

**Motion 1**

**The government should address and tackle the problem of  
children and young people at risk**

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## **Introduction**

The issue of children and young people at risk (hereafter ‘youths-at-risk’) has drawn attention from the media and the government in recent years. Such a concern is roused by the possible negative impacts these young people might bring to the community.

Our group attributes this phenomenon to many factors. The youths-at-risk, marginalised for different reasons, are tagged with negative labels by the community. Our group considers them victims, and we feel a need to speak up for them.

We hope the government will implement policies to improve the situation, and help these young people to break out of their predicament, reconnect with and earn recognition from the society. If we simply fold our arms and do nothing, more youths-at-risk will fall prey to temptation of lawbreakers, and society will face dire consequences.

## **Current situation**

### Definition of Children and Youths-at-Risk

Surveys and research done by our group show that ‘youths-at-risk’ refers to young people, aged 6 to 24, whose behaviour crosses between average youths and juvenile delinquents. They stay in by day, come out at night and frequent places such as billiard parlours, game arcades, Internet cafés and public housing estates. They usually look very trendy, even flamboyant. They are prone to engage in anti-social behaviour such as fighting, drug abuse and trouble-making; they are also prone to be lured by gangsters into crime. The problem thus needs more attention from society.

### Figures about Youths-at-Risk

So far, there are no accurate figures for the number of youths-at-risk in Hong Kong since they often are not visible in the community at large; but some side data can give us a glimpse of the severity of the problem.

A study shows that 80% of the youths-at-risk aged 14 to 19 have abused drugs in the past 12 months; another study finds that among the interviewed street youths aged 11 to 18, 63% have had experience of sex. The crime rate of children and youths under aged 15 has remained high over the past decade; on the average, one of every hundred has committed crimes.

In districts that are densely populated or with a high population percentage of new immigrants, such as the North District, the problem of youths-at-risk is even more complicated.

### Factors constituting Youths-at-Risk

There are three factors for the marginalisation of youths-at-risk: family, study and peer influence. Everyone has psychological needs: pride, the sense of achievement, security and acceptance. When young people are unable to get satisfaction through normal channels, they will attempt other means, such as breaching the law. Youths-at-risk often lack family care, acceptance from

others, and academic achievement; most of them have a very low opinion of themselves and prefer to seek recognition from their peers and the sense of achievement by alternative means.

Under continuous peer influence, youths-at-risk easily become detached from the society, indulge in the world of their peers and lead an abnormal life: they loiter in the streets, form gangs, develop problematic behaviour, etc.

### Problems faced by Youths-at-Risk

In fact, youths-at-risk are facing different problems. Their behavioural problems make it hard for them to integrate into traditional schools; they also lack work experience, opportunities and other channels for further studies. They have generally insufficient skills for life, socialisation, and handling emotions. At school and in society, their image and behaviour have hampered their chance of being accepted. Gangsters can easily exploit the habits and ways of life of these young people.

All these problems are faced by a group of immature and psychologically unprepared youths. Society has the responsibility to improve their situation. Solving the problems of the youths-at-risk will also help combat crime and maintain social stability in the long term.

### **Deficiencies in the Current Policies**

#### School Education

In the current mainstream schooling system, each class comprises about 40 students. Teachers have not enough time to care for each student. In districts with more problems or in schools of lower achievement, teachers and students bear even more pressure.

#### School Social Workers

Although the policy 'one school social worker for each secondary school' is in force to provide counselling and help students solve problems, very often the social workers can only afford the time to counsel students with obvious problems, rather than to do preventive work. Moreover, these social workers are perceived as 'counsellors for problematic students', therefore students often hang back in taking the initiative to approach them.

#### Outreach/Night Social Workers

Outreach and night social workers mainly target youths-at-risk aged 12 to 20. Through proactively reaching out to the youths, counselling and group activities, the social workers help these youths overcome difficulties and change their values. They also give them advice on different things. However, as the resources are evenly assigned to the districts disregarding the different problems in different districts and the mobility of these youths, the policy is highly inflexible.

### Further Studies/Career/Vocational Training

The Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Training, the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme and the Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme provide young people with vocational training and help them integrate into society. However, as these policies and courses are not designed to meet the particular needs of the youths-at-risk, they are not well received by these youths. Besides, it is difficult for youths-at-risk to compete with other students to get into these programmes.

One can therefore see enormous room for improvement in the policies regarding both preventive and follow-up measures.

### **Suggestions**

In view of the above, our group sees an urgency to formulate a series of measures, preventive and follow-up, to prevent young people from turning into youths-at-risk, and to help youths-at-risk reform.

