

Abuse of children younger than 3 years old soars in Hong Kong

Social Welfare Department report reveals a total of 947 child abuse cases last year, with a rising number involving youngsters aged 2 or below

The number of child abuse cases in Hong Kong involving infants aged two or below has more than doubled in recent years, and the abusers were younger too, according to the latest report from the government’s Social Welfare Department.

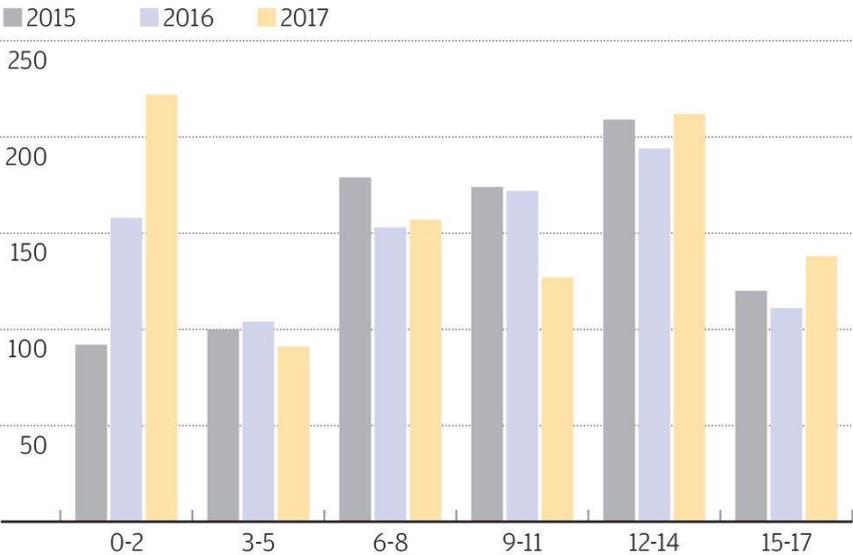
A total of 947 cases – a high since 2013 – were recorded in last year’s annual study, which also revealed that abuse targeting children aged two or younger shot up from 92 cases in 2015 to 222 last year.

This age group made up 23 per cent of the 2017 cases – the highest percentage of all age groups.

The pattern was a marked change from the one in 2015 and 2016, when most cases involved youngsters between the ages of 12 and 14.

More than three-quarters of the abused children aged two or younger suffered neglect defined as a lack of attention to the child’s basic needs that could endanger or impair health or development. Examples included failure to provide necessary food, clothing or medical treatment.

Age distribution of children in newly reported abuse cases



Source: Social Welfare Department

There were 554 child abuse cases in the first six months of this year.

Lee Yu-po, service manager at protection group Against Child Abuse, said families with infants aged three or younger were more prone to abuse because of the pressures of taking care of a newborn.

However, the spike in cases involving youngsters under three could also be caused by greater awareness and a higher rate of reporting, Lee said.

“We have received more reports from neighbours and relatives,” Lee said. “Some might have made a report after hearing more crying from a baby or noticing unstable emotions in a mother.”

Raymond Fung Hing-kau, a senior social work supervisor at non-profit organisation Caritas Hong Kong, said he had seen more unplanned pregnancies in recent years, which could be a factor.



“Some might not be ready to be parents, so their emotions and resources could be relatively weak,” Fung said.

Hong Kong has seen several shocking child abuse cases in recent years. Just this Tuesday, a 26-year-old father was jailed for more than six years for slapping and shaking his newborn daughter, who was left blind and dependent on life support.

Earlier this year, a five-year-old girl died after she was repeatedly thrown at a ceiling and poked in the chest with scissors.

Yuen Long, Kwun Tong and Tuen Mun were the districts with the most child abuse cases last year.

“A larger proportion of the cases were associated with contributing factors relating to the abuser or suspected abuser,” the report said.



Most prevalent among those factors was a lack of parenting skills, followed by emotional or psychological problems and “undesirable hobbies”.

A rising number of abusers were aged 31 or younger in the last two years. Among the 957 culprits in 2017 were 114 between 27 and 31 years old. That figure was up from 75 in 2016.

Meanwhile, the number of older abusers declined or was flat.

Most were married, but there was a significant increase in the number of single abusers, from 139 in 2015 to 196 last year.

Fung said he had seen more young mothers seeking help, with many under 21.

“Some might be less settled or without enough parenting experience,” he said. “Some could also come from families lacking resources.”

He said NGOs handling child protection needed greater funding to employ more social workers to carry out home visits in high-risk cases.

Fung called on the government to increase the number of social workers at the kindergarten level.

Although he believed education was more useful than heavier penalties, Fung said stiffer sentences were still necessary.

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