

Penal Populism, Prison and Performance Measures: Autoethnography of a New Zealand Corrections Officer

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Abstract

This autoethnography outlines contradictions in offender rehabilitation policies that were apparent to me while I was employed as a Corrections officer at a New Zealand prison. I ponder the social, political and cultural barriers to reducing the prison population by story-lining three intersecting topics: contemporary prisoner and officer relations, the goal of reducing reoffending, and the long shadow of (post-)colonialism. I provide analysis of these topics, drawing on both my positionality as a former officer, and my subsequent reflections as a social science academic. I conclude by noting that crime and punishment in New Zealand are salient political issues, and that advocates of progressive penal policies ought to be prepared for more authoritarian attitudes to criminal justice re-emerging in the political discourse.

Keywords: Corrections officer; performance measures; penal populism; reducing reoffending

Introduction

Topics of crime and punishment have featured regularly in recent election campaigns, in both Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas. A confluence of factors has led to the emergence of what is now widely described in academic literature as *penal populism*—a term used to convey the idea that politicians are tapping into a latent punitiveness that the public has towards the perpetrators of crime (see Pratt, 2007). Increasing sentence lengths, a rise in the number of imprisoned, and the likelihood of more austere prison conditions have all been attributed to penal populism (Pratt, 2007; Roberts et al., 2003).

One factor contributing to penal populism has been the spread of neoliberalism, a free-market reorientation of the state away from higher levels of intervention over the economy. An outcome of neoliberalism globally has been an increasingly privatised media landscape, which has resulted in a tendency for media outlets to focus on sensational, violent stories to draw in more viewers (Dobrynina, 2016; Pratt, 2007). It is during this period of economic upheaval that ‘tough on crime’ policies are thought to have appealed to public anxieties about the deteriorating well-being of individuals and their communities (Mora & Christianakis, 2013; Wacquant, 2009). The combination of penal populism with neoliberalism has also led to the emergence of *neo-correctionalism* (Cavadino & Dignan, 2007), where punishment is centred on the correcting of individual offender behaviours rather than addressing the structural issues that contribute to crime in the first place (see also Kramer et al., 2013).

Much like other anglophone countries, neoliberal reconfiguration led to significant structural changes of the New Zealand economy. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, successive governments in New Zealand loosened the regulatory environment, sold off state assets and withdrew from the areas of employment, housing and welfare, which in turn compromised supports for society’s most vulnerable persons (Kelsey, 1995; Lerner, 1997). This reconfiguration has been paradoxical, as a greater emphasis on the protection of individual property rights has led to an expansion of the carceral state in

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New Zealand and other liberal democracies (Pratt, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). The rise of corrective approaches to justice has complicated an already messy relationship between a more evidence-based rehabilitation and the public's desire for retribution. What follows is an audit culture of politically motivated performance metrics being attached to the provision of public services, including the justice system (Andrew & Cahill, 2009; Jacobs, 1998). It was within this wider ideological clutter that the goal to reducing reoffending by 25% by 2017 (RR25, hereafter) was introduced in 2012 by the National-led Government (Scott & Boyd, 2016).¹

After a change of focus brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the topic of crime and punishment in New Zealand has returned as a key discussion point leading into the 2023 election. This autoethnographic account uses ground-level observations of the New Zealand prison system to reflect on the National-led Government's failure to substantively reduce the number of repeat offenders between 2012 and 2017. I draw attention to some of the contradictory elements of my role as an officer; namely, superficial prisoner relationships, ill-conceived performance measures, and (post-)colonial justice processes. I conclude by considering the road ahead, noting that progressive approaches to criminal justice in New Zealand are facing strong headwinds.

Context

I am a Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) man who, from February 2016 to July 2017, worked as a Corrections officer for the Department of Corrections in a New Zealand prison. Implied in the job title is the responsibility to help facilitate a change in prisoner behaviours, encompassing a requirement on the part of officers like myself to talk to prisoners about their past offending and to encourage a different life path. I lived in a town about 20 minutes from the prison and commuted daily. While wearing my uniform to and from work, I would regularly be identified as an officer by members of the public. Consequently, I would be offered their perspectives on the nearby prison and those who were imprisoned, even if it was not clear they knew anyone imprisoned at the facility. The town I lived in is notable also as a nineteenth-century colonial settlement and for its role as a staging ground for the British during the New Zealand Wars. Since that time, it has had a history of racial segregation, with Māori facing explicit discrimination.

