

ILLEGITIMATE BIRTHS

Section 41 of the Child Welfare Act, 1925, requires Registrars of Births to notify nominated Child Welfare Officers of all illegitimate births. It is then the duty of these officers to make confidential inquiry into each case with a view to ensuring that the infant is adequately provided for and also to assist the mother where necessary with advice about affiliation proceedings, securing employment when fit, the infant's placement, or other relevant matter. The Superintendent of Child Welfare may, on the written application of the mother, help her to establish paternity and to secure a maintenance order. Often no other action is called for beyond the initial inquiry, since in the majority of cases either the mother or other relatives make suitable arrangements.

An endeavour is made to keep the child and its mother together or to have the infant so placed that the mother can continue her interest in her baby. In only a small proportion of cases is it necessary for the infant to be committed to the care of the State. A large number of illegitimate children are adopted.

During the year ended 31st March, 1946, 1,606 illegitimate births were notified to the Child Welfare Officers. Of these infants, 719 were residing with their mothers and 37 with other relatives, 62 were committed to the care of the State, 276 were in registered foster-homes or nursing homes, and 362 were adopted. In a number of cases inquiries have not been completed or the child died.

The number of illegitimate births as recorded by the Registrar-General over the period 1st January to the 31st December, 1945, was 1,824, as against 2,020 for the previous year, a decrease of 196. The difference between our total and that supplied by the Registrar-General—1,606 as against 1,824—is no doubt due in part to the different periods represented and also perhaps to the time lag between recording and notification. In last year's report reference was made to the increase then recorded in the number of illegitimate births, and it was contended that war conditions were no doubt responsible for the major part of the increase. As I am suggesting in another part of this report, when commenting on the drop in the number of Children's Court appearances, any decrease noted this year could be largely ascribed to the return to more normal conditions. It would be reasonable to expect that the quite substantial reduction recorded in illegitimacy figures will be maintained as general conditions further improve.

INFANT-LIFE PROTECTION

By virtue of Part V of the Infants Act, 1908, it is unlawful for any person to maintain apart from its parents any child under the age of six years for a longer period than seven consecutive days unless that person is licensed as a foster-parent. The administration of these legislative provisions falls on the Child Welfare Branch, and in actual practice the inspection of homes, the issuing of the licenses, and the subsequent supervision of the children in the homes is carried out by the women field officers. In each of the main centres the volume of work involved in these duties requires the full-time services of one officer. The children concerned do not become State wards because of the licensing, and their maintenance is still primarily the responsibility of their relatives, but the agreements for payment of maintenance must be approved by the Superintendent or his authorized officer. The Child Welfare Amendment Act, 1927, makes provision for these agreements to be registered if necessary at a Magistrate's Court, and they thus become, in effect, maintenance orders enforceable under the Destitute Persons Act, 1910.

At the 31st March, 1946, there were 826 licensed foster-homes and the number of infants placed in them was 909. Many of these children return later to their relatives, some remain in their foster-homes after attaining the age of six years, and in some cases the child is adopted by its foster-parents.