

***The Problem of Prisons: Corrections Reform in
New Zealand Since 1840***

Newbold, Greg (2007) Wellington: Dunmore

Reviewed by Robert Webb

There are few texts on the history and analysis of prisons in New Zealand. Greg Newbold has illustrated his academic expertise in the area, and his latest work has depth of information that set it apart from other penal histories. Newbold's analysis examines penal reforms in detail from 1840 to the present. Building upon his previous works on the history of prisons, this book is both an historical account and a critical analysis of reform directions. The book comprises two main parts, with the first sections focused on the chronology and history of prison development, with chapters divided into the main historical periods: charting events and reforms within each. The second part of the book is devoted to the analysis and critique of policy developments and the particular features of the New Zealand prison system.

The historical parts of the book provide insight into the influence of international conceptions of punishment. From the design of prisons, to the use of flogging and hard labour, developments are carefully noted. The focus on particular features in New Zealand shows how local social and political influences have shaped the system. Chapters are included on the maximum security prison, capital punishment, women prisoners, community corrections, prison privatisation, specialised sentences, and problems with criminal reformation. The capital punishment chapter, for example, gives insights into the use of the punishment throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Details include the 1880 hand-drawn instructions from Downing St. on how to bind the hands of the condemned prisoner, and the positioning of the noose. The eventual repeal of this sentence for murder in 1961 was a product of longstanding debates around its use. Notably, once the capital punishment sentence was repealed, the number of murders occurring did not sharply increase. As Newbold concludes from an analysis of this punishment "policy

decisions about capital punishment are influenced more by emotionalism and political expediency than by practical efficacy” (p.252).

The Problem of Prisons provides an interesting analysis of the continued failure in prison reforms to meet the intended goal of reducing reoffending. Newbold observes that approaches to criminal reformation have emerged in a faddish manner historically. Governments revisit failed correctional strategies, depending upon what is considered fashionable at the time. Old strategies are remodelled as the new solutions of today, regardless of the ineffectiveness of past attempts. One example given is the moral panic around youth offending in the 1950s, which led the then National government to form detention centres for youth offenders. The detention centres imposed a sentence of boot camp style training, aimed at changing young offenders’ behaviour through harsh discipline. Renamed corrective training in the 1980s, as Newbold observes, it was widely used for youth offenders until studies demonstrated that it did not work, and had high recidivism rates. This analysis is interesting, as two decades after this sentence was discarded because of its failures, the use of corrective training and harsh discipline is one option being discussed in the current public discourse around youth gangs.

The contemporary situation of higher prison numbers with harder and longer sentences is reviewed from a careful documentation of particular crimes and events that influenced political decisions and legislation. Newbold examines the public outrage at high profile crimes in the 1990s, and the calls for harder sentencing that were met by the implementation of the Sentencing Act 2002 and the Parole Act 2002. Combined with a greater use of the preventative detention sentence for violent offending, the changes rapidly increased prison numbers. Crime control and correctional reforms are popular political platforms. Tough on crime policies have re-emerged into the political debates from parties pursuing populist agendas. These debates seem to miss the point that over the last two decades, the sentences for violent offending have lengthened, and have been used more often. The debates also ignore the reasons why prisoners have a high recidivism rate upon release, which Newbold examines at length.

The analysis of prisoner reformation points to a number of reasons why some prison programmes fail. Even when programmes are effective in prison, Newbold points to the reality of life on the outside as part of the reason for failures. He observes that programmes delivered in a highly controlled environment may be effective. Upon release, however, former inmates are faced with the realities of paying bills and making a living, and return to impoverished situations where often drugs and alcohol are readily available. Those situational factors on the outside make it difficult for the effects of programmes to be sustained.

In summary, it is good to see such an authoritative academic work produced despite the small New Zealand market for such a text. Well written with comprehensive coverage, the book is a valuable addition to sociologists and criminologists wanting to examine prisons as a response to crime in this country.