

Since last year's report was written we have experienced increasing difficulty in keeping our staffs up to strength, and we have now had to take similar action to the Police Department in regard to appealing in every case where a prison officer is called in the ballot. We abstained from taking this course until the present month (June), only one exemption having been asked for previously, but with the responsibility that devolves upon us for the safe custody of prisoners of all classes we decided that the "danger-point" had been reached, and in the public interest we could not further reduce the margin of safety.

Prison officers have responded well to the call for men, and in addition to those who enlisted voluntarily a number have already been called up in different ballots. Our records show that there are thirty-four officers in the first category and eighteen in the second. This represents over 33 per cent. of our total authorized strength. Some of our officers have been wounded, and one (Warder Hazelton) has made the supreme sacrifice.

The conduct of the officers has been reasonably satisfactory. Certain officers who offended against the regulations have been suitably dealt with. In one case only was dismissal considered necessary.

Owing to continued ill health, Mr. A. A. Gideon, Gaoler at Invercargill, recently found it necessary to apply to be retired on superannuation, and the consent of the Minister and of the Superannuation Board having been obtained, he has decided to commence his three months' leave prior to retirement on the 1st July. Mr. Gideon is an old and valued officer of the Department, having entered the Prison service in 1882. He has always been a hardworking, highly practical, and useful officer, and his services will be much missed by the Department. It is hoped that freedom from official worries will restore Mr. Gideon to health, and so enable him to long enjoy the pension he has so well earned.

INSPECTION OF PRISONS.

With the assistance of the Deputy Inspector the prisons have been carefully and closely inspected during the year. Order and cleanliness have been kept up to a high standard, and discipline has been well maintained. The Gaolers and officers in charge have had many difficulties to contend with owing to shortage of staff and other troubles arising out of war conditions, but have carried on their work with the greatest efficiency.

HEALTH STATISTICS.

The returns of sickness given in Table A show that the daily average number of prisoners on the sick-list was somewhat higher for 1916 than for the preceding year—14·20 as against 12·66; but these figures give no reliable indication of the actual conditions. It frequently happens that men and women are suffering from disease before committal. They become hospital cases immediately on reception, and remain on the sick-list during the whole period of their incarceration. Thus, though the general health of the prisoners is undeniably good, two or three chronic cases of this description in one prison will readily make the returns for that prison considerably higher than those for the preceding year. This is particularly the case in regard to Maori prisoners, a percentage of whom are often found to have tubercular trouble on admission. The figures for Invercargill, where there are generally a number of young Maoris, illustrate this point very clearly. Speaking generally, it can be said that chronic disease very seldom originates in a prison.

Deaths.

There were six deaths in the prisons, including one suicide, during the calendar year, compared with eleven in 1915 and thirteen in 1914.

PRISONERS DETENTION ACT, 1915.

Since this Act was brought into operation it has been found necessary to apply its provisions in a limited number of cases only. The first case was treated at the Napier Prison as from the 14th February, 1916, the patient remaining under detention for a period of three months. Three male prisoners have since been detained at Lyttelton for treatment, and four at Auckland, while one female has been brought under the provisions of the Act at Wellington. It must not be understood, however, that those prisoners who are dealt with under the Prisoners Detention Act are the only ones suffering from venereal disease. There are sometimes others who are treated by the Medical Officers while serving their sentences. This particularly applies to the Addington Prison for females.

As pointed out in another paragraph of this report, the absence of infirmaries and other proper equipment for coping with this disease, and even for ordinary illness, is a regrettable feature of the New Zealand prisons that is being remedied as finance and circumstances permit.

PREVENTION OF CRIME.

In many respects the probation section of the Department's work is the most important of all, and in view of the steps now being taken by your direction there is every prospect of the work being carried on more vigorously than heretofore, and so receiving the prominence it deserves. In all matters of social reform the old saw that "prevention is better than cure" holds good, particularly when the "cure" is applied after the disease has become almost ineradicable. Our chief and practically our only hope of reducing the spread of crime lies in the growth of preventive agencies, not in the treatment of the offender after his committal to prison. While your proposed alteration and amendment of the Prison Regulations, entailing as it will a more