

BAHAMAS

Rehabilitation of Inmates: A National Imperative

by Dr. Elliston Rahming
Superintendent of Prison

Her Majesty's Prison is quite often described by a local newspaper as "Fox Hell Prison." This portrayal of HMP, due in part to the perceived size of the inmate population, is unfounded, unwarranted and ill-conceived.

Indeed, the facts are that the prison admission figures are trending downward and the average daily population is appreciably lower than it was just five years ago. For instance, in 2005, there were 2,897 admissions to Her Majesty's Prison. In 2010, there were 2,374 admissions – an 18% decrease. Moreover, the average daily population ten years ago was approaching 1,500 whereas in 2011, the average daily population hovers around 1,300.

If we break the daily population down by housing units, we will see that Her Majesty's Prison has a capacity for 1,348 inmates but as at November 1, 2011 we had an actual inmate population of 1,319 broken down as follows:

Inmate Population as at November 1, 2011

Facility	Intended Capacity	Actual Population
Maximum Security	450	740
Remand Centre	300	266
Medium Security	300	203
Minimum Security	80	40
Female Prison	120	35
Central Intake	48	09
The Annex	50	26
Total	1,348	1,319

Of the 1,348 inmates, 708 (54%) are sentenced and 611 (46%) are remanded or awaiting trial. So, clearly, our Maximum Security facility is overcrowded but it is patently false to say that Her Majesty's Prison overall, is overcrowded. Through a system of re-classification, we hope in short order to transfer a sizeable number of inmates who are now in Maximum to other, less crowded units. This, of course, is an ongoing exercise.

Having bragged about the downward trend in our admission numbers, I hasten to add that among one hundred and fifty-five countries surveyed by NationMaster.com the average inmate

count was 148 per 100,000 citizens. In our case, in terms of the size of our prison population, we rank ninth in the world and number one in the Caribbean on a per capita basis.

We have some 435 persons behind bars per 100,000 population, compared to:

Barbados	- 367 per 100,000
Trinidad and Tobago	- 351 per 100,000
St. Kitts & Nevis	- 338 per 100,000
Grenada	- 333 per 100,000
Antigua & Barbuda	- 278 per 100,000
St. Vincent & The Grenadines	- 270 per 100,000
Saint Lucia	- 243 per 100,000
Jamaica	- 176 per 100,000
Guyana	- 175 per 100,000

These figures suggest that for every 270 citizens in The Bahamas, one is incarcerated.

Having laid that preamble, I go now to the topic of today's discussion, rehabilitation of inmates. I have already established that close to one-half of our inmates are remanded – awaiting trial. There is, therefore, no legal basis to require them to engage in educational, trade or work programmes. You should also know that among sentenced admissions in 2010, 55% were sentenced to six months or less and 72% were sentenced to a year or less. These sentences are hardly long enough to change mindsets, alter attitudes, erase habits and eradicate behavioural patterns.

Of the remaining 28% of those sentenced, many have been assigned to our Maximum Security Facility for safety and security reasons. By the very nature of maximum security, there is little space for inmate educational, trade or work programmes until they are re-classified and graduate to our medium security facility. What then do we do about rehabilitation?

One of the vexing issues that exercises the minds of Bahamians in relation to prison is the question, "What Works?" If we take murderers, for instance, most Bahamians seem to favour capital punishment; some favour life sentences without the possibility of early release and some prefer long sentences with the option of early release.

Here is what we know. We know that between 1973 and 2010, there were 1,817 murders or manslaughter incidents in The Bahamas. Of more recent note, Police Sergeant Chaswell Hanna has documented that during the period 2005-2009, 349 murders were recorded, 243 of which were investigated by the Police; 63 of which were prosecuted by the courts resulting in 18 convictions (ten murder convictions and eight manslaughter convictions). Of the ten murder convictions, two were sentenced to death. Of course we know that there have been no executions since 2000.

The jury is still out as to "what works" for murder or manslaughter convicts. It is instructive nevertheless to note that between the years, 1973-2010, 353 persons who had been sentenced to Her Majesty's Prison for murder or manslaughter were released. Of that number, fourteen (or 4%) were released by way of capital punishment in prison; another ten (3%) died otherwise in prison; 19% were released on license and the balance was released either by the courts or after having served their time.

So, in the 37-year period since Independence, of the 329 live bodies released from prison who had served time for murder or manslaughter, twenty (or 6%) of them served sentences of

fifteen years or longer and within this group, only two (or 10%) of them have returned to prison – one for shop breaking and the other is remanded for murder.

These facts suggest that long sentences, with or without the possibility of release, are impactful and do not unduly imperil society. Indeed, these findings compare favourably with those by Amnesty International which found that 8% of convicted murderers go on to commit a future murder after being released.

We have established, then, that insofar as the protection of society is concerned, long sentences for serious, high risk, dangerous offenders work. What else do we know? We know that while educational programmes, vocational training and psychiatric therapy are important to the rehabilitation process, the source of criminality is mostly psychological rather than social; it is mostly choice-based, not class-based; and it is mostly individualistic, not communal.

Therefore, just as we make a choice whether or not to engage in a crime, the inmate makes a choice either to use his time in prison or to waste it. For those who elect to use the time in prison (and they are in the majority), the prospect of rehabilitation, reformation, and reintegration is high as evidenced by our twenty percent recidivism rate among sentenced admissions.

