

18. It is satisfactory to be able to report, as shown by Table D, that there have been no children under ten years of age confined in the prisons during the past year, while there was one such infant imprisoned in 1897. In those aged from ten to fifteen years there were 38, as against 25 in 1897, and in those aged from fifteen to twenty years there were 225, as against 241 in the previous year, a total decrease of 4 in those under twenty years of age.

19. In dealing with these youthful offenders a uniform system of discipline and punishment is adopted in all the prisons. They are kept entirely separate, and so freed from the contaminating influence and association of the more hardened criminal, and have the opportunity afforded them of pursuing a study that would ennoble their minds, and perhaps even fit them for a more useful sphere of life on their return to the outer world; but to properly carry this into effect more accommodation is required in the larger prisons.

20. A reference to Table K shows that there was an increase of 54 prison punishments—viz., 247, as against 193 in 1897. Of these, 235 were minor punishments inflicted by Visiting Justices, while 12 were more serious or aggravated prison offences, and, after first being investigated by Visiting Justices, were reheard in open Court. This system of taking the more serious offences to open Court continues to give general satisfaction.

21. During the past year the prisoners at the three centres and Lyttelton have been principally employed on work in connection with the fortifications; good progress has been made, and the Harbour Defence Department appear well satisfied with the work done for them by this department. The work of building the new prison at Mount Eden, Auckland, continues, and it is hoped that in the course of another year another wing will be ready for occupation. The grounds around Government House, and those around the Supreme and Stipendiary Magistrates' Courts, in Auckland, are kept up by prison labour. At New Plymouth the cutting down the hills at the back of the gaol was continued, and a boundary-wall is now being built. At Napier the prisoners have been employed in quarrying and cutting stone for building a new boundary-fence. In Wellington good work has been done in making bricks, drainpipes, and tiles for the various Government buildings, and in keeping the road leading to the defence-works in good order. At Lyttelton the Sticking Point reclamation-work continues, and a considerable amount of work has been done for the Stock Department at Quail Island. At Hokitika the prisoners have been employed in keeping the rifle-range in repair, cutting firewood on the gaol reserve, and keeping the hospital roads and grounds in order. At Wanganui the rifle-range has been kept in order by the prisoners, and work has been done in the gardens. At Dunedin work at the fortifications has employed the majority of the prisoners, while some few have been worked in putting up workshops and punishment-cells in the new prison; while in Invercargill they have, as usual, worked for the Corporation, who pay a fair rate of wages for their services, and appear quite satisfied with the arrangement.

22. As regards new prisons, the locality that requires most attention is Wellington; the Terrace Prison is out of date, and, as pointed out in previous reports, is fast becoming unserviceable, and some years ago it was decided to move the prison from the present locality to Mount Cook, which had been selected as a prison reserve some time in the forties. A building was in due course erected, and is now fit for occupation, and, in fact, was occupied by Maori prisoners last year. A movement is now being made to obtain that building and site for educational purposes, without perhaps giving a fair amount of consideration to the question of properly housing and classifying the prisoners in Wellington. It is admitted by all well versed in the matter that the only system which has the least chance of making imprisonment deterrent must include separate treatment not only of first offenders, but throughout the various grades. The classification of prisoners should not be confined to merely keeping first-sentenced prisoners from contact with hardened criminals, but extended to all classes with the greatest care and judgment. There can be no proper classification in the buildings now occupied by the Terrace prisoners, and some final decision should be arrived at as to where the Wellington prison is to be. A gaoler's residence is much required at Dunedin, and one should also be commenced as soon as possible at Mount Eden, Auckland.

23. The number of offences committed by prison officers last year was four, as against eight in 1897. With the exception of leaving a cell-door unlocked, before alluded to, there is every reason to be satisfied with the conduct and ability of the prison officers generally.

24. It was pointed out last year that the system then in force for the classification of prison officers in regard to rank and pay was not working satisfactorily, and it was suggested that a scheme for putting all the subordinate prison officers on a scale of pay regulated by length of service instead of by the class of prison they may chance to be posted to was ready for your consideration. That new system was in due course adopted and came into operation on the 1st January last, is giving satisfaction, and has added to the efficiency of the service. Under the new system a person on first entering the service is placed on probation for six months, and therefore is not permanently appointed until he has shown his fitness and qualification for the position. Another important feature in the new scheme is that every officer, in due course, without having recourse to improper influences, provided he shows ability and his conduct is satisfactory, will get periodical advancement in pay regardless of the class of prison he may happen to be serving in.

25. It is said by many, who perhaps have not sufficiently studied the matter, that a criminal class is being created in the gaols by their treatment while undergoing sentences, and that in many cases they leave prison worse characters than when they entered it; but the fallacy of this cry, which has been going on for years, is shown annually by a decreasing criminal class, notwithstanding an increasing population. Insufficient consideration seems to be given to the fact that the main object of imprisonment is to punish, and is the method society adopts to avenge itself against those who have broken its laws, and therefore the aim of those in charge of prisoners should be to make imprisonment deterrent, and that gaols should be houses of correction: *i.e.*, punishment.