As an officer and an aspiring academic, I noted that attempts to rehabilitate prisoners from 'behind the wire' did not appear to have been particularly successful. During the time that I worked as an officer, the overall number of people imprisoned increased, while the rates of reimprisonment remained stable (Department of Corrections, 2017; Johnston, 2016). In the final three months of my employment, I became reacquainted with numerous individuals who had been imprisoned, released and then imprisoned again. By the time I left Corrections in 2017, there had only been a 3.9% reduction in reoffending over the five-year period (this included non-custodial sentences for offending; Department of Corrections, 2017). As strategies to reduce reoffending floundered, I observed that some prisoners were moved to facilities further away from family as the prison network neared full capacity.

Despite the Sixth Labour Government successfully reducing the prison population between 2018 and 2022,² the social and economic costs of high-per-capita imprisonment rates in Aotearoa New Zealand remain. According to New Zealand's Ministry of Justice (2023), the nation's rate of imprisonment (170 per 100,000) is higher than the OECD average (147 per 100,000), which includes especially punitive jurisdictions within the United States (629 per 100,000). Furthermore, despite a reduction in the overall rate of imprisonment in New Zealand, disparities between Māori (the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand) and non-Māori (non-Indigenous peoples) persist (Department of Corrections, 2023). In 2017, the

¹ National is the main centre-right party in New Zealand politics.

² Labour is the main centre-left party in New Zealand politics.

then-incoming Minister of Corrections, Kelvin Davis, claimed that Ngāpuhi—the iwi (tribal affiliation) he himself descends from—were probably the most incarcerated peoples in the world (RNZ, 2018). The disparity is evident in statistics made available by Corrections: while Māori only make up around 17% of the total population of New Zealand, they account for nearly 53% of those imprisoned (Department of Corrections, 2023).

Coupled with ethnic disparities in the justice system is a media fixation on certain types of heinous offending. I found this striking because it is at odds with the offender profile of a vast majority of prisoners I dealt with as a Corrections officer. This observation is consistent with data from Corrections that shows that the number of people imprisoned for homicide is less than 10% of the overall prison population (Department of Corrections, 2021). Such misconceptions also seemed to dictate elements of the public debate. After leaving Corrections, I began to wonder what were the social, political and cultural barriers to further reducing New Zealand's prison population? I examine this question through analysing my subjective reflexive experience as a Corrections officer.

Method

Autoethnography offers a highly personalised account that draws on the experience of the author for extending social understanding (Sparkes, 2000). There are numerous definitions of autoethnography, each of which uses a systematic approach to link personal experience to social, cultural and political phenomena (Duncan, 2004; Sparkes, 2000; Stahkle-Wall, 2016). Drawing from Stahkle-Wall, this article uses the scholarly potential of autoethnography to pull together anecdotes from my time at Corrections and illuminate the differences between the realities of prison and what appeared to be the socio-political expectations regarding such places. Such an approach required that I analyse the experiences to link the personal with the social “[thus] preventing the paper from appearing self-indulgent, therapeutic, and egocentric” (Stahkle-Wall, 2016, p. 2).

The data for this autoethnography was collated retrospectively. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) note that the development of autoethnography might rely on self-reflective data, in which the author journals reflections about their experiences related to the topic. For this research, the journaling of experiences took place in the six-month period after I left the Department of Corrections and had embarked on doctoral study. The experiences I have journaled include interactions with prisoners, Corrections officers and members of the public. Without prior consent, the privacy of these individuals must be represented with due consideration of their agency, and to ensure that any of the anecdotes do not risk their identification (Stahkle-Wall, 2016). To protect their privacy, the anecdotes outlined in this autoethnography have been generalised. This includes removing key identifiers such as the prison unit, location of the prison, and any other area where prisoners, Corrections officers and members of the public reside.

This autoethnography is bounded by my social interactions while employed at the Department of Corrections. I consider the effect of correctional policies that have attempted to alter the rate of reoffending, and how many prisoners continue to cycle hopelessly through New Zealand's justice system. Through analysing my own experiences as a Corrections officer, I give consideration to some of the social, political and cultural barriers to reducing New Zealand's prison population. My perspective is different, however, to convict criminology (for a New Zealand example, see Andrae et al., 2017). As an officer, I had certain privileges which preclude me from offering a comprehensive insider's perspective. Not least, I was able to return home at the end of my shift and largely avoid the experiences of isolation, coercion and violence that many prisoners report as part of a custodial sentence (Bevan, 2017; Lancaster, 2020; Richards, 2014). Neither is this a collaborative autoethnography. At no point did I, as the author, collect reflections from the other characters in my story (see Chang, 2013; Roy & Uekusa, 2020).

