



Guyana's Prisons: Colonial Histories of Post-Colonial Challenges

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Abstract: *This article argues that history can play a role in addressing present-day concerns about the form and function of incarceration in the post-colonial nation of Guyana. It analyses some of the key features of imprisonment during the British colonial period (1814–1966), and connects them to the challenges faced by the prisons sector since Independence in 1966. The authors suggest that an appreciation of the history of jails in Guyana – including issues connected with prison capacity, overcrowding, training and education, and rehabilitation – can play a role in inspiring and supporting change in the Guyana Prison Service. In this way, the article suggests, historical research can impact on the administration of criminal justice in Guyana – and potentially in other contemporary post-colonial contexts, both within, and beyond, the Caribbean region.*

Keywords: British Guiana; colonialism; criminal justice; Guyana; history; jails; prisons; punishment; security

Violence, crime, and insecurity have jeopardised and undermined development in Guyana since Independence in 1966 (Granger 2011). In the last two decades, in common with other countries, including neighbouring Caribbean states, Guyana has sought to enhance citizen security by designing and implementing new reforms centred on traditional control-oriented state protection, preventative, and rights-based strategies. Successful governments have partnered with overseas institutions to implement projects aimed at modernising the administration of criminal justice and policing (Canadian Bar Association 2015; Inter-American Development Bank 2015). However, except for a recently launched project that seeks to reduce pretrial detention and increase the use of alternative sentences

(Inter-American Development Bank 2017), and despite a 2017 agreement between the UK and Guyana to undertake a review of security (Security Sector Reform Programme Action Plan 2018), much less attention has been paid to reform at the penal level.

Guyana was under British control for much of the 19th and 20th Centuries, and there are three colonial-era prisons still in operation: Georgetown (Camp Street); New Amsterdam, including a separate jail for women; and Mazaruni, which includes the Sibley Hall facility for first and petty offenders. These institutions have been augmented by two jails established in the post-Independence period, at Lusignan and Timehri. Overcrowding in all five jails has been a serious issue, and over the past decade it has worsened. By the end of 2018, occupancy levels were at 147.2% (World Prison Brief data for 2019).¹ Poor conditions and lengthy remand periods were the background to prisoner unrest in the nation's oldest and largest jail, Camp Street, in March 2016, when 17 prisoners died in a fire started by inmates (Pieters 2016). Just over a year later, in July 2017, prisoners orchestrated a fire in which all but one block of the prison burnt down. Four inmates escaped, and one officer died (Department of Public Information, Guyana 2017a; *Stabroek News* 2017).

Prior to the Camp Street fires, the Guyana Prison Service was making efforts to shift the nature of incarceration in Guyana, from punitive forms originating in the nation's colonial era to modern correctional and rehabilitative models. This was underpinned by a commitment to the development of capacity, accommodation, training, and education, despite resource constraints. There is now a growing public awareness of the challenges faced by the prison system in Guyana, though until recently there has been little understanding of their colonial roots. Recent reports have all highlighted overcrowding, poor infrastructure, a lack of educational programmes, and a shortage of funding (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018; Pieters 2016; Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). These reveal the existence of serious structural deficiencies within the service that affect the treatment of prisoners, and prevent Guyana's Prison Service from meeting its essential purpose, the reformation and social readaptation of prisoners. Slow economic growth and political instability have further added to this problem, creating a power vacuum within the community (United States, Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, OSAC, Guyana 2018).² Nonetheless, the Guyana Prison Service has embarked on a period of relatively intensive activity, with a view to stimulating change. During the past two years, work has begun on the construction of new blocks at Camp Street prison to replace those burnt in the 2017 fire, and on the expansion of prisoner accommodation at the existing jail in Mazaruni. Efforts have also intensified in recent years to review prison education and skills training. Meantime, the Ministry of Public Security, which has primary responsibility for the Prison Service, declared itself 'ready and willing to work with all stakeholders to ensure the well-being of offenders, and the general security of this nation' (*Demerara Waves* 2017).

