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## Crime and Punishment

FOR the first time in nearly 40 years a comprehensive statement has been made on prison policy in New Zealand. In a brochure\* notable for its balanced and forward-looking attitude the Department of Justice has given the facts, outlined the problems and suggested possible reforms. Some of the facts are depressing, and should cut deeply into national pride. New Zealand, a young country with no large cities, and whose people enjoy one of the highest living standards in the world, has far too many criminals. More serious adult crime exists here, relative to population, than in England and Wales. Further, one and a half times as many young people (again relatively) are sentenced to Borstal, and twice as many go to prison. These comparisons may tell us more about the attitudes of the Courts in the two countries—especially towards the use of probation—than about the incidence of crime; but when full allowance is made for differences in policy the figures remain disturbing.

It is obviously not a function of the Department to discover the causes of crime in a prosperous community. There is, however, one point at which its policy has a direct bearing on the growth of delinquency. On June 1 of this year, 965 men were serving sentences of more than three months, and 81.7 per cent of them had previous convictions. The problem, clearly, is to reduce the number of first offenders who relapse into crime. It is on the threshold that young people can best be reclaimed; and if too many of them are returning to prison, improvement must be looked for in the system as well as in themselves. Some will say that punishment should be more severe. The Department, however, points out that experience has disproved the value of "extreme deterrence" as the sole answer to crime. For the

younger criminal, especially, something more is needed.

There is at present no single prison in which young offenders can serve short sentences. They are therefore exposed to the bad influence of older prisoners. A step towards overcoming this difficulty may be taken if the Department is able to carry out its plan to open a "detention centre" for young adults. The aim will be "to give the offender a life of very strict but constructive discipline, physical activity, hard work, and a total absence of all amenities, activities and comforts above those required for physical and mental health." Some young people, given a short and sharp foretaste of prison—without its harmful influences—could be expected to heed the lesson. Others would not respond, so that great care would be needed in the selection of offenders for such treatment. And here, perhaps, an alternative remedy could be found in the wider use of probation.

Unfortunately, many people regard probation as a "let-off." It is nothing of the sort. Probation is "a conditional suspension of punishment" which allows an offender to rehabilitate himself under supervision. Its use throughout New Zealand has very wide local variations. According to the brochure, about one in every 28 persons convicted—excluding convictions for traffic offences—is placed on probation each year. "In some Courts the proportion is as high as one in 10, in other Courts the proportion is as low as one in 125." The Probation Service is not, the Department explains, a sentimental luxury: "It is an essential social and, indeed, financial economy, and can play a vital part in the struggle to prevent the repetition of crime..." Some variation in its use from district to district is a natural result of the Courts' discretionary powers, but the figures suggest that it could be used more consistently. There is no better way of providing opportunity for reform at the time—after the first offence—when it is most likely to be taken.

\*A Penal Policy for New Zealand, published by the Department of Justice, and printed at Mount Crawford Prison, Wellington.

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