

## FIRST OFFENDERS' PROBATION ACT.

1. It is exceedingly gratifying to be again able to report that this Act continues to work smoothly and well, and generally carries out the intentions and purport of its introduction; in fact, the more it becomes known the better it is liked. It has certainly already rescued many from a career of crime. Table L shows that during the past year 93 offenders were brought under its provisions, as against 83 in 1889. Of these, 44 satisfactorily carried out the conditions of their licenses and were discharged, 2 were rearrested and committed to prison, 2 absconded, and 1 died, leaving 44 still under the supervision of the Probation Officers.

2. The amount of costs as ordered to be paid by the various Courts before which these 93 offenders were brought was £261 Os. 5d., of which sum £103 4s. 9d. has been actually paid into the Probation Officers' hands, while the remainder, the greater part of which is not yet due, is being paid by instalments.

3. The approximate cost of keeping these offenders in prison had not the Probation Act been in force would have been about £2,400, which, if added to the amount of costs actually paid, gives a saving of £2,503 4s. 9d. for the year.

4. Since the Act came into force, in October, 1886, 376 persons have been placed on probation, of whom 293 were discharged after having satisfactorily completed the terms of their licenses; 16 were rearrested and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, 2 died, 5 managed to elude the vigilance of the Probation Officers and absconded, and 60 are still on probation.

5. The Probation Officers continue to take great interest in the working of the Act, and their reports, which are generally adopted, are very full and complete, showing zeal, tact, and ability; and, though they receive no remuneration for their work in connection with this Act, they could not, I believe, take more trouble, or exercise more careful discrimination, even if a substantial salary were attached to the office.

6. The great argument in favour of this First Offenders' Probation Act is that it endeavours to work reformation in persons who are only just entering on a dishonest course, and are perhaps wavering between the straight or crooked road. In America the system adopted is to try and reform in prisons, but what this Act claims is reformation without the prison-brand. In the United States prisons, such as Elmira, New York, and Concord, Massachusetts, a system has been introduced which renders proficiency in study a chief test of the fitness of their inmates for liberty, and a sumptuous dietary scale is provided; while at the California State Prison the convicts are not even obliged to work, and still have a meat-diet with coffee and vegetables, better than many honest toilers are able to obtain outside. While they entirely ignore the mischief arising from the mutual corruption of prisoners associated in prisons, there is scarcely a prison in the whole of America where the inmates are kept separate from one another. The so-called "graded system" adopted in America merely consists in offering to its murderers, burglars, and violators a very low maximum of five years' possible detention, but with the easy opportunity of liberation in eighteen months or two years. The Elmira system is just a minimum punishment, with a maximum of indulgence. The question that seems to have to be met here is, what is the general effect of such prisons as Elmira, Concord, &c., upon the discouragement of crime in the external community? for the prevention of crime is mainly secured by the moral and other influences which operate outside prisons; and this is where the superiority of the First Offenders' Probation Act is claimed over all so-called prison reforms. If, by any means short of increasing crime, persons can be saved or reformed when young, or even when come to years of discretion, without being sent to prison, then surely a great and good work is being done. A reference to the criminal statistics in America shows that, whereas in 1850 every million inhabitants of the United States contributed 290 prisoners, the proportion had risen to 853 in 1870, and as high as 1,169 in the million in 1880. The last year's census appears to indicate a still further increase of criminality, there being 10,000 more convicts than in 1880. So much for reformation in gaols and the graded and intermediate systems carried out in Elmira and other American prisons! But, turning to the reformation under the First Offenders' Probation Act, what do we find? A steady but sure decrease of crime, as in 1882 the proportion of prisoners to population was 0·171, while in 1890 it was only 0·085. The American statistics above quoted may be looked upon as absolutely correct when it is stated they are obtained from information published by the Howard Association, an association instituted for the promotion of the best methods of crime-prevention and penal treatment, and the conclusion arrived at by this philanthropic body is that, although many unreflecting persons in America have been induced to favour the Elmira type of prisons, sagacious observers see their really disastrous tendency, while the rapid increase of crime in the United States is a sufficient condemnation of the system. On the other hand, in New Zealand there is every reason to believe and hope that, the more the judicious exercise of the provisions of the First Offenders' Probation Act is extended, the greater, in a corresponding degree, will be the decrease of crime.

I have, &c.,

A. HUME, Inspector of Prisons.