

17. This matter of juvenile criminals and their treatment has been brought under the notice of the head of the department and the public annually by me in various reports, but I regret to say it has not received the consideration which is due to a question of such vital importance to the community generally. It is a source of considerable satisfaction to me to notice the Justices are now turning their attention to this matter in the various cities. How it has been allowed to remain so long in abeyance is a mystery beyond conception. Every possible precaution has been taken to prevent these unfortunate infants and children from being contaminated in prison; but, as has been so often pointed out in previous reports, children are no proper inmates for gaols, and every time they enter the prison-doors, so much nearer are they to becoming confirmed criminals. This problem of how juvenile offenders should be treated is nothing new: the reports on the New Zealand prisons for the last eight years clearly point to the necessity of legislation on this matter, and it will, I think, be freely admitted now that these reports have not been exaggerated or overdrawn. As long as we continue to mix up in our industrial schools convicted children with unconvicted orphans or neglected or homeless children, so long will it ultimately be found that we are manufacturing criminals. The fact of as many as 22 unfortunate infants under the age of ten years having been confined in our prisons during the past year is indeed a serious blot on our administration, and it is to be earnestly hoped that this most important subject will before long receive the serious consideration it deserves. As far as can be seen at present, there is little hope of any diminution in the number of juvenile offenders for this year, but the probability of an increase.

18. It is interesting to notice from Table E that a comparison of the previously-convicted prisoners sentenced during the past year with those sentenced five years ago—viz., in 1884—shows a decrease in the once-convicted of 60 males and 16 females, a decrease in the twice-convicted of 21 males and 7 females, and in the thrice or oftener convicted an increase of 128 males, with the substantial decrease of 147 females. This large decrease in the female prison-population is extremely gratifying, and has enabled me to recommend the closing at an early date of the Addington Prison, the few prisoners confined there being transferred to Lyttelton. This will save a considerable amount in salaries, fuel, light, &c., and ample provision for the female prisoners is being arranged for at Lyttelton without any additional expense. The introduction of the separate-cell system in the female prisons is the effective agency of a reformation which has brought about this decrease in numbers.

19. It is now universally admitted by all competent authorities that to make prisons deterrent and reformatory the inmates must be entirely separated from one another when not at labour, and located in separate cells instead of in association. This, it is to be regretted, cannot at present be carried out at Auckland, Wellington, or Dunedin; and it is of the utmost importance that the prisons now building at Auckland and Mount Cook should be pushed on to a state of completion with all possible speed, and a new prison built at Dunedin at once. It has been more than once said that Mount Cook is not required; but if any one has any misgivings on the subject he is invited to visit the Terrace Prison and ascertain for himself whether such buildings and appliances as exist there are fitted to hold the class and number of prisoners for whom accommodation has to be found. A review of the prison reports for the last few years show that the calculations for requirements have come out fairly correct, and there has certainly been no waste in erecting any buildings not actually required. As long as prisoners are associated in gaol, so long must classification be delayed or seriously impeded, while there cannot possibly be reformation or deterrence.

20. There is a slight increase in the number of prison punishments awarded during the past year—viz., 227, against 214 in 1887. These were minor punishments, inflicted by Visiting Justices, whilst 15 serious or aggravated prison offences, after first being investigated by a Visiting Justice, were reheard in open Court, as against 11 similar cases in 1887. There is nothing calling for special remarks on any of these cases, except to state that if Gaolers were given power to punish to a limited extent for minor offences, and if the lash was introduced for certain of the more serious cases, there would probably be a considerable decrease in the number of offences. It is more than probable that it would be unnecessary to resort to the use of the lash often; still, the very fact of offenders knowing that it can be used is in itself a very great deterrent. The power to award corporal punishment should only be delegated to those hearing cases in open Court, and for offences of a very grave nature.

21. The number of offences committed by prison-officers last year was 17, as against 18 in 1888. The more serious of these offences were neglects of duty by which prisoners were allowed to escape, and were committed by some of the older officers in the service. The younger subordinates are more satisfactory in every respect than some of their older comrades. All fresh appointments to the prison service are now made from men serving in the Permanent Militia. This arrangement saves me considerable trouble, but it has not been long enough in force for a decided opinion to be formed of its success or otherwise.

22. The new prison-buildings in course of erection at Wellington and Auckland have made fair progress during the year, and I have every reason to be satisfied generally with the amount of work done by the prisoners. At Wellington the main wing is being roofed in, and the interior fittings are well on towards completion. This wing should be fit for occupation at the end of the year. This prison is most urgently required, the accommodation at the Terrace being limited, and unsuitable for classification or prison purposes. At Auckland the wing now in course of construction should be far enough advanced in a few months to enable tenders for the roofing to be called for. The ground-floor of the wing has been occupied by prisoners for some time past, which has permitted the vacating and pulling-down of some of the rottenest and most vermin-infested portions of the old prison-buildings. A plan has been made and specifications drawn out for a new prison at Dunedin, and it is hoped that tenders will be accepted at an early date for its construction. If these three prisons were only well on towards completion, there would be some hope of carrying out classification in its entirety, and stopping contamination and corruption from evil associations.