

**For discussion
on 3 March 2009**

Legislative Council Panel on Security

Measures adopted by the Police to combat street deception

Purpose

At the meeting of the Panel on Security held on 3 February 2009, Members requested information on the number and nature of street deception cases in the past three years and the measures adopted by the Police in combating such crime.

Number and nature of street deception cases

2. Street deception generally refers to crimes involving small gangs of fraudsters tricking innocent passers-by on the street into releasing cash or valuable property to them within a short period of time. The number of reported cases and the total amount of reported losses in 2006 to 2008 are set out below –

| Year | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Number of reported cases | 217 | 262 | 207 |
| Total reported losses (HK\$ million) | 14.54 | 13.50 | 5.10 |

Compared with 479 reported cases with total reported losses of \$28 million in 2004, street deception has been on a modest decrease in recent years. Most recently, there was a 21.0% decrease in the number of cases and a 62.2% decrease in total reported losses in 2008, compared with 2007.

3. A breakdown of reported cases of street deception by type in 2006 to 2008 is at the **Annex**. The most common types of street deception include “spiritual blessing”, “borrowing money / mobile

telephones”, “dropped money” and “fake electronic parts”, which accounted for 98.6% of all street deception cases in 2008. The modus operandi of these four types of cases and their respective trends in recent years are described in paragraphs 4 to 7 below.

Spiritual blessing

4. Until 2008, “spiritual blessing” was the most common type of street deception. Such cases usually involve a group of three to five culprits approaching a victim to entice him through staged trickery to engage in some kind of blessing ritual and to contribute his valuables or cash in the ritual. The culprits then swap the victim’s property for a worthless substitute and flee. The monetary losses could be substantial, e.g. the average loss of the 34 victims in 2008 was HK\$70,149 with one significant case involving a reported loss of HK\$537,000. With the enhanced efforts of the Police in publicity, public education and enforcement (see paragraphs 9 to 13 below), this type of deception dropped significantly by 76.6% (or 111 cases) in 2008 compared to 2007.

Borrowing money / mobile telephones

5. “Borrowing money / mobile telephones” was the most prevalent type of street deception in 2008, accounting for 127 cases (or 61.4%) of all street deception cases. This type of deception usually involves a culprit asking a victim to lend him money or his mobile telephone, on the excuse that the culprit is a tourist badly in need of cash, or the culprit’s own mobile telephone is out of order or the battery is flat. The culprit may then disappear with the victim’s money or mobile telephone. In some cases, the culprit may swap his own fake mobile phone with the victim’s mobile phone for safekeeping before disappearing. The monetary losses in these cases normally range from several hundred to several thousand dollars.

Dropped money

6. “Dropped money” cases normally involve a gang of two to three culprits staging a “discovery” of a bag containing apparently genuine foreign notes together with the victim. The victim is then duped into “sharing” the “profits”. On the excuse that they need to withdraw cash to effect the sharing, the culprits first pretend to transfer the notes in the found bag into a lockable bag or container previously prepared by them, and lock it. The fraudsters then give the locked bag or container to the

victim whilst they retain the key. As a guarantee, they would request the victim to deposit a substantial amount of cash, pending their return. The culprits would never return, and the victim would be left holding the empty locked bag or container. This type of cases has dropped significantly from its height in 2004/2005 (over 50 cases each year) to only 2 cases in 2008.

Fake electronic parts

7. “Fake electronic parts” scams work in a way similar to “dropped money” cases, except that the scams involve low-priced electronic parts. The victim is first paid a small amount of money to keep watch on some electronic goods while the first culprit leaves the scene. A second culprit then approaches the victim and persuades him to purchase the electronic parts together from the first culprit for a high value when the first culprit returns. The victim discovers subsequently that he has been tricked into buying goods of little worth. This type of crime picked up again in 2008 (41 cases), after a mild drop in 2006 and 2007 (23 and 13 cases respectively).

Measures to combat street deception

8. The Police have adopted a three-pronged strategy to combat street deception – prevention, information-led operations, and prompt and effective investigations.

Prevention

9. The Police have stepped up efforts in preventing street deception through enhanced publicity. To raise public awareness, the Fight Crime Committee adopted “Beware of Deceptions” / “Watch out for Deceptions” as one of the themes for its publicity programme for 2007/08 and 2008/09 respectively. District Fight Crime Committees are encouraged to organise publicity activities at the district level in support. The Police also publicise the modus operandi adopted by the fraudsters through various media (e.g. TV and radio Announcements in the Public Interest, printed media, the HKPF’s homepage, broadcasts on public transportation, etc.). In addition, all Regional Crime Prevention Offices display banners with anti-street deception messages at prominent locations throughout the territory. The weekly “Police Magazine” television programme also features recent cases of street deception to

raise public awareness.

10. As victims of street deception are frequently elderly people, the Police proactively liaise with elderly day care centers and other places frequented by the elderly to increase their awareness. The Police also hold regular seminars at elderly centres, kai-fong associations and other organisations to spread the anti-deception message to the targeted audience throughout the territory.

11. The Police have established District Response Teams to maintain close liaison with the banks within each district. Bank staff can readily contact these teams if they come across elderly customers withdrawing or depositing unusually large sums of money, out with their normal spending patterns. This initiative has resulted in nine successful interventions since 2007, preventing potential losses of \$1.15 million.

Information-led operations

12. Apart from enhanced publicity, the Police regularly update its information base and conduct proactive operations targeting identified known personalities and black spots to keep street deception in check. The Police also maintain regular contacts with the Mainland authorities to exchange information in this regard. As a result, in 2008, the Police arrested 28 suspects, 23 of whom have been convicted.

Prompt and effective investigations

13. To facilitate prompt and effective investigation of street deception crimes, where appropriate street deception cases are handled by regional or district investigation teams with the necessary experience, expertise and resources. Enhancement of sentencing under the Organized and Serious Crimes Ordinance (Cap. 455) is an effective measure in deterring the growth of street deception. In 2007, the prosecution made five successful applications for sentence enhancement under Cap. 455, and seven in 2008. The enhanced sentences ranged from 36 months to 72 months of imprisonment, compared to the original sentences ranging from 24 months to 48 months of imprisonment. The Police and the Department of Justice will continue to consider the need to apply for sentence enhancement for future convictions, where appropriate.

Conclusion

14. There has been a decreasing trend in street deception cases in recent years. This is largely attributable to the success of the territory-wide publicity efforts, and the effectiveness of information-led operations which successfully neutralized a number of street deception syndicates. The Police will continue to closely monitor the situation and keep up their efforts in combating this type of crime.

Security Bureau
February 2009

Annex

Reported cases of Street Deception by Type in 2006 to 2008

| Type | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Spiritual blessing | 129 | 145 | 34 |
| Borrowing money / mobile telephones | 35 | 90 | 127 |
| Fake electronic parts | 23 | 13 | 41 |
| Dropped money | 8 | 0 | 2 |
| Fake gold items | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Bracelets / valuables | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Medicine / herbs / pills | 21 | 14 | 0 |
| Foreign money exchange | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Others | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 217 | 262 | 207 |