

KULTURALISM®

PRISONERS IN THE COMMUNITY REPORT

2025



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PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report was created by Kulturalism® to examine the current realities of prisoner release, supervision, and reintegration across England and Wales. It was developed in response to rising public concern around licence recalls, probation failures, and the lack of stable support for individuals returning to the community after custody.

The report draws on a combination of official government data, a targeted literature review on post-custody supervision, and real-world insight from individuals recently released from prison. These accounts — shared through unstructured conversations in a community setting — offer valuable context to the broader evidence base on housing, probation, and reintegration challenges.

It also reflects postgraduate academic study in Criminal Psychology, as well as Kulturalism's direct engagement with issues of crime prevention, justice reform, and community safety.

This report is intended to inform public understanding, support professionals across justice, housing, and probation, and amplify the voices of those often overlooked — individuals navigating release, recovery, and rehabilitation outside of prison walls.

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INTRODUCTION



This report reveals the true scale and risks of managing prisoners in the community across England and Wales.

We found:

- Over 240,000 people are under community supervision — including thousands released early to ease prison overcrowding.
- Most recalls to prison are for non-criminal breaches, not serious reoffending.
- Many prison leavers are placed in unsafe HMOs, often with drug users or untreated mental health needs, fuelling relapse and harm.
- A significant number are released with no stable housing, and only 1 in 4 secure long-term accommodation.
- Short sentences lead to the highest reoffending rates — nearly 60% reoffend within 12 months if jailed for under 6 months.
- Public trust has eroded after high-profile failures, including cases where offenders under supervision committed murders.
- Probation services are overstretched, under-resourced, and in some areas operating with over 40% staff vacancies.

Recent government reforms include early release policies, increased tagging, parole restrictions, and triaging supervision.

The evidence highlights a system **under pressure** — one that must balance rehabilitation with real public safety risks, often without the tools or capacity to do so.

PRISONERS IN THE COMMUNITY (ENGLAND & WALES) – 2024/25

Number of Prisoners Released and Under Community Supervision

In 2024, 57,277 offenders were released from custody (56,834 from determinate sentences, 443 from indeterminate. This annual release figure remains below pre-pandemic levels (which averaged ~69,000 per year) despite a recent increase due to early-release schemes.

As a result of these releases and offenders serving community sentences, the probation service supervises roughly 240,000 individuals in the community at any one time. As of December 2024, there were 240,362 offenders under probation supervision in England and Wales – a caseload essentially unchanged from the previous year.

This total includes people on court-ordered community sentences as well as those on licence after prison (i.e. parole/post-release supervision). For context, about 107,600 of the caseload were serving community orders or suspended sentences, while around 137,400 were pre- or post-release cases (prisoners in custody being prepared for release, or ex-prisoners on licence).

In other words, tens of thousands of ex-prisoners are out in the community on licence at any given time. All standard prisoners serving over 12 months (and shorter sentences under post-sentence supervision) are subject to probation monitoring upon release, as mandated by the **Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014**.



OFFENDERS ON LICENCE OR PROBATION

Those released from prison serve the remainder of their sentence under supervision (on licence). In addition, offenders given community-based sentences (Community Orders or Suspended Sentence Orders) are supervised by probation.

As noted, the total probation caseload is around 240k, which illustrates the scale of “prisoners in the community”. This caseload had grown in the mid-2010s after post-release supervision was expanded to all short-term prisoners, but it has fluctuated in recent years.

Notably, the number of people on Community Orders has been declining again (about 61,663 on COs at end of 2024, down 5% that year) while those on suspended-sentence orders rose (~47,350 at end 2024, up 7%).

Meanwhile, the post-custody supervision cohort has been rising – about 63,156 offenders were on post-release licence supervision at end 2024 (an increase of 6% over 2023).

This reflects the growing number of ex-prisoners in the community due to earlier releases and longer licence periods.

RECALLS, BREACH RATES AND REOFFENDING STATISTICS

Supervision in the community is backed by enforcement powers: offenders who breach licence conditions can be recalled to prison.

