

# MNS DISORDERS IN GUYANA'S JAILS

1825 to the Present Day

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## Resisting Carceral Confinement in Guyana: Legacies of a Colonial State

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In July of 2017, a fire destroyed the majority of the buildings that stood in the compound of the Georgetown Prison in Guyana's capital. Four prisoners escaped and one warden was killed. Over 1000 people were imprisoned at the time in a space meant to hold less than 600 people. Just over a year earlier, in March 2016, 17 prisoners died and eight were injured after a fire spread in the Capital A Block of the prison. The setting of this fire arose out of prisoner's frustration with structural deficiencies within the prison which included overcrowding, poor sanitation, and an infestation of pests. Also of relevance was that the overcrowding was caused in large part by the length of time individuals were being held on remand before trial. However, these events did not occur in a vacuum. The issues of overcrowding and the numbers of prisoners being held on remand for extended periods of time have been linked to varying forms of prisoner resistance since British rule.

Historically, prisons in British Guiana were used by colonial administrators to control and confine the labouring population, namely the formerly enslaved and indentured immigrants, within the plantation society. As a result, those of African and Asian descent were disproportionately policed and punished to deter others from engaging in 'criminal' activities. Most notably this occurred for breaches of contract and misdemeanours under the immigration ordinance. Whilst some prisoners adapted to the substandard living conditions and overtly punitive environment of the prison system, many sought to test these institutional practices. Critically, therefore, prisons quickly became sites of resistance and challenge for the labouring population as they attempted to alter their legal, social, and political situations.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, government inquiries and the reports of colonial authorities have urged change in the provision of the colony's prison system, citing concerns disturbingly similar to those identified by the Commissions of Enquiry into the 2016 and 2017 fires. This included, among others, poor infrastructure, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions. As in recent years inquiries into these concerns were often a direct response to violent, every day, or official forms of prisoner's resistance.

Due to the limited number of warders the prison system was often reliant on the compliance of prisoners to adhere to rules and regulations rather than force. As a result, when the prisoners felt powerless, they would often resort to uprisings as a way to challenge the system. Habitual offenders frequently took advantage of the lack of trained warders required to maintain discipline with the creation of gangs that threatened to overwhelm the balance of control. These groups included a range of differing classes, such as first offenders, juveniles, and those awaiting trial. Whilst attempts were made in the 1930s to alter certain aspects of the prison system, such as the separation of different classes of prisoners, these efforts were ultimately hampered due to budget constraints, and the need to manage and discipline the prison population. A lack of space, and facilities within Guyana's prison system mean that those on remand continue to be held in close association with those imprisoned for committing violent crimes.

Rum, cannabis, and opium provided an escape from the hardships of labouring on plantations throughout much of the nineteenth century. And, having become firmly established within the culture of the labouring class the increased legislation introduced around the turn of the twentieth century unsurprisingly led to a significant rise in this form of resistance both inside and outside the prison walls. For many prisoners, substance use provides an escape from the anxieties of being imprisoned. Thus, unlike uprisings that involve acts of violence, most acts of resistance have involved everyday negotiations that have taken place between the prison population and the staff. This has included the consumption and trade of illicit substances, such as alcohol and drugs, the latter of which has mostly been trafficked by the prison staff for financial gain. Recently, much has been done to improve fencing, with the introduction of night-time surveillance, to help stem attempts by friends and family to throw contraband over the walls.

Hence, it can be seen that the use of alcohol and drugs within the prison is a trend that has continued into the twenty first century. Whilst the introduction of technology has led to a wider range of contraband in recent years (cell phones and sim cards), alcohol, and drugs continue to play an important role in helping to relieve the strictures of incarceration. In particular, cannabis remains a key drug within the prisons in connection to both escapism and resistance. Additionally, images and videos of participation in other illegal or banned activities, such as human 'dog fights', bring attention to the conditions in the prison system, both physical (the overcrowding) and mental (frustration and boredom).

As Guyana's prison system continues to attract media attention and the concern of prison reform and human rights organisations (United Nations), history can be drawn on to highlight continuities in terms of the challenges of managing large numbers of prisoners with limited means. Despite some temporary successes for the prison population during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, resistance often led to additional or continued oppression. Yet, such acts of resistance continue. Since independence, a lack of resources and poor infrastructure has meant that the several commissions of enquiry have not resulted in systemic change. Further uprisings occurred in the summer of 2020 in response to continued deplorable conditions and worries that COVID-19 was spreading in the prison. It also provides a final sobering conclusion that little has changed in terms of the high rate of imprisonment in Guyana and the detrimental effects the system has had since the beginning of British rule in 1814.

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📌 **ADDICTION, ALCOHOL, BRITISH EMPIRE, CAMP STREET PRISON, GUYANA, GUYANA PRISON SERVICE, INTERDISCIPLINARITY, JAILS, MAZARUNI, MNS DISORDERS, NARCOTICS, PUNISHMENT, UNCATEGORIZED**

# **BRITISH GUIANA, GUYANA, GUYANA'S PRISON SERVICE, RESISTANCE, RESISTANCE IN GUYANA'S JAILS**