

## Courts and Criminal Justice – Prison Records

### The administration of gaols and penal institutions in the nineteenth century

Prior to 1871 penal institutions and gaols were separately administered by officers located within the Chief Secretary's Department ([VA 475](#)). In 1871 under the provisions of the *Statute of Gaols Amendment Act 1871*, the Inspector-General of Penal Establishments assumed responsibility for the administration of gaols, and a Penal and Gaols Branch ([VA 1464](#)) was established within the Chief Secretary's Department. The branch was responsible for the management of Victorian gaols and penal institutions and the control and supervision of the adults and minors who were detained.

The earliest penal institutions were almost entirely punitive in emphasis, while gaols were used for the detention of prisoners not sentenced to hard labour, such as debtors, lunatics, the old, the destitute and children who had been convicted of vagrancy. For more information about records concerning the administration of prisons, probation and parole, and for records of individual institutions see [VRG 9 Prisons and Youth Training Centres](#) and [VRG 93 Corrections](#) on PROV's online catalogue at [www.access.prov.vic.gov.au](http://www.access.prov.vic.gov.au).

### Records relating to gaols and penal institutions: a select list

Victorian prisons were required to submit information about the prisoners in their custody to the Penal and Gaols Branch ([VA 1464](#)) of the Chief Secretary's Department. There was no state-wide centralised registration of prisoners until 1985. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was common practice for a prisoner to be moved directly from the court where the trial was held to a local prison, such as Beechworth. If the trial took place outside the Melbourne area researchers are advised to consult the records of local prisons. For records of individual institutions see [VRG 9 Prisons and Youth Training Centres](#) on PROV's online catalogue.

From around 1860 Pentridge became the central prison for the Melbourne area, and registers were kept for both male and female prisoners who passed through Pentridge. These prisoners were registered in [VPRS 515 Central Register of Male Prisoners](#) [1850 - 1948] and [VPRS 516 Central Register of Female Prisoners](#) [1857 - 1948]. Please note that these registers only contain details of prisoners that passed through Pentridge and were not state-wide central registers. Unless a prisoner passed through Pentridge it is unlikely that there will be a reference to them in VPRS 515 and VPRS 516.

These registers are arranged in prisoner registration number order. Subsequent entries were added under the prisoner's original registration number. Some entries span long periods of time, and include details about the prisoner's behaviour while incarcerated. The registers give the prisoner's name, date of birth, country of origin, occupation and physical description, as well as the reason for conviction, sentence and the dates served. In the earlier volumes entries under 'previous history' often include the name of the ship on which the prisoner arrived in Australia if they were not born in Australia.

Both series are subject to access closures under sections 9 and 11 of the *Public Records Act 1973*. Section 9 closures are progressively opened as the closure period expires. Some volumes are closed under section 11 due to the fragility of the records. See the Online Records section below for information about digitised volumes of VPRS 515 Central Register of Male Prisoners.

The portion of VPRS 516 Central Register of Female Prisoners that is not closed under section 9 can be accessed on microfiche in PROV Reading Rooms without having to be ordered. Please note: the microfiche copy of this series was formerly registered as VPRS 8622 and is now registered as VPRS 516/P1. See PROV's guides to [Microfilm, Microfiche and Online Resources at the Victorian Archives Centre](#), and [Microfilm, Microfiche and Online Resources at the Ballarat Archives Centre](#) for more information about accessing records on microfilm and microfiche.

## Online Records

The following records have been digitised and can be accessed online:

[VPRS 515 Central Register of Male Prisoners \[1850 – 1948\] \[selected volumes only\]](#)

This series is indexed by [VPRS 10867/P0 Alphabetical Index to Central Register of Male Prisoners, 1868-1947](#).

VPRS 516 Central Register of Female Prisoners (referred to above, and accessible on microfiche in PROV Reading Rooms) is indexed by [VPRS 10879/P0 Alphabetical Index to Central Register of Female Prisoners \[1857-1948\]](#).

## Privacy and Access to Records

To protect the privacy of the subjects of files, many records of prisons, the courts and the police are closed from time of creation for 75 years for adults and 99 years for children under section 9 of the *Public Records Act 1973*.

### Prisons

To enquire about accessing prison records that are closed under section 9 for family history purposes contact:

Information Officer  
Corrections Victoria  
GPO Box 123  
Melbourne VIC 3001  
Tel: (03) 8684 6600  
Tel: 1300 365 111 (tollfree in Australia)

To enquire about accessing prison records that are closed under section 9 and that are created about yourself, or records created about family members after 5 July 1978 contact:

Freedom of Information Officer  
Department of Justice  
GPO Box 4356  
Melbourne VIC 3001  
Tel: (03) 8684 0000  
Tel: 1300 365 111 (tollfree in Australia)  
Web: [www.justice.vic.gov.au](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au) (Go to: Your Rights, then Freedom of Information)

### Courts

To enquire about accessing court records which are closed under section 9 contact the court where the hearing took place. If it is a magistrates court (including a court of petty sessions) that has been closed, contact the Melbourne Magistrates Court.

Web: [www.justice.vic.gov.au](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au)

### Police

To enquire about accessing records created by Victoria Police which are closed under section 9 contact:

Freedom of Information  
Victoria Police  
GPO Box 415  
Melbourne VIC 3005  
Tel: (03) 9247 6666  
Web: [www.police.vic.gov.au](http://www.police.vic.gov.au) (Go to: Our Services, then Freedom of Information)