

Call to review age limit for juveniles

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Social workers, lawyers want it lowered to 15, academics urge caution

A call has been made to review the upper age limit in the Children & Young Persons Act (CYPA), and to bring the ceiling age to define juveniles and young persons down to 15 from the current 16.

The move has been mooted as youth appear to have matured at an earlier age compared to preceding generations since the Act was enacted in 1949.

The suggestion came up in the form of a question tabled for discussion by Mr K. V. Veloo at the Singapore Children's Society annual lecture delivered earlier this month, but was not addressed then for lack of time.

Mr Veloo, a retired chief probation officer, comes with a distinguished career in social work and vast experience in dealing with juveniles and delinquents.

'My reasoning is that young persons nowadays mature more rapidly - both physically and emotionally. They have better cognitive development and keener sense of maturity of judgment,' he said in the write-up explaining the question submitted for the meeting.

'Hence, they should be held socially responsible for their conduct, behaviour and anti-social acts. Age, in their case, must be co-related to increased social responsibility,' he said.

Mr Veloo also pointed out that anecdotal evidence showed that large numbers of juvenile offenders were found in the 15 to 16 age group, and questioned if the current juvenile correctional system had been able to do enough to salvage them.

Lowering the upper age limit means those aged 15 and above now will not have the care and protection of the Juvenile Court and will be treated as young adults, like those in the present 16-21 age group.

The move can attract a term in a reformatory centre or even the young offenders' section in prison if the person is convicted of serious offences.

Lawyers and social workers contacted by The Straits Times concurred with the move but academics urged caution.

Singapore Management University's Assistant Professor Chen Siyuan, whose research interests include Family Law, noted that the main rationale for the move is that young persons nowadays mature more rapidly.

'I'm not convinced that's necessarily the case,' he said. He noted that while young persons today are exposed to more education and more information, this did not mean they have been taught how to handle and process such things, and therefore, make better judgments than their counterparts in the past.

'Intellectual capacity and maturity are not the same. Indeed, imposing a greater sense of social responsibility on young persons by way of the law primarily attacks the symptoms and not the cause of the problem,' he added.

National University of Singapore Associate Professor Debbie Ong called for a lot more broad-based research first into a 15-year-old's mind, the roots of his misconduct and his background.

'We need reliable data and not to proceed on some general observations. We have to review this as we review everything else to ensure we are current and effective,' she said.

But lawyers and social workers interviewed thought otherwise and supported moves to bring down the age.

Mr Yusof Ismail, chief executive of AIN Society, a group that works with troubled youth and dysfunctional families, suggested the move was 10 years overdue.

'I would bring it down to 14, as young people reach puberty earlier nowadays because of the kind of meat-rich meals they eat, the greater exposure they get through the Internet, travel and other things,' he said.

Veteran lawyer Singa Retnam pointed to the case of a 13-year-old delinquent whom he had defended. He said he had the maturity of a 'crime organiser' and even had a girlfriend.

'But the response has to be total. Not only should legislation be put in place to bring the age down, but a whole slew of supporting steps, such as returning the power of the cane to teachers, should be considered. Mindsets have to change,' he said.

On Monday, the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports posted its response to public feedback obtained during the consultation exercise held over three weeks on the proposed Bill to amend the CYPA. The amendments aim to enhance the protection and rehabilitation of children and young persons.

Among other things, it said on its website: 'MCYS has noted comments on the definitions within the CYPA regarding the age of the child or young person.'

It is understood the age issue could be addressed when the proposed Bill is taken through its next reading in Parliament.