

6. MOTOR ACCIDENTS.

Motor-vehicle accidents continue to take a heavy annual toll of human lives. During the year ended 31st March, 1932, there were 148 fatal accidents which resulted in the deaths of 157 persons. Compared with the similar figures for the previous year, these figures show a decrease of 73, or approximately one-third in the number of accidents and a decrease of 90 or 36 per cent. in the number of persons killed. A search for the causes of the reduction directs attention to the following :—

- (a) Reduction of vehicle mileage as a result of the economic depression ;
- (b) Accident prevention propaganda ;
- (c) More universal enforcement.

It should be noted that the enforcement has not been reflected in an increase in the number of convictions for traffic offences, which dropped from 18,145 in 1930 to 15,135 in 1931, or by approximately 16 per cent. An examination of the major classes of offences reveals that there were 3,109 convictions for negligent or dangerous driving, which is the lowest figure for the last five years ; convictions for breaches of regulations for lighting vehicles dropped from 3,965 in 1930 to 2,557 in 1931 ; while other minor offences fell from 2,971 to 1,967.

The immediate gratification at the reduction in the number of persons killed during 1931 should not be regarded as an indication that efforts in the direction of reducing accidents should be slackened. Apart from the fact that the year is too short a period to ground a belief that there has been any permanent improvement, the plain fact that there were 157 deaths of people, for the most part in the earlier years of their lives, points to the room that remains for further improvement. Expressed in potential earning-power, these 157 deaths represent approximately £550,000, and if the personal injuries suffered in the non-fatal accidents and the damage to motor-vehicles are added to this figure the total must come to well over £1,000,000. The annual economic loss by motor accidents is therefore a staggering figure, to say nothing of the human misery involved. Considering the deaths alone, it is a striking commentary that the total for the last ten years is equivalent to the present population of the borough of Mataura.

The question of the public safety is an important one in connection with the administration of the various Acts and regulations dealing with the control of motor traffic. Broadly speaking, there are three main points to be considered :—

- (1) A reasonable set of laws and regulations ;
- (2) An adequate system of detecting breaches ;
- (3) A scale of punishment which is effectively deterrent.

Under heading (1) attention is directed to the fact that the rapidly changing conditions are under constant review, and in particular to the following proposed or actual alterations to the existing laws and regulations :—

- (a) More stringent qualifications for drivers of both private and public vehicles.
- (b) An absolute speed-limit of forty miles per hour for all motor-vehicles, in addition to the present provision that a speed in excess of thirty-five miles per hour shall be *prima facie* evidence of dangerous driving.
- (c) Higher standards of braking efficiency.
- (d) As described elsewhere in this report, a new system of lettering and figuring has been devised in connection with motor-vehicle registration-plates, and this it is anticipated will facilitate the task of the policy and local authorities in enforcing the motor laws.

The question as to the adequacy of the existing machinery to secure enforcement of the traffic laws is one that is difficult of determination. There is conclusive evidence of enforcement activity in the 15,000-odd convictions which were secured for traffic offences during the year 1931, but the large number of fatal accidents arising from causes constituting breaches of the law suggest that there is room for improvement in the extensiveness of the enforcement machinery. The Dominion is already paying a considerable amount annually for traffic police and other forms of traffic control, yet there is reason for believing that more extensive enforcement machinery would be the best practical step in the direction of arresting the heavy annual toll of life resulting from motor-vehicle accidents.

In addition to the aspects of the Transport Licensing Act, 1931, dealt with in other parts of this report, its enforcement should be a definite step in the reduction of motor accidents. All service-cars and omnibuses are now placed on definite time-tables worked out so that in no case will their speeds require to exceed thirty-five miles per hour (their maximum under the Heavy Motor-vehicle Regulations). In granting the services the licensing authorities are required to take into account the conditions of the roads and any speed-restrictions in force over the route. All public vehicles except taxis are now subject to stringent safety requirements for the protection of the public, and are subjected to an inspection at least once a year by Government Vehicle Inspectors under control of this Department. Taxis are not within the scope of the Act, but in the majority of cases are inspected periodically by local-body Inspectors under by-law powers.

Careful attention has been given to the question as to whether the existing punishment for breaches of traffic laws are adequate deterrents, and it would appear that the most important point is the inadequacy of the penalty for dangerous driving. It is proposed to take the first opportunity of amending the Motor-vehicles Act with the object of making the punishment for this offence more severe.

STATISTICS.

Bearing in mind the magnitude of the problem of motor accidents, there is a curious lack of comprehensive statistical data which provides the only means of shedding light on the causes of accidents. This Department prepares statistics based on the reports of Coroners' proceedings relating to fatal accidents, and, while they are reliable as far as they go, it must be conceded that, as each fatal