

18. I am glad to be able to report, as shown by Table D, that only one child under ten years of age, like in the previous year, has been confined in the gaols of the colony during the past year; but here I must reiterate what was said last year, that this is one too many. In those aged from ten to fifteen years there were 25, as against 17 in the previous twelve months; while in those aged from fifteen to twenty years there were 241, as against 257 in 1896: showing a total decrease for the last year of eight in those under twenty years of age.

19. The question of the most expedient modes of dealing with juvenile offenders is beset with grave difficulties, and at present is engaging the attention of competent practical authorities in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. These difficulties have been considerably increased of late years by changes in public opinion and in Magisterial practice, but there have been no corresponding changes in legislation or administration. The system that admits of infants being sent to prison, and thereby branded for ever as gaol-birds, meets with universal disapproval, but there does not appear to be any unanimity amongst practical authorities as to the best course to adopt on this embarrassing question. It is argued by some that sending children to Industrial Schools tends to encourage mutually contaminating influences; but that contention hardly holds good in this colony at the present time, owing to the excellent boarding-out system which is so extensively resorted to, but the danger in sending children to Industrial Schools appears to be the encouragement, it may be, to reckless and drunken parents to endeavour to throw their offspring upon the honest taxpayer for support. Whipping, again, as an alternative for either prisons or industrial schools, whilst finding advocates amongst many humane persons, is stoutly opposed by many competent authorities. Then, again, fines, if imposed, must lead to imprisonment if not paid. "The First Offenders' Probation Act, 1886," and "The Justices of the Peace Act, 1882," have done much to alleviate the necessity of sending children to gaols, but the danger to be guarded against in resorting to the provisions of either of these statutes is that children may be led to think that they can commit offences with impunity. While, I am pleased to say, at the present time juvenile offenders are not increasing in the colony, it is feared that result will not long be maintained if we continue sending our offending infants to prison, and, as prevention is decidedly, in such cases, better than cure, it appears to me that the query, What to do with our juvenile criminals? is a question which needs at the present time most careful consideration at the hands of all concerned.

20. A reference to Table K shows that there has been a decrease in the number of prison punishments of sixty-nine—viz., 193, as against 262 in 1896. Of these, 188 were minor punishments inflicted by Visiting Justices, while five were more serious or aggravated prison offences, and after first being investigated by Visiting Justices, were re-heard in open Court. This system of taking the more serious offences to open Court is satisfactory to the department.

21. The number of offences committed by prison officers last year was eight, as against four in 1896. I have every reason to be satisfied with the conduct and ability of the staff at the various prisons.

22. During the past year the prisoners at the three centres, and at Lyttelton, have been principally employed on works connected with the fortifications, and good progress has been made, but there is yet a considerable amount of work to be done before the fortifications can be said to be complete. The Harbour Defence Department have been pleased to express their approval of the work done for them by the prisoners. Good progress has been made in continuing the building of the new prison in Auckland. At New Plymouth, considerable progress has been made in cutting down the hills surrounding the gaol, which, for sanitary reasons, was urgently required. At Nelson the Rocks Road work has been completed, and the prison has been reduced to a police gaol. At Napier, stone has been quarried and got ready for building a new boundary wall, which is much required. In Wellington, good work has been done in making bricks, drain-pipes, and tiles for the various Government buildings. At Lyttelton, the reclamation work at Sticking Point continues, and a considerable amount of improvements have been done for the Stock Department at Quail Island. At Hokitika, the prisoners have been employed in cutting firewood, and keeping the hospital and gaol grounds in order. At Dunedin, the fortifications work has found employment for all the prisoners available; while in Invercargill they have, as usual, been employed by the Corporation, which pays a fair rate of wages for their services.

23. As regards new prisons, at Dunedin the new buildings have been completed, and are now occupied; but a gaoler's residence is much required, and, as a good site is now available, the house should be commenced. One wing of the Mount Cook Prison, Wellington, has been completed and occupied. This prison is very much required, the Terrace buildings being obsolete, and proper classification is out of the question in such buildings. The only way to make imprisonment deterrent and reformatory is by cellular separation, and any prison that cannot provide a separate cell for each prisoner detained therein is out of date.

24. It has been noticed recently that agitations have been got up in certain quarters in favour of having prisons for females, entirely separate from and independent of the male prisons; that two such establishments should be formed—one in the North and one in the South Island—to be managed entirely by females, under a female Inspector and female Visiting Justices; and, doubtless, as time goes on and population increases such institutions may be found necessary, but that time has not yet by any means arrived. On the 1st of this month there were only fifty-four female prisoners in both islands, and out of these there are only ten who have sentences to serve that will not expire in less than twelve months, while many have less than a month to serve; therefore, were it possible to get the whole of the female prisoners in both islands into any one place, there would not be sufficient to fill one prison. Then, as regards the appointment of female Visiting Justices, who, in accordance with the provisions of the Prisons Act would require to be Justices of the Peace, it may be pointed out that during the past year only ten female prisoners were punished for prison offences,