

8. During the past year the daily average number of prisoners in gaol has been 469·15 males and 52·33 females, being an increase of 9·93 males, with a decrease of 6·06 females; a net average increase of 3·87 for the year as compared with 1891. This, considering the influx of population, cannot be looked upon otherwise than most encouraging and satisfactory.

9. According to figures supplied by the Registrar-General, the population of the colony was at the end of the past year 368,007 males and 324,419 females—a total of 692,426 persons, whilst the number of prisoners at the same date was 435 males and 42 females—477 persons. The average percentage of prisoners according to population was therefore ·069—a decrease of ·01 as compared with the previous year.

10. During the year 1892, 55 male misdemeanants in default, and 53 male and 18 female supposed lunatics were detained in the various prisons of the colony—an increase of 9 males with a decrease of 2 females in the former, and a decrease of 13 males with an increase of 1 female in the latter, as compared with the previous year: a total decrease of 4 males and 1 female prisoners. It is again pointed out that prisons are improper places for the detention of supposed lunatics, as the limited staff does not admit of their being properly nursed or attended to, and their presence is entirely opposed to discipline being maintained.

11. With reference to prisoners undergoing sentences of penal servitude, there were at the close of last year in the several prisons 136 males and 2 females—a decrease of 27 males and 2 females on the previous year. This again is encouraging, and tends to prove that serious crimes are decreasing.

12. During the year 268 male and 36 female prisoners were acquitted or discharged after remand, as against 327 males and 43 females in 1891, giving a decrease of 49 males and 7 female prisoners in 1892.

13. On reference to the financial table marked B it will be seen that the prisoners were maintained last year at a gross cost per head of £49 15s. 9d., as against £52 2s. 8d., and at a net cost of £36 4s. 5d., as against £36 9s. 3d. in 1891. The gross totals are made up as follows: Staff supervision, £33 2s. 3d.; maintenance, £13 7s. 8d.; and incidentals, £3 5s. 10d. It must be recollected that the prison at Nelson was reopened last year, which of course adds its quota to additional expenses; yet, owing to a strict system of economy on the part of all concerned, there has been a saving of about 5s. per head on the net cost of each prisoner, though provisions have been somewhat more expensive than in former years, and the receipts are some £300 less than in 1891.

14. The receipts and credits for prison-labour, road-metal, maintenance of prisoners, &c., amounted to £6,899 15s. 6d., as against £7,216 1s. 6d. in the preceeding year, giving a decrease of £316 6s.

15. Table C shows that out of the prisoners who passed through the various gaols last year 2,568 males and 454 females were able to read and write, 109 males and 49 females could read only, whilst 294 males and 115 females could neither read nor write.

16. It is interesting to note from Table F that a comparison of the previously convicted prisoners sentenced during the past year with those sentenced five years ago—viz., in 1888, shows a decrease of 12 males and 15 females in the once-convicted, a decrease of 70 males and 20 females in the twice-convicted, whilst in those convicted thrice or oftener, there is a decrease of 74 males with an increase of 59 females. The increase of the last class of offenders proves that there still remains in the colony a band of the irreclaimable and hopeless class of women who have probably spent the greater part of their lives in prisons, and whose reform is beyond all possibility, and they may be looked upon as certain to frequent the prisons for the remainder of their days. It is admitted freely that no reformatory system yet invented can reclaim such persons.

17. Attention is called to Table D, and it is with extreme regret I have to report that during the past year 12 infants under the age of 10 years have been confined in the prisons of the colony as against 10 in 1891. These children have, of course, been kept entirely separate from the adult prisoners, but I have no hesitation in stating that it is nothing more nor less than a grave scandal that prisons should be used for the incarceration of those who are better fitted to be cared for in a nursery than placed in the cells of any prison, the moral atmosphere of which can only lead to their ultimately becoming hardened criminals. In those aged from 10 to 15 years there were last year 48 as against 55 in 1891, while those between 15 and 20 years were 198, as against 214 in the previous year, giving a total decrease for last year of 21 of those under the age of 20 years. These 12 children under 10 years of age being in prison is anything but satisfactory, and it gives me much pain when visiting the prisoners to see these unfortunate children, who, in the majority of cases, would be far better in the industrial schools. However, I feel I should be neglecting my duty if I did not again record my annual protest against the system of using prisons for the purpose of detaining children of tender years. There can be no doubt that the result of this misguided treatment of young persons will make its mark to the detriment of the colony in future years.

18. The total number of punishments awarded for prison offences last year was 245, as against 148 in 1891. Of these, 233 were for minor offences punished by the Visiting Justices, the remainder being serious or aggravated prison offences, which, after first being investigated by a Visiting Justice, were reheard in open Court. It will be seen that there has been an increase of 97 prison offences, which it is somewhat difficult to account for, unless it is that at times there appears to be an epidemic of offences, which lasts for a short time, and then things settle down quietly again. In each case the Visiting Justices have dealt speedily and judiciously with the offenders brought under their jurisdiction, and awarded suitable punishment.

19. The number of offences committed by prison officers was 7, as against 9 in the preceding year. There were two cases of intoxication, but, considering the long hours and trying work which falls to the lot of a prison official, there is no room for fault-finding with the manner in which, as a rule, the duties are carried out, or the general conduct of all concerned.