

Family Council

Summary of Initial Findings and Policy Recommendations of Four Studies on Families

Background

As announced in last year's Policy Address, the Family Council was to conduct focused discussions and studies on four problems, including juvenile drug abuse, prostitution and the neglect of elderly people and children. The Family Council has followed up by commissioning the Central Policy Unit to invite academic institutions with a good understanding of the problems to undertake relevant studies with a view to exploring the causes of these problems and their relation to family, and making policy recommendations to alleviate them at the family level. The research teams have just submitted the interim reports and outlines of policy recommendations. This paper aims to brief Members on the initial findings¹ of the studies and some policy options and recommendations for consideration.

Study 1: Drug Abuse among Youths and Family Relationship

Findings/Observations

2. The report pointed out that the number of young drug abusers was increasing and more young people abused drugs at a younger age. The problem was more serious among youths who were not attending schools. The youths at risk, in particular, did not think drug abuse was a problem nor was there a need to seek help. This may be attributed to the fact that abuse of psychotropic substances was described as "drug overuse" instead of "drug abuse" in Hong Kong.

3. The four major factors contributing to drug abuse include: (a) growing up in dysfunctional families, e.g. families with parents having poor relationship/divorced parents/single parent, where the parents have to work long

¹ Study findings as at 8 September 2010.

hours and have little communication with their children and there are seldom happy family life; (b) easy access to drugs; (c) poor academic performance, boredom and peer influence; and (d) parents having drug dependence. It is worth noting that the above factors often co-exist and interact, and family structure, e.g. with deceased parent(s), has a greater impact on male to abuse drugs.

4. Prevention and intervention should start with family members of the drug abuser and training in family relationship and parenting was the most effective way. The study also had two important observations: (a) theories and perspectives of social ecology should be applied to tackle youth drug abuse; and (b) high-risk factors had to be alleviated and protective factors be enhanced.

Policy Recommendations

5. As youth drug abuse is a complex issue, it is recommended that a multi-pronged policy of “youth-based, family-focused, community-sensitive and government-led” be adopted. The policy may be implemented through seven measures: (a) identify high-risk families and provide them with support; (b) actively foster family relationship (e.g. implement 5-day week in all corporations/organisations, offer recreation and travel vouchers to families, set up district training centres for parenting skills, etc.); (c) enhance community participation; (d) cut off sources of drugs; (e) expand the scope of professional training; (f) assess the effectiveness of the existing Anti-youth Drug Abuse Programmes; and (g) reform the education system.

Study 2: Parental Perspectives of Child Neglect in Hong Kong

Findings/Observations

6. Data obtained from telephone surveys showed that respondents (i.e. parents who had one or more children aged under 16) generally recognised the various needs in raising a child, including sufficient food and clothing, love and care, protection, education and medical attention, and fully agreed that these were the responsibilities of parents.

7. Regarding the neglect of children, the neglect of physical care had the highest level of awareness (mean value = 4.23), while the neglect of emotional

needs had the lowest level of awareness (mean value = 3.09) (the highest value is 5). Results showed that parents relatively did not accept the neglect of physical care.

8. The respondents generally tended to accept the intervention of social workers, especially for cases involving the lack of proper care for emotional and educational needs. They also believed that neighbours could offer some help. However, they did not want police intervention.

Policy Recommendations

9. Preliminary data indicates that people in Hong Kong consider that family is an important base to look after children's development needs, of which parents are the key figures in meeting children's physical, psychological, emotional and educational needs in their development, in particular, parents' love is hard to be made up by routine services. Therefore, the role of the family in love and care should not be excessively interfered with or replaced. It is recommended that the government may provide relevant services to help parents fulfil their responsibilities and to promote mutual-help among family members and neighbours, e.g. public education on the adverse effects of the neglect of children.

10. Regarding case intervention, it is recommended that social workers may strengthen their supporting role but police intervention should be the last resort.

Study 3: Family-centred Prevention of Adolescent Girls' and Boys' Compensated Dating

Findings/Observations

11. Preliminary observations on the findings indicated that young people who had engaged in compensated dating, including prostitution, were mostly around 15 years of age and predominantly female. Risk factors contributing to youth compensated dating can broadly be classified into two aspects: (a) the prevalence of the internet provides an easily available channel for young people to post their photos or messages on the web or discussion forums to find their dates and negotiate a deal; and (b) most of these young people come from underprivileged families or single-parent/broken families and they are not close

to their parents and lack of proper care and guidance from their parents or senior family members.

12. From a family perspective, protective factors conducive to the prevention of youth prostitution mainly include: (a) the fathers are in employment and the young people have a stronger attachment to their fathers; (b) the young people live with their parents and accept more readily parental guidance; and (c) the young people attend counselling service with their parents.