My story begins, then, with the premise that prisons have failed to ‘correct’ the individual behaviours of offenders and are unlikely to ever satisfy such an objective. If we wish to continue proactively reducing the prison population, we must consider how the current set of circumstances has come to pass. This includes the role of prisons as social institutions, the social policy settings of government, and the long tail of colonialist thinking in New Zealand. I start with an interaction I had with a prisoner who, in the most general sense, was representative of his peers.

The prisoner and the Corrections officer: A symbiotic relationship

“Luke, Luke! What up, bro?” My eyes scanned wearily up and down the access road that separated one of two remand units. It was the voice of a young man I had come to know quite well. “Hah, Luke, you fat cunt! Where have you been?” he yells again, while standing on the tips of his toes and peering through the grill of the double-gated entrance way. His tone this time suggested that he was excited—maybe because I had registered his voice and started grinning as he came into full view. We had struck up some light-hearted conversations during his previous lag some two months earlier, and maybe it helped him to see a familiar face despite returning to largely hostile surroundings. I also felt ambivalent. Yes, he was back. But at least he was one of the ‘good’ guys, filling a bed space where someone less hospitable might have been accommodated during my two-day break.

The prisoner and I had been through a similar courting process to that of many others, underpinned by the distrust between prisoner (confined by the state) and Corrections officer (an ancillary of the state). He was the statistical mean of a prisoner—young, brown,³ athletic and witty—and me being that of a guard—middle-aged, White and overweight, with a similar penchant for joke-telling. These were relationships that would often evolve from a starting point of distrust before reaching a precipice, moving to discussion and, finally, acceptance. It was rare to have any sort of bond with a prisoner without it starting as a form of verbal, and sometimes physical, jousting, setting the tone for how we might liaise with one another in the future. If you were to close your eyes during conversations with these young men, you might have thought you were in another place altogether; sport, food, women, cars, hunting and even politics were regular discussion topics.

Maintaining positive relations between most officers and most prisoners spoke to a more serious need: the mutually understood responsibility to remain safe at all times. Only months earlier, the young man at the gate had intervened when an agitated prisoner challenged me to a fight. Fortunately, other prisoners in the unit also worked to quickly defuse the situation, and it brought to me the comforting realisation that most prisoners can interpret the risks associated with spiralling levels of violence and probably shared a view that violence should only ever be used as a last resort. Ironically, it was as if a Hobbesian view of the social contract had been reimagined from behind the wire by such prisoners; that is to say, from within the facility that they had been held in since it was adjudicated that they were no longer fit to mingle beyond it. If prisoners were able to reason this way inside the wire, it suggested to me that they were at least capable of doing so outside of it.

The prisoner and I knew, however, we would never actually be close. A reasoning perhaps grounded in the belief that it might jeopardise my role as an officer, or his well-being as a prisoner. The prisoner–officer dynamic is rooted in social institutions that define the company we keep, or do not keep, if we are to enjoy the ongoing acceptance of our respective peers. It means that despite having shared experiences and common interests, the respective roles of officer and prisoner maintains both visible and invisible boundaries. We are taught as officers to never trust a prisoner, never share anything regarding your personal life with prisoners, and never have contact with prisoners when they were released. It is a contradictory message for the more contemporary-style corrective services that we are trained to provide.

³ In the New Zealand context, ‘brown’ typically denotes an individual of Māori or Pasifika ethnicity.

Indeed, as officers, we are also expected to build rapport with prisoners, encourage positive behaviours and, where possible, discuss the causes of their offending. In my own time outside of work, I would sometimes sit in the public gallery during sentencing hearings of prisoners I had on my caseload, much to the bewilderment of escorting officers from the prison who would look at me awkwardly across from the dock.

An ‘us versus them’ dualism is a common feature of populism (Aslanidis, 2016; Canovan, 1999). Within the framing of crime and punishment, most of ‘us’ are cast as the ordinary, law-abiding members of the public and the other are ‘them’, the criminals, their lawyers and the prisoner rights’ advocates (Pratt, 2007). This is in part because the public assumes that prison populations are composed mostly of violent offenders who pose a threat to society (Roberts & Hough, 2005). Such an assumption is itself a consequence of the aforementioned overrepresentation and sensationalism in the media of instances of especially violent crime (despite these also being statistically the rarest; Pratt, 2007). Both the de-escalation of potential violence by an intervening prisoner and my choice to attend court proceedings in my own time were a challenge to this ‘othering’ of prisoners by the rest of society.

