

9. During the past year the daily average number of prisoners in gaols has fallen from 537·2 males and 99·6 females to 511·6 males and 96·8 females, being a decrease of 25·6 males and 2·8 females, giving a net average decrease of 28·4 prisoners for the year 1884.

10. According to figures obtained from the Registrar-General, the estimated population of the colony at the close of the year 1883 was 319,033 males and 265,941 females—total, 584,974 persons; and the number of prisoners at the same date was 505 males and 101 females—total, 606. At the end of the year 1884 the population was 331,035 males and 277,306 females—total, 608,401 persons; while the number of prisoners at that date was 503 males, 102 females. The average number of prisoners to population was therefore as follows: In 1883, ·103 per cent.; in 1884, ·099 per cent.: a decrease of ·04 per cent. When it is recollected that the Police Offences Bill was passed last session, whereby a large increase of short-sentenced prisoners might reasonably have been expected, I think these statistics cannot be looked upon but as satisfactory.

11. In the year 1883 111 males and no female debtors were detained in gaols, against 117 males and 1 female in the past year; and in 1883 there were 56 male and 13 female lunatics confined in the various prisons, as against 68 males and 16 females during the past year: giving an increase in 1884 of 6 male and 1 female debtors, and an increase of 19 male and 8 female lunatics. Attention may here be drawn to the great expense caused by the detention of these debtor prisoners, as they perform no labour and therefore give no return for the cost of their maintenance. They receive the scale of rations laid down for prisoners not employed at hard labour, and, as they merely suffer the inconvenience of the deprivation of liberty, they seldom pay the debt, but prefer to remain till the stipulated alternative has expired. I venture to recommend your consideration of the question as to whether or not such debtors should be compelled to pay for their maintenance while incarcerated. These misdemeanants are never committed to prison unless the committing Magistrate is satisfied, by proof adduced, that they are contumacious debtors, able, but unwilling, to pay their judgment debts, and preferring to suffer imprisonment and obtain free quarters rather than discharge their liabilities. If, in addition to imprisonment, such contumacious debtors were compelled to pay a reasonable price for their maintenance in prison, I believe future statistics would show a considerable reduction in the numbers of such prisoners. In connection with this class of prisoners it should be borne in mind that they require a larger amount of care and supervision from the officers, in consequence of their being permitted to receive daily visits from their friends and to enjoy the privilege of daily correspondence by letter with the outside world. As regards lunatics, who are still more expensive prisoners to maintain, the medical comforts forming a heavy item in their maintenance, it is worthy of note that from the thirteen larger prisons of the colony 49 males and 7 females were during the year 1884 transferred to lunatic asylums. Of these numbers Invercargill furnished 14 males and 3 females, and Wanganui 10 males and 2 females; being a total of 29 from these two districts, or more than one-half of the total number transferred from the larger prisons. I take this opportunity of again protesting against the prisons of the colony being utilized for the detention of supposed lunatics and persons suffering from *delirium tremens*, as the limited number of the staff at each prison entirely prevents such cases being properly cared for, watched, or attended to, while the harm they cause by setting at defiance all discipline and order is calculated not only to lead others to commit acts of insubordination, but also to peril life and lead to frequent destruction of Government property. I believe it is the unanimous opinion of all experts in the matter that prisons are most unsuitable places for such cases.

12. In the year 1883 there were 414 males and 64 females acquitted or discharged after remand, as against 439 males and 55 females during the past year; being an increase in 1884 of 25 males, with a decrease of 9 females.

13. With reference to penal-servitude prisoners, there were at the close of last year 199, as against 201 at the same period of the previous year, or a net decrease of 2 prisoners in 1884. Owing to the want of more cellular accommodation in many of the prisons, it is still impossible to separate penal-servitude from hard-labour prisoners, or to make any difference in their treatment.

14. As regards the financial table given under heading B, it will be found that the prisoners were maintained last year at a gross cost of £55 9s. 9d., as against £55 11s. 6d. for the previous year, and at a net cost of £44 14s. 5d., as against £45 9s. 7d. for the year 1883. These totals are made up as follows: Staff supervision, £36 18s. 4d.; maintenance, £15 9s. 2d.; incidental, £3 2s. 3d. I would here point out that the saving of 15s. 2d. per head during the past year, while it may be deemed satisfactory, would have been considerably larger had it not been for the numerical increase in debtors and lunatics before alluded to. In justice to the department I am pleased to be able to record that the utmost economy has been studied by all concerned.

15. In the gross total cost per prisoner Hokitika Prison is the highest, at £111 17s. 7d.; New Plymouth being next, with £109 13s. 7d.: while the lowest is Mount Cook, at £39 8s. 2d.; followed by Auckland, with £42 19s. 4d. Owing to the isolated position of Hokitika it has been found impracticable to make further reductions in the staff. As the number of prisoners at New Plymouth has now been increased, without any increase in the staff, in order that the building may progress more rapidly, the net cost per prisoner will be proportionately reduced.

16. The receipts and credits for prison-labour, road-metal, needlework, maintenance of naval prisoners, &c., for the past year amounted to £6,555 9s., as against £6,428 5s. 8d. in 1883.

17. As regards education of prisoners, a reference to Table D shows that of a total of 4,180 male and 993 female prisoners, 3,437 males and 741 females were able to read and write well, and 503 males and 174 females were unable to read or write.

18. Under Table I it will be noticed that of the more serious offences there were—forgery and uttering, 35; larceny, 41; indecent conduct and rape, 13; housebreaking and burglary, 11: being an increase on the previous year of 17, 6, and 1, on the first three named offences respectively, and a decrease of 6 on the last named.

19. The total number of prison punishments during the year has been 311, as against 238 in