As they implement changes to the form and function of prisons, key personnel in the Guyana Prison Service have begun to ask questions

about the history of the nation's penal institutions. As Kevin Pilgrim, then Senior Superintendent of Prisons, with responsibility for education and skills training, put it at the end of 2018: 'How can we move forward into the future when we don't understand our past?' (Pilgrim 2018). In the absence of any previous research, the authors of this article worked in partnership with the Guyana Prison Service to investigate this history. Our intention was to stimulate debate about continuity and change during the colonial period and in the 50 years since Independence. Overall, the partners' hope was that the historical work could inspire a shift in public and political attitudes, and inform policy debates. In this way, it might become a model for bringing historical research to bear on the security challenges of other contemporary post-colonial contexts, both within, and beyond, the Caribbean region.

The starting point for this work was the hypothesis that the challenging jails context in Guyana today can be connected to the nation's colonial history. Indeed, a decade before Independence, R.D. Fairn, Commissioner of Prisons and Director of Prison Administration for England and Wales, visited what was then a British colony and found an antiquated system which breached the minimum standards set by the United Nations. The system was based on an 1892 Ordinance and a 1913 set of rules. This, he wrote:

shackled the judiciary with a system of prison sanctions which is based on the historical experience of Great Britain – the end of [convict] transportation and the evolution of the English Prison System – all of which is quite irrelevant to British Guiana. ... what is worst of all is that the rules are so archaic and there are so many of them, that neither staff nor prisoners know what they are or indeed where they are! (National Archives of Guyana 1956)

According to the United Nations, Fairn continued, the role of prisons was to establish in inmates 'the will to lead a good and useful life on discharge, and to fit them to do so'. In his view, the system in place at the time was a failure in both respects (National Archives of Guyana 1956).

To link colonial to post-Independence history, a brief history of both Guyana and of punishment is useful. In the 18th Century, the Dutch occupied and created three colonies: in Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo. Britain seized control in 1781, following which the colonies changed hands from Britain to France, back to The Netherlands, and then after the 1815 Congress of Vienna which ended the Napoleonic Wars, to Britain. After first uniting Demerara and Essequibo, in 1831 the British merged the colonies to create British Guiana. Sugar quickly became the colony's key export, and the expansion of production necessitated land clearance and plentiful labour. This underpinned the marginalisation of Indigenous (Amerindian) people and the importation of enslaved labourers from Africa. After slave emancipation in 1834, Guiana received large numbers of indentured and migrant workers, from India, China, Africa, Portugal, and other parts of the Caribbean, notably Barbados (Adamson 1984; Roopnarine 2011, 2014).

The owners of enslaved people had recourse to brutal forms of discipline and punishment over their captive property. This included corporal

punishment, reduced rations, and the use of heavy chains. However, following emancipation and in common with other former slave colonies in Britain's West Indian possessions, punishment passed from private hands to the colonial state (Browne 2017; Paton 2004; Rodney 1981). Thereon, the British established a range of institutions, and associated rules and regulations, to manage the labouring population. They included hospitals, a reform school, and a lunatic asylum (Aickin 2001; De Barros 2002, 2014; Gramaglia 2013; Smith 2014). Of interest here is the colony's jail-building programme, which established both the prison infrastructure and the cultures of penal practice that are still in evidence in Guyana today.

The penal agenda in British colonies generally was driven by innovations in Europe and North America. Changing forms of punishment at this time included the building of cellular prisons and penitentiaries (Gibson 2011; McConville 1981; Morris and Rothman 1998). From the 1840s, international experts met regularly. One especially important debate was around the relative merits of the separate and silent system, in which prisoners were kept alone in cells. This was first introduced in 1829, in the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, but had such profound psychological effects on inmates that it ultimately gave way to a system of separation at night, and association during the day, though sometimes the latter was in silence (Rothman 1998). From 1872, an International Penitentiary Congress took place every five years, with topics of discussion including prison labour, the classification of inmates, corporal punishment, separation and association, education, the treatment of women and juveniles, officer training, prisoner release, and rehabilitation (Henze 2015; Shafir 2014). It is important to note that during the 19th and early 20th Centuries incarceration existed in parallel with a range of punitive measures, including banishment and exile, workhouse confinement, agricultural and industrial colonies, and penal transportation (Anderson 2018).

