During my 32 years in Hong Kong, I suppose I have built up a reputation as a person who fights for the underprivileged: for their housing, their living standards, and for their human rights.

People sometimes remind me that I am getting older, and my friends and relatives in England are pressing me to retire. But I feel that there is still one big battle ahead which I am eager to fight. It is about an issue that I have been considering for many years, as I meet with members of the public with problems every week in my Urban Council office.

What is the issue that worries me so much? It is the problem of what causes child delinquency, serious crime and violence in our society. This crime problem has increased in other parts of the world as well as in Hong Kong in recent years. I once asked permission to interview youngsters in prison and be allowed to study their home backgrounds, in the hope of finding out the root of the problem. I was refused permission by the Government, because they said they had officials doing the job.

We are all horrified by the rape-kilings of young children, by the cruelty of gang murders, and by such awful crimes as that known as the Jars Murder. I have met some of the persons accused of such murders, and a friend of mine has met the man accused of the Jars Murder. They appear to be quite reasonable people, and it is difficult to imagine why they commit such awful crimes.

Older people usually refer to the crime problem as a "youth problem", and they put all the blame on our young people. This is not new in the world. Throughout history young people have been blamed in this way. More than 2000 years ago, the famous philosopher, Socrates, was put to death on charges of corrupting the young people of his day.

I think it is easy to blame someone, instead of considering the real reasons, and whether our society is failing in some way to meet the needs of young people. Those needs change with each generation, to some extent, but older people usually think that young people's needs are always the same as when they themselves were young.

It seems to me that we study subjects like science, the arts, commercial, business and technical subjects, we neglect to study human behaviour. We learn how to be doctors, nurses, scientists, engineers and so on, but we never learn the science of how to be good parents to our children. Children who do what they are told are called "good children" and those who do not obey are just "bad children" who need to be punished. But we never consider why some are "bad", and never realise that our punishments may just
making them worse. Society usually despises children who are poor and badly dressed, or those whose parents treat them badly. This only makes things worse for those unfortunate children — and worse for our society in the long run.

In the past few years I have read all the books I can find in the shops (and there are not many) on this subject of youth crime. I find that there are more books to encourage crime than to try to stop it. From my study of the books I have found, and from my own observations, I have formed some ideas about what influences young people to go into crime, and I should like to put some of those ideas to you today.

Instead of talking about a "youth problem" we should consider our social problems:

1. **Parents:** One reason is the wrong treatment by parents. Most parents, of course, do their best for their children. They want them to have a good education, and to get a good job. Unfortunately, they do not always do this in the best way. A century ago, a famous English writer, Samuel Butler, wrote a book called "The Way of All Flesh". The book deals with the generation gap, which is found between parents and children in all countries and at all times. In fact, it tells his own story of how his father tried to force him to become a minister of religion, and refused to support his studies when the boy refused to take up a career in the church.

   Parents often make the mistake of believing that their child must want to be what they want him to be, and they will not accept him if he has different ideas. Our society is also to blame for this, because it offers material advantages to those who become highly professional, and despises and pays low wages to those who do manual jobs.

   We need to spend more time trying to find out what our children want to do, what they are capable of doing, rather than what we think will give them the highest income. I wonder how many children have run away from home, as Butler eventually did, because their parents pressed them to do something they were incapable of doing. Once the young person leaves home, it is very easy to become involved in crime as an easy way to make a living.

   Of course, there are also bad parents who take no interest in what their children are doing, but who just enjoy themselves or even beat their children. One book I have just been reading says:

   "Professionals agree that abused children have extremely high potential, when older, to engage in criminal activities... The abuse and neglect of children must be recognised as a major factor in the production of criminals."
Court records are full of evidence that cruelty and neglect are the main causes of youth crime. Therefore, I consider that parents have a very great responsibility to deal with their children in such a way that they will not be attracted to crime.

2. Education

Education has often been considered a method of keeping young people from committing crime. Generally speaking, I think this is true. But there are possibilities that education can also push children into crime.

