

DUNEDIN.

On the 8th April, 1916, I took over all books and papers pertaining to the First Offenders' Probation Act from the Gaoler. On that date there was one probationer on the books. Since then I have taken charge of six cases, making seven in all. Of these, three have been transferred, and four remain on my register. I may mention that two or three cases whom I was interested in when before the Supreme Court were ordered to report to the Probation Officer in another district, the Probation Officer being a police officer who was interested in the cases.

I attend the Police Courts almost daily, and the Supreme Court at its quarterly session, and frequently confer with Judge and Magistrates when young people are coming before them. Then, again, I visit my probationers, either at home or work: this I find very helpful, and it is appreciated. Something like sixty-odd letters have been written in connection with the first offenders, to say nothing of the fairly bulky correspondence with the Department. Then, again, at certain times each month I meet the probationers at my office, and people who may be interested in any case coming before the Court. I am pleased to put on record that the Judge and Magistrates, Court officials, and the police lend me every possible assistance, and this helps me much.

Suggestions and Recommendations.

I have no hesitation in stating that the First Offenders' Probation Act has more than justified itself, and on the whole the result is that many who would have been a burden upon the State got a chance, and have seized the opportunity, and thus not only saved themselves, but the State from having to keep them.

The probation system suggests that the committal of first offenders to prison is unnecessary. In my opinion it could be used more than is done. To send a young man to prison for a first offence is taking a big risk of manufacturing a criminal.

The probation system prevents a man or woman in many ways from becoming a criminal: first, by showing him definitely what his duties are; second, by providing him with a Probation Officer, a friend who will assist him to develop self-reliance and self-respect by kindly advice and sympathy, and at the same time be present to protect him in case of emergency.

It is a difficult thing to do much with young persons if they think they are simply on a sort of ticket-of-leave; but when you can get them to feel that they are on their honour, then there is hope. The Probation Officer should be able to create such a hope in the minds of all who come under his control. When this is done the percentage of those going back is very small.

I do not agree that the term of probation should be short, but rather a fairly lengthy period should be adopted, giving authority to the Probation Officer to recommend to the Department, if a man or woman is doing well, that a certain time should be remitted. Say, a person is placed on probation for two years. If you can make the person feel that, his conduct being good, at least six months will be taken off, this would, I think, prove very helpful. There can be no doubt as to the efficiency of probation as the surest means of obtaining real reformation in young people.

The home: The Probation Officer has considerable power vested in him in regard to visiting the homes, and just as he uses it advisedly or inadvisedly he will be welcome or unwelcome, and his chances of success enhanced or minimized. This is the Probation Officer's best card if rightly played.

I would strongly recommend that many who are now convicted to come up for sentence when called upon should be put upon probation. I am satisfied that the results would be much more satisfactory through having the assistance of the Probation Officer.

INVERCARGILL.

From the date of my appointment, May, 1916, to the 31st March, 1917, five men were dealt with under the First Offenders' Probation Act, three of whom were granted probation at Invercargill—one by the Supreme Court and two by the Magistrate's Court; one was placed on the register by transfer, and one was on the register at date of my appointment. The terms of probation were—two for a period of two years, one for one year, and two for six months each. Two cases were reported on to the Supreme Court and two to the Magistrate's Court. Of the former, one was granted probation; and of the latter, probation was recommended and granted in each case. In the three placed under my charge two presented no difficulties; the other required moral support and friendly counsel. Two were transferred to other districts, two have completed their term satisfactorily, and one will finish his term with next report.

The First Offenders' Probation Act is without question an effective preventive agent. The primary value of the Act consists, in my opinion, in saving the offender from association with criminals and others with previous prison experience. A person convicted of a first offence, if imprisoned, is brought into personal contact with criminals whose habits of thought and conduct are, perhaps insensibly, communicated. After release, the offender has to face the future as well as the record of his past. For some time—how long depends on the environment and moral atmosphere of his private and home life—he lives in a world separated from former associations, the influence of which will probably force him into association with others alike circumstanced in relation to society. Smarting under the sense of moral defeat, the loss of self-respect, the shame and stigma inseparable from imprisonment, all unite in making a second offence easily possible.

Aid societies can do good work in assisting discharged prisoners to recover lost positions, but these cannot restore the power and virtue of lost reputations and personality that imprisonment entails.

The provisions of the Act could be applied with advantage in some instances where fines are inflicted instead of imprisonment, especially in the case of married men. The burden of a fine frequently falls upon the wife and family. Where a penalty is to be inflicted a term of probation