

7. There were no death sentences passed on prisoners in the colony during 1896.

8. From Table A it will be seen that at the commencement of last year 519 males and 63 females were undergoing imprisonment in the various gaols of the colony, while at its close there were 503 males and 47 females, giving a decrease of 16 males and a decrease of the same number of females. During 1896 3,280 males and 670 females passed through the various prisons, as against 3,385 males and 659 females during the previous year, a decrease of 105 males and an increase of 11 females, a total decrease of 94 prisoners.

9. During the past year the daily average number of prisoners in gaols has been 514·38 males and 57·12 females, a decrease on the previous year of 11·8 males and an increase of 0·1 females. The colony may therefore congratulate itself on this complete denial of the oft-repeated statement that criminals are being imported to this country.

10. According to the figures supplied by the Registrar-General, the population of the colony at the end of the past year was 398,660 males and 355,356 females, a total of 754,016 persons, while the number of prisoners at the same date was 503 males and 47 females; total, 550 persons. The average percentage of prisoners according to population was therefore 0·0729, as against 0·0785 in 1895.

11. During the past year 59 male misdemeanants in default and 55 males and 17 females supposed lunatics were confined in the various prisons in the colony, a decrease of 5 in the former, and in the latter an increase of 1 male and 8 females. I must again record my annual protest against these supposed lunatics and persons detained during the Colonial Secretary's pleasure being kept in prisons. There are three of the latter—1 male and 2 females. It is freely admitted on all sides that prisons are certainly not suitable places for the detention or treatment of these unfortunates; but, while public opinion is divided as to where such cases should be sent, a gross injustice is being done in sending them to prison, both to the sufferers and to the prison officials. It is believed the officials of the gaols use their best efforts to alleviate these people's sufferings, but there is neither the accommodation, appliances, nor the training necessary to enable them to successfully treat such maladies, which must only be aggravated by detention in prisons. I should like to see this, in my opinion, most important matter seriously taken up by prison reformers instead of many questions of not half so much importance.

12. At the close of the year there were 107 males and 2 females serving sentences of penal servitude, a decrease of 18 on the previous year; but, as the Criminal Code Act passed in 1893 abolished sentences of penal servitude, it is only a matter of a short time when there will be no more prisoners of the penal-servitude class.

13. During the past year 340 males and 45 females were acquitted or discharged after remand, as against 421 males and 28 females for the previous year, a decrease of 81 males and an increase of 17 females.

14. 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 £47 3s. 3d., as against £46 15s. 3d., and at a net cost of £31 3s. 6d., as against £32 2s. in 1895. The gross costs are made up as follows: Staff supervision, £31 1s. 1d., as against £30 10s. 7d.; maintenance, £12 16s. 5d., as against £13 2s. 10d.; and incidentals £3 5s. 9d., as against £3 1s. 8d. I have previously stated that the management has been economical, and to qualify that I would point out that the peculiar configuration of the country necessitates keeping open prisons at which there can only be few prisoners, but, owing to isolation and the Supreme Court sittings being held in the locality, a prison becomes a necessity. After pointing out in my reports for the years 1883, 1886, and 1888 that some of the smaller prisons might be closed, it was at last decided to make Timaru and Nelson police gaols, which would meet all the requirements of those places and save expense, but shortly afterwards I received instructions to reopen Nelson, and send a party of prisoners there to work on the Rocks Road. Again, in the prisons of this colony it must be remembered there are a large percentage of prisoners who contribute nothing towards their maintenance, such as awaiting trial, sick, misdemeanants' remands, supposed lunatics, &c., and their being exempted from labour tends to additional expenditure which the most careful administration is powerless to curtail. It should be borne in mind that a large sum out of the expenditure under the heading of "Incidentals" is recouped to the Government, and is therefore in reality merely a transfer—viz., to Railways, £216 7s. 11d., and Post and Telegraph, for telephones, &c., £74 10s.

15. As regards the education of prisoners, a reference to Table C shows that, out of a total of 3,280 males and 670 females, 2,478 males and 573 females were able to read and write well, while 199 males and 47 females were unable to read or write.

16. The receipts and credits for prison labour, road metal, bricks, &c., amounted last year to £8,977 2s. 9d., as against £8,402 4s. 6d. in the previous year, giving an increase of £374 18s. 3d.

17. It is interesting to notice from Table F that a comparison of the previously-convicted prisoners sentenced during the past year with those sentenced five years ago—viz., in 1891—shows a decrease in the once-convicted of 53 males and 10 females, a decrease in the twice-convicted of 3 males and 14 females, and in the thrice or oftener convicted a decrease of 45 males and 85 females. These decreases are considered satisfactory as tending to show that the present treatment of prisoners if not reformatory is at least deterrent.

18. A lady who has for some years past been an Official Visitor to one of the prisons of the colony recently, when delivering a public address, is reported to have said that her experience of seven years' visiting at a prison, and her reading, had led her to see that the criminals were always coming back, but the figures quoted in the last paragraph certainly tend to show that her experience and reading have somewhat misled her in this matter. Had she said drunkards instead of criminals keep returning to prisons I should have been prepared to agree with the contention. As in former reports, it has been pointed out that, in the opinions of those who have studied the subject, a grave error is made in treating drunkenness as a crime instead of a disease. The system of fining persons convicted of drunkenness, or sentencing them to imprison-