

PREVENTION OF CRIME AND GENERAL PROBATION WORK.

As stated in last year's report, the Department regards the probation section of its work as one of its most important branches. It is a branch that is growing in extent as each year passes, and if it is to continue successfully an endeavour should be made, without further loss of time, to establish a special organization at headquarters to direct the work of the Probation Officers, link up the various agencies, and so create a complete and ordered system.

Until recent years the whole of our probation work was carried out by police and prison officials; and, while these officers were thoroughly conscientious in the discharge of duties for which they received no remuneration, they had neither the time nor the opportunity to follow up individual cases, and so give full effect to the intention of the First Offenders' Probation Act, and of the sections of the Crimes Amendment Act providing for the release of prisoners upon probation.

The success of all systems of probation or parole depends almost entirely upon the reformatory effect of the system upon the individuals who are placed upon probation by the Courts, or who are released from prison on probationary license. Unless, therefore, the Probation Officers are able to keep in close and sympathetic touch with the probationers it is obvious that the mere fact of reporting at monthly intervals to an official, whose time is already fully occupied in attending to the duties of his own position, will have little effect in preventing the probationer from lapsing into the evil habits or irregularities that led to his conviction or imprisonment.

The lack of adequate supervision from which our probation system suffered since its inception has been overcome to some extent during the past three or four years by the appointment as honorary Probation Officers, in each of the centres of population, of gentlemen who have had long experience of social-reform work in connection with the Churches and the Salvation Army. In some cases a small honorarium is paid, but it may be said that the whole work is practically carried out gratuitously. The reports of the gentlemen who are acting as First Offender Probation Officers, which are appended to this report, indicate clearly the importance and value of their work, and the sympathetic and thorough manner in which they are carrying out their honorary duties. It must also be remembered that each of them has his own special work to attend to, and that none of them confines himself merely to attending to his charges under the Probation Act. Their field is a much wider one.

A very important section of our probation work has also been built up in connection with the supervision of habitual criminals and prisoners sentenced to reformatory detention under the terms of the Crimes Amendment Act, 1910, who have been released on probationary license on the recommendation of the Prisons Board. Mr. T. I. Smail, of Christchurch, who has for very many years been engaged on social-reform work in that city, was one of our first Probation Officers under the Act of 1910. With his well-known and long record as a social worker his services were naturally of great value to the Department. Mr. W. Brakenrig, of Auckland, Mr. J. Cumming, of Dunedin, and Mr. A. McLean, of Invercargill, were also among the early appointees. All were experienced social workers with long records of useful service behind them, and all have "made good."

Owing to the increase in the number of this class of probationers as time went on it became necessary to call fresh agencies to our aid, and the offer of the Salvation Army to allow us the assistance of their extensive organization was accepted. The Staff Captains in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch were accordingly appointed Probation Officers under the Crimes Amendment Act, and were given the necessary authority to allow their officers in the smaller centres to act as sub Probation Officers. Since this arrangement was made much valuable work has been done for us, again gratuitously, and the work of supervision has been placed on a sounder basis.

The habitual criminal or reformatory-detention probationer presents, of course, an entirely different problem from the first offender: his lapses are more frequent and his needs greater. As I have pointed out in previous reports, the path of reform is far easier if men can be kept out of gaol. Once they have served a sentence their own self-respect and the respect of their fellows for them has in many cases been lost, and the work of rehabilitation is difficult, often impossible.

In the country districts we still find it necessary to utilize the services of the police both as Crimes Amendment and First Offender Probation Officers. Many of them are doing exceedingly good work, but it would be preferable if we had a complete organization to cover both town and country.

Hitherto Government expenditure on probation and preventive work has been almost negligible, although it is clear to all those who have studied the question that a well-equipped probation section would be in reality a highly payable commercial branch of the Prisons Department, or of any Department to which it might be attached. Probation and preventive work, if properly and thoroughly carried out, actually means the saving of lives to the State, and the keeping in useful and payable occupation of men and women who would otherwise become a burden on the community. Practically every person who goes to gaol becomes a wasted asset so far as the State is concerned. Consequently, as I have already stated, the necessity of building up a properly organized probation and preventive system is largely a commercial proposition that should make a stronger appeal than it has done in the past to the governing authorities.

FIRST OFFENDERS' PROBATION ACT, 1908.

The reports of our five honorary Probation Officers on the working of the First Offenders' Probation Act for the year 1917-18 are again presented. They contain much useful information regarding the administration of the Act, and suggestions as to further improvements that should be made. As stated in the preceding section of my report, the Probation Acts are the greatest