

LCQ4: Committing drug-related offences by young people

Following is a question by the Hon Lillian Kwok and a reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr Tang Ping-keung, in the Legislative Council today (January 31):

Question:

It has been reported that youth drug abuse has become increasingly hidden with the ages of youth drug abusers showing a downward trend, and some lawbreakers have made use of the Internet as a platform for selling drugs. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of young people aged under 21 who were arrested on suspicion of having committed drug offences in the past year, and the types of offences involved; whether the authorities will formulate new measures targeting the situation of a downward trend in the ages of persons committing drug offences; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) of the number of cases of online drug trafficking detected by the Police in the past five years and the penalties imposed on the convicted persons, and set out the relevant information in a table; and

(3) given that as at March 10 last year, 223 secondary schools in Hong Kong participated in the Healthy School Programme with a Drug Testing Component implemented with funding from the Beat Drugs Fund Association, whether the authorities have gained an understanding of the reasons why the remaining schools did not participate in the Programme, and whether they will launch targeted anti-drug publicity and measures to identify high-risk persons?

Reply:

President,

The Government is very concerned about the problem of youth drug abuse. In the past decade, there has been an overall decrease in the number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21, from 829 in 2014 to 659 in 2023. The number of young people arrested for drug offences has also decreased from 632 to 323 over the same period. While the situation is stable, the Government is aware of the potential hidden problem of youth drug abuse in recent years, including the global trend towards online drug dealing. I would like to emphasise here that the world of Internet is not beyond the law. To tackle the problem of online drug dealing, the law enforcement agencies (LEAs) have stepped up patrols and taken relevant enforcement actions on the Internet. Relevant speeches, actions, videos or social media content may serve as evidence of an offence. For example, the Police cracked down a syndicate selling cannabis and related products on the Internet last year,

with 16 people arrested and took over the instant messaging channels on Telegram.

My reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) In 2023, 323 young people aged under 21 were arrested for drug offences, accounting for about nine per cent of the total number of arrestees for drug offences. Among the young people aged under 21 being arrested, about half of them were involved in offences such as manufacturing and trafficking of drugs. The rest were involved in offences such as possession and consumption of drugs. Detailed figures are set out in Annex 1.

In the past decade, the number of young people aged under 21 arrested for drug offences decreased from 632 in 2014 to 323 in 2023. The proportion of them among all arrestees for drug offences decreased from 13 per cent to nine per cent over the same period. Detailed figures are set out in Annex 2. Although the number and proportion of young people arrested for drug offences rebounded in 2021, they dropped in 2022 and 2023. This is attributable to the Government's timely adoption of multipronged anti-drug strategies and measures. Among them, law enforcement and preventive education and publicity are particularly important.

On law enforcement, to deal with the exploitation of young people in drug trafficking, the LEAs may apply to the court for increasing the sentence of offenders who have exploited young people in drug trafficking under section 56A of the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance (Cap. 134), so as to enhance the deterrent effect. Since 2009, a total of 31 cases have been successfully brought to the court for sentence enhancement. The additional increase in sentence ranged from 1.5 months to 40 months of imprisonment.

On preventive education and publicity, the Narcotics Division (ND) of the Security Bureau and the LEAs have made continuous efforts to launch publicity programmes targeting at the young people. They have actively used various means popular with the young people, such as social media, animated videos and key opinion leaders. In addition, young people are warned from time to time that young age is not a mitigating factor in court sentence, and drug trafficking by students can also result in heavy penalty. Various LEAs have also covered anti-drug education programmes in their youth activities. Young people participating in these programmes can bring anti-drug messages to their families, schoolmates and friends for dissemination in the community.

(2) In the past five years, the number of online drug trafficking cases detected by the Police increased from one in 2019 to 17 in 2023. The number of arrestees also increased from 22 to 166. The number of online drug trafficking cases detected by the Police, the number of arrestees and the maximum penalties imposed on the convicted persons are set out in table at Annex 3.

(3) The Beat Drugs Fund has provided funding support for the Healthy School Programme with a Drug Testing Component (HSP(DT)) implemented by the ND. The

HSP(DT) aims to promote a drug-free school culture by enhancing students' resolve to stay away from drugs through a wide range of personal growth activities and voluntary school drug testing. While 43 schools participated in the programme when it was launched in 2011, the number of schools participating in the programme has currently increased to 237, accounting for nearly half of the 519 secondary schools in Hong Kong.

For other schools yet to participate in the programme, some of them have developed a healthy school policy with an anti-drug element, or have even arranged their own drug tests.

While the number of participating schools has increased significantly, we will not stop there. When sending invitations for the new round of applications for the 2024/25 school year in February this year, the ND will step up its efforts in proactively explaining the programme to school sponsoring bodies, principals' associations and parents' associations to clear up doubts. It will also organise sharing sessions to invite participating schools and teachers for experience sharing, with a view to boosting the confidence of non-participating schools in joining the programme.

To strengthen the capacity of teaching staff and school social workers in identifying and handling at-risk students, the ND, in collaboration with the Education Bureau (EDB) and non-governmental organisations, arranges for school personnel to receive anti-drug training on identifying at-risk students. The EDB has also drawn up guidelines on handling drug-related incidents for schools.

Apart from the aforementioned HSP(DT) and anti-drug training on identifying at-risk students, the ND has also implemented other anti-drug measures, including:

(i) Beat Drugs With Sports Programme: It is a programme without drug testing components aiming to promote healthy lifestyle and a drug-free culture in secondary schools through the implementation of student-led sports-related activities with anti-drug themes.

(ii) Strengthening teaching resources: The ND developed in collaboration with the EDB the teaching resources on anti-drug education in the Values Education Curriculum Framework (Pilot Version). The relevant resources have been uploaded to the EDB's website and are available for use by teachers; and

(iii) Interactive anti-drug drama: It is a free drama tour for schools that educates upper primary students in an interactive manner on drug harms, the skills of refusing drugs and the dire consequences of committing drug offences, etc.

President, the community as a whole should have "zero tolerance" towards drug-related crimes. The ND and the LEAs will continue to spare no effort in combating drugs and curbing drug harms in future.

Thank you, President.