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Big increase in prison assaults

By James Fogarty

Castlerea Prison witnessed a significant increase in assaults between 2022 and 2024, according to the latest Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) report.

In 2022, 16 assaults between individuals in custody were recorded at the prison, increasing slightly to 20 in 2023, before significantly increasing last year to 72 assaults.

The other prisons which saw increased assaults were Cloverhill, Mountjoy Female Prison, Limerick Prison, and Mountjoy Men's Prison. In 2024, the majority of assaults took place in cells (27 per cent), landings (27 per cent), and exercise yards (25 per cent).

However, there has been a significant decrease in incidents of 'inadvertent or unintentional striking of a staff member or injury to a person in custody' during physical interventions, falling from 21 in 2023 to three in 2024.

The report also reveals that there was persistent overcrowding at the Cast-

lerea facility last year, despite an increase of six in bed capacity, bringing it to 346. In another sign of overcrowding, there were also 58 people on remand cell-sharing in with sentenced individuals in Castlerea as of the end of 2024.

In terms of medical and dental care, the report noted long dentist waiting lists at Castlerea Prison, as well as a lack of healthcare available to people experiencing mental health difficulties.

Seizures of drugs at the prison have fallen in recent years from 85 in 2017 to 47 last year. The lowest number of seizures took place in 2021 when 29 were recorded.

The IPRT said that the proposal to establish new 'Independent Living Units' at Castlerea Prison, Shelton Abbey and Loughan House are positive steps. These units "will assist people accommodated there to develop and maintain life-skills essential for exercising personal autonomy and successful reintegration into the wider community".

It also noted "positive

relationships" between people in custody and staff at the prison.

When contacted about the report, the Irish Prison Service said it must accept into custody all people committed to prison by the courts.

"As such, the Irish Prison Service (IPS) has no control over the numbers committed to custody at any given time. As of December 1st, 2025 there were 5,782 (123% of capacity) prisoners in custody with a bed capacity of 4,702. On the same date, there were, 614 prisoners sleeping on mattresses, 557 prisoner on temporary release and 1,213 held on trial or remand." Regarding violence in prisons, the IPS said in Castlerea Prison there is a peer mediation programme.

"Mediators have successfully reduced violence and conflicts, and fostered trust among inmates and staff," it said. It added that mental health services are available in Castlerea Prison through collaboration with the National Forensic Mental Health Service.