2025 13,583 licence recalls, a 36% increase on the same period the year before

The volume of recalls has surged. In just the first quarter of 2025, 10,101 individuals were recalled to prison, a 36% increase on the same period the year before. Across all of 2024, more than 35,000 recall admissions occurred — a 34% year-on-year rise. [By March 2025, there were 13,583 prisoners being held on recall](#), reflecting the growing strain on custody space and community monitoring."

The Ministry of Justice attributes this rise partly to policy changes that put more offenders on licence (such as early releases under new schemes) and a 2024 rule change that made short-term offenders automatically subject to a fixed 14-day recall for breaches.

In short, more offenders are being released earlier and any non-compliance is triggering many more recalls.

PRISONERS RECALL

Why are prisoners being recalled – petty breaches or serious crimes? Most recalls are for “technical” breaches of conditions rather than new crimes.

Key Indicators

- In Jan–Mar 2025, about 75% of recalls involved non-compliance (e.g. missing appointments or breaking curfew),
- 34% involved failure to keep in touch with probation.
- 22% were for failure to reside at an approved address
- Only about 23% of recalls were triggered by the offender being charged with a new offence

These proportions have been stable, indicating that the majority of licence recalls are for **rule violations** – often relatively minor or procedural breaches – rather than fresh serious crimes. This suggests many ex-prisoners are being returned to custody for not adhering to **supervision requirements** (like missed meetings or substance use) even if they haven’t committed a new offence.

There is a concern about finding the right balance between enforcing compliance and recalling people for every infraction. **Breach of community orders** shows a similar pattern. Around 10% of community orders in late 2024 were terminated early due to failure to comply with requirements (e.g. missed unpaid work sessions), compared to roughly 65% that ran full course and others ending for positive reasons. So about 1 in 10 community-sentence offenders end up breaching conditions significantly.

What proportion go on to reoffend? The proven reoffending rate (within 12 months) for all offenders in England & Wales is about 26–27% in recent data

Reoffending Rates

Reoffending rates vary greatly by offender type. Adults released from prison or starting court orders had a 33.8% reoffending rate, reflecting higher risks in that group. Notably, those released from very short prison sentences have extremely high recidivism: 56.9% of adults released from custodial sentences under 12 months reoffended within a year (nearly 60% reoffending rate for sentences ≤ 6 months).

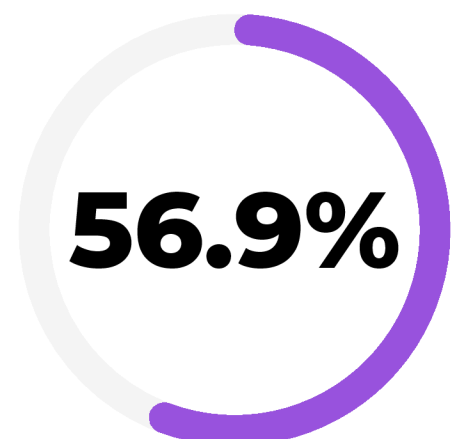
In contrast, longer sentences and those on community orders have somewhat lower reoffending rates. The reoffending rate has been rising post-pandemic (from a low ~22.7% in 2020 up to ~26% now).

These figures underscore that over a quarter of offenders overall commit a new proven offence within a year, and **for short-term prisoners a majority do** – a serious public safety challenge. It also highlights why robust supervision and support in the community are critical to breaking the cycle of reoffending.

Longer sentences - lower reoffending rates

Notably, those released from very short prison sentences have extremely high recidivism

56.9% of adults released from custodial sentences under 12 months reoffended within a year (nearly **60% reoffending rate for sentences ≤ 6 months**)



MAPPA: MONITORING HIGH-RISK OFFENDERS IN THE COMMUNITY

The most dangerous individuals are managed under Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (**MAPPA**), which coordinate police, probation, prisons and other agencies to supervise high-risk offenders. The **MAPPA** population has been steadily growing and reached a record high. As of March 2023, 91,040 offenders were under MAPPA in England & Wales, a 2% rise from the previous year and 51% higher than in 2013.

