

LCQ14: Curbing youth gambling participation

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Starry Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs, Miss Alice Mak, in the Legislative Council today (June 4):

Question:

In April this year, the Government published a consultation paper on the regulatory regime on basketball betting. There are views pointing out that while the regime aims to combat illegal gambling activities, the community is generally concerned about possible intensification of the gambling craze upon regulation of basketball betting, particularly the negative impact on youths. In addition, it has been reported that the average age of participants in basketball betting is younger than the corresponding figures in horse racing and football betting, and statistical data from gambling counselling organizations also indicate a deteriorating trend in the gambling problem among young people. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as the aforesaid consultation paper has pointed out that the regulation of football betting since 2003 has generally been effective in channelising illegal betting demand to the legal channel, whether the Government has compiled statistics on the changes in betting turnovers of legal and illegal gambling, as well as the number of help-seeking cases from pathological gamblers and the age distribution trend of those help-seekers, since the regulation of football betting; whether it has assessed the effectiveness of the existing betting regulatory regime in reducing youth gambling participation;

(2) of the following information on the assistance provided by the Ping Wo Fund to help youths quit gambling in the past five years: the number of youths assisted, the expenditure on the relevant publicity and education activities and the number of people covered, and the percentage of help-seeking cases from youths involving basketball betting;

(3) whether it will, upon implementation of the regulatory regime on basketball betting, require basketball betting operators to submit data on young bettors on a regular basis; whether it has assessed the adequacy of the existing measures to curb underage betting, including whether it will further restrict advertising targeted at youths;

(4) as there are views in the community that the authorities should consider setting up a dedicated committee to monitor the impact of basketball betting on youths, and strengthening the use of the Ping Wo Fund to take forward anti-gambling education (especially publicity efforts targeting young groups), whether the authorities will study the relevant proposals; and

(5) whether it has studied if implementation of the regulatory regime on basketball betting will result in a lower age range of gamblers; whether it will make use of technology to enhance the monitoring of gambling activities (such as using artificial intelligence to identify abnormal betting patterns), so as to prevent youth gambling addiction?

Reply:

President,

As a matter of policy, the Government does not encourage gambling. To address the possible problems brought by gambling, the Government adopts a multi-pronged strategy including law enforcement against illegal gambling activities, public education on the harms of gambling addiction, provision of counselling and support services to people in need and regulation over gambling activities through legislation.

The Government's consolidated reply to Dr the Hon Starry Lee's question is as follows:

Combatting illegal gambling activities

On law enforcement against illegal gambling activities, the existing Gambling Ordinance explicitly stipulates that all unauthorised gambling activities, apart from those situations stated in the ordinance, constitute an offence. The Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) has put in place strategies to combat illegal gambling activities, especially those involving triad-related or organised crimes, in four aspects, namely prevention, education, intelligence gathering and law enforcement. The HKPF will continue to closely monitor the illegal gambling trend, take appropriate intelligence-led law enforcement actions and strengthen the promotion against these illegal gambling activities. It is worth noting that according to the Gambling Ordinance, participating in illegal gambling (such as betting with an illegal bookmaker) is also an offence. Upon conviction, an offender is liable to a maximum penalty of a \$50,000 fine and imprisonment for nine months.

Public education and provision of counselling and support services

The Government attaches great importance to preventing gambling-related problems, particularly among youth. The Government established the Ping Wo Fund (PWF) in 2003 to finance both preventive and remedial measures to address the gambling-related problems. The Ping Wo Fund Advisory Committee (PWFAC) was also established to provide advice to the Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs on the use and application of the PWF.

The PWF provides appropriate counselling, treatment and other support services to individuals affected by gambling as well as their family members. The PWF will also launch targeted public education and publicity campaigns to raise public awareness (particularly among young people) on the harms of gambling addiction, thereby mitigating its associated negative consequences.

The PWF has consistently prioritised public education and awareness campaigns to raise public awareness on the harms of gambling addiction, and to increase public knowledge of the services available, enabling those in need to seek help at an early stage. These public education measures include providing financial support for non-governmental organisations and schools to organise public education programmes aimed at preventing and alleviating gambling-related problems, a publicity truck programme and other promotional efforts on traditional media and online platforms.

The PWF's funding support on public education and other publicity campaigns aimed at preventing and alleviating gambling-related problems has more than doubled over the past five years. Detailed figures are set out in the Annex.

In the past five years, service-seekers aged 18 or below constituted 1-2 per cent of the total number of persons receiving counselling or treatment services from the four counselling and treatment centres funded by the PWF. These data indicate that there has been no substantial change in the prevalence of gambling among young people. Relevant data (including variation in other age groups) are set out in the Annex. Separately, according to the information from The Hong Kong Jockey Club (HKJC), the proportion of bettors in the 18-21 age group has consistently remained below 2 per cent in the past five years.

We do not maintain a separate breakdown on individuals receiving counselling and treatment services due to illegal basketball betting.

We will review the work of the PWF from time to time, with particular focus on young people, to enhance measures for preventing and alleviating gambling-related problems. The HKJC has also committed to donate to the PWF over a four-year period starting from 2023/24, with contributions set at \$45 million per annum for the first two years and \$50 million per annum for the subsequent two years.

Regulations

The Government currently regulates the HKJC's betting activities through the Betting and Lotteries Commission (BLC). Restricting betting activities to a limited number of authorised and regulated outlets is to address the actual 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.

According to the HKJC, the amount of football betting turnover ranged from \$92.5 billion to \$160.3 billion in the past five years. In addition, since the legalisation of football betting in 2003, it has diverted back to the legal channel over \$1,581 billion of turnover, which would have continued to flow into the unregulated and illegal gambling market without the regulation.

Under the existing mechanism, the Government requires the HKJC to submit regular work reports for review by both the Government and BLC. The HKJC is also required to meet with the Government and BLC on a regularly basis to report on its progress and plans, ensuring compliance with all licensing conditions and facilitating the review of current betting-related measures. The Home and Youth Affairs Bureau will continue to work closely with BLC to ensure that authorised betting activities are properly regulated.

At present, a number of conditions have been imposed under the licences of horse race betting, football betting and Mark Six Lottery issued to the HKJC to require its adoption of measures to minimise the negative impact of gambling on the public, especially on young people. These conditions include that the HKJC:

1. shall not accept bets from juveniles;
2. shall not accept credit betting;
3. 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
4. shall not, in conducting any promotional activities, target juveniles, etc.

As stated in the consultation document on the regulatory regime on basketball betting, the above stringent legal and regulatory restraints will continue to be put in place in the proposed basketball betting regime.

We will continue to closely collaborate with the PWFAC and the BLC, observe the prevalence of gambling activities among Hong Kong people, maintain communication with relevant departments, and proactively enhance our efforts to prevent and alleviate problems relating to gambling. As mentioned above, the HKJC has committed to donate to the PWF over a four-year period from 2023/24. If it is decided to implement the proposed regulatory regime for basketball betting, the Government will request the HKJC to further increase the donation to the PWF for stepping up public education programmes, as well as enhancing counselling and support services.