

Juvenile Delinquency in Hong Kong

by *Ka chi Kwok**

Juvenile Delinquency

According to the Juvenile Offenders Ordinance of Hong Kong, youthful offenders are those who are below the age of 16. The Crime Report prepared by the Royal Hong Kong Police Force in 1976 revealed that the number of youthful offenders prosecuted was 1,429, while the number of offenders between the age of 16 and 20 was 5,392 and that of those of the age of over 20 was 15,539 in total.

In working with youthful offenders, one has to find out under what circumstances an individual becomes an offender and what are the causes that may be accounted for his behaviour. In Hong Kong context, the followings are main contributing factors towards youthful offences.

(a) The increase in population which composed of different social economic strata: This is particularly true in those highly populated public housing estates which are further complicated by its poor physical environment and overcrowdedness. The unhealthy neighbourhood and the overcrowded housing condition are not only considered to be the major causes of crime but also have become great obstacles causing great difficulties throughout the process of social rehabilitation.

(b) The lack of legitimate channel or opportunity to achieve one's expectation or social goal: It is especially true among the lower socio-economic class youth living in public housing estates. Owing to the great competition and lack of adequate skills and training to achieve their unrealistic expectation or social goals, they may resort to the means of illegitimacy by violating the social norms.

(c) The lack of healthy recreation

outlet for the youths: For lack of healthy recreation and socially acceptable outlets, the youths in an overcrowded town naturally have more opportunities to come into contact with street corner gangs and undesirable characters and thus engaged in illegal activities. The social enquiry records prepared by the probation officers revealed that the youths were led to participate in illegal society activities mostly by the lack of healthy recreation outlets and effective parental guidance and control.

(d) The decline of social control: The breakdown of traditional social controls may have great consequences upon the behaviour of the individuals, especially the youths. Subjected to the rapid urbanization process especially in the transitional period, they have no clear conduct norms or primary group solidarity. Such a phenomenon can be well explained by the well discussed issue of "Generation Gap" existing between the older and the younger generations. From our experience of working with youthful offenders, we are not surprised to find that there is always a relationship problem between the two generations and it has always proved to be a hindrance towards their rehabilitation.

It should be noted that no single psychological or sociological factor will inevitably produce criminality. An individual becomes an offender as the result of the interplay between his inherited characteristics and the life situation into which he is born and in which he grows. In other words, there must be something wrong all through his socialization process. He becomes an offender as a result of unsuccessful socialization.

Measures of Prevention

The increase in juvenile delinquency and crimes committed by young people

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in recent years has stimulated the Government of Hong Kong into trying not only to find out what tends to lead young people to such behaviour, but also to break new grounds in guiding them and their parents, and to bring about changes and improvements in social provisions in order to meet this threat to the well-being of our future generation.

The emphasis is laid on the preventive youth work, which embodies youth guidance projects, play-leadership schemes, detached work programmes and school social work. All these preventive youth work programmes are being taken up both by the Government and the voluntary sector. The voluntary agencies, with the support of the Government both in financial and in other aspects, play a significant role in the field of crime prevention. Youth guidance scheme is geared towards those youth between 11 to 15 years, especially the age group between 12 and 14 who have completed primary education at the age of 12, but cannot continue their secondary education for various reasons like academic and financial. They cannot work in industrial undertakings because the minimum age for industrial undertaking is 14. The project offers them guidance in the preparation of employment and better use of leisure and counselling services to the individuals.

Parks and playgrounds are black spots for unlawful activities. Play-leaders are stationed at parks and playgrounds to ensure that the facilities are well utilised and the equipments are better used. Through ball games and various activities conducted in parks and playgrounds, the play-leaders get in contact with potential delinquents in order to win them over from participating in unlawful activities. The main characteristic of this approach is informality. There are no membership requirements and organisation and supervision are minimal. Participants are allowed a high degree of freedom. Play-leadership affords young people who frequent parks and playgrounds an opportunity to bring their personal and family problems to the play-leader once a more intimate relationship has been established.

Youth services have to be brought to where the youths are. There are some

youths who do not like to participate in activities organized by youth centres as they consider they are not suitable for them. Detached workers work at street corners or tea houses to get in contact with those youths who have behavioural problems and to give timely advice and counselling to help them from committing unlawful activities. It is in fact an "on-the-street" approach. The detached worker, who is a social worker, aims to identify natural groups of young people, to be acquainted with the group and to modify their behaviour and attitude through various methods of counselling.

