. At Stafford, gym staff partnered with health care, mental health, and neurodiversity managers to offer appropriate sessions, including separate ones for those who might need a quieter environment and remedial classes to enhance overall well-being. At Forest Bank, quieter gym sessions were also available specifically for neurodivergent prisoners.

Appendix I Methodology

This findings paper draws on evidence from 38 inspections published during the annual reporting period from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. As part of HMI Prisons' evidence base, a representative survey of prisoners is carried out at the start of each inspection. The questionnaire includes structured questions which facilitate quantitative analysis, enabling a comparison of 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 6,281 responses from the adult men's and women's prisons inspected. Due to some incomplete surveys the number of responses for each question varies and may not total this number in all cases. A comparative analysis was conducted which compared the responses of prisoners who were in prisons of different functions and their experience of access to physical activities. 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% possibility that the difference in results is due to chance.

A 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 HMI Prisons' ethical principles for research activities: [Ethical principles for research – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

Appendix II References

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