Our rehabilitative thrust begins with a mandatory classification and sentence planning process to ensure that, to the extent possible, we house remanded prisoners with other remanded prisoners ; gleaners with gleaners, juveniles with juveniles and jail birds with jail birds. Also, as part of this process, we seek to ensure that we do not use the one-size-fits-all approach.

During the intake classification process, great care is taken to ensure that a structured plan is put in place for all sentenced inmates that would take them from arrival to release. The aim is to amplify their strengths and erase their deficits.

This is done in three basic ways:

(1) Attitude Adjustment Programmes	(2) Work Programmes	(3) Technical Vocational & Academic Programmes
Anger Management	Day Release Work Programme	Introduction to Computers
The Sycamore Tree Restorative Justice Programme (set to begin this Friday)	Auto Mechanic Repairs	Word & Excel
Faith-based Initiative	Landscaping and Grounds Maintenance	Basic Numeracy
Family Reunification	Painting	Basic Literacy
Job Seeking & Job Keeping Skills	Electrical Installation	BJC Courses
Substance Abuse Education	Plumbing	Cosmetology

Religious Counselling	Culinary Arts	Ceramics
	Tile Laying	Tailoring
	Dry Wall Installation	Craft Production
	Carpentry	Auto Body Repair
	Masonry	Basic Welding
	Roofing	Entrepreneurship
		Hospitality Services

These programmes, combined with a slightly more tolerant public that's willing to give ex-offenders a second chance, have contributed to a marked decrease in the rate of recidivism from 42% six years ago to just under 20% today.

It may interest you to know that, according to Wikipedia, the recidivism rate for released prisoners in the United States within one year is 44% and 67% after three years. In California, which has the highest recidivism rate in the United States, 70% of released inmates return to prison within three years. Arizona has the lowest rate of recidivism, at 25 %.

So, here's what we know about "what works" in our prison:

- 1) We know that habitual or dangerous inmates who serve long sentences (15 years or longer) return to prison at a relatively low rate.
- 2) We know that short sentences for habitual, non-violent offenders tend to be counter productive. Therefore, they should be steered towards alternative, treatment-oriented forms of punishment as opposed to imprisonment
- 3) We know that petty, non-violent offenders on whom a fine is levied are ten times more likely to avoid incarceration if they are afforded a reasonable time to pay the fine, say 30 days.
- 4) We know that inmates who complete our Day Release Work Programme or our technical – vocational programmes show a relatively low recidivism rate.

And so I say that the naysayers who refer to Her Majesty's Prison as "Fox Hell Prison" are wrong. They are dead wrong. The facts tell a different story. Indeed The Canadian Correctional Association has put out a document entitled "Ten signs of A Well-run Prison" and I share these principles with you today:

- 1) Staff and inmates can pursue their routine activities in a safe, secure environment.
- 2) There is a high staff retention rate.
- 3) There is a written code of ethics for staff that is uniformly enforced.
- 4) There is ready access to quality medical/dental/psychiatric care and self development programmes for staff and inmates .

- 5) There is an open and fair system for the adjudication of staff and inmate grievances and imposition of disciplinary measures.
- 6) Policies and procedures, not personalities, drive discipline and orderliness.
- 7) Visitors are regarded as partners and are treated with courtesy and respect at all times.
- 8) The quantity and quality of food provided to inmates are matters of top priority.
- 9) The physical environment is clean and uplifting for staff and inmates.
- 10) There is a shared philosophy and a common vision established by The Commissioner and fostered down the chain of command.

Of these ten standards, Her Majesty's Prison is fully compliant with six of the standards and is working feverishly on the remaining four. In summary, I can report today that:

- The prison population is down and, due to expanded programmes, staffing levels are up;
- Recidivism is down;
- Escapes are down;
- The number of college graduates on staff has doubled within the past five years;
- Personal assaults on officers and inmates are down;
- We now have 52 recruits in training – all of whom hold at least the minimum academic qualification of five BJC's;
- Recruitment and promotions are now transparent;
- We have begun remedial classes for remanded juveniles who volunteer for the programme;
- We have re-launched educational programmes within our Maximum Security Unit, offering remedial as well as BJC courses. By January of 2012 we hope to have installed the widely-acclaimed Auto Skills Programme of Canada within Maximum Security. This would allow long-term inmates access to state-of-the-art, interactive, computer-aided, self-teaching technology to promote academic development among Maximum Security inmates;
- We will, in cooperation with BAIC, cultivate ten acres on the compound for agricultural and horticultural production;
- We will expand our Inmate Industries Programme with a focus on tourist-related souvenir production as a further means of promoting self employment upon release. In this regard, we seek to partner with the private sector and we hereby invite proposals. The private sector can provide the capital, the know-how and the marketing, and we will provide the labour;

- We will continue to expose our staff to the finest training opportunities both at home and abroad;
- We are well on our way towards genuine prison reform whereby inmates are treated as subjects not as objects. We seek to create an institution wherein inmates lose their liberty, not their dignity; and
- We invite members of the Rotary Club to volunteer as Big Brothers and mentors for soon-to-be-released inmates so that they may have positive linkages and purposeful support systems upon release.

Prison reform, rehabilitation, reintegration and restoration is everyone's business, yours and mine. I invite you to join us in this common cause.

Thank you very much.