

## No. 2.—CHILD WELFARE BRANCH.

SIR,—

I have the honour to submit the following report on the work of the Child Welfare Branch for last year :—

The Child Welfare Act passed last year removes much of the legal machinery enacted some forty-three years ago which through the effluxion of time had been found inadequate for dealing with the various classes of children who require either protection or correction or maintenance at the hands of the State. Under the Industrial Schools Act, now repealed, it was necessary for a child to be committed to an industrial school before the Department could assume control or assist in any way. Now the Child Welfare Act provides simpler methods for accomplishing this object, and, in addition, has special clauses that legalize the informal system of probation or supervision—a system that has grown up under the working of the juvenile probation system. Previously there was no provision for the State to assume control of young persons over sixteen years of age except by transfer from gaol to an industrial school. This, of course, is entirely a wrong procedure, which has been rectified in the new Act by the provision whereby any young person charged with an offence against the law may be referred to the Children's Court to be dealt with as in the case of a child under sixteen years of age.

As stated in the report of the Minister, the most important provision in the Child Welfare Act is for the establishment of Children's Courts, presided over by Special Magistrates or Justices authorized to exercise jurisdiction in these Courts. The personnel of the Courts may include honorary associates of either sex whose function it would be to act as the children's friend and generally to advise the presiding Magistrates. In addition, there is provision for the appointment of Child Welfare Officers who will investigate each case from a social welfare standpoint, and will furnish the Court with particulars as to family history, conduct, progress at school, degree of mentality, &c.

As a rule the Child Welfare Officers will be identical with the regular field officers of the Branch, but in outlying towns and in smaller centres it is proposed to utilize the services of local voluntary social-service workers. By this means it is hoped to enlist the sympathies and services of local organizations with the object of dealing with the various classes of children in their own districts and by private effort directed from the nearest child-welfare centre.

The Child Welfare Officers are now authorized to lay informations and to bring children before the Courts. Formerly the police were the only officers authorized to perform this important duty.

For some years past the Department has been much concerned at the high death-rate among illegitimate infants, in comparison with infants born in wedlock. The provision in the Child Welfare Act for all such cases to be inquired into by Child Welfare Officers and to be supervised where necessary is a step in the right direction, although it is felt by the majority of the field officers that there should be provision for earlier registration. The experience during this year should indicate whether the existing provision is sufficiently far-reaching or not.

Provision is made in the new Act for regulations governing the employment of children in street trading and places of public entertainment, and also regulating and restricting the attendance of children at places of entertainment.

It is regretted that special provision was not made in the Act for the inspection of private institutions for children and for the co-ordination of all private social-service effort with that of the Child Welfare Branch of the Department. At present there is much overlapping, and not only wasted energy, but in many cases assistance that is given direct with the best of intentions is probably not appreciated and would have produced better results if given in another manner. I think it may be freely admitted that the denominational organizations engaged in social-service work are sincere in their desire to do what is best for the children under their charge and for that section of the community that requires assistance, but probably very few of the church social-workers have had any former experience or training in constructive social-service work. There is very great need for co-ordination and for the adoption of modern standards in providing for the housing, feeding, classification, and training of children who through misfortune or improvidence on the part of their parents are dependent upon charitable organizations for subsistence.

The Branch carries out the following phases of social-welfare work :—

- (1.) Maintenance, supervision, and training of all destitute, dependent, and delinquent children committed to the care of the State.
- (2.) Supervision of children and juvenile offenders placed on probation by the Courts.
- (3.) Supervision of all infants under six years of age maintained for payment apart from their parents or guardians.
- (4.) Supervision of children in cases where widows' pensions are paid by the State.
- (5.) Supervision of all illegitimate births, with provision for assisting mother and child where necessary.
- (6.) Education and training of afflicted children over the age of six years. The definition, "afflicted" includes deaf, blind, or improvable feeble-minded children, and children partially deaf or suffering from defective speech, and stammers.