In the colonies, British administrators adapted prisons and penal regimes to local circumstances. Thus, they moulded both prison architecture and jail regulations to suit climate, political economy, and ideas about the so-called racial 'character' of Africans, Asians, and other colonised peoples (Dikötter and Brown 2007). For example, administrators in British India described isolation as particularly cruel to Indians used to living with extended family and kin (Arnold 1994). On the other hand, in mid-19th-Century British Guiana, African inmates were said to solicit solitary confinement, so that they could enjoy the advantages of quietude in a cell, with no expectations of labour (TNA, CO114/19).³ The need to prepare food differently for Hindus of different castes was also a factor in Indian prison management (Arnold 1994). In British Guiana, initially all incarcerated persons consumed a standard diet. Then, in 1878, the colony introduced two separate diets reflecting its demographics: the 'East Indian Diet Scale' and the 'Creole Diet Scale', comprising food items specific to the two groups (TNA, CO111/44). In colonies such as Jamaica, British administrators shaped the prison regime to reflect new ideas about the appropriate treatment of women, notably through the abolition of the corporal punishment of female inmates (Paton 2004).

Connecting the Colonial Past to the Present Day

One of the reasons that research on the history of Guyana's prisons has been lacking relates to the structure and character of colonial archives (Rodney 1981; Stoler 2009). Government departments in the colonies, including those relating to prisons, produced voluminous papers such as minutes, correspondence, reports, and enquiries. However, very little of this material, especially for the 19th Century, survives in the National Archives of Guyana (NAG) today.⁴ This means that for the 1800s, prisons material is scattered across its other collections, such as newspapers or the proceedings of the Court of Policy (legislative council) (National Archives of Guyana, AB1: Court of Policy and Combined Court proceedings). Though Guyana's archives contain copies of letters written by governors and other colonial personnel to the Colonial Office in London, its main prisons collection is on the 20th Century, notably sequences of pre-Independence annual reports (NAG, AC8 Box Collection, Prison Service). A greater volume of material survives in the UK, where The National Archives holds incoming letters, which include numerous enclosures and notes. There is an eclectic range of material: from reports on mundane matters and enquiries into unrest, to evaluations of the effectiveness of prison officers and drafts of prison plans (TNA, CO111). Other relevant material can be found in Parliamentary Papers (PP) (1867–8, 1871, 1875), the 'Blue Books' of statistics (TNA, CO116), and duplicates of Guyana's Court of Policy holdings (TNA, CO114). Published annual reports in the British Library (BL) include the Surgeon-Generals' Reports, and Inspector-General of Prisons' Reports, each of which is highly relevant to the study of jails history (BL, C.S.F. 351).⁵

The authors worked transnationally across these archives, and for the first time established the following timeline of prison building in British Guiana. In 1814, the British took over and later extended two Dutch jails, in New Amsterdam and Georgetown. In 1843, they opened Her Majesty's Penal Settlement (HMPS) Mazaruni. Between 1837 and 1931, they also established 13 district prisons, along with several 'lock-ups' in the more remote regions (Moss *et al.* 2020). A series of key themes emerged during this archival work. These included: ongoing concerns about prison capacity and prisoner numbers; and discussions on work, education, religious instruction, women and juveniles, prison guards, and punishment for refractory inmates. In this section, we focus on three of the central issues that straddle the colonial and modern periods: sentencing, overcrowding, and training and rehabilitation. This enables us to consider why, and how, the colonial state made choices in these areas, and the factors that frequently constrained it, and to gauge the nature and extent of continuity between the colonial past and the post-colonial present. In so doing, we provide an evidence-based platform for addressing the need for change in Guyana's post-Independence prison regime.

Sentencing

The use of imprisonment in British Guiana was limited until the abolition of slavery in 1833. There was limited jail capacity, and enslaved persons were mainly punished by slaveowners (Browne 2017). During this decade the prison population increased from an annual incarceration rate of 0.1% of the total population in 1831, to 1.9% in 1840 (TNA, CO116/176–87; CO116/197–208; CO116/209). Three prisons were established to meet the state's increased use of prison sentences after emancipation, in Wakenaam (1837), Mahaica (1837), and Capoey (1838). After a period of relative stability during the 1840s, between 1850 and 1861 yearly admissions increased dramatically to reach 4,313, 2.9% of the general population. The total continued to rise throughout the 1860s, until its colonial-era peak in 1869 with 6,383 committals, 4.3% of the general population (Moss *et al.* 2020; TNA, CO111/383/25; CO116/238).