Social workers are sent to work in school settings with those who are identified to have behavioural problems and those with difficulties in school work. Poor performance in school often indicates family or emotional problems rather than academic aptitude. These problems discourage children from studying and cause them to drop out from school, thus increasing their exposure to delinquent influences. The aim of school social work is both preventive and remedial: it tries to detect anti-social or quasi-criminal tendencies in students and to prevent them from being influenced by criminal activities or joining gangs. The school social worker encourages students to talk about and identify their problems of behaviour and family relationship and advises them how to overcome those problems. It is believed that the earlier the service is rendered to the student and his related persons concerned, the better the chance of his being rehabilitated will be.

Apart from focussing on preventive youth work, the Government is also embarking on housing redevelopment programmes to have the old housing estates redeveloped so as to provide a better living environment to residents.

Basic social and recreation facilities are provided within the estates, educational programmes are conducted to promote good neighbourliness, and residents are encouraged to form among themselves mutual aid committees to shoulder the managerial responsibilities and to take part in fight-violent-crime campaigns and anti-drug campaigns.

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Family life education is much encouraged to enable family members to have a better understanding of their respective roles in the family. It ought to be stressed here that the voluntary organizations take a very significant part in the promotion of educational programmes by offering both financial and manpower support.

The Role of Social Welfare Department in the Treatment of Youthful Offenders

The Probation and Corrections Division of the Department of Social Welfare provides services in the form of probation, correctional institutions and after-care services to offenders who are referred by the courts for care and rehabilitation.

Probation is used by the courts to place an offender at liberty under the supervision of a probation officer for a period of one to three years. The probation service is statutorily governed by the Probation of Offenders Ordinance under which the Principal Probation Officer and probation officers are gazetted. Probation officers are attached to all levels of the court and probation orders are usually made after the court has considered carefully the circumstances leading to an offence, the nature of the offence, and the character of the offender. As of 31-st December, 1976, there are altogether 11 probation offices commanding a staff of 54 probation officers and seven senior probation officers. The duties of probation officers are to assist and guide probationers to become useful and law-abiding members of the community by exercising their professional skills and knowledge of local resources to meet the practical needs of probationers for financial assistance, employment, schooling, etc. Family counselling is also rendered to the probationer's family to achieve total rehabilitation. Another important aspect of probation officers' work is to conduct social enquiries at the direction of the courts to obtain information relating to the circumstances and home surroundings of an offender for the purpose of determining or reviewing sentences.

Community support and involvement are essential to the rehabilitation of offenders. The Volunteer Scheme for Probationers has in this light been launched to match a small number of probation cases with volunteers who are to give personal and moral support to the delinquents. The Service also maintains close relationship with other government departments and voluntary agencies for assistance and support.

The Probation and Corrections Division operates five correctional institutions for different age groups, four for boys and one for girls, with a total accommodation for 590 juveniles. These are: the Castle Peak and O Pui Shan Boys' Homes which are reformatory schools for boys; the Begonia Road Boys' Home which is a combination of a remand home, probation home, place of detention and place of refuge; the Ma Tau Wei Girls' Home which provides similar facilities for girls; and the Kwun Tong Hostel where residents go out to work in the daytime and return to the Hostel after work.

Training programmes in the institutions are tailored to the needs of the residents. They normally feature:

(a) School and trade training during the day—classroom teaching to instil in the residents the incentive to learn and trade training to inculcate good working habits;

(b) Recreational and creative training during leisure time—organized and free activities such as ball and group games, community service projects, music, drama and arts for residents to learn to cooperate and communicate with their peers and to develop a sense of self-worth and self-respect;

(c) Group living experience during the evening—basically a kind of social training, a re-socialisation process leading to growth and development;

(d) Casework and group counselling—caseworkers in the institutions design their treatment programmes, including case and group counselling, according to the needs of each individual resident, whilst also enlisting the support of his family.

