

PRISON POPULATION.
Comparative Figures.

The last statistics to hand from the Commissioners of Prisons for England and Wales—viz., those for the year ended 31st March, 1916—show that the daily average number of prisoners in all their institutions had fallen from a total of 12,104 in 1914–15 to 8,256 in 1915–16, a decrease of 3,848, or 31·7 per cent. In New Zealand the figures for the year ended 31st December, 1915, were 1,008, while for the year 1916 they were 943, a reduction of only 65, or about 6·4 per cent. The English returns show that the prison population decreased by nearly 57 per cent. between the year 1913–14 and the year 1915–16, while in New Zealand we find that the figures for 1916 are in excess of those for 1913, the daily average for the earlier year being 893. During the first six months of 1917 we have had a slight reduction in our daily average compared with 1916, but even now the figures merely approximate to those of 1912. Unfortunately, 1915 was a record year in the history of the New Zealand prisons, and in spite of the fact that a number of ex-prisoners are known to have enlisted, it does not appear as if our criminal population is likely to be reduced to a figure appreciably below that reached during the pre-war period. When the war is over it is to be feared that we shall have the customary experience after the cessation of all wars—a large increase in the number of persons committed to our prisons.

It is difficult to assign a cause for the extraordinary difference between the figures for England and Wales and our own, but perhaps it is partly to be accounted for by the fact that, while the war has revolutionized the social conditions existing among the lower stratum of society in the older countries, making living possible where it was formerly impossible, and providing well-paid work for the masses who previously found it difficult to obtain work at all, conditions in this country have remained practically the same. The war has made little or no difference. In New Zealand it cannot be said that the ranks of the criminal classes are recruited from the poverty-stricken. Poverty and the conditions arising therefrom are seldom the cause of crime in this Dominion.

The reasons given for the fall in the English prison population are as follows, viz.: (1) The enlistment of many habitual petty offenders; (2) the restrictive orders issued by the Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic) and those made by the Justices and by the military authorities; (3) the great demand for labour, rendering employment easy and well paid, and resulting in ability to pay fines, this latter being greatly aided by the operation of section 1 of the Criminal Justice Administration Act, 1914.

Practically none of the agencies referred to operate in New Zealand except the first, and this is perhaps to a small extent counterbalanced by the creation of new offences by the War Regulations Act and the consequent committals thereunder, and by the sentences passed on military offenders by the Military Courts-martial.

Generally speaking, an analysis of the criminal statistics of this country appears to show that but for the intervention of the war the criminal population would either have remained much at the same level as in 1915, or would have shown an increase on the figures for that year.

The fluctuations in the prison population from 1881 to 1916 are shown in the table below:—

Daily Averages, 1881 to 1916.

Year.	Daily Average of Prisoners in Dominion Prisons.		
	Males.	Females.	Total.
1881	631·66	94·37	726·03
1891	459·22	58·39	517·61
1911	799·08	64·18	863·26
1912	855·28	64·07	919·35
1913	826·69	66·55	893·24
1914	916·09	63·72	979·81
1915	931·33	76·79	1,008·12
1916	895·99	82·78	942·77

EXPENDITURE AND RECEIPTS.

From the figures published in Table B, covering the financial year ended 31st March, 1917, it will be seen that the total expenditure amounted to £69,536. The total for the previous year was £71,174, the decrease for 1916–17 therefore being £1,638. The cash credits for the year amounted to £9,867, against £11,982 for 1915–16. The reduction of £2,115 thus shown in the cash earned by the Department is accounted for to some extent by the fact that the amount received for bricks supplied from the Mount Cook works is about £1,100 less than for the previous year, while there has also been a falling-off in the sale of dressed stone and road-metal at Auckland, and of concrete building-blocks at Invercargill.

In order that the actual value of the prison labour employed during the year, other than that utilized for domestic work or paid for by cash credits, might be fairly assessed, the Engineer-in-Chief of Public Works was asked to obtain estimates from his District Engineers of the value of the different classes of outdoor work according to free-labour standards that had been carried out by prison labour under prison officers for the twelve months ended 31st March last. The