

HABITUAL OFFENDERS.

HITHERTO Government inquiries and Social Science discussions have been conducted as if the principal point to be ascertained was, how the existing habitual offenders could be improved. The greater part of the labours of the Departmental Committee now sitting seems so far to have been expended in this direction.

We venture to submit that these labours would be much more profitably bestowed if they were devoted to the purpose of stopping the source of supply rather than of dealing with the ready-made offender.

Experience has taught us that when the habitual offender has reached a certain stage his reformation is next to an impossibility. Improvement to a certain extent may no doubt be effected by much care and improved systems of treatment ; but a complete cure is more than can be reasonably expected. By all means get every improvement effected that is attainable within reasonable limits ; but do not let the question of how to do this so overshadow the main question as to put it out almost of sight.

It is not suggested that the members of the Government Departmental Committee now at work are entirely ignoring the question as to how the ranks of the habitual offenders are recruited ; but all that has transpired concerning their proceedings goes to show that their energies have been exerted much more in the direction of how to deal with the existing offender than how to prevent his creation. When suggestions were made as to important changes in the mode of education of the young, and when it was attempted to be pointed out that the root of the evil was more likely to be struck at by this means than by any other, these suggestions were, it is said, rejected as being beyond the scope of the Committee.

This is to be regretted, because while it is most desirable that the committee should carefully avoid being drawn into any phase of the question beyond what is of real practical utility, it will be a matter of much more serious regret if, through any mistaken ideas as to the limits of their inquiry, they decline to consider thoughtful schemes, capable of almost immediate application, and which would give a reasonable prospect of stopping, or at all events of lessening considerably at the fountain-head, the supply of those likely to become habitual offenders.

The School Board has now existed for twenty-three years. Has the system of education which it introduced assisted to lessen juvenile delinquency ? Has any perceptible improvement taken place in the conduct and character of the rising generation ? Has it laid a foundation for the hope that it will have any marked effect in reducing the number of habitual offenders in the future ?

There is, alas ! too much reason to fear that only negative answers can be given to these queries.

Juvenile delinquency has increased at a rate almost alarming.

The children of the poor of to-day have less regard for law or authority.

They are more prone to acts of wanton mischief.

Rudeness, incivility, indecency, and profanity are more than ever features in their speech and behaviour.

Veneration or respect for age and experience is a diminishing quality.

Drinking and smoking have become habits at a much earlier age.

The whole tone of the conduct of the children of the poor is disappointing and regrettable.

Many may say that these allegations are over-stated, and that much of what is complained of is only