

Law and order situation in 2019

Overall law and order situation in Hong Kong

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1. Overall situation

The overall number of crimes reported in 2019 was 59,225 cases, representing an increase of 5,000 cases (+9.2%) when compared with 2018 (54,225 cases). Violent crimes also increased by 806 cases (+9.1%) from 8,884 cases to 9,690 cases. For every 100,000 people, there were 787 crimes reported, of which 129 cases were classified as violent crime, compared with 728 cases and 119 cases respectively in 2018.

The overall crime situation in Hong Kong had been on a downward trend for 12 consecutive years, from 80,796 cases in 2007 down to 54,225 cases in 2018. The law and order situation remained stable in the first half of 2019 with a further drop of 4.7% in overall crime when compared with the same period of 2018, hitting a new record low since half yearly figures were maintained in 1977.

However, the trend reversed in the second half of 2019, with the months-long social unrest stemmed from protests against the “Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019” (“anti-extradition amendment bill”) ongoing since June. Not only the 4.7% decrease for the first half of the year had been offset, an overall 9.2% yearly increase in crime was subsequently recorded at the end of the year.

The increase in crime reports was attributable to two factors, a rise in crimes directly related to the radical protests stemmed from the “anti-extradition amendment bill” related incident (including offences against public order, arson, criminal damage, possession of unlawful instrument, possession of offensive weapons, assault on police and resisting arrest, etc.) and a surge in crimes which were indirectly affected (including robbery, burglary, snatching, theft from vehicle and taking conveyance without authority) in the sense that criminals were taking advantage of the thinning out of crime prevention work and resources to cope with related public order events.

The detection rates for overall and violent crime also dropped noticeably in 2019, respectively by 9.4 and 13.8 percentage points from 46.5% to 37.1% and from 65.1% to 51.3%. Significant drops in detection rate were noted in cases of assault on police (-56.2 percentage points), robbery (-27.2 percentage points), arson (-26 percentage points) and criminal damage (-11 percentage points). The fact that many of the culprits were all suited up and masked to conceal their identity when committing these offences had made it more difficult to conduct investigation.

2. Crimes Arising from Radical Protests

The increase in cases of offences against public order (+36 folds), arson (+2.2 folds), criminal damage (+54.1%), possession of unlawful instrument (+10.6 folds), possession of offensive weapons (+91.5%), assault on police (+2.6 folds) and resisting arrest (+63.1%) were considered directly attributable to the "anti-extradition amendment bill" related protests. Increase of cases ranging from 54.1% to 36 folds were noted. 74% of the cases were committed in the second half of the year.

Some radicals, due to different political stances, targeted and vandalised shops they disliked and attacked people with opposite views. Since last October, 1,200 cases had been reported to Police, involving vandalism of more than 1,000 venues, some of which were repeatedly damaged. There were cases in which innocent members of the public were attacked by rioters due to different political views. Among which were two heinous cases in which a man suffered 40% burns to his body after he was poured with inflammable liquid and set into fire in Ma On Shan on November 11, 2019. The second case was on November 13, 2019 in which a 70-year-old cleaner was hit in his head by a brick hurled by radicals in Sheung Shui and subsequently died.

3. Traditional crimes

Homicide saw a decrease of 24 cases (-50%) from 48 to 24 cases. Of the 24 homicides occurring in 2019, 23 were detected. For the remaining case, Police have identified the suspect and are pursuing the case. Over 50% of the cases were committed in domestic violence setting or perpetrated by relatives or family members.

2019 saw a total of 210 robbery and 2,394 burglary reports. The majority of the cases (79% of robbery and 67% of burglary) occurred in the second half of the year.

Robbery rose by 42.9% (+63 cases), mainly attributable to the increase of cases committed at goldsmith / jewellery / watch shops (+2.8 folds or 14 cases), on the streets (+41.2% or 28 cases) and convenience shops (+21.4% or 3 cases). There were no robbery cases involving the use of genuine firearms. Burglary on the other hand climbed up by 52% (+819 cases), over 70% of the cases involved non-residential premises.

Violent protests showed signs of winding down from December 2019 onwards. Police could, therefore, deploy more resources for maintaining law and order. From December 2019 to February 2020, 36 cases of robbery and 74 cases of burglary had been detected (as at February 20, 2020).

Regarding sexual offences, indecent assault and rape cases respectively went down by 10.6% (-117 cases) from 1,099 to 982 reports and 20.6% (-13 cases) from 63 to 50 reports. Majority of rape cases were committed by acquaintances (98%). Detection rates of rape and indecent assault remained high at 92% and 76.6% respectively.

740 serious drug offences were registered, representing a decrease of 47.1% when compared with 1,399 cases in 2018. While the overall serious drug arrests went down by 48.5%, the number of youth (aged 10-20) arrested for

serious drug offences also dropped by 28.7%. The decrease in cases and arrests, however, might not be able to reflect the real drug situation in the second half of the year, given that the large amount of police resources had been re-deployed to cope with the public order events stemmed from the “anti-extradition amendment bill” related protests since June. Having said that, with the combined efforts of the Police and Customs and Excise Department, an increase in drug seizures was made by 2.3 folds in ketamine (+269kg), 1.4 folds in cocaine (+779kg), 1.4 folds in methamphetamine (ice) (+238kg), and 26.5% in heroin (+13kg).

