

2025 POLICY ADDRESS

Blueprint embraces holistic approach for child safety

Grenville Cross says moves to address suicide, mental health issues represent a big step in the right direction

On Wednesday, in his fourth Policy Address, the chief executive, John Lee Ka-Chiu, unveiled an imaginative blueprint for Hong Kong's transformation. He saw it becoming a powerhouse for life sciences, energy, artificial intelligence and aerospace, with vast investment envisaged. The city will be plugged into China's strategic priorities, with its status as a global financial leader and competitive talent hub rigorously enhanced.

It is a bold agenda, and everybody will wish the government well in its implementation. However, not all the proposals were headline-grabbing, and public welfare issues were also addressed. They included child safety, an issue Lee has prioritized. Thanks to him, the reporting of child abuse will become mandatory for child-care professionals on Jan 20 — a much-needed reform which aligns Hong Kong with other advanced jurisdictions.

However, child abuse remains a serious concern, and far more needs to be done to combat it. In June, for example, the Social Welfare Department reported a three-year high for 2024, with 1,504 registered child abuse cases. Yet those statistics, while alarming, tell only part of the story, with most cases never appearing on the radar.

Many children live in straitened circumstances, often in cramped and sometimes unhealthy conditions. This not only hampers their studies but also endangers their safety. When tempers flare in the summer heat, the most vulnerable can find themselves on the receiving end.

All too often, children face domestic beatings, verbal abuse and arbitrary punishment, including scapegoating and isolation. Many suffer in silence, bottling up their pain. They have no idea to whom they can turn for help, and fear that even if they do complain, they will not be taken seriously. Not all can cope, and some snap, as the Policy Address has recognized.



Grenville Cross
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Between, for example, last November and this June, the Social Welfare Department handled 243 suicide-related referrals from schools, while the Hospital Authority received over 100 such cases.

In the first eight months of this year, the Education Bureau recorded 23 suspected suicide cases among students, with 28 deaths recorded in 2024, and 32 the year before.

In 2023, moreover, a research team led by Hong Kong Polytechnic University Professor Jasmine Zhu Shimin, a member of the Mental Health Research Centre, made some alarming findings. It examined two age groups, based on an extensive school-based survey comprising 541 grade 4-6 students and 3,061 grade 7-11 students from 15 schools. It reported that suicidal thoughts, associated with depression, bullying, and loneliness, were identified in 17.51 percent of secondary school students and 15.76 percent of primary school students.

Moreover, attempted suicides were reported in 7.84 percent of secondary school students and in 8.17 percent of primary school students, again linked to bullying and depression. These were truly shocking revelations, and something had to be done — step forward, John Lee.

In late 2023, his government, as a first step, following a spike in suspected suicide cases among primary and secondary school students, introduced, on a trial basis, the Three-Tier School-based Emergency

Mechanism (the Mechanism) for secondary schools. Its function is to provide professional help for students deemed at high risk of suicide.

Whereas the Mechanism's first tier involves the schools in facilitating professional help and treatment for students at a higher risk of suicide, the second tier involves the Education Department in providing backup (if required) by organizing an off-campus support network. Under the third tier, school principals refer students with severe mental health issues to the Hospital Authority for specialist psychiatric help.

Although the new law mandating child abuse reporting will undoubtedly help to alleviate the plight of distressed children, it is not a panacea, as the government realizes.

Therefore, Lee's announcement last week that the Mechanism will not only be made permanent but also extended to primary 4 to 6 pupils on a trial basis is doubly welcome. Students at all levels require support, and its extension places a much-needed focus on the problem of suicidal tendencies among younger children. As the lawmaker (and educationist) Chu Kwok-keung has explained, "This mechanism will help us intervene and provide support earlier, potentially preventing tragedies."

Chu also urged the government to provide enhanced training in counseling for front-line teachers and to make dedicated support counsellors a fixed part of staff establishments (he was hopefully pushing on an open door).

What is clear, therefore, is that suicide prevention among youngsters is one of Lee's priorities. Mental health is a significant challenge that must, so far as possible, be addressed by stakeholders. Although there is no single means of preventing suicidal tendencies (or worse) among the young, Lee has embraced a holistic approach focused squarely on child safety, which is a big step in the right direction.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Proceeds from legalized basketball betting should be put to productive use

The Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has passed a bill legalizing basketball betting. With a vote of 77 in favor, two against, and two abstentions, the Betting Duty (Amendment) Bill 2025 was approved on Sept 11, introducing a comprehensive regulatory framework for basketball betting, following the model established for football betting in 2003. The Hong Kong Jockey Club (HKJC) will serve as the exclusive operator, and a 50 percent duty on net profits will be levied on licensed betting entities.