This increase can be attributed to the colonial state's desire to use prisons to punish breaches of labour laws by indentured immigrants. Between 1838 and 1917, 13,533 such workers were imported from China, 32,216 from Madeira, and 239,000 from India (Auguier *et al.* 1960; Laurence 1994; Look Lai 1993; Roberts and Johnson 1974; Roopnarine 2014). The British established separate institutions specifically for their penal confinement, in Fellowship (1868) and Suddie (1875). They also reopened the previously closed district prison at Mahaica in 1868 for the same purpose. Concerns raised by a parliamentary commission of enquiry into the treatment of immigrants in 1871 led to improved labour laws and general conditions (Parliamentary Papers 1871). As a result, by 1901 annual admissions went down to 4874, 1.6% of the general population (TNA, CO116/269). From this period the total prison population continued to decline. This was despite the increase in the general population, the opening of gold and diamond mines in the interior of the colony, and the construction of four prisons in the mining regions between 1925 and 1931 (Moss *et al.* 2020). From 1930 to 1980, the total prison population remained stable (below 1.0% of the colony's general population). However, during the following decade (1980 to 1990) the total number of prisoners rose by 46%, and has continued to climb (World Prison Brief data for 2018).

This is a consequence of several related factors: tougher law enforcement, lack of alternative sanctions, increased commitment by the courts to deter and punish, and longer custodial sentences. Drug offences were targeted by legislation in 1988 with the Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances Act. This introduced a mandatory three-year sentence for anyone found in possession of particular drugs.⁶ A recent study on inmates in Guyana, by the Center for Latin American Studies on Crime and Violence (UNTREF), sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank, found that drug-related offences in 2017 were the second leading cause of incarceration, with 21.3% of those questioned imprisoned for possession or dealing (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). This is despite a move by other countries to avoid custodial sentences for those found with small amounts of drugs for personal use.

The impact of the justice system on sentencing and jail numbers is not without precedent. In the year of emancipation, 1834, the colonial state introduced an 'Ordinance to establish and constitute inferior courts of criminal justice in British Guiana'. This enabled it to assume the social and judicial roles previously taken by slave owners. Under this Act, Justices of the Peace were appointed to hear complaints lodged against emancipated people for offences such as negligence, malingering, and after criminalisation in 1855, Obeah, a form of spiritual healing (Paton 2015). This produced a similar increase in the total prison population (TNA, CO111/131/74). While in 1837 and 1838 the British established three prisons to deal with the rise in custodial sentences, they were unable to accommodate the growing number of prisoners (TNA, CO116/209–11). The introduction of a controlled and regulated flow of Indian indentured immigrants during the 1850s placed similar pressures on the prison system. Strict labour and vagrancy laws, introduced between the years 1852 and 1864, saw the percentage of the population in prison rise. This trend persisted during the 1860s as colonial authorities continued to use custodial sentences to control the labour force. Indeed, remarkably, convictions under the Masters and Servants Act 1853, including those committed by indentured labourers, ranked second in the colony as late as 1930 (TNA, CO116/211–99).⁷

Prisoner offences historically differ significantly from those in more recent years, though the courts' lack of consideration of jail capacity remains unchanged. While numerous agencies and institutions within Guyana's criminal justice system operate together, in principle to maintain the law, the courts continue to ignore the effects of their sentencing decisions. As the latest increase in the jail population demonstrates, strategies in sentencing and reform do not reflect what the prison system can sustain, but rather what can be temporally or locally achieved. Furthermore, events of comparatively major significance within the system, such as dramatic increases and decreases in the prison population in the 19th Century, appear to have been forgotten relatively quickly, if they are recognised at all. And yet, knowledge of the system's colonial past, and an appreciation of continuity, including in the relationship between law and patterns of incarceration/decarceration, have the potential to inform debate and to underpin change.

