

50 per cent increase in heroin abuse among youngsters

By SUSAN FURLONG

MORE people under the age of 21 are being arrested for drug-related offences, highlighting a growing problem of substance abuse among Hongkong's youth, according to the Government's Narcotics Division.

Almost half of all new cases reported to the Government's Central Registry on Drug Abuse in the first nine months of this year involved youths under 21.

But, more worrying, social workers say, is the upswing in the number of youths abusing heroin.

Between January and September, 386 new heroin

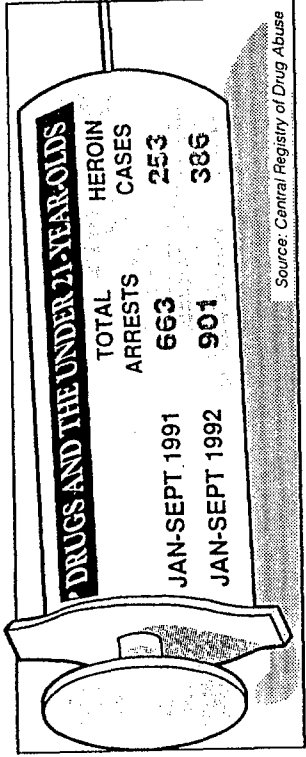
under 21-year-olds arrested in 1991 was 879.

Overall figures for drug-related arrests rose from 5,861 for the first three quarters of last year to 6,645 in the same period this year, an increase of 13 per cent.

Legislator Mr Albert Chan Wai-yip, a member of the Government's drug advisory body - the Action Committee Against Narcotics - described the surge in drug offences as "quite alarming".

"We are very concerned about the increase... and it is one thing we will look into," he said.

The Acting Commission-



er for Narcotics, Ms Anissa Wong Sean-ye, said in most cases young people were arrested for possession, and probably intended to "take the drugs themselves."

"Unfortunately these figures back up the increase we have noticed in newly reported cases of drug abuse among young people," she said. "Certainly this is something we need to pay attention to."

The head of the police Narcotics Bureau, Chief Superintendent Keith Braithwaite, said the rise in arrests

pointed to a "continuing increase in involvement by youngsters" in drug abuse.

"Youngsters involved in trafficking or being addicts themselves are now beginning to become noticeable and police are targeting them as well," he said. However, there had been no special campaign this year to crack down on young drug offenders, he added.

The supervisor of the Caritas outreach team for Aberdeen and Wong Tai Sin, Mr Charles Chan Chi-kwong, said heroin had become more readily available on the streets.

"It's really quite strange.

Heroin became less popular for a few years and now that has changed and it is becoming more popular again."

In the mid-1980s heroin abuse among youths dropped off as psychotropic drugs, particularly cannabis, became more common. But, since 1989, heroin has steadily gained ground.

"We are very puzzled about this trend and can only make informed guesses as to why this is happening," Mr Chan said.

He suggested psychotropic abusers turned to heroin when the supply of softer drugs was squeezed.

"Heroin now seems to

contain quite a significant proportion of barbiturate compounds. It seems similar to the softer drugs they were taking before and it might be one reason abuse has increased."

Drug rings were also recruiting more young people as pushers, he said.

"The drug dealers introduce them to making easy money. But if they want to make more, they have to become addicts to earn the dealers' trust," he said.

The supervisor of Social Service with the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation

Increase in heroin abuse

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young people abusing heroin," he said.

While the police and customs had concentrated on reducing the drug supply, more effort should be placed on cutting demand among youths through education programmes, he said.

"The basic problem is the demand for use. And if that demand still exists, even if supply of a drug is cut, they will look for another drug."

A founder of the Kely self-help group, Mary, said the increase in young drug offenders, heroin abusers and student suicides were symptomatic of widespread uncertainty.

"The stress of the population of Hongkong as a whole has increased and the symptoms are showing in various forms - in child suicide, increased drug abuse and an increase in the crime rate," she said.

At the end of November, 45 youths under 21 had enrolled in treatment programmes run by the society, compared with 22 last year.

"I think this reflects the scene... there has been an increase in the number of