

CLASSIFICATION OF PRISONERS.

Owing to the unsatisfactory arrangement of the older New Zealand prison buildings and the paucity of exercise-yards it has not yet been found possible to carry out a thorough system of inter-classification in the general prisons, but when the Auckland and Invercargill buildings and the necessary exercise-yards in connection with them are completed we should be able to deal with this matter more thoroughly. The primary classification—that is, the setting-apart of different prisons for special classes of prisoners—that has been introduced during the past five years is working satisfactorily, and, so far as can be judged, is giving good results.

The task of the Department in carrying out an effective primary classification would be much lightened if such a wide interpretation were not given by the Courts to the sections of the Crimes Amendment Act providing for sentences of reformatory detention. Under existing conditions it frequently happens that there is no difference in degree of criminality, gravity of offence, or possibility of reform between two individuals, one of whom may have been sentenced to hard labour and the other to a term of reformatory detention, yet on the sentences the two men should be placed in different divisions, and prevented, as far as possible, from associating. One receives a small wage for his work; the other a lesser amount as a hard-labour gratuity. There is also sometimes a difficulty in drawing a clear line of demarcation between the respective criminality of a man who is declared an habitual and one who is sentenced to reformatory detention. In practice the two classes are, of course, kept entirely separate, but there is often little difference between them.

HABITUAL CRIMINALS AND PRISONERS SENTENCED TO REFORMATORY DETENTION.

The Prisons Board has very fully analysed the statistics regarding the administration of the Crimes Amendment Act of 1910 in its annual report, and it is therefore unnecessary to make further reference to the detailed matter with which the report deals. It is apparent, however, that owing to the large and increasing percentage of prisoners who have been sentenced to terms of reformatory detention or who have been declared habitual criminals by the Courts, the work of the Board has an increasingly important bearing upon the internal government of the prisons in its relation to the general behaviour and demeanour of the inmates. As these are matters with which the Department is intimately concerned, I may perhaps be permitted to remark that, by a somewhat minor alteration of its procedure probably requiring a slight amendment of the Act, the Board could assist the general administration considerably in maintaining tranquility in the prisons, and so improving the condition of the prisoners concerned and relieving the officers in charge of some of their anxieties. All that is necessary is for a definite term to be fixed within which a prisoner, once he enters upon his habitual sentence, is not entitled to have his case considered by the Board. The term I suggest is three years, which would fit in satisfactorily with the system of classification now in operation. If this were done uniformity would be established, much of the unrest which I find among this class of prisoners on my visits to the different institutions would cease, and, if I may be permitted to say so, the intention of the framers of the original Act, with regard to the longer detention of habituals, would be more fully carried out.

SUGGESTED EXTENSION OF EXISTING ACTS.

On more than one occasion it has been suggested that the powers at present contained in the Crimes Amendment Act for the release of certain classes of prisoners on probation should be extended to include all hard-labour prisoners. As has been pointed out in another paragraph of this report, there is in reality very little to differentiate one class of prisoners from another, and now that the probation system has been in operation for some years and has been thoroughly tested there should be no reasonable objection to its extension in the manner suggested. In order to prevent any possible abuse, a distinction might be made between reformatory and hard-labour sentences by making it obligatory for the latter class of prisoners to serve half the term to which they have been sentenced before the question of their release on probation could be considered.

Another direction in which an amendment in existing Acts is necessary is in regard to the treatment of wife-deserters, and of men who are imprisoned in default of maintenance. In New South Wales I found an Act in operation under which power was given to the Comptroller-General of Prisons to compel men imprisoned on these grounds to perform any specified class of work, "and to pay the estimated value of their work, after deducting maintenance, in or towards satisfaction of the order for the support of the wife or children of the prisoner under the Deserted Wives and Children Act." If a similar measure were passed in New Zealand it would have a beneficial and probably a deterrent effect.

ASSISTANCE TO PRISONERS ON RELEASE.

There is little doubt that however thorough a prison system may be in training men to habits of discipline and industry, much of this effect is lost if prisoners are left entirely to their own devices on their release. Many men have a keen desire to "go straight" when they are free, but in order to do so it is necessary that they should immediately find employment. In many cases this is a practical impossibility unless organized assistance is available; failing it, want, misery, a final loss of self-respect, and a return to gaol. There are Prisoners' Aid Societies in all the principal cities of New Zealand, which have done good work in succouring the fallen and supplying as far as possible the want I have referred to, but their means are limited and there appears to be lack of a general organization working from a common centre. I paid some attention to this question during my visit to the Commonwealth, and, so far as I could judge, the best results were obtained in New South Wales, where there is a general