The lawmakers' decision to legalize betting on basketball is undoubtedly correct. As reported by the HKJC in its submission to the legislature, the illegal basketball betting market turnover in 2024 was estimated at between HK\$70 billion (\$9 billion) and HK\$90 billion, with approximately 430,000 residents having placed illicit wagers on the sport. Legalization will effectively regulate this massive demand and steer residents away from unlicensed and criminal bookmakers.

These vast illegal proceeds are a primary source of income for triad societies and criminal syndicates, enabling them to flourish. As Hong Kong's history of corruption demonstrates, such illicit funds can also foster corruption within law enforcement agencies.

Furthermore, legalizing basketball betting will redirect revenue from illegal gambling operations into government coffers, with projected annual tax revenues of HK\$1.5 billion to HK\$2 billion. It will provide significant relief for the government's budget deficit.

However, it is also true that legalization could inadvertently normalize gambling culture among vulnerable groups. The legalization of football betting in 2003 has already led to a rise in gambling participation, particularly among young people. Therefore, the government must adopt a strong, three-pronged approach to demonstrate its firm stance against the dangers of gambling.

First, robust enforcement must continue to combat illegal gambling, cutting off the primary revenue stream for organized crime. Simultaneously, strict regulatory enforcement action must be taken to prevent underage gambling within the HKJC system.

Second, public education efforts — primarily through media and schools — should be intensified to promote an antigambling message. This should emphasize that sports are for entertainment and health, not for betting.

Third, counselling services for gambling addiction must be enhanced. A well-publicized and managed 24-hour helpline is essential. It is encouraging that the government plans to establish a new counselling center dedicated to addressing gambling addiction, particularly among young people.

Beyond these preventive measures, the SAR government and the HKJC can take one decisive step to garner public support for legalized betting: providing robust support for elite soccer and basketball in the city. Both entities should allocate a portion of their proceeds from legalized betting to establish a fund. This fund would support local soccer and basketball excellence under the Hong Kong Sports Institute's elite sports program.



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Moving forward, local media, perhaps under a dedicated sports channel, should be encouraged to adopt more balanced sports reporting, with a greater focus on local athletic achievements. To facilitate this, the HKJC could sponsor more live television broadcasts of local sports events and have these broadcasts shown in major shopping malls. This would significantly promote local sports and help elevate them to a world-class level.

The goal would be to launch a 10-year program aimed at elevating local soccer and basketball performance to a world-class standard. Imagine the thrill for Hong Kong residents witnessing their teams competing on the global stage, such as the World Cup finals, through an HKJC-sponsored program! With sufficient resources and professional support, this is an achievable ambition. Hong Kong has nurtured world-class athletes in swimming, fencing, and squash through dedicated youth programs; the same can be done for its two most popular sports.

Indeed, the HKJC Charities Trust has announced a HK\$70.75 million investment in a three-year initiative, The Jockey Club Believe and Bounce Basketball Programme, to make the sport more accessible to children, young adults, and the underprivileged. This is a commendable step for community sports, expected to benefit over 32,000 people, including more than 660 coaches. However, it is not enough.

Currently, local sports media, particularly television news, focus heavily on international soccer and the NBA. One cannot help but suspect that this coverage is intended to promote betting interests. Moving forward, local media, perhaps under a dedicated sports channel, should be encouraged to adopt more balanced sports reporting, with a greater focus on local athletic achievements. To facilitate this, the HKJC could sponsor more live television broadcasts of local sports events and have these broadcasts shown in major shopping malls. This would significantly promote local sports and help elevate them to a world-class level.

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Foundation of the rule of law firmly established

George Orwell, in his influential 1940 essay on the novels of Charles Dickens, distilled what he saw as the central problem of political life in any jurisdiction: "How to prevent power from being abused."

One imperfect but well-tested component in advancing this project is what is referred to as the "rule of law". Orwell, whom many regard as the most articulate critic of British political life, still identified "an all-important positive English trait: the respect for constitutionalism and legality, the belief in 'the law' as something above the state and above the individual, something which is cruel and stupid, of course, but at any rate incorruptible."

