



## Save lives by suspending short prisons sentences

An influential coalition led by Revolving Doors Agency are urging the government to temporarily stop short prison sentences of under six months to prevent further spread of Covid-19. Their proposals would only affect non-violent and non-sexual offences that can be managed safely in the community. This will save lives by reducing the risk of exposure for staff and vulnerable prisoners.

In France they have already taken action to curb short prison sentences, leading to a reduction in daily prison entrants from 200 to 30. Curbing short prison sentences will reduce churn, ease pressure on prisons and reduce infection<sup>1</sup>.

Recent Ministry of Justice figures exposed a vast shortage of 4,800 prison staff who are already sick or self-isolating<sup>2</sup>. Revolving Doors warn that the rapid churn of people in and out prison will spread Covid-19, will increase infection of staff and prisoners, risks the health of prisoners with underlying health issues. Unless action is taken to stop this churn it could lead to more deaths in prison, increasing staff shortages, and an inability to safely operate prisons.

Every three months over 5,000 people start a prison sentence of less than six months<sup>3</sup> for a non-violent offence, such as theft. These men and women suffer from a combination of severe deprivation, drug addiction, homelessness, and mental ill-health. This not only puts them at very high risk of serious disease and death if infected, but also makes them far more likely to spread Covid-19 throughout our prisons.

We estimate that during the peak of this pandemic up to 2,000 people with Covid-19 will be sentenced to prison to for up to 3 months.

The churn of people going in and out of prison is extraordinarily high and poses an unmanageable of people carrying Covid-19 from prisons, back into communities, and back into prison again.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministère de la Justice, <http://www.justice.gouv.fr/la-garde-des-sceaux-10016/covid-19-mesure-daccompagnement-penitentiaire-33010.html>

<sup>2</sup> Figures true on 25 March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Justice.2020. Prison Reception Data.

## **Christina Marriott, Chief Executive of Revolving Doors Agency said:**

“To give people another short prison sentences – sometimes for the 50<sup>th</sup> or 100<sup>th</sup> time – is evidentially short-sighted. But this is more serious. Right now a short prison sentence adds enormous risks to the offender, to other prisoners, to prison staff and to communities.

“The government must urgently stop the churn of people in and out of our prisons, sometimes for as little as a week or two. Keeping non-violent and non-sexual offenders out of prison is the smart thing to do. It will help protect our prison staff, tackle this pandemic, and ultimately save lives.

“In places like Scotland it’s already the norm. France has recently taken decisive action to end short prison sentences because of Covid-19. In these extraordinary times this government needs to deliver smart justice that protects the public. This isn’t brave, it’s just the sensible thing to do.”

**ENDS**

## **Notes to the Editor**

### **Supporting data:**

- Over 44,000 prison sentences of less than six months were handed out last year. This represents nearly half of all people sent to prison to serve a sentence.
- The churn for people serving these sentences is extraordinarily high, 68% of people who are sentenced to less than six months in prison reoffend within a year of release<sup>4</sup>, and 82% of people sent to prison for less than 6 months for theft offences are convicted again within a year of release<sup>5</sup>.
- People experiencing homelessness are 10 times more likely to have Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and 34 times more likely to have tuberculosis. Nearly a quarter of people serving short prison sentences under six months have been released homeless last year<sup>6</sup>. The spread of communicable disease can be swift for people without adequate access to hygiene facilities or a safe home.
- 70% of shop thefts are driven by drug addiction<sup>7</sup> which is known to increase the risk of respiratory and blood-borne diseases.

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Justice. 2019. "Reoffence Type Data Tool January-December 2016". London.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/797424/Reoffence\\_type\\_data\\_tool.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/797424/Reoffence_type_data_tool.xlsx)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Justice data obtained by Revolving Doors Agency under FOI Act ref. no 190122018.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/828162/oi-190122018-accommodation-release-from-custody-tables.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828162/oi-190122018-accommodation-release-from-custody-tables.xlsx)

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Social Justice. 2018. "Desperate for a fix". CSJ: London.  
<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Desperate-for-a-fix-WEB.pdf>

- Women in prison, two thirds of whom serve short sentences under six months, are 5 times more likely to be HIV+ compared to the general population<sup>8</sup>
- Every three months over 5,000 people start a prison sentence of less than six months<sup>9</sup> for a non-violent offence, such as theft. These men and women suffer from a combination of severe deprivation, drug addiction, homelessness, and mental ill-health
- We estimate that during the peak of pandemic up to 2,000 people with Covid-19 will arrive in prison to for a stay of 3 months.