### Small Class Teaching

We suggest the government accelerate the implementation of small class teaching in primary and secondary schools. Small class teaching allows teachers to understand each of their students better and recognize their problems at an early stage. It also enables them to help in dealing with students' emotional and behavioural problems, and preventing them from becoming youths-at-risk.

Small class teaching can be implemented in stages; priority should be given to the most affected areas and Band 3 schools in order to utilize resources in the most efficient way.

### Increasing the Number of School Social Workers

We suggest the government raise the number of school social workers to three in each primary and secondary school so that they have enough time to understand students' needs and strengthen preventive measures in schools. To facilitate good use of resources as aforementioned, the government could consider prioritising schools in need.

Once the number of social workers is increased, they will have sufficient time to communicate with students. Through seminars and conversations, it will change the traditional image of social workers. In this way, students will be more willing to express themselves and the social workers can recognise and help with students' potential problems.

### Increasing the Number of Outreach/Night Social Workers and Effective Allocation of Resources

There are 16 outreach social work teams in Hong Kong, each of which comprises six members. According to the statistics provided by the Social Welfare Department, the number of youths-at-risk found by social workers in the year 2007-2008 reached 13,262. On average, each social worker needed to handle 138 cases. This reveals a severe shortage of outreach social workers.

The government should increase the number of outreach social workers and better allocate resources. It should not distribute resources evenly among all the districts but rather according to the specific needs and mobility of the youths-at-risk.

### Creative Return to Campus Scheme

Apart from the above proposal, we suggest to put forth a brand new Creative Return to Campus Scheme. Using the school system and campus life as the base of the Scheme, it aims to provide youths-at-risk with suitable education, training and experience so as to reintegrate these once-neglected youths into society and enable them to make their own living.

#### (a) Basic Admission Arrangements

The Creative Return to Campus Scheme will establish a school for students who cannot adapt to mainstream schools. Referral can be made by social workers and schools. To ensure resources are allocated to students in true need, direct enrolment will be given lower priority.

#### (b) Diversified Syllabus

Subjects will be innovative and diversified. Examples include band training, hair-dressing and bartending. Practical and conversational language will be taught. These courses aim to arouse the interest of youths-at-risk in work and help them realize their strengths so that they are able to adapt to society.

#### (c) Flexible Class Schedule

As youths-at-risk might not like routine school life, so the class schedule will be regulated according to the adaptability of students. The duration of class hours for new and school-shy youngsters will be shorter than that of the well-adapted youths so that the youths-at-risk can gradually adapt to a disciplined life. Intervals resulting from the reduction of class hours will be filled with recesses so as to facilitate administration and give students sufficient time to rest.

#### (d) Prospects

After receiving education at school, youths-at-risk will be able to lead a collective life. With the help of social workers and teachers, students can choose to further their studies along the original academic path or to pursue a career in the profession they have had exposure to at school. Certificates issued by the school will also guarantee the future prospects of these youths-at-risk.

The Creative Return to Campus Scheme can provide a fair platform for young people labelled as 'evildoers' to readapt themselves into collective life, learn the importance of cooperation and the way of dealing with people, and develop their own personality and value system. In addition, the school will be able to provide youths-at-risk with opportunities to reintegrate into society via unorthodox methods. This will help broaden their horizons and recognise their potential. This kind of school will surely appeal to youths-at-risk.

## **Conclusion**

Judging from the persistently high crime rates among children and youngsters, the rising trend of drug abuse, and the massive number of youths-at-risk, our group firmly believes that youths-at-risk is a pressing issue for our society to tackle.

Regarding the existing policies, we think that education, preventive and follow-up measures need to be significantly improved.

School education plays a pivotal role in preventing children and youngsters from becoming youths-at-risk. Therefore, in communities with the high number of youths-at-risk, such as the North District which is marred by cross-district drug abuse and Band 3 schools, prompt action to adopt small class teaching is needed so as to improve the communication between teachers and students. Meanwhile, the number of school social workers should be increased accordingly and they should play a more active role in school and narrow the gap between themselves and the students.

Our group suggests enhancing the number of outreach social workers and the flexibility of their work in communities mentioned above, providing youths-at-risk with adequate services.

Youths-at-risk often do not do well academically. Various interviews we conducted have shown that they cannot fit in with the mainstream education system. The Creative Return to Campus Scheme will give them freedom with an emphasis on personal interests and a flexible syllabus and class schedule. Under the supervision of social workers and teachers, their needs will be fully met.

Youths-at-risk need our help. Should we just sit back and do nothing? Policies may not be immediately effective; but only by helping these young people can we build a healthier society and a better future.

Finally, on behalf of the 19 Child Councillors in my group, I move that the motion 'The government should address and tackle the problem of children and young people at risk' be passed.

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