

Although the number of distinct persons received into the prisons may be regarded as the best criterion of the extent of the Dominion's criminal population, it is to be noted that the daily average number of offenders in our institutions was slightly higher than that for the previous year—viz., 1499·58, as compared with 1458·16 for 1927. There were various factors contributing to this state of affairs—economic conditions, petty recidivism, and to some extent the more lengthy terms of detention prescribed under the Prevention of Crime Act, which only became operative in 1925. But this average by no means represents a constantly large number of inmates throughout the year. A graphical record showing the weekly fluctuations of the prison population reveals that in the early winter months of last year the number of prisoners was unusually high when unemployment was rather acute. In May, 1928, the number in custody was 1,564 inmates, which is the highest on record for many years. Although the number steadily declined until in November it was down to 1,442, the high peak tended to throw up the daily average for the year.

A satisfactory feature of the figures dealing with offenders under age-groups shows that there has been a falling-off in the number of young offenders, the number of persons received into our institutions under the age of twenty years being 168 for 1928, as compared with 225 for the previous year. The number of committals to prison between the ages of twenty and twenty-five have also shown a pronounced reduction; these are distinctly hopeful signs so far as the future criminal problem is concerned. The wisdom of concentrating effort in directing youthful energies along social lines, and redirecting criminal tendencies when they are first made manifest, is now recognized by all authorities dealing with delinquency. The problem of the recidivist and the habitual criminal can only be effectively dealt with in the formative period before anti-social habits become ingrained. "That residuum or substratum of incorrigible offenders—of men who make crime a profession—against whom the most elaborate penal code and the best administered prison system is powerless" is also the problem of the English Prison Commissioners.

Of the total of 2,549 distinct persons received into custody, 1,538 or 60 per cent., were New-Zealand-born, as compared with, 1,570 for the previous year. It is satisfactory to note, therefore, that, relative to the increase in the general population, and having regard to the percentage of New-Zealand-born to the total population, crime amongst the New-Zealand-born is slightly lower than amongst the rest of the population.

The extent of serious crime in the Dominion can be gauged from the table dealing with the period of sentences imposed, for it can be safely assumed that short sentences connote offences of a more or less venial character; and as 17 per cent. of the total receptions were for terms of less than one week, 37 per cent. for terms of less than one month, 58 per cent. for terms of less than three months, and three-quarters of the total receptions were for terms of less than six months' imprisonment, it will be seen that the amount of serious crime in the Dominion is proportionately small. Notwithstanding this fact it is to be noted that there were four cases of an unusually grave nature involving life sentences, as compared with two for the previous year.

It is pleasing to be able to record again that the sentence of capital punishment was not required to be given effect to during the year, although in one case the extreme penalty of the law was commuted to imprisonment for life. No floggings were administered at any institution during the year.

Ten persons died from natural causes, of whom five died whilst under treatment in public hospital and one in a mental hospital. There were two cases of suicide. Of the prisoners who escaped from custody during the year, only two were not recaptured.

Following the recent arrangement with the Mental Hospitals Department to make its specialist officers available for reporting on prisoners with impaired mentality, a large number of inmates were clinically examined for the information of the Prisons Board. In three cases prisoners were temporarily transferred to the mental hospital for more intensive observation; in two cases prisoners were transferred to mental hospitals direct from the Courts; and in twenty-five cases prisoners were transferred to mental hospitals upon certification as being mentally defective. One prisoner was required to be detained beyond the period of his sentence in terms of the Prisoners' Detention Act, 1915.

A noteworthy feature of the prison statistics is the decline in the number of commitments of women to prison. The total number of women offenders ordered detention in penal institutions was 117, as compared with 134 for last year and 150 for the previous year. Eighty-five of the 117 women were New-Zealand-born, while the preponderant offence came under the heading of vagrancy, and in this connection it is to be noted that 52 per cent. of the total number of women offenders were between the ages of forty and sixty years.

The total number of commitments of women to prison for drunkenness was only sixteen.

BORSTAL INSTITUTIONS.

The prison statistics include commitments to Borstal institutions, but a separation of the figures shows that 138 lads and 16 girls, a total of 154, were committed by the Courts, while 24 youths and 4 young women were transferred to the Borstals from industrial schools and penal institutions, for the purpose of training and discipline.

A Borstal institution is defined in the Prevention of Crime Act, 1924, as "a place in which young offenders, whilst detained, can be given such occupational training and other instruction, and be subject to such disciplinary and moral influences, as will conduce to their reformation and the prevention of crime."

The Act provides that where a young person is convicted on indictment of an offence for which he is liable to imprisonment, or where a young person is charged before a Magistrate with an offence punishable by imprisonment, in lieu of passing a sentence of imprisonment an order for Borstal detention may be made. The system is a recognition of the necessity for dealing with youthful