Overcrowding

A second example of the connections between the history and present-day concerns of the criminal justice system can be seen in the overcrowding of Guyana's prisons. Indeed, overcrowding has been a troubling characteristic of the modern prison since its invention in the 19th Century. The ongoing debates on how to tackle this demonstrate the depth of the problem, especially in countries struggling under economic pressure. In Guyana this situation was further exacerbated by the Camp Street fire of 2017. At the time of the incident, the site contained 984 inmates, despite being designed to hold 600, and in its aftermath they required rehousing (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018). The United States Bureau of

Democracy, Human Rights and Labor further emphasised the scale of the problem in its 2018 report which highlights the ‘harsh and potentially life threatening’ conditions in Guyana’s prisons (United States, Department of State 2018). However, research from this project reveals that the overcrowding and poor jail conditions to which these reports allude are by no means a modern phenomenon.

Historical research identifies questions relating to the welfare of inmates in Guyana’s prisons from as early as 1831 (TNA, CO116/178). Official reports asked about the ‘insecure and dilapidated state’ of the buildings, disease epidemics, and prisoners’ monotonous and deficient diet (TNA, CO116/170–299). Overcrowding impacted on the provision of basic services, such as medical care and clean water. In an environment prone to the spread of infectious diseases, the combination of crowded cells and limited health services often proved fatal. Outbreaks of diarrhoea, dysentery, and influenza, and illnesses such as malaria and yellow fever, were among the most common causes of ill health reported during the 19th Century (for examples, see TNA, CO111/391/111; CO111/396/30; BL, *Report of the Surgeon General*, 1889, 1892–3). Reports found that sickness was caused by drinking contaminated water, due to the exhaustion of fresh supplies (BL, *Report of the Surgeon General*, 1889, 1892–3). These all remained issues into the 20th Century, when diarrhoea, acute gastritis, and upper respiratory tract infections continued to be the most common forms of diseases among inmates (for examples, see NAG, *Medical Reports*, 1955, 1990; TNA, CO116/219). Moreover, today, the United States and United Nations have stressed unhygienic conditions and prisoners’ ongoing lack of access to potable drinking water (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018; United States, Department of State 2018). The 2018 Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent in Guyana similarly found that Lusignan prison in particular ‘clearly fell short’ of United Nations standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018). Its study reported that one block built to contain 30 inmates held more than 80, all of whom had to share one shower and one toilet. These statistics mirror those from the colonial period, when wards routinely accommodated double the recommended number of prisoners (for examples, see Parliamentary Papers 1875; TNA, CO111/427/21). Yearly statistical updates from the colonial Blue Books also demonstrate that the daily average of inmates in Georgetown prison often exceeded its capacity (TNA, CO116/236–9, CO116/244).

Due to this lack of secure space, during the British period prisoners were required to remain in their cells for periods often in excess of ten hours a day (TNA, CO116/178–80; CO116/217–21; CO111/391/115). Contemporary reports suggest that ‘the many hours devoted to sleep’ within the colony’s prisons were the result of a lack of lighting during hours of darkness, and the physical and mental inability of the prisoners to focus after ten hours of labour. Since Independence, government has abolished prison sentences with hard labour, and introduced electric lighting. However, inmates continue to be confined in their cells for large amounts of the day (United States, Department of State 2017). The low staff to prisoner

ratio has also had a significant impact on the personal security of inmates and guards alike. The 2017 survey of inmates in Guyana found that eight out of ten prisoners had witnessed inmates being beaten, while six out of ten prisoners had been victims of theft (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). Officers' inability to fully comply with national and international standards has led to the creation of a dangerous environment for all involved.⁸ The loss of dignity that these 'dehumanizing conditions' create have led to an increase in the number of punishments being administered within prisons, as prisoners have lost trust and confidence in the legitimacy of the regime.⁹ Indeed, in 2014, an Inter-American Development Bank study highlighted that trust in the criminal justice system had reached an all-time low (Sutton and Baxter 2017). This is highly problematic because crime, insecurity and recidivism are strongly correlated with a lack of interpersonal trust. This is extremely damaging to the prisoners and to the communities to which they will return.

