

18. With reference to these juvenile offenders whose prison-career I have closely watched, I have no hesitation in stating that sending them to prison does considerably more harm than good, and that, however carefully they may be looked after in prison, they are more dangerous to society when liberated than they were when sentenced, and the dread of prison-life is lost to them. They receive the same rations as adult prisoners, and as many of them are mere children prison-discipline has to be relaxed on their behalf. It appears to me that the only means of preventing a criminal class developing in the colony is to establish a reformatory for juvenile offenders. This might advantageously be done as an experiment, without incurring any additional expense in the South Island, by converting either Caversham or Burnham Industrial Schools into a reformatory for convicted juvenile criminals, and retaining the other establishment as an industrial school proper for unconvicted orphans or neglected and homeless children.

19. It is interesting to notice from Table F that a comparison of the previously-convicted prisoners sentenced during the past few years with those sentenced five years ago—viz., in 1883—shows a decrease of 10 males and the substantial decrease of 180 females. The contrast is significant in a variety of ways. In the first place, the saving of expense to the country has been considerable. In private families there has not been so much loss in wages while the bread-winner has been shut up, but more important still has been the vast amount of human misery which has been spared. Some credit for this must be given to the better system of management which has been established in all the prisons of late years, which is proved by the marked diminution in the number of prison-punishments; there has been improvement also in the methods employed for the treatment of long-sentenced prisoners. For all of them the first stage of life is made especially penal and severe, and they must win their way upwards to milder treatment by conducting themselves so as to deserve it. More care, too, is now given to their instruction; this, combined with a fixed system of punishments and rewards, is an effective agency of reformation.

20. In order to prevent a fluctuation by and by, and the present satisfactory falling-off in reconvicted criminals being followed by a temporary increase, it is of the utmost importance that the prisons now building at Auckland and Wellington should be finished with all practicable speed, as the additional accommodation is urgently required to guarantee the complete separation of casual offenders from habitual criminals. This is the only complete method of preventing the contaminating influence of the worst class of offenders. It is generally the case that, in spite of all precautions, criminals do contrive to hold some intercourse with one another. It is important, therefore to take care that the least possible amount of mischief shall come from it, and this is very fairly secured by the absolute local separation of the two classes, and the consequent limiting of the influence of the worst class to members of its own order. A prison so conducted is no longer what a prison once was—a training-school in vice, taking its own fashion, almost as a matter of course, from the lowest and most degraded of its inmates.

21. The total number of prison-punishments awarded during the past year was 214, as against 227 in 1886. These were minor punishments by Visiting Justices, while 11 serious or aggravated prison-offences, after first being investigated by a Visiting Justice, were reheard in open Court, as against 19 similar cases in 1886. The steady annual decrease in prison-offences is very satisfactory, but such a large number as 105 in one prison (Auckland) is much too great, and I hope to see it considerably reduced during the present year. Experience proves that, where there are a great many prison-offences recorded at the same prison year after year against the prisoners, the officers are as much, and generally more, to blame than the prisoners.

22. The number of offences committed by prison-officers last year was 18, as against 25 in 1886. The more serious of these were two cases of intoxication, and one of gross neglect of duty. The conduct of the officers, notwithstanding this, has been very good, and, with one or two exceptions, they are as a body admirably suited for the duties they are called upon to perform.

23. The prison-buildings in course of erection at Wellington and Auckland have made good progress during the year. At the former place the main wing is nearly ready for roofing, notwithstanding that the work was somewhat delayed in consequence of being suddenly called upon to furnish about one million and a half of bricks for the new printing office. The prisoners have been steadily employed in the manufacture of bricks, tiles, drain-pipes, &c., and the goods turned out give universal satisfaction. At Auckland the ground-floor of the wing now in the course of construction will shortly be ready for occupation, and this will give much needed additional accommodation. When these two prisons are completed, or rather the wings now under construction are fit for occupation, the present unseemly crowding will be discontinued, and the classification will be enabled to be carried out, which, though most important, has been quite at a standstill for some time past, owing to the limited accommodation available. A prison for first offenders, known as the star class of prisoners in England, is much required, and is one of the best possible preventatives against contamination. The calculations I made some years ago as to the amount of prison-accommodation required for the colony has so far proved accurate, and, if the prisons now building at Mount Cook and Auckland are only pushed on fairly fast to completion, there should be no more unnecessary crowding together of prisoners, and consequently no more corruption from evil associations.

24. The principal works at which prisoners have been employed during the past year are as follow: Auckland—Building new prison, stonebreaking, repairing rifle-range, and cleaning Governor's House and Supreme Court. New Plymouth—Completing the centre dome and excavating round the prison. Napier—Building a boundary-wall, stonebreaking, and limeburning. Wanganui—Working around the prison, and laying out the grounds. Wellington—Building new prison, excavating, manufacture of bricks, tiles, drain-pipes, and all tinware for prison use. Lyttelton—Reclaiming for Harbour Board, manufacture of boots and uniform, clothing, &c., and printing. Dunedin—Levelling round prison-site, working at Jubilee Park and Botanical Gardens. Invercargill—Working for Corporation. Hokitika—Reclaiming land and clearing bush. The question of prisoners' labour has had my close attention, both in respect to carrying out the provisions of the Act relative