It was evident to me during my time as an officer that some choices made by individuals that led to a custodial sentence reflected the limited number of alternatives on offer; for example, the consumption of illicit substances to manage mental health issues or the sale of illicit substances to supplement income. This is not to claim that all prisoners are free of culpability, but rather that many are non-violent in nature and have the same desire to maintain order as those of ‘us’ in the community. This is a view validated in the sentencing hearings I attended, which gave more background to the offender profile than what an officer would typically be aware of.

It was apparent to me that many of the young (brown) men housed in the prison I worked at were being socialised into gangs. Despite the reluctance of prisoners to discuss their reasons for gang affiliation, there is evidence in New Zealand that the recruitment of young people into gangs frequently occurs behind the wire (Lambie, 2018; Taonui & Newbold, 2016). Given the likelihood of gang socialisation and other negative social outcomes arising from imprisonment, it might be assumed that the public would be averse to its widespread use, especially of non-violent offenders. Instead, judging from the interactions I had with the public during my time as an officer, they were indifferent to the efficacy of prisons in addressing recidivism or offender rehabilitation. “You need prisons to put the scum somewhere,” was a comment made to me, and one that was typical of those made by people in the town where I lived.

If a young man were to cycle once through the New Zealand justice system—from police, to courts, and then sentencing—the likelihood of him being caught committing similar offences a second or third time is higher than someone who has not had any contact with the justice system in the first place (Kilgour & Polaschek, 2012; Poa & Monod, 2016). While the young man standing at the gate that day was representative of many of other prisoners with whom he shared the compound, it was not just age, gender and ethnicity that this prisoner had in common with his peers. The charges that had led to his detainment by the state were also similar. They covered what he and officers alike would gleefully refer to as ‘dumb shit’, a catch-all term for offences that were at the less-serious end of offending but were ill-advised, and often the consequence of other choices that preceded the offending, such as alcohol intoxication.

Performance measures versus social forces

Reporting progress on reducing reoffending has continued to be how correctional facilities are assessed and supported (Johnson, 2017; King & Elderbroom, 2014). Such measurements emphasise a view that the future choices of offenders are manipulable through a mixture of rehabilitative courses, reintegration pathways and coercive measures (Scott & Boyd, 2016). When I first applied to become an officer in 2015, Corrections was three years into this ambitious goal of reducing reoffending by 25% (RR25). At first glance,

RR25 (at least in the context of prisons) seemed like an attempt to modestly realign the sector towards prisoners' reintegration post-release. According to the Department of Corrections' 2014 strategic report, RR25 would be accomplished through focusing on the following: "community support" (e.g., housing initiatives); "working prisons", centred on various programmes or employability; "modern infrastructure" to facilitate such programmes both inside and outside of prison; and "visible leadership" (an expectation on staff to act professionally and facilitate rehabilitative outcomes). Critically, however, RR25 did not seek to change public attitudes towards imprisonment, those who were imprisoned, or those recently released from a term of imprisonment. Instead, RR25 upheld a philosophy that those who had cycled through the justice system were inherently more criminal than those who had not.

Questioning RR25 would have been heresy at the time, but there were sound reasons for casting doubt over the Department's vision even before it unravelled. Criminal justice advocate Kim Workman warned that such a broad target would encourage Corrections to either focus less on the needs of its more complex offenders or look for ways to creatively report progress (RNZ, 2017). In other words, any gains were most likely to come from persons completing community-based sentences. The first acknowledgement from Corrections that achieving RR25 by 2017 (cynically or otherwise) was unlikely to eventuate came in mid-2016. An update of the performance measure in the Corrections 2015/2016 Annual Report showed only a 5.6% change relative to the 2011 baseline, suggesting that much of the supposed gain had evaporated from a high-water mark of over 12.7% in 2014. Notable also was that from 2016, Corrections moved reporting on the RR25 target from the first few pages of its annual report to the appendices section, a separate document that would usually only contain technical information regarding the reporting of data (see Department of Corrections, 2016).