This reflects more offenders (particularly sex offenders) being kept under long-term monitoring in the community. About 70–75% of **MAPPA** cases are **Category 1** (registered sex offenders) – there were 68,357 registered sexual offenders under **MAPPA** at March 2023.

A further ~24% are **Category 2** (violent or serious offenders who received 12+ month sentences) – numbering 21,897 Category 2 offenders. The remainder are **Category 3** (“other dangerous” offenders who pose serious risk but don’t fit Cat1/2) and the newly introduced **Category 4** (terrorism-related offenders).

Category 3, while a small group, has grown – there were 540 Category 3 offenders under active multi-agency management at March 2023 (up 37% from the previous year). **Category 4** (added in 2022 for terrorist/radicalised offenders) counted 246 offenders in 2023.

Under **MAPPA**, offenders are monitored for specific risks: e.g. registered sex offenders must report addresses and are often subject to **Sexual Harm Prevention Orders**; violent offenders might have exclusion zones or license conditions.

Agencies share intelligence on these individuals. For example, domestic abuse perpetrators are increasingly brought into **MAPPA** Category 3 to coordinate safety plans.

The use of **MAPPA** has expanded, evidenced by the large increase in Cat3 cases in recent years (often domestic abusers now flagged for multi-agency management).

Overall, **MAPPA** provides a structured framework to manage those offenders in the community who pose the highest risk of serious harm, through enhanced surveillance, restrictive conditions, and partnership working (police home visits, probation supervision, mental health input, etc.).

HIGH-PROFILE FAILURES AND RECENT HEADLINE CASES

Despite the safeguards, there have been some grave failures in community supervision that garnered national headlines and exposed deficiencies in the system. A notable example is the **Damien Bendall case**. Bendall was a convicted offender under probation supervision in 2021 when he committed a horrific crime: in September 2021, while on a curfew, he murdered a mother (his partner) and three children in Killamarsh, Derbyshire (and also committed rape). An independent review by HM Inspectorate of Probation found “the Probation Service’s assessment and management of **Bendall** at every stage... **was of an unacceptable standard** and fell far below what was required.

Bendall had a history of **violence and domestic abuse red flags**, but probation officers mis-assessed him as medium risk and inappropriately recommended a curfew at the future victims’ home, without conducting basic **safeguarding checks**. The review noted that if he’d been correctly assessed as high risk, he likely would have been supervised by more senior officers and not allowed such living arrangements. Instead, an inexperienced, under-qualified officer supervised him and warning signs (like resumed drug/alcohol use) were overlooked.

The Chief Inspector cited a lack of “professional curiosity” – staff took Bendall’s self-reports at face value and failed to probe deeper or act on intelligence. In essence, the Damien Bendall tragedy exposed systemic failings: **poor risk assessment, inadequate information-sharing with police/social services, and critical staffing issues** (the officers handling him were insufficiently trained and supported).

It prompted 17 recommendations for improvement, all accepted by the government. This case underscored how lapses in probation practice can have devastating consequences, fueling public outrage and demands for accountability.

Another high-profile failure was the case of Jordan McSweeney, who in June 2022 – just 9 days after release from prison on licence – brutally murdered law graduate **Zara Aleena** in London. McSweeney was a prolific offender with violent behaviour in prison, but probation had assessed him only as medium risk and, critically, failed to recall him promptly when he began skipping appointments post-release. A review found McSweeney “**should have been considered a high risk of serious harm...** If he had, more urgent action would have been taken to recall him”, but the **Probation Service** did not act until it was too late. He missed several supervision meetings; by the time a recall was finally approved and paperwork processed, he had already **killed Zara Aleena**.