2019 also saw a decrease of 362 triad-related crimes (-21.1%) from 1,715 to 1,353 cases. Reduced police resources in mounting intelligence-led operations against triad-related activities since June might be one of the contributing factors for the drop.

Deception fell by 1.9% (-156 cases) from 8,372 to 8,216 cases, mainly due to the drop in online miscellaneous fraud by 49.3% (-333 cases), social media deception by 18.7% (-386 cases), online business fraud by 14.7% (-400 cases) and email scam by 8.7% (-78 cases), which together attributed to the decline in internet deception by 18.8% (-1,197 cases).

While the overall situation in deception had improved, the amount of loss involved remained a matter of concern. In particular, telephone deception cases incurred a total loss amount of 150 million (+1.5 folds or 89 million) with only 5.4% increase (+33 cases) in reports. Meanwhile, corporate email scams incurred a total loss amount of 2.5 billion (+47.8% or 818 million) against a decrease of reports by 15.2% (-135 cases). Internet deception, which totalled 5,157 reports, accounted for the majority (62%) of the overall technology crimes (8,322 reports) in 2019.

Youth crime involving offenders aged from 10 to 20 registered an increase of 1,499 arrests (+54.1%) from 2,769 to 4,268 arrests in 2019, mainly attributable to the increase in the number arrested for offences against public order (+21.5 folds) and criminal damage (+88.1%) in connection with the “anti-extradition amendment bill” related protests in the latter half of the year. It is noteworthy that between June and December, there were 2,442 youths arrested for the “anti-extradition amendment bill” related protests, which exceeded the annual increase in youths arrested (1,499).

4. Observations from incidents arising from “anti-extradition amendment bill”

(i) Increase in proportion of students and youngsters arrested

Among the 7,549 persons arrested in connection with the incidents, 3,091 were reported to be students, constituting 40.9% of the total arrested persons. The percentage of arrested students had significantly increased after the school year began, from 25% (between June and August 2019) rising to 43.6% (between September 2019 to February 20, 2020). More and more arrested persons are of younger age.

(ii) The disobedience to law

In the early stage of the public meetings and processions related to “anti-extradition amendment bill”, some protestors ruined and “hijacked” peaceful demonstrations by illegal acts including blocking roads, charging police cordon lines and besieging Central Government Offices and Legislative Council Complex. Later on, they even adopted extreme methods by obstructing major transportation hubs in various districts, making it impossible for members of the public to go to work and class as usual, or even to live a normal daily life. However, some people covered up, connived, condoned or even supported those who committed crime and used violence. Furthermore, various excuses they made for justifying or romanticising the illegal acts gradually eroded the law-abiding value of the city, which in turn instigated more people to take part in illegal and violent acts. It is one of the major causes of reversing the good law and order that Hong Kong used to maintain.

(iii) Home-grown terrorism

During the “anti-extradition amendment bill” incidents, the online publicity materials at first appealed to the public to join the public processions or demonstrations, but later turned into “weapon making handbooks” or even “guides to kill police”. Violent acts committed by the protestors changed from throwing water bottles and other objects to hurling bricks and mills barriers or even petrol bombs, corrosive liquids and shooting arrows. In order to express their dissatisfaction with the society and the government, rioters chose to hurt the public and cause social panic which exactly is the behaviour of home-grown terrorism.

Way Forward of Police

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In 2020, Police will exert all efforts to restore the social order and reinstate the sense of security we have lived in Hong Kong through four approaches namely stringent enforcement of law, intelligence-led operation, building trust and enhancing professionalism.

Stringent enforcement of law — Police will not condone any violent acts. In face of the continued escalation of violence by rioters and the incitement of youngsters and students to use violence, Police will stringently enforce the law including targeting those who, via the internet, incite others to commit crime and those who teach others in using petrol bombs.

Intelligence-led operation — Police will continue to enhance intelligence gathering, curbing those core radicals who use illegal ammunitions and explosives to commit crimes, thereby averting serious casualties.

Building trust — At present, the relatively tense police public relations are partly caused by all kinds of fake news and fake information smearing Police which emerge from the “anti-extradition amendment bill” incidents. This has caused part of the public in misunderstanding Police’s actions. Police will continue to proactively clarify and rebut fake information and review the communication with members of the public so as to

increase the transparency of Police work, clearing the doubts of the public. In parallel, Police will actively establish partnership with the media and continue to maintain good communication with a view to enhancing mutual understanding and respect. On the condition of not affecting operations, Police will assist in media reporting as far as possible.

Enhancing professionalism — Police will continue to enhance professionalism and strictly demand officers to uphold professional attitude while at work and in execution of duties.