

£500,000 a week in legal aid for prisoners' human rights claims

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Courtesy Daily Mail

By Jack Doyle

Taxpayers are handing nearly £500,000 a week in legal aid to prisoners to help them make human rights claims.

In four years, convicts have been given more than £93million to help them demand early release from jail, compensation or softer treatment behind bars.

The bill has spiralled from £1million a year before the Human Rights Act came into force to more than £25million in 2010.

Since then prisoners addicted to heroin have used legal aid to win thousands in compensation for being forced to go 'cold turkey' when locked up.

In another notorious case, a rapist was given legal aid to claim his rights were breached by having to 'slop out' because there was no lavatory in his cell.

And in May 2011 burglar Wayne Bishop was released from jail after the Court of Appeal ruled that locking him up breached his family's human rights.

Justice Secretary Chris Grayling has ordered a review of legal aid payouts over the damaging 'compensation culture' gripping jails.

Robert Oxley, campaign manager of the Taxpayers' Alliance, said: 'Britain's legal aid bill has become unsustainable and must be reformed.

'It's important that prisoners, like everyone else, have access to justice, but this must not be abused. Taxpayers are sick to death of paying for frivolous legal actions by inmates who do it simply because someone else is paying.'

Figures released under the Freedom of Information Act show £93,482,475 has been spent on legal aid for prisoners in the four years since 2008. That is the equivalent of £449,435 a week.

It was £19.7million in 2008, but rose to £24.2million in 2009. It peaked in the last year of the Labour government at £25.7million in 2010 and fell back to £23.6million last year.

The total excludes criminal legal aid and is for internal prison matters only – cases brought by burglars, rapists and other convicts while they are behind bars.

All 143 prisons in England and Wales are required have legal services officers whose job is to 'identify prisoners who may be eligible for publicly funded legal services'.

Inmates can demand lawyers to represent them at Parole Board hearings which decide whether they are safe to be released.

They can also use legal representation to demand better treatment from governors, or fight disciplinary cases over breaking jail rules. Such cases involve fights with other inmates, disobeying instructions or being caught with drugs or phones.

A breakdown of the costs shows 'free-standing advice and assistance' for inmates cost nearly £53.6million over four years. Assistance at disciplinary hearings cost more than £12.6million and lawyers at Parole Board hearings cost more than £27million.

Mr Grayling said: 'After years spiralling out of control, rising by 2,500 per cent in a decade, the bill to the taxpayer has started to fall.

'I am concerned about public confidence in the legal aid system. I have ordered an urgent review into aspects of the system that affect its credibility with the public.

'Legal aid is a fundamental part of our legal system, but resources aren't limitless. Legal aid should be reserved for cases where there is genuine need.'

In October one of the country’s most senior judges, Lord Justice Davis, warned that human rights laws mean ‘unthinkable’ cases were coming before the courts.

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