

Action at last on sex comics

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BY GARY MARCHANT

AN EXTENSIVE study of sex and violence in children's comic books, released in August, has spurred the Government into taking action that will lead to a clamp-down.

In announcing in the Legislative Council that stringent new laws are being drawn up, the Attorney General, Mr John Hopley, referred to the report as "shocking, accurate, and useful."

He said the report, prepared by Joint Interact Council (Rotary District 343) and the Hongkong Social Worker's Association, brought home sharply the extent of the problem, which he admitted had not been fully appreciated.

The study, a year in the making, examined the violence, cruelty and sadistic sex found in many of the comic books on sale and the impact they had on young people. The final report made a series of recommendations calling for tougher action by Government.

A panel of experts on anti-social, delinquent and criminal behaviour in children said the cover designs on the comics were crude in the extreme, bizarre and grotesque, seductive, indecent and unhealthy.

"Most are shockingly obscene, outrageously violent, ugly and horrifying," one teacher commented in the report.

"None of these books has a healthy theme," a former primary school teacher said. "The heroes who appear to be fighting for righteousness are blood-thirsty, revengeful savages. Some books introduce children to disgusting, unhealthy sex games and one actually advocates lesbianism."

In one of those described as among the worst offenders, a comic known as *The Little Rascals*, the report says that 50 of the 60 pages include a fight with "blood and gore being copiously spattered across every page.

"Jaws, faces, eyes and other parts of the head are kicked, drawing blood, eyes are jabbed with fingers, drawing more blood, a face is slashed down the middle."

This is followed by seven pages of rape, the report says, in which a girl is kicked in the face and punched, has her hair set on fire, is punched again and finally falls to the floor unconscious, the blood flowing freely from her nose and mouth.

Concerned individuals and organisations who believe these comics increase the incidence of anti-social, delinquent and criminal behaviour by children point with alarm to police records that show that 48 per cent of all persons charged with crimes of violence during 1972-73 were under 21.

For sexual offences, the figure was 49 per cent, for homicide 59 per cent and for robberies 64 per cent, the report says.

They compare these figures with the very low figure of three per cent for narcotic offences by young people and point out that use of narcotics is rarely shown in Hongkong's comic books, and in the rare instance it is shown, it is not glamourised.

The comic books, they contend, lead children to believe that violence is an acceptable way of dealing with problems that cannot be solved easily in any other way.

To learn more about the problem, the report set out to find answers to the following questions:

● What is the content of the comic books sold in Hongkong.

● In what numbers are they sold? How widely are they read, by whom, and why?

● What does the law in Hongkong say about these books?

● What, if anything, should be done about these comic books?

The study found a shocking assortment of bizarre sex acts and grisly violence in the comics, and at the same time pointed out how little the police can do about it under present laws.

The researchers found that of more than 30 different comic books on sale in Hongkong, about 75 per cent have a constant, continuous over-riding emphasis on violence, cruelty, sexual assault, prostitution and perversion.

The study estimated that more than 1.5 million Chinese language comics are produced in Hongkong each month. Nearly all of the buyers of these comics are children, more than one third of them 10 years old or younger.

In an effort to find out who reads these comics, and why, the researchers interviewed 981 students and 451 adults.

Nearly half of the boys and one-fourth of the girls interviewed said they read the comics.

When the 408 students who read them were asked why they did so, the most frequent answer was that the stories were exciting and stimulating. Eight per cent said they read the comics to learn how to fight.

Of the 408 students, 56 per cent said they thought the comics had a bad effect on children, and 96 per cent of the non-readers thought the effects were bad.

Of the adults interviewed, 90 per cent thought the comics were harmful. Eighty-one per cent thought they should be banned or censored, but 12 per cent thought that nothing could or should be done about them.

The panel of experts on child behaviour point out that the books are dangerous because they lead to imitative behaviour at an age when children are still unable to tell right from wrong, good or bad.

When one considers the type of behaviour shown in the comic books which may be imitated, the senseless array of violence and perversion, the implications are frightening.

But despite the inherent dangers, there is no current law that put a stop to it.

"The Police Department and the Attorney General's Office are among those who feel that the Indecent Exhibitions Ordinance is too vague and that it would be difficult and time-consuming to try to prove in a court of law that a comic book is 'indecent, obscene, revolting or offensive' because these are subjective criteria that mean different things to different people," the study says.

Complaints made to police about the comics are referred to the Attorney General's Office, which invariably advises police against taking any action because of the difficulties of a prosecution under the present law.

And even if a prosecution were successful, experience with adult pornography indicates that the penalties would be so low as to be without effect on publishers and distributors. Fines range from \$50 to \$250 and no one has ever been imprisoned.

Other ordinances that could be used to prosecute producers and sellers of harmful comics are the Control of Publications Ordinance and the Books Registration Ordinance. But these also present difficulties and are too weak to stamp out the flood of smut aimed at children.

In a special memorandum specially written for the study, Mr Henry Litton, Q. C., pointed out that the law dealing with books for children portraying crime, violence or cruelty, and incidence of a repulsive or horrible nature, is much more specific in Britain.

To fight the widespread problem in Hongkong, the study recommended that:

● Legislation be introduced to amend the Indecent Exhibitions Ordinance to increase the maximum penalty under the ordinance so as to provide an effective deterrent.

● The police be requested to consider seizing all comic books which are indecent, obscene, revolting or offensive under the Indecent Exhibitions Act.

● The Government immediately enact legislation making it mandatory for all comic book manuscripts to be reviewed before publication and that the right of publication be denied if they are found objectionable.

The Attorney General's statement in Legislative Council last week indicates that the authors of the study are nearing success in their fight.

Although it is too early to tell how strong the new measures will be, if they succeed in stamping out sex and violence comics, the researcher's hard work in producing the study will be well rewarded.