Behind the wire, it was clear to me that RR25 amounted to little more than a lofty aspiration featuring at the bottom of staff email signatures. This was no more evident than in an interaction I had with another young man shortly before he became eligible for parole. Upon unlocking him at eight that morning, he emerged from the bathroom with a new tattoo across his right cheek. Such jailhouse tattooing contravened the Corrections Act and cast doubt on whether the young man was ready for the impending parole hearing, despite having already completed a long list of programmes prescribed by his case manager. When I asked the young man what had compelled him to take such a risk, his response was depressingly familiar, "Who cares, jail is mean."⁴

One impact of long periods of imprisonment, particularly among those already socially marginalised, is that it leads to a greater normalisation of prison in the life of a prisoner, and thus, prison itself loses any deterrent effect or, even worse, becomes a rite of passage (Workman & McIntosh, 2013). A fellow officer shared a view that when considering the prisoner's life outside the wire, jail probably was 'mean'. The officer then went on to remark, "He probably comes from one of those families when you open the fridge and there's just margarine." Anecdotally at least, the prisoner was not alone; other prisoners had made decisions ensuring they would spend the longest possible time in prison. These prisoners would turn down enrolment in programmes geared towards an early release, preferring to avoid the conditional release that comes with parole. It painted a grim picture of the agency many of these prisoners had outside the wire in that, for many of them, the risk of being unable to meet the conditions of release led them to accept a longer period of imprisonment than might otherwise have been the case.

We never found that tattoo gun, though I had marvelled at others in the past. They resembled an intricate bird's nest of materials that had been stripped from pens, wires and batteries. "What do you call this?" I posed to another prisoner as I placed a tattoo gun on the desk in front of him; he grinned and gave a wry smile before replying: "Māori ingenuity." Indeed, it was ingenuity for which I would not have ever had the technical ability, especially from within the confines of a prison with limited access to materials.

⁴ A colloquialism in New Zealand English to indicate something is fun or enjoyable.

Caught within a complex web of social forces, this prisoner might have otherwise been a mechanical engineer, but had instead found himself under involuntary confinement by the state.

The persistence of behaviours routinely characterised as ‘dumb shit’ could not be attributed simply to failings in either individuals or the justice system. They were consequences of poverty, gang socialisation, inadequate housing, substance addiction, poor education and unemployment (see also Johnston, 2016). Structural changes to the economy are required regarding the provision of housing, employment and justice, as opposed to piecemeal interventions like RR25. In small towns across New Zealand, economic liberalisation shuttered once profitable industries and impoverished families who have lived in the area for generations (Conradson & Pawson, 2009; Gray & Lawrence, 2001; Larner, 2005). In a conversation I had with a sentenced prisoner, another young man scoffed at the idea of not selling illicit drugs again upon release: “Why would I get some shit job paying min[imum] wage when I can make a grand a week selling crack?” I found this statement remarkable, not for its candidness, but the suggestion that an income of \$1000 per week was somehow noteworthy, when only a generation earlier, a stable and sufficiently well-paying job had been readily available in the same town he had grown up in.

In 2017, former Corrections Deputy Chief Executive Vince Arbuckle acknowledged the failure of RR25 and the need for structural change when he addressed shortcomings of the performance measure at the Waitangi Tribunal (Waitangi Tribunal, 2017). He spoke to the difficulties faced by Corrections staff who knew they had little chance of reducing the rates of reoffending among those who received a custodial sentence. Of concern to Mr Arbuckle was that there is a sense of inevitability about offenders returning to the same challenging environments upon their release from prison and their involvement in gangs (Waitangi Tribunal, 2017). The issue Arbuckle highlighted is that it was not ‘dumb shit’ alone which was responsible for young people cycling through the justice system, but a broader set of social forces.

RR25 was one of the few Better Public Services targets that fell significantly short of their stated aims; I resigned in the same week that the Department abandoned its target. Although my decision to move on was not related to the failure of RR25, I had nonetheless accepted that the formula necessary for breaking the cycle of recidivist offending was unlikely to be engineered through the delicate interactions of prison staff behind the wire. When commenting on the surge in correctional programmes offered in the US, Maxwell (2005) opined that to be successful, programmes from behind the wire needed to somehow develop in prisoners the necessary coping strategies to “ameliorate the economic, social, and cultural stresses of post-release life” (p. 519). It was evident from my observations that the story was the same in Aotearoa New Zealand. By 2018, two-year reoffending rates in New Zealand were continuing at levels higher than 50%, despite programmes being widely available to prisoners (Department of Corrections, 2019). Mr Arbuckle was, therefore, correct in his submission to the Waitangi Tribunal when he conceded that it is the environment outside of prison that has the most direct impact on the chances of an individual re-entering the justice system.