Teachers, like parents, set standards for their students. Those children who reach the standard are considered "good" students, while those who fail to do so are labelled "bad" students. Sometimes these so-called BAD students are simply being given a kind of education that is not suitable for them, and for which they have no ability. This is not the fault of the teachers, because the syllabus for almost every school is intended for the above average child. There is very little provision for those who are not good at English, Mathematics, Science and other academic subjects.

When a student is unable to cope with the work, the teacher may become frustrated and blame or even ridicule the student in front of his classmates. The more the student is blamed, the worse he is likely to become.

For boys and girls in this situation, the Hong Kong triads offer an easy solution. By joining the triads and selling drugs, a boy can have a family relationship with a gang and may eventually make plenty of money from crime. A girl, by working in a bar or fish-ball stall, may make money without having to worry about study.

I have been a student myself, and although I managed to do well in examinations, I can still remember how I looked forward to the time when I would not have to spend long hours learning facts to put down on paper at examinations. Usually, once the facts are written down on the paper, they have disappeared from the student's brain.

An average or below-average student will accept anything rather than undergo examination pressure. The below average student is afraid of the anger of his parents and teachers if he fails, so he wants to escape from it. The triads offer this way of escape, and too often young people take that way.

I believe that some of those pressures could be lifted in Hong Kong if we used Chinese as the medium of teaching, recognised Chinese qualifications above English qualifications for Chinese students, and diversified the syllabus for those students unable to manage the academic
subjects. I am sure that many teachers would welcome such a move, and that it would solve many behaviour problems.

3. Business

Hong Kong, like all big business centres, puts material success before everything else, as if money were the only important thing in life. I would be interested to know how much this business and commercialism have influenced the patterns of behaviour of young people.

As a teacher, I know the value of visual aids in teaching children. But what we have here and in other big cities of this kind are visual aids to crime. Films and TV shows sometimes wrongly influence young people. If children watch violent films day after day, some of them at least must be influenced to feel that human life is cheap, and murder is an acceptable way of getting revenge. Those who produce the films do not mind how much crime they create, so long as the money keeps pouring in at the box offices.

Advertisements on TV are also often a bad influence on young people. Some advertisements lead young people to believe that to be popular with their friends they must wear a certain brand of clothes, a certain kind of watch, a special kind of make-up, and so on. These advertised goods are very expensive, not because they are exceptionally good, but because the customers must pay for the high cost of advertising. Young people are therefore encouraged to spend a lot of money on the goods advertised, and if they cannot afford to buy those goods, they may feel tempted to steal or gamble to get the money to buy them.

Sometimes more tragic results follow. A young girl who had spots on her face tried all the creams she saw advertised on TV, and when none of them succeeded in making her beautiful, she committed suicide. Some young people have copied the methods of crime seen on films, and have committed murder.

If we feed young people with these wrong values, we cannot expect them to know right from wrong, and in the end they may lose all sense of what is really valuable in life.

I am in favour of films which show good moral values, films that prove that crime doesn't pay but that good values do.

Ten years ago, Sir Murray MacLehose asked me what I thought should be done to reduce youth crime. I told him he should speak to the film producers here and try to influence them to show better and less violent films. Obviously my advice was not accepted.
4. Politics

Another bad influence on young people is the political system of any country, and I believe that this is especially true of colonial systems.

If you look at any place in the world where violence is worst, you will find that there is something wrong with the political system, that it does not represent the aspirations of some of the people, and that it harbours injustices. I will mention a few, but there are many others:

Violent crimes are committed in the Middle East, where the people of Palestine feel that they have been deprived of their national home. Cruelty takes place daily in Northern Ireland, where the Irish Catholics claim that they are unfairly treated by Irish Protestants. Crimes and political murders are being committed in places like El Salvador and the Philippines, where minorities claim that they have been deprived of their rights. There have even been violent crimes in Britain in recent years, no doubt because of rising unemployment.