The case review by the **Chief Inspector highlighted** heavy workloads and high vacancy rates in the London probation unit as contributing factors – staff were overloaded and communication with prisons about McSweeney’s risk was poor. The East London coroner’s inquest delivered a damning verdict: **Zara’s death was “contributed to by the failure of multiple state agencies”**, specifically citing “serious failures to accurately assess risk” by probation and delay in recalling McSweeney when he should have been considered high risk.

The coroner’s Prevention of Future Deaths report (July 2024) warned that unless probation services improve, “similar deaths will occur.” It noted the local Probation Delivery Unit was operating with only **58% of required staff in 2024** (down from 61% in 2022) – an extreme staff shortage leading to overworked officers, superficial risk assessments, and inadequate supervision of an obviously dangerous individual.

The coroner described this understaffing as “a **national problem**” with some areas even worse. This case too caused public alarm, reinforcing perceptions that probation failures can directly endanger lives.

Other incidents have added to public concern: for example, the terror-related **Streatham attack in early 2020** (an extremist offender released on licence who stabbed people on the street while under surveillance), or offenders like **Joseph McCann** (who in 2019 committed a series of rapes after probation lost track of him due to bureaucratic errors). Each of these cases received intense media coverage.

Collectively, they have shaken confidence in the probation system’s ability to manage **violent offenders**. Public perceptions of risk have been shaped by such headlines – there is a sense of “**how could this person have been free?**” after each serious offence by someone under supervision.

While these catastrophic failures are relatively rare in absolute terms, they have prompted government inquiries and promises of reform. Surveys consistently show that public trust is low whenever the probation service is seen to miss obvious dangers, and victim advocacy groups and the press have been highly critical in these instances. In short, these failures have galvanized calls for tighter monitoring, better resourcing of probation, and tougher release decisions for dangerous prisoners.

GOVERNMENT REFORMS

Where do you go from here?

EARLY RELEASE

To ease overcrowding, prisoners were released earlier than usual under ECSL (18 days early) and SDS40 (after 40% of sentence). This helped reduce prison numbers but put more pressure on probation.

PROBATION RESET

Routine meetings with low-risk offenders were suspended in the final third of their supervision to reduce workloads.

This means fewer check-ins — a risky but necessary triage approach due to staff shortages.

PAROLE TIGHTENING

Under the Victims and Prisoners Act, the Justice Secretary now has power to block releases of high-risk offenders.

SENTENCING & TAGGING

Magistrates now give longer sentences, but the government also expanded electronic tagging, including GPS and sobriety tags, to track offenders in the community.

ACCOMMODATION, SUPPORT, AND REHABILITATION IN THE COMMUNITY

A crucial aspect of community reintegration is whether released prisoners have stable housing, employment, and support – factors known to reduce reoffending. Unfortunately, many prisoners leave custody to very precarious circumstances.

The latest data show significant proportions of ex-prisoners are released either homeless or into transient (insecure) accommodation. In the year to March 2025, only 84.0% of offenders had any sort of settled or temporary accommodation arranged for the night of their release.

This means about [16% of released prisoners were effectively homeless on release](#) – either going to emergency shelters, sofa-surfing, or even the streets. This “housing on release” metric has been declining (it was 85.7% the previous year, and higher before), indicating the situation is worsening slightly. It excludes cases where status was unknown, so the true rate of homelessness could be a bit higher. [Homelessness strongly correlates with reoffending](#). Those released without stable housing have a reoffending rate over 65–70%, among the highest of any group.

Recognising this, the government launched the [Community Accommodation Service Tier 3 \(CAS3\)](#) in 2021. CAS3 provides up to 12 weeks of basic accommodation for prison leavers at risk of homelessness. It started in a few regions and was expanded nationwide by December 2023. Essentially, CAS3 contracts short-term hostel or B&B places where people coming out with nowhere to live can stay temporarily while they (with probation’s help) secure more permanent housing.