Prisons and (post-)colonial Aotearoa⁵

The drive from my home to the prison took around 20 minutes by car, and as a Pākehā with a moderate grasp of the region’s bloody colonial history, this daily commute gave rise to an eerie parallel. Each morning I would put on a uniform, adorn myself in protective armour and then travel by convoy into the countryside to a fortification (prison) where most people identified as being of Māori descent. Notably, the car park was only another five minutes by car from the site of a historical pā (settlement) and the location of a series of battles between local iwi and the British. It was common also to hear Māori Corrections staff speak of

⁵ There is ongoing scholarly debate regarding the description of Aotearoa New Zealand as a postcolonial society that goes beyond the scope of this paper (see Smith, 2012).

their discomfort at being party to a justice system which had so routinely disempowered their own people, both historically and in more recent times.

It was ethnicity, then, which became the initial fault line in my interactions with prisoners. Shortly after being assigned to a unit, a high-profile gang member turned to me at the conclusion of a television news story and said, “That Trump character, he’d be your kind of guy, right?” After responding, “Nah, fuck that guy,” we both laughed. It was the sort of interaction that served as a reminder that prison could amplify what has been an adversarial biculturalism nurtured throughout colonisation, where the markers of who belongs to which group are crudely assigned to fairly predictable social cleavages: Pākehā versus Māori; officer versus prisoner; us versus them; and, as the public often see it, good versus bad.

A lot of this adversarial type thinking also seems to be entrenched in the minds of the public. Dressed for work in the appropriate Corrections attire, I would regularly stop at a service station to collect a few necessities before continuing on my journey. One exchange was representative of the opportune comments from strangers when noting that I was in uniform. While processing payment for my coffee, a service station attendant said, “I don’t envy you, mate.” I shrugged, nodded and chuckled awkwardly, all at the same time. When handing back my EFTPOS card, he offered a further unsolicited comment: “Do us all a favour and gas the lot of them.” I recoiled, managing only a grimace before hastily retreating to the car—while some of those in the line behind me began to call out approvingly.

Physically leaving the scene that day was straightforward enough, but it was more difficult to eschew the feelings of cognitive dissonance: what was my role, and what purpose did it really serve the public? If the genesis for which many of these young men wound up in prison was connected to colonisation and ongoing systemic racism (Cunneen, 2009; Webb, 2017), at what point do the public attitudes towards these young men become more problematic than the actions that led to their imprisonment? For Māori prisoners, such as the high-profile gang member, a Pākehā officer like myself was another malevolent representation of this power relation, set on upholding the structures of White supremacy.

Part of the early colonial project in New Zealand was to purposefully disempower Māori from participating on equal terms with Pākehā (Hokowhitu, 2007). Māori school-aged rangatahi (youth) were shuffled away from literacy and numeracy and into manual labouring positions, on the pretence that these skills were not required unless they were part of the ruling class (Hokowhitu, 2007). To exacerbate matters, te reo Māori (the Māori language) was also banned from being taught or spoken in New Zealand schools, ensuring Māori were assimilated into the colonial education system (Walker, 1990). This alienation from the structures of government and bureaucratic decision-making occurred alongside Māori alienation from their land, often by consequence of war (confiscation), or dubious acquisition by Pākehā settlers (Boast & Hill, 2010; Taonui, 2010).

More recently, the aforementioned impacts of economic liberalisation have been especially felt among Māori communities, which have further fractured as their working-age adults were forced to leave smaller settlements in search of work in the cities (Larner & Craig, 2005; Murphy & Cloher, 1995). Such upheaval has resulted in children becoming dislocated from meaningful cultural instruction as well as the safety and protection afforded by whānau (the wider family group). It is within both the historical context of colonialism and more recent neoliberal thought, that the failure of corrective approaches to criminal justice ought to be considered (Kim et al., 2010; McIntosh & Workman, 2017; Workman & McIntosh, 2013). The consequence of these structural disadvantages is a normalisation of Māori being over-represented in prison at the same time as they have been made socially, culturally and economically precarious (Cook, 2021; Stanley & Mihaere, 2018).

