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Abuse of child labour on rise

By JACQUELINE LEE

THE abuse of child labour is on the rise and prosecutions in the first six months of this year have already exceeded the number for the whole of last year.

By the end of June, the Labour Department had issued 70 summonses against employers for hiring workers under 15, compared with 61 for last year.

Continuation of the trend will see illegal employment of underage workers back to the high level of 1989 when there were 158 prosecutions.

In line with the Government's policy of en-

forcing nine years of compulsory education, the Employment of Children Regulation bans people aged below 15 from industrial jobs.

Children aged under 15 may work part-time in non-industrial establishments, such as acting in films and television programmes, but employers must have permission from the Commissioner for Labour.

Employers have to furnish letters of consent from the children's parents as well as documentary proof that the children are at school or have finished Form Three.

The prosecuted cases may well be just the tip of the iceberg.

An interview with two teenagers who started working at 13, showed they had no problem getting jobs. Employers were happy to offer them work, for reduced salaries.

Nor had they been checked on by labour officials over two years.

A Labour Department spokeswoman said inspectors vetted records of employees during routine visits to work places.

The inspectors would also check with workers if

they suspected they were under age.

Employers found to have breached the regulation are liable to a maximum fine of \$20,000.

The spokeswoman admitted that detection would be impossible if employers hid details about under-age staff from company records and the workers were not present during visits by inspectors.

A social worker in the Wan Chai and North districts warned that the phenomenon of students quitting school for employment could spread.

There was a group of teenagers in Wan Chai who had quit school before 15 to do odd jobs, the social worker said.

"Most of them left school because they were frustrated that they could not cope with school work. Their former school friends who were also having the same problem may be tempted to follow their examples," she said.

The social worker is at the community centre frequented by the two underage workers interviewed by the Post. Her identity is with-

held to protect the identities of the two youngsters.

"The teenage workers are often exploited because employers know that they're illegal. The workers know they're exploited but they are happy to be able to stay away from school and have some money to spend," she said.

"Their life-style also leaves them vulnerable to triad influence. Some of them have triad links although the association may be much more loose because they are not at the core."

She suggested the Government should extend vo-

catational training to junior forms of secondary school to provide an alternative for marginal students who had difficulties fitting into the mainstream of grammar schools.

"The youngsters may be doing badly in academic work but quitting school at such a young age will lose them some very important training such as moral values and social skills," she said.

At present industrial training centres and technical institutes run by the Vocational Training Council only admit students aged over 15 or those who have completed Form Three.