The distinguished British socialist historian, EP Thompson, went further when he argued, in 1977, that: "We ought to expose the shams and inequities which may be concealed beneath this law. But the rule of law itself, the imposing of effective inhibitions upon power and the defense of the citizen from power's all-intrusive claims, seems to me to be an unqualified human good."

Much earlier, due to the unwritten nature of the evolved British constitution, the way was left open for a scholar possessed of remarkable understanding, Professor Albert Venn Dicey, to analyze and describe — indeed, reveal — the essence of this historically tempered set of resilient governance principles.

In 1885, in a foundational book, Dicey identified three core principles of the rule of law: the supremacy of regular law (rather than arbitrary law); equality before the law (no one, whether a private citizen or a public official, is exempt from the duty to obey the law or from the jurisdiction of the courts); and the essence of the United Kingdom's unwritten constitution was to be found in collective judicial decisions rather than any single written document.

The British system of parliamentary government (where the government was located entirely within the legislature) evolved over a period of some 50 years following Britain's defeat in the American Revolutionary War in 1781. It featured, at that time, limited franchise elections, and



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it was incorporated into the largely white components of the British Empire, including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, from the mid-19th century.

But the new "colony" of Hong Kong, like many other lower-ranked jurisdictions within the British Empire, used a form of government structurally based on the established (pre-parliamentary) government model that applied during the reign of George III (1760-1820). A powerful executive government, headed by the governor, was combined with a governor-appointed Legislative Council (LegCo) exercising attenuated, law-enacting powers.

Combined with this appointed-governance structure, however, were powerful governance principles derived from Diceyan constitutionalism. This framework included an independent judicial-legal system (and legal profession), and commitment to a "single-track" system of regulating the state-citizen relationship. That is, the same courts applied the common law (and LegCo ordinances) to the interaction between the government and residents, as well as in disputes among residents.

In short, British colonial-constitutional thinking was fundamentally influenced by British constitutional thinking. As a consequence, the pivotal rule of law paradigm, with its stress on judicial independence, has been centrally relevant in Hong Kong from the inception of British rule until the present day.

Two other factors that have amplified the effectiveness of the rule of law regime in Hong Kong should also be noted.

First, around 50 years ago, Professor Lau Siu-kai published a groundbreaking article titled: Utilitarianistic Familism: The Basis of Political Stability in Hong Kong. This article

provided a foundational explanation of how the British rule of law system in Hong Kong meshed so well with the exceptional, self-reliant effectiveness of arguably the central operational pillar of Chinese culture, the Chinese family. The late Leo Goodstadt, with customary insight, put it this way: "It would have been hard to find anywhere ... a people easier to serve and rule. (Hong Kong) people were ideal constituents, the secure foundations on which Hong Kong's success had been built despite the economic turbulence and political uncertainty." This emphasizes the depth of these influences on the rule of law in Hong Kong.

Next, the British, from the outset, introduced a unique, bedrock financing system for the new "colony": land-related revenues derived from a system of universal leasehold land distribution. Under this system, the government retained a core, indefinite proprietary interest in all land in Hong Kong — and it still does. This system proved to be outstandingly good at raising public revenue, ensuring ample funding to establish and maintain the new rule of law system from the foundation of British-ruled Hong Kong.

In 1999, the leading commentator on Hong Kong's Basic Law, Professor Yash Ghai, summarized how this system had evolved, arguing that: "Although not perfectly, the Hong Kong legal system was based on the essential principles of the common law. There was equality before the law. Individuals and groups aggrieved by a decision of a government official or public agency could go to the courts for redress."

History demonstrates how a Diceyan-influenced, rule-of-law regime has put down profound roots in Hong Kong. It has been stress-tested many times since 1842, most recently following the major insurgency which began in mid-2019. Each time, its durability and remarkable significance have been reconfirmed. It has not only weathered these storms but also provided a set of pivotal institutional values that are woven into Hong Kong's essential identity.

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Bicycle removal alert



A worker removes an illegally parked bicycle in Causeway Bay on Monday. Hong Kong authorities can remove bikes without notice if they obstruct public areas. Illegally parking a bicycle on pavements or pedestrian paths can result in a fine of HK\$2,000 (\$257). Leaving a bike in a designated parking space for over 24 hours is also a violation, incurring the same fine. ANDY CHONG / CHINA DAILY