CAS3 has now supported a substantial number of ex-prisoners: 23,160 individuals were placed in CAS3 housing from its start in July 2021 through March 2025. In just the last financial year (2024/25), 10,020 offenders used CAS3 accommodation upon release. [This is a positive intervention](#), but the outcomes show how difficult resettlement can be: Of those who left the CAS3 accommodation during 2024/25 (about 9,715 cases), only 25.6% moved on into settled long-term accommodation afterward. Another 20.6% went into “transient” accommodation (e.g. another hostel, temporary arrangement).

Worryingly, 11.7% ended up homeless or rough sleeping even after the 12-week placement. And notably, 28.7% were recalled to custody or went back to prison before their accommodation period ended – often because they reoffended or breached conditions, which itself sometimes happens due to the instability of being homeless or mixing with others in hostels.

Probation works with local authorities and charities to secure housing for ex-prisoners, but places in Approved Premises are limited, and many end up in the private rental sector, often facing homelessness or poor conditions. A government-funded halfway house scheme has been slow to scale, leaving many without stable options.

Employment after release remains a major challenge — only 20% are in work at 6 weeks, rising to 34.5% by 6 months, meaning most remain unemployed. While job schemes like ROTL placements and probation job coaches are growing, barriers like stigma, low skills, and criminal records persist.

Support services like addiction treatment, mental health care, and mentoring can reduce reoffending — but access is patchy. Some are funded through Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS), though many providers report low uptake or have withdrawn.

Prison-based probation officers now start release planning 12 weeks in advance, and continuity of supervision (same officer pre- and post-release) is being rolled out. Family support, education, and resettlement hubs are also being encouraged.

The evidence is clear: prisoners with housing, jobs, and structured support are far less likely to reoffend. Yet too many are still released without the basics — undermining rehabilitation and public safety. Improving “through the gate” support remains essential.

CONCLUSION

The Challenge of Community Supervision



Around a quarter of a million people in England and Wales are now managed in the community — either on licence or serving community sentences.

This group is growing, and so is the pressure on probation.

While most are supervised safely, serious failures like the Bendall and McSweeney cases show what happens when risk is misjudged or support systems fail.

Rising recall rates and high reoffending after short sentences highlight the challenge.

The government's response has focused on:

- Tightening public protection (parole reforms, more tagging, MAPPA changes)
- Relieving pressure on probation (staff recruitment, Probation Reset)
- Improving resettlement (housing, jobs, education)

Some progress is visible — employment rates are up slightly — but many prison leavers still face homelessness, unemployment, or unsafe placements.

Ultimately, success will be judged by safer communities and lower reoffending. That means not just catching breaches — but helping people build new lives. With proper resources, probation can do both. Without them, the risks remain high.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings

Kulturalism® recommends the following urgent actions to improve public safety, reduce reoffending, and support safe reintegration:

Guarantee Stable Housing on Release

Every prison leaver should have access to safe, supported housing — not placements in high-risk HMOs with drug use, violence, or known exploitation.

- Expand supported housing schemes and prioritise justice-involved individuals in local authority planning.

Rebuild Probation Capacity and Supervision

Fast-track recruitment, improve staff retention, and reduce unmanageable caseloads to allow meaningful offender contact.

- Restore supervision for all risk levels, backed by national training and trauma-informed practice.

Reform Recall for Non-Criminal Breaches

Avoid re-imprisoning individuals for technical or petty licence breaches that pose no public risk.

- Focus on proportionate, community-based responses unless there is clear evidence of harm or danger.

Recognise the Psychological Harm of Imprisonment

Mental health and trauma must be central to resettlement support. Many prison leavers carry hidden psychological scars that drive relapse and isolation.

- Our next report, [“The Hidden Sentence: The Psychological Harm of Incarceration”](#), will explore how this affects prisoners/ex-offenders once in the community.

Strengthen Risk Reviews and MAPPA Safeguards

Expand the use of MAPPA for stalking, domestic abuse, and serial offenders — and ensure early-warning failures are not repeated.

- Lessons from recent tragedies must lead to national-level policy change and stronger community monitoring.

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Kulturalism® is a not-for-profit organisation.

We thank you for your continued support in our efforts to contribute to Safer Streets.

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