Understanding the normalisation of ethnic stratification is also critical to appreciating the present-day discrimination faced by Māori. Residents in the town I lived during my time as an officer referred to a particular suburb as the “dark side”, due to the fact that most who lived there were either

Māori or Pasifika, a reference to their generally brown skin tones. So common was the term used in social interactions that no further explanation was required. The dark side was then a placeholder term for an area where one might expect social deviance or anti-social behaviours. Such urban segregation between Māori (and Pasifika) and Pākehā residents has inevitably had consequences for how the former interface with agencies of the state, not least of which is the over-policing of Māori communities (McIntosh & Workman, 2017; Workman, 2013).

The ongoing colonisation of Māori has been dependent, then, on the construction of ignorance about their culture, language and beliefs, and of their being designated as the Other (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018). Through its institutions, New Zealand society has nurtured a certain view among Pākehā settler descendants regarding the civility of Māori (Jackson, 2017). Penal populism is then nourished through this entrenched view within Pākehā society, one that represents Māori as having a proclivity towards crime and violence (Hokowhitu, 2007; McIntosh & Workman, 2017). This Othering, or the routine characterisation of Māori as an untamed, warrior-like race, leads to the legitimisation of justice processes among the dominant Pākehā majority that imposes state controls and the colonial institutions that come with it—prisons (see also Jackson, 2017).

With even the most cursory overview of colonisation and postcolonial New Zealand outlined above, it is clear that a belief persists among Pākehā that Māori ought to be managed and controlled (Mihaere, 2015). Such belief among Pākehā has also been routinely validated by political actors. In 2014, then-Prime Minister John Key referred to New Zealand as a country “settled peacefully” (Godfrey, 2015, p. 5). On another occasion, Key, when visiting Ngāti Porou, joked about being fortunate not to be visiting neighbouring Tūhoe, suggesting he might have been eaten by the local population (RNZ, 2010). Such instances of historical revisionism were perhaps convenient, allowing the then-National Government to obscure the intergenerational trauma of colonisation and set aside the structural disadvantages responsible for the disproportionate level of imprisonment among Māori in the first place. Godfrey (2015) referred to this rationalisation of colonisation as a way to legitimise its imposition on Māori, in a manner that is often contradictory to the stated aspirations of redressing past injustices. As an officer, I also noted that some prisoners carried with them sentiments of past injustice.

It is not as if Corrections staff are ignorant of our national history. In the first session of my first day of training in Wellington, the colonisation of New Zealand and its impact on Māori was explained by a senior training facilitator of Māori descent. The topics of colonisation and structural disadvantage were also revisited at different points throughout the six-month training, bestowing a rudimentary sociological explanation of New Zealand society on the department’s newest recruits. But having acknowledged as much, the training programme became discombobulated throughout the induction process, frequently circling back to notions that it is incumbent on officers to encourage offenders to better themselves, while keeping them imprisoned for increasingly longer periods of time. Corrections, though, can only act within their remit.

After I departed Corrections a change of government brought a renewed attempt to address Māori over-representation in the prison system. Hōkai Rangi is a comprehensive strategy co-designed in 2018 by Corrections and Māori under the auspices of the Sixth Labour Government. In essence, Hōkai Rangi was designed to fulfil the needs of Māori offenders alongside a range of culturally tailored support, created by Māori for the Māori prison population. However, according to Te Pere (2021), among the problems of implementing Hōkai Rangi has been an inertia within the Department, particularly among staff working in the prisons, far removed from Corrections head office. It is perhaps of little surprise, then, that after nearly three years, Hōkai Rangi has had no demonstrable effect on shifting the proportion of Māori imprisoned, despite an overall drop in the rate of imprisonment and the number of Māori imprisoned (Te Pere, 2021).

There are also numerous critiques from Māori scholars regarding prison programmes, including those with a kaupapa Māori focus. To summarise just one, the co-opting of kaupapa Māori principles into

the prison system validates the use of prisons, which are themselves a colonial construct for managing deviant behaviour (Mcintosh & Workman, 2017; Mutu, 2013; Webb, 2018). Thus, the appropriation of kaupapa Māori by Corrections amounts to another way in which the state continues to colonise and harm Māori (see Jackson, 1987; Tauri, 2013). While Corrections have accepted the role played by colonisation in the disproportionate imprisonment of Māori, the Department remains fixated on folding kaupapa Māori principles into a framework of individual responsibility, an argument which could be extended to include Hōkai Rangi.