Policy Recommendations

13. The policy recommendations are “family-focused” and cover four main areas: (a) enhance parenting skills, including moral/sex education, effective mutual communication and monitoring of their children’s use of the internet; (b) strengthen parent-child relation and support to broken/single-parent families; (c) encourage fathers to take up employment so as to set a good example to their children; and (d) in the event that their children have problems, parents should be open-minded, and co-operate with the Police and social workers/professional groups to tackle the problems and show their love and care for their children instead of evading their responsibilities.

Study 4: An Exploratory Study of Neglect among Elderly in Hong Kong: A Family Perspective

Findings/Observations

14. The report pointed out that elderly neglect may be taken as an early sign of elderly abuse. To better understand the reasons behind elderly neglect, observation and analysis on any change in relationship among family members (i.e. caring or worsening relationship) and their life history (i.e. life events) are required.

15. The study found that family members may not be able to adapt when there are changes in the family (such as increasing stress in taking care of elderly family members with declining health; discord and conflict arising from living with new family members like daughters-in-law/grandchildren in a small living space; a sharp decrease in income due to retirement, children’s unemployment or emigration, etc.) and impact of external factors (such as the shift of social values

from familism to individualism, materialism and utilitarianism). Continuing conflict may undermine the respect, communication and care between different generations, resulting in alienation and the elderly may be deprived of proper care and even face the risk of being abused.

Policy Recommendations

16. The report suggested a three-tier preventive measure: (a) more efforts to maintain/strengthen family values (such as filial piety); (b) early identification of families with problems and timely intervention to improve family relationship; and (c) provision of affordable and readily available family mediation or marriage counselling services for families in need.

Conclusion

17. It is noted from the above study findings and observations that family imbalance has a catalytic effect on these social problems to a certain extent. Corresponding policy initiatives are therefore required to strengthen the caring function of family, in particular assistance to high-risk families in financial hardship or in a dysfunctional state to promote mutual-love and mutual-help and more effective communication among family members of the elder, middle and younger generations for building a happy and harmonious family.

18. However, rapid changing socio-economic conditions are posing great challenges to family pattern, values and functions, it is not appropriate that families take the blame of all social problems or be relied on too much to solve these problems. Likewise, the public should not expect the government to undertake all the responsibilities. In the face of limited public resources but increasing social demand, individual members and various sectors of the community have to put in great efforts to support families while policy-makers need to focus on two areas, namely coordination of cross-sector collaboration and ensuring appropriate support for high-risk families, and to introduce targeted measures when necessary.

Advice Sought

19. Members are invited to note the initial findings and some policy options and recommendations of the four studies. As the four studies are still underway

(see Table 1 for details), the findings and recommendations above are just some observations and analysis of the preliminary data and need to be interpreted with caution.

Central Policy Unit
October 2010

Table 1: Summaries of the Four Studies on Family-related Social Problems

Project Co-ordinator	Institution	Subject of Study	Proposed Date of Completion
Prof. YIP SF, Paul	The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, University of Hong Kong	<p>Drug Abuse among Youths and Family Relationship</p> <p>Through literature and secondary data analysis, focus groups and case studies, the study collects evidence from different perspectives <u>to explore the underlying causes of drug abuse among youths (aged 12 to 34), ways to tackle/prevent youth drug abuse at family level, and relevant policy options/recommendations.</u></p>	November 2010 (data collection and analysis largely completed)
Dr. CHAN Yuk-chung	The Centre for Social Policy Studies, Hong Kong Polytechnic University	<p>Parental Perspectives of Child Neglect in Hong Kong</p> <p>Through telephone surveys (1 000 samples) and in-depth face-to-face interviews (75 persons in total) and literature support, the study examines from the perspectives of parents, and <u>explores Hong Kong parents' perception of the basic needs of children and their degree of acceptance of child neglect behaviours, the threshold for professional intervention and policy recommendations.</u></p>	March 2010 (telephone surveys and in-depth face-to-face interviews still in progress)

Project Co-ordinator	Institution	Subject of Study	Proposed Date of Completion
Dr. CHEUNG Chau-kiu, Jacky	Social Capital and Impact Assessment Research Unit, City University of Hong Kong	<p>Family-centred Prevention of Adolescent Girls' and Boys' Compensated Dating</p> <p>Through questionnaire surveys (300 samples; aged 12 to 23) and in-depth face-to-face interviews (100 persons in total) and literature support, the study <u>explores the problem of young people engaging in compensated dating (including prostitution) in Hong Kong and the physical and psychological harm inflicted on them. The study aims to identify, among other things, the family-related risk factors and protective factors and explore preventive and intervention measures and policies against youth prostitution.</u></p>	January 2011 (in-depth face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions still in progress)
Prof. CHAN Cheung-ming, Alfred	Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies, Lingnan University	<p>An Exploratory Study of Neglect among Elderly in Hong Kong: A Family Perspective</p> <p>Through interviews of 40 families with elderly neglect/abuse problems and 40 happy families and literature support, the comparative study <u>explores the key factors contributing to elderly neglect (or even elderly abuse), with a view to putting forward preventive measures/policy recommendations.</u></p>	January 2011 (in-depth face-to-face interviews still in progress)