Under the provisions of the Industrial and Reformatory Schools Ordinance, a boy at a reformatory school may be

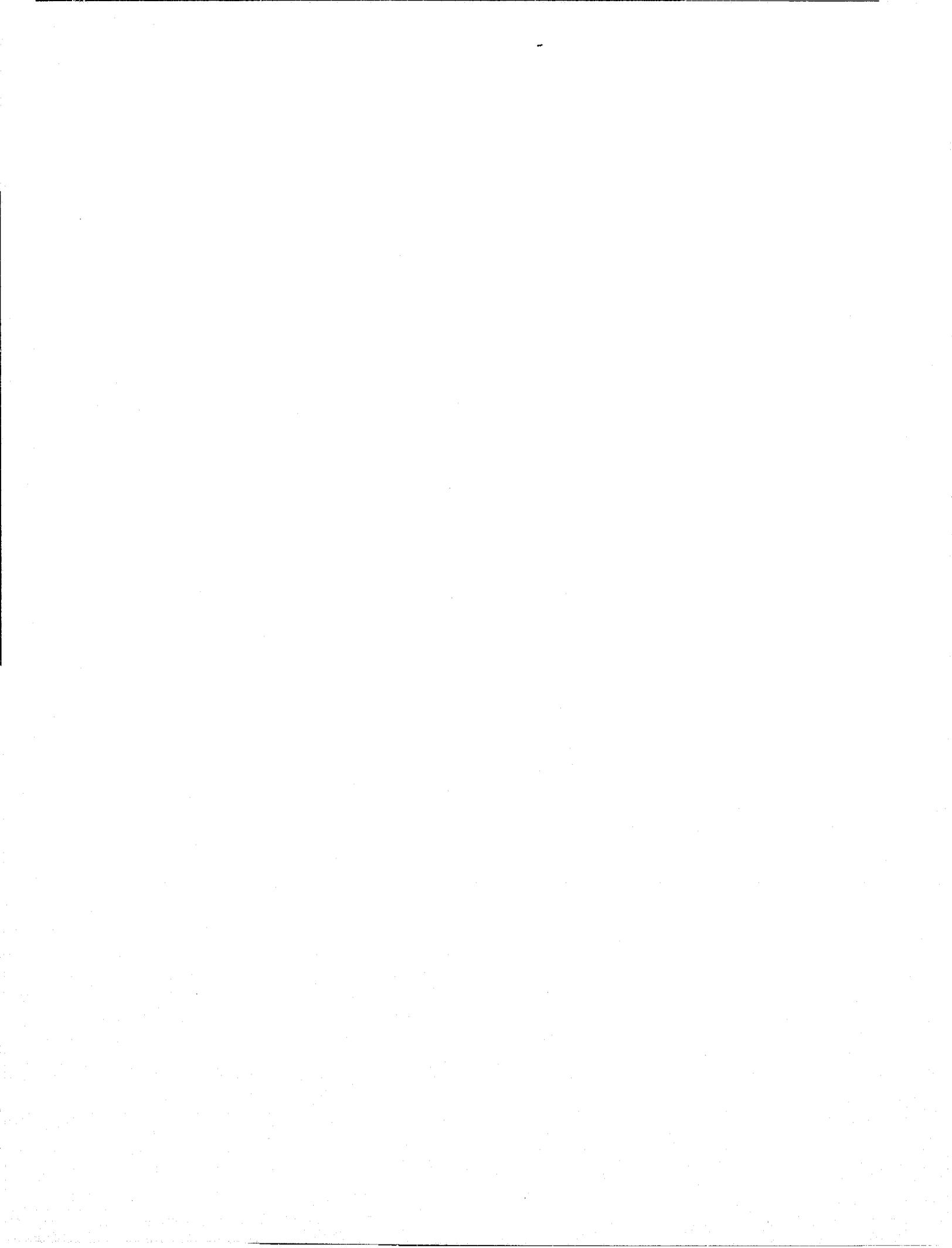
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released on licence when he is considered fit for discharge subject to supervision by an aftercare officer for the remaining period of the school order or when the boy reaches the age of 18. The aftercare officer is responsible for the formulation of an aftercare plan which in most cases includes job placement. If during the supervision period the licensee is found uncontrollable, the licence may be revoked and he may be recalled back to

the Home for further training.

Conclusion

Juvenile delinquency is not an easy problem to be tackled. With the concerted effort of the authorities concerned, the families, the individuals and the community, it is hoped that effective measures can be taken in the prevention of crime and treatment of youthful offenders.



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