

## LCQ5: Curbing young people's participation in gambling

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Caspar Tsui, in the Legislative Council today (August 18):

Question:

As revealed by the findings of a survey, nearly 20 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had participated in football betting and, among them, nearly 20 per cent had not reached the legal gambling age (i.e. 18 years of age). On curbing young people's participation in gambling, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of law enforcement operations mounted by the Police for combating illegal gambling in each of the past three years; the total amount of cash seized, as well as the number of persons arrested (with a breakdown by whether they were bettors or bookmakers, and whether or not they had come of age), in such operations;

(2) as there are comments that many young people are currently addicted to gambling and the main cause thereof is that the Hong Kong Jockey Club offers betting activities with a wide variety of bet types, whether the Government will study solutions to young people's addiction to gambling, such as reducing bet types and raising the legal gambling age to 21; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) given that the Government established the Ping Wo Fund in 2003 to finance non-governmental organisations in taking measures to prevent and mitigate gambling-related problems, of the expenditure of the Fund, the number of requests for assistance received (with a breakdown by whether or not the assistance seekers had come of age), as well as the number of assistance seekers who had successfully quit gambling but soon relapsed, in each of the past three years?

Reply:

President,

The Government has a clear stance on its policy to not to encourage gambling. However, since there is a certain public demand for gambling, the Government allows the provision of legal and authorised gambling in a limited and regulated manner as a means to address public demand, so as to prevent the public from turning to illegal gambling. On another front, to address problems caused by gambling, the Government adopts a multi-pronged strategy, including regulation over gambling activities through legislation, stringent law enforcement against illegal gambling, public education and publicity on harm of gambling addiction, and provision of counselling and support services

to people in need.

Having consulted the Security Bureau (SB), my reply to the Hon Chan Hak-kan's question is as follows:

(1) According to the SB, the respective numbers of persons arrested for illegal gambling offences and the total amount of betting slips and cash seized in each of the past three years are as follows:

In 2018, 5 048 persons were arrested (77 of them were arrested for bookmaking), amounting to around \$155 million (including around \$147 million betting slips and around \$8.3 million cash);

In 2019, 3 296 persons were arrested (2 of them were arrested for bookmaking), amounting to around \$4.7 million (including around \$2 million betting slips and around \$2.7 million cash); and

In 2020, 5 198 persons were arrested (19 of them were arrested for bookmaking), amounting to around \$602 million (including around \$593 million betting slips and around \$8.3 million cash).

The Police does not maintain other breakdown figures mentioned in the question.

(2) The Government's established gambling policy is to restrict the gambling activities to a limited number of authorised and regulated outlets. The policy objective of such authorisation is to address the substantial and persistent public demand for certain gambling activities which is being satisfied by illegal means and the issue cannot be tackled by law enforcement alone. These illegal gambling activities can easily lead to gambling addiction and maybring along a series of social problems.

At present, under the Betting Duty Ordinance (Cap. 108), the Government authorises the Hong Kong Jockey Club (HKJC) to conduct horse race betting, the Mark Six Lottery and football betting. A number of conditions have been imposed under the relevant betting licences issued to the HKJC to require its adoption of measures to minimise the negative impact of gambling on the public, especially young people. These conditions include that the HKJC shall not accept bets from juvenile; shall not accept credit betting; shall display notices reminding the public of the seriousness of excessive gambling and provide information on the services available for those with gambling disorder; and shall not, in conducting any promotional activities, target juvenile, exaggerate the likelihood of winning or impliedly suggest that betting is a source of income.

We disagree with the comments cited by Member in the question that the offer of a variety of bet types by the HKJC is the main cause of young people being addicted to gambling. In determining the bet types to be made available, the HKJC generally takes into account the bet types offered by illegal gambling operators and only offers some of the more common or popular ones to the local community. It is worth noting that illegal gambling operators introduce new and innovative bet types from time to time with a

view to expanding their customer base by bringing novelty. In order to assist the Government in achieving its policy objective of eradicating illegal gambling through the provision of lawful and authorised betting outlets, the HKJC has to monitor changes in illegal betting methods and update the bet types it offers having regard to circumstances. Such an arrangement enables the HKJC to conduct betting activities that are competitive enough when compared with those conducted by illegal operators, so as to address the public demand for the relevant bet types effectively and prevent the public from placing bets with illegal operators. Of course, the Government will require the HKJC to provide detailed justifications and data in considering any proposal of new bet types to ensure that these bet types will not increase the prevalence of gambling (particularly among the youth).

As for the legal gambling age, the age of 18 is generally regarded as the indicator of adulthood in Hong Kong, and is also the existing statutory age for legal gambling. In fact, restrictions on gambling age vary around the world and there is no standardised practice. We note that in Singapore and Macao, people aged below 21 are prohibited from entering casinos but the age for legal participation in betting on horse racing or sports remains at 18. We do not consider raising the legal gambling age to 21 the right cure for youth gambling. On the contrary, it may increase the risk of young people aged between 18 and 20 turning to illegal gambling and developing gambling behavioural problems.

To prevent youth gambling problems, apart from regulation by the Government, the Ping Wo Fund has been implementing public education campaigns and publicity measures aiming at preventing gambling problems to promote anti-gambling messages among young people. The Fund has been sponsoring non-governmental organisations and schools for organising anti-gambling publicity and education activities via two annual funding schemes, namely the Ping Wo Fund Sponsorship Scheme and the Ping Wo Fund School Project Grants. In assessing the funding applications, priority will be given to activities targeting or benefitting young people and families. Organisers are also encouraged to hold such activities to raise public awareness of the risks of gambling. Moreover, the Fund has launched a publicity truck to strengthen publicity at school and community levels. The Fund has stepped up publicity on Internet platforms, with a view to promoting anti-gambling messages among young people.

(3) The audited expenditures of the Ping Wo Fund for financing four counselling and treatment centres over the past three financial years were about \$19 million for 2017/18, about \$21 million for 2018/19 and about \$23 million for 2019/20 respectively.

Apart from gamblers with gambling disorder, the four counselling and treatment centres also provide counselling and treatment services for other relevant affected persons (e.g. family members of gamblers with gambling disorder). Over the past three years (i.e. from 2018 to 2020), the numbers of cases served by the four centres were about 1 900, 1 900 and 1 400 while the numbers of beneficiaries involved were about 2 500, 2 500 and 1 800 respectively.

The decrease in the number of cases receiving counselling and treatment services in 2020 was mainly due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, we will step up the publicity on our service. We also receive telephone enquiries through the Ping Wo Fund Gambling Counselling Hotline (183 4633). We hope these services could facilitate the assistance seeking process by the affected persons and their family members, and minimise the impact of the pandemic on our services.