Fortunately for Hong Kong, we have not gone to such extremes of violence. This is probably due to the cultural background of the Chinese, and because most of the population here are immigrant, or the children of immigrants who have chosen to live here. However, we should not forget that the origin of the triads was a patriotic political movement to unite the Chinese against the foreign Manchu. Triads still try to use this political background to attract young Chinese people to join them as "blood brothers".

It is not difficult for the triads to find injustices by which to justify their crimes. Theoretically, Europeans and rich people no longer have extra-territorial rights as they had before World War 2, but in fact the law does still seem to favour those influential people. Prosecutions against Europeans, especially if they are Government servants, are often stopped by the Legal Department. But young Chinese are put into court sometimes on very minor offences. I recently wrote to the Attorney General and asked him if he could drop a case against a Form 5 student preparing for his exams. The boy was accused of stealing an article worth $1.20, and he insisted he was innocent. The Attorney General refused to cancel this minor case, for which a very strong warning would have been enough. If this had happened in England, the police would have warned him, made him pay for the article, and let him free. In Hong Kong it seems we like to fill the courts with minor charges, wasting time and money, and destroying young people.

The great danger is that intelligent young people who see these injustices may feel that by entering into crime they may get revenge on society. Unfortunately, those who do this only make things worse for
themselves, and the people they hurt by their crimes are usually their own people. Therefore they do not in any way advance the cause of justice. The great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi showed the importance of self-sacrifice and non-violence, and we can learn a lot from him.

I have tried today to pinpoint some of the causes of youth delinquency and crime in Hong Kong. They are: the failure of parents and schools to reach the more difficult children, and the bad influence of business and political systems. If we want our young people to grow up with good character and a sense of responsibility, we must give them conditions in which these qualities can be nurtured and grow. We cannot blame a plant for not producing good fruit if we plant it where it cannot get water or sunshine. Nor can we blame a child who does not grow to be a fine character, if we deprive the child of parental love, the care of society, and the protection of the law.

Since our society has failed to save many young people from crime, at least we should now try to rehabilitate those who have fallen into crime and who wish to become good citizens again. For several years I have been trying to introduce into Hong Kong a law called the Rehabilitation of Minor Offenders Act, which has been in operation in Britain since 1974. I do not claim that this law is entirely suited to the needs of Hong Kong, but at least it provides a basis on which to begin to rehabilitate minor offenders. The Act is not intended to encourage young people in their life of crime, but to encourage those who have committed minor offences and who want to become good citizens. At present there is not such chance for them in Hong Kong. A young boy or girl who steals a bar of chocolate, a few pencils, a book, or some other small article, and pleads guilty or is found guilty, will have a criminal record for life. Even if the magistrate orders no record to be kept, that only applies to the court, but the police will still keep the record, and that may influence the rest of his life, especially a child who wants to go abroad to study, or in certain types of jobs.

According to this Act in Britain, a young offender has his record cleaned after a certain length of time, according to the seriousness of the offence. Once the record is cleaned, he can then hold up his head and say he has no criminal record. It has been found in Britain that once a young person has had his record cleaned in this way, he seldom goes back to crime, but becomes a law-abiding citizen. I see no reason why this act should not apply to H.K.
I will give you two examples to show how the law works in Hong Kong. An elderly man wanted to become a watchman after retiring from service in the British Army in Hong Kong. To become a watchman, it is necessary to get clearance from the police that a man has no criminal record. This man was refused the permit to be a watchman because he had a record for fighting when he was a young teenager. A lady aged over 40 wanted to join her family in Canada. She needed clearance from the police. But the police said she had stolen some flowers from someone’s garden when she was sixteen years old, and therefore she had a criminal record.

I am a member of the international body of lawyers known in Hong Kong as JUSTICE. We have just set up a special committee to study this Rehabilitation Law, and we sincerely hope to be able to change the law in Hong Kong to help to rehabilitate those young people who want to go the right way after committing a minor offence. It is good for the young offender, but it is also good for the community if we can save those young people from further crimes.

As you are University students, you are the future leaders of Hong Kong. I hope you will do your best to improve the system of justice for the people of Hong Kong, and that you will value human rights more than personal success.