### **About Revolving Doors Agency:**

**Revolving Doors Agency** is a charity working across England to change systems and improve services for people with multiple problems, including poor mental health, who are in contact with the criminal justice system. [www.revolving-doors.org.uk](http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk)

Revolving Doors' campaign #Shortsighted was launched in March 2018. The campaign is changing the conversation around short prison sentences. <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/blog/together-we-are-changing-use-short-sighted-short-sentences>

**For more information or to arrange an interview please contact one of the following:**

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### **About the Coalition:**

A broad coalition of police and crime commissioners, philanthropists, charities and academics led by Revolving Doors Agency:

1. Alice Dawnay, SwitchBack
2. Anna Herrman, Cleanbreak
3. Anne Fox, Clinks
4. Campbell Robb, Nacro
5. Caroline Carr, The New Leaf Initiative
6. Charlotte Pickles, Reform
7. Christina Marriott, Revolving Doors Agency
8. Christopher Stacey, Unlock
9. Darren Murinas, Expert Citizens CIC
10. David Jamieson, The PCCs for West Midlands
11. Deborah Padfield, Cambridgeshire County Council
12. Deonne Peters, Opportunity Nottingham
13. Dr Amy Ludlow, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge
14. Dr Beth Watts, Heriot Watt University

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<sup>8</sup> Revolving Doors Agency, Public Health England and Home Office. 2017. "Rebalancing Act". Revolving Doors Agency: London. <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/file/2049/download?token=4WZPsE8I>

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Justice.2020. Prison Reception Data.

15. Dr Christopher Padfield, University of Cambridge
16. Dr Jane Dominey, University of Cambridge
17. Duncan Shrubsole, Lloyds Foundation Trust
18. Emma Wells, Community Chaplaincy Association
19. Hardyal Dhindsa, The PCC for Derbyshire
20. Helen Schofield, Probation Institute
21. Imtiaz Amin, The Zahid Mubarek Trust
22. Jemima Olchawski, Agenda
23. Jo Rogers, Fulfilling Lives
24. Jo-Anne Welsh, Oasis Project
25. Joy Doal, Anawim
26. Julia Mulligan, The PCC for North Yorkshire
27. Karyn Kirkpatrick, Keyring
28. Katie Logue, FLIC (Single Homelessness Project)
29. Laura Guy, Fulfilling Lives/ Single Homelessness Project
30. Laura Seebohm, Changing Lives
31. Laurie Hunte, Barrow Cadbury Trust
32. Lisa Dando, Brighton Women's Centre
33. Lord Ramsbotham, CBE
34. Mark Burns-Williamson, The PCC for West Yorkshire
35. Matthew Ellis, The PCC for Staffordshire
36. Natasha Finlayson, Working Chance
37. Nicky Park, St Giles Trust
38. Niki Gould, The Nelson Trust
39. Nina Champion, Criminal Justice Alliance
40. Oliver Hilbery, MEAM
41. Oliver Standing, Collective Voice
42. Paddy Tipping, The PCC for Nottinghamshire
43. Professor Ben Crewe, University of Cambridge
44. Professor Jane Millar, University of Bath
45. Professor Loraine Gelsthorpe, University of Cambridge
46. Professor Nicola Padfield, University of Cambridge
47. Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Heriot Watt University
48. Ralph Findlay, Blast Foundation
49. Richard Garside, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies
50. Rick Henderson, Homeless Link
51. Rt Hon. Lord Bradley
52. Siobhan Pollitt, Back on Track
53. The Lord Bishop of Gloucester, Rachel Treweek

## **Quotes form Coalition members**

**Duncan Shrubsole, Director of Policy, Communications and Research, Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales:**

“Short prison sentences add enormous risks to offenders, other prisoners, prison staff and communities. As pressure mounts on the NHS and support services, it is critical that we do all we can to reduce the spread of coronavirus. Ceasing short prison sentences for non-violent offences offers an important way to do that.”

**Charlotte Pickles, Director at Reform**

“This is a vital step to help prisons to combat COVID-19. It will help mitigate against the spread of the virus and reduce overcrowding. Short sentences are costly and ineffective, and we estimated that this could safely cut the population by as many as 2,300.”

**Nicky Park, Head of Prison and Women’s Services , St Giles Trust**

At a time of profound national crisis, the suspension of short prison sentences would be a pragmatic and sensible move at a time when prisons are chronically short staffed and would help minimise the risk of the infection being transmitted both in prisons and in the community when prisoners are released.

**Professor Loraine Gelsthorpe, Director of the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge**

“There are good reasons to avoid the use of short sentences for non-violent and non-sexual offences as a general rule. There is all the more reason to avoid the use of short sentences in the current context of Covid-19.”