The policy of transferring inmates from overcrowded to less crowded facilities has further added to these concerns, owing to the negative impact that familial separation has on rates of reoffending (Ministry of Justice 2017; Vera Institute of Justice 2012). In 2017, 54.8% of inmates who were interviewed stated that they had moved institution since their arrest (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). The policy of transferring prisoners within the system was first used in Guyana in 1842, following the establishment of HMPS Mazaruni, to relieve overcrowding in Georgetown and New Amsterdam jails (TNA, CO111/191/100; CO111/192/124). While this had an immediate effect on prisoner numbers in these two locations, the penal settlement was in an isolated location. Though this was viewed as positive for inmate reform, it restricted the ability of family members to visit. Despite family support now being a recognised component in enabling prisoners to better transition from incarceration, we see a repetition of the pattern today. Indeed, in 2017, 80% of sentenced inmates reported being transferred to prisons 'further away' from their families (Sarsfield and Bergman 2017). With the current expansion of Mazaruni, itself stimulated by the desire to streamline the local prison system and reduce overcrowding in the facilities along the coast, this is likely to be sustained (Department of Public Information, Guyana 2017b).

Training and Rehabilitation

The third point of continuity addressed here relates to training and rehabilitation. Although they differed from prison to prison, in the middle of the 19th Century most programmes available to prisoners were located in HMPS Mazaruni, due to constraints on space in the other facilities. In prisons such as Georgetown and New Amsterdam, male inmates were required to undertake public works outside the jail, including weeding, building and repairing roads, and sea wall construction, in addition to tending to the daily needs of the prison. In Mazaruni, they worked inside the compound, quarrying stone, or in agriculture. During the first half of the 19th Century, there was an evangelical Christian commitment to labour training

and religious instruction as a means of encouraging self-reflection and reform. However, this had faded by the 1870s and it was not until 1935 that the policy towards prison work changed to take a more rehabilitative approach. Prison authorities then recognised the important function of skills education in this regard (NAG, *Superintendent of Prisons Report*, 1935). To some extent, officers taught vocational pursuits and trades to inmates with short sentences. They included farming, animal husbandry, masonry, and plumbing. Cooking and baking were also taught to male prisoners to qualify them for positions on ships (NAG, *Superintendent of Prisons Report*, 1951). Female prisoners were restricted to domestic duties, which included laundry, cleaning, cooking, and the making and mending of clothes for both male and female prisoners (NAG, *Superintendent of Prisons Report*, 1940). However, overall, the resources and facilities available to properly implement training and rehabilitation were always limited. This impacted on the ability of prisons to reform and socially readapt inmates in preparation for their release.

The main religious bodies made other efforts to rehabilitate prisoners during the colonial period. Along with attempts to educate them in numeracy and literacy, they focused a substantial amount of effort on encouraging self-enhancement, through motivational and religious instruction, thought to be helpful in the prisoner's reintegration process. Although there was no paid full-time chaplain or priest attached to any of the prisons, all prisoners could pursue their own religion. Ever conscious of the multi-ethnic jail population, religious ministration was regularly conducted by visiting chaplains, catechists, or lay readers of the English and Scottish Churches, and by Roman Catholic priests, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, and officers of the Salvation Army, while an Indian catechist attended to give religious instructions to Hindus (NAG, *Superintendent of Prisons Report*, 1933). These bodies were instrumental in rendering assistance in the after-care of released prisoners, one of the weakest areas in the prison system throughout the colonial period. Indeed, in 1918 the Governor appointed a Commission to revive The Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society which had become dormant in the 1890s (NAG, *Superintendent of Prisons Report*, 1950). This was achieved through the Salvation Army authorities to whom an annual grant was given. It held church services each Saturday at the prison, after which it interviewed prisoners to establish a relationship with them before they were discharged. It then provided food, temporary housing, assistance in obtaining employment, and small financial assistance to recently discharged individuals. The efforts of the Society were, however, frequently obstructed by poverty and high rates of unemployment (NAG, *Superintendent of Prisons Report*, 1930). Nevertheless, the assistance that this programme provided, however limited, was considered vital in preventing prisoners from being reconvicted (NAG, *Superintendent of Prisons Report*, 1933). In 1948, following the colonial authorities' increased desire to learn more about discharged prisoners, and to tackle the recidivism rate and juvenile delinquency, a full-time after-care officer was appointed. Each year he assisted a few discharged prisoners in finding employment, and provided railway fares and small sums of money (NAG, *Superintendent of*

Prisons Report, 1950). Though the programme continued to operate, because of the deteriorating economic conditions in the colony during and after World War Two, it had little, if any, effect in curbing the recidivism rate.

