

The number of distinct persons involved and classified under three main classes according to the nature of the offence are shown in the following table for the purpose of comparison with previous years :—

Year.	Offences against Person.	Offences against Property.	Miscellaneous Offences.	Total Distinct Persons.	Ratio to 10,000 of Population.
1925	173	721	1,996	2,890	20.88
1926	217	836	1,702	2,755	19.49
1927	192	937	1,582	2,711	18.84
1928	165	877	1,506	2,548	17.37
1929	196	854	1,546	2,596	17.62

The statistics reveal a slight increase in the number of offences against the person, and a small decrease in the number of offences against property. Under the heading "Miscellaneous Offences" there has been a small increase. The number of commitments to prison for drunkenness was 426 (1929) as compared with 412 for 1928, and a slight increase in the number sentenced to imprisonment for vagrancy is also noticed.

Of the total number of 2,596 distinct persons received into custody during 1929, 1,460 males and 96 females, a total of 1,556 were New-Zealand-born, as compared with 1,538 for the previous year. The increase in the number of New-Zealand-born women received into custody over the previous year was 11, the total being 96 (1929) as compared with 85 (1928).

This increase is attributable mainly to the growth in the number of women committed for vagrancy—51 (1929) as against 37 (1928). The total number of women prisoners in 1929 was 121 as compared with 117 in 1928.

The extent of serious crime in the Dominion can be gauged from the table dealing with the period of sentences imposed, for it may be assumed that short sentences connote offences of a more or less venial nature. In this respect it is to be noticed that 34 per cent. of the total number of persons committed to prison were for terms of less than one month, 58 per cent. for terms of less than three months, and 73 per cent., or approximately three-fourths of the total number sentenced to imprisonment, were for terms of less than six months. It will thus be seen that the proportion of serious crime is relatively small. In view of the strong authoritative opinion as to the futility of short sentences for reformatory purposes, the desirability of applying some alternative method of treatment—such as probation, the imposition of a fine, or where it is considered the ends of justice cannot be adequately met by such means, a more salutary term of reformatory detention—should be considered in preference to meting out a sentence which is too short for the practical application of any socializing influences, but which nevertheless habituates an offender to the conditions and atmosphere of a prison, and thereby diminishes its deterrent influence.

In this connection it is interesting to note that over the past seventeen years during which period the Prisons Board has been functioning, 79 per cent. of all persons sentenced to terms of reformatory detention or hard labour and released on the recommendation of the Board have not lapsed subsequently, thereby showing the beneficial effect of disciplinary treatment for substantial terms, whereas with short sentences it is not unusual for the same person to be committed several times a year. It should be noted that, although the total number of new receptions for the past year was 4,357, this represents only 2,596 distinct persons.

It is pleasing to be able to again record that the sentence of capital punishment was not required to be given effect to during the year, making the fifth year in succession in which the Department has been free from this unpleasant duty. One prisoner was sentenced to death, but this sentence was commuted to imprisonment for life. No prisoners were flogged during the year. Eleven persons died from natural causes, of whom ten died whilst under treatment at the public hospitals, two of these deaths being the result of an outbreak of typhoid at Waikeria. There was only one case of suicide during the year. Of the prisoners who escaped from custody, only one was not recaptured. In one case extradition was necessary.

Following the arrangement with the Mental Hospitals Department to place its specialist officers at the disposal of the Prisons Department, fifty-seven persons were examined mentally during the past year by psychiatrists for the information of the Department and the Prisons Board. In twenty-four other cases prisoners were transferred to mental hospitals for observation, or upon certification as being mentally defective.

A noticeable feature has been the freer use made of the provisions in the Mental Defectives Act for the mental examination of persons charged with offences where the question of mental impairment is involved. In this connection many persons may be certifiable as "socially defective" within the provisions of the Mental Defectives Amendment Act, 1927, but are not thereby relieved of criminal responsibility at law, it being impossible to certify that they were not aware of the nature and quality of their act and that they did not know such act to be wrong. A fixed term of imprisonment in such cases rarely affords adequate protection to society, and is not always in the best interests of the offenders themselves. It is hoped that as soon as the financial position improves it will be possible to make provision for the treatment of such cases in an institution or institutions under the Mental Defectives Board, where they can be detained as long as they are regarded as a danger to themselves or the community, regardless of the expiration of any sentence imposed.