Ultimately, the long shadow cast by the entrenched, systemic racism throughout the New Zealand justice system continues to have negative consequences for Māori, their families and their communities (Workman, 2014). The consequential mass imprisonment of Māori is then a human rights issue (Tauri & Webb, 2012). From my observations outside the wire, however, there was at best acquiescence among Pākehā regarding the role that colonisation and systemic racism has played in poor justice outcomes for non-Pākehā and their families.

Change the policy, prisoner or the public?

This article gave a first-person account of the contradictions evident in how New Zealand's Department of Corrections has been configured to operate in the twenty-first century. These include an antiquated us versus them prisoner–officer relationship which inhibits magnanimity and capacity building, ambitious neoliberal performance measures favouring only piecemeal societal intervention, and an inadequate appreciation for the historical and ongoing mistreatment of Māori, despite bureaucratic handwaving to these past injustices. Each of these contradictions (by no means an exhaustive list) reinforce that the onus for change has remained on the shoulders of individual offenders (see also Kramer et al., 2013).

In parallel to these contradictions, the New Zealand public continues to hold inaccurate perceptions of prison and prisoners. If the public were to accept that prison has a limited role to play in reducing reoffending, and indeed ensuring public safety, it might open the possibility of reversing the growth of the prison network and its operations. To accomplish this, advocates for decarceration must navigate widely held yet erroneous ways of public thinking; for example, that offenders are *not* part of society; that would-be offenders are susceptible to the same deterrents as others; and that Māori, who currently make up over half of all those imprisoned, have had equitable interactions with the state. What has proven to be the stumbling block for advocates of this 'progressive' penal reform is that attempts to rebut such assumptions with evidence-based arguments do not seem to be politically effective (Lambie, 2018; Roberts et al., 2002; Tauri, 2019).

This article provides a ground-level understanding of a few social, political and cultural barriers to reducing the prison population, but is only a starting point. It is a precursor to further empirical work; for example, what Corrections officers see as the core function of their role or what appetite the public has for the social reforms necessary to reduce the number of people cycling through the justice system. It also underscores the pervasiveness of colonial thinking in mainstream society, which leads to more obvious questions about how to address anti-Māori prejudices through the national education curriculum.

The prison population began to fall after I left the Department of Corrections, suggesting that penal populism in New Zealand might be receding. A reduction in the number of persons imprisoned was said to be a consequence of streamlining prisoner bail and parole applications (Ministry of Justice, 2021). However, at least some of the reduction in prisoner numbers was a by-product of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Justice, 2022). The pandemic has been cited globally as pushing down rates of imprisonment, due to the early prisoner releases, long lockdown periods and a backlog of cases before the courts (Brennan, 2020; Chartrand, 2021). It is notable that rates of imprisonment in New Zealand have increased again in the past 12 months (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

In the absence of a mandate for decarceration, or any profound structural changes to either the justice system or the broader economy, it is plausible that rates of imprisonment will continue in an upward trajectory. Such possibilities reflect not only the predominance of neoliberalism, but the return of law and order to the media cycle at a time of heightened anxieties in middle New Zealand regarding economic well-being. As the National Party (currently in opposition) dusts off previously touted policies of boot camps for wayward youth (RNZ, 2022a) and targeted social investment (RNZ, 2022b)—both individualised responses to social issues—it is not inconceivable that performance measures will themselves return. Few options exist for those wishing to push back on a punitive discourse, and a consequential rise in the rate of imprisonment. A politically viable option might be to draw on the economic anxieties of middle New Zealand by pointing out the wastefulness of prisons, and the broader justice bureaucracy. (For a comprehensive discussion regarding populist decarceration strategies, see Oldfield and Mills, 2022.) Such a course of action would seek a mandate for change, recognising that public attitudes are malleable and thus giving space for policies that address the underlying causes of crime to take root (see also Frost, 2010).

It would be difficult for me to overstate how dire prisons are, where the life chances for those entering these facilities, at best, diminish, and where, at worst, prisoners themselves become the victims of horrific crimes. These ‘hidden’ crimes are part of the basis upon which prisoner advocacy groups have argued that prisons should be abolished entirely, with only the most high-risk offenders being managed under some form of security (Coyle & Scott, 2021; Davis & Rodriguez, 2000; McLeod, 2015). Others have advocated the reform of existing facilities to ensure they are more responsive to the needs of prisoners (Grant, 2016; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2013). This article stops short of endorsing one position ahead of the other, but instead works off a statement of fact that prisons in New Zealand are not effective in one of their key objectives: reducing reoffending. As a society, we can continue to ignore that fact—but at what cost?

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