The need to support prisoners has gained momentum during recent years with the introduction of numerous schemes, such as the 'Prisoners of Purpose' programme, initiated by the staff welfare officer and chaplain of the prisons in 2001 (Clarke 2009). The scheme, which operates under the theme of 'redeeming time and realigning purpose', includes a literacy workshop, where inmates are taught to compose songs, and write short stories or poems. This project utilises the peer education concept, and those who successfully participate in its Behavioural Change Programme are selected as leaders to promote the concepts they have been taught (Guyana 2015). In addition, a steel band, known as the Republican Steel Orchestra, was established, along with the Republican Boxing Gym. These have produced several talented boxers and musicians from among the prison population. The service also hosts an annual week of activities which provides prisoners with the opportunity to highlight their work to the public. In addition to these activities, the Prison Service has made efforts to introduce structured classes at various locations within the prison system. The topics so far have included: ceramics, upholstery, electrical installation, automobile maintenance, and barbering. However, despite these efforts, less than a third of the inmates interviewed for the Sarsfield and Bergman (2017) study attended educational classes. Among those who did not, a significant number claimed that no classes were offered, or that they had no interest in them, perhaps due to their lack of accreditation. In summary, due to the ongoing budgetary constraints within the prison system, there is still a lack of consistent and recognised job training.

Conclusion

This article has explored three of the central concerns of the Guyana Prison Service: sentencing practices, overcrowding, and employment and educational programmes. Tracing these challenges back to the creation and operation of infrastructures and prison regimes during the British colonial period, it suggests that systemic deficiencies continue to prevent custodial sentences from meeting their essential purpose: the reform and social readaptation of prisoners. This reality is grounded in the ongoing coloniality of modern-day policy and practice, augmented by the apathy of Guyana's society which has chosen to ignore the conditions in which prisoners are confined. Indeed, the 2017 Commission of Inquiry into the Georgetown prison fire referred to the relationship between penal practice and public opinion as 'the plantation mentality of control and contain' (Commission of Inquiry 2017, p.14). The consequence of this has been a lack of desire for change, which has meant that, just as in colonial times, uncertainty and stasis have prevailed within the system. Although the origins of the challenges of sentencing, prison numbers, and training and rehabilitation in Guyana's jails can be found in the colonial era, there is no single set of factors that explains their ongoing pervasiveness. Neither

is there a single route towards effective reform. Moreover, while there appears to be a great awareness, and commitment on the part of the current Prison Service's leadership to adopt transformative incarceration strategies, change has been difficult to implement. This is due to ongoing resource constraints, a population that has harsh attitudes to those in conflict with the law, and a lack of political will.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 World Prison Brief data are available at: <http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/guyana> (accessed 27 April 2019).
- 2 The general crime rate in Guyana, according to the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), is currently higher than the United States national average.
- 3 The National Archives, Kew (TNA). The full set of references is: TNA, CO111: governor's correspondence, 1815–1966; CO114: Combined Court [legislative council], 1854; CO116: 'Blue Books' of statistics, 1821–1942. References in the text for TNA will be cited as TNA, followed by the series, volume, and page or folio number.
- 4 The National Archives of Guyana (NAG) reports. These are: AC8 Box Collection, Prison Service, *Superintendent of Prisons Reports*; *Medical Reports*. References in the text for NAG will be cited as NAG, followed by the name of the AC8 Box Collection, Prison Service report, and the year of the report.
- 5 British Library (BL) reports. These are: C.S.F 351, British Guiana, *Report of the Inspector-General of Prisons* (Georgetown, 1890–1961); *Report of the Surgeon General* (Georgetown, 1889–1938). References in the text for BL will be cited as BL, followed by the name of the C.S.F. 351, British Guiana report, and the year of the report.
- 6 Laws of Guyana, Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Control) Act, chapter 35:11, part 2, sections 4, 5 and 8.
- 7 The leading cause of imprisonment recorded in British Guiana's 'Blue Books' during this period was classified simply as 'other offences'. No examples of these convictions were given by way of explanation.
- 8 Prisons fall under a framework of national and international law, such as the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights, the United Nations Convention Against Torture, and the European and American Conventions on Human Rights. Recommendations and minimum standards are also published by the United Nations in the form of a Best Practice Handbook.
- 9 The report by the United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on its Mission to Guyana* (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018), in reference to Lusignan prison, states that: 'No human should be subject to such dehumanising conditions'.
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