



「通頂」徵象：對「不歸家少年」的研究
The Stop-out Syndrome: When Night Life
Takes Over from Home Life

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YOUTH STUDY No. 8:

The Stop-out Syndrome: When Night Life Takes Over Home Life

SUMMARY REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

This exploratory study looks at how teenagers who stay out overnight spend their time after midnight. The subjects of the study are between 10 and 18 years old and have repeatedly stayed away from home overnight. They are not runaways as such as they are still in contact with their homes via pagers, for instance. However, the fact that they choose not be at home overnight is a phenomenon which has been growing in Hong Kong over the past few years.

The major objectives of this study are to understand why these teenagers stay away from home at night, what they do at night, the potential dangers they face, and in the light of these findings, to explore the implications for services and policy options.

2. METHODOLOGY

A case-study approach was adopted so that the researchers had an in-depth interview with each respondent. Consent to be interviewed was obtained from 25 teenagers. They were drawn at random from a range of locations such as the Hong Kong Cultural Centre at Tsim Sha Tsui, McDonald's at Mongkok, parks or housing estates, all of which are popular places for teenage overnight gatherings. Some respondents were referred by other social service agencies as well as service units of the Federation. Eleven professional social workers interviewed the youths face-to-face for an hour to an hour-and-a-half using uniform sets of open-ended questionnaires. Throughout the interviews, respondents were encouraged to express their opinions and feelings freely.

Obviously, the small number of cases in this study may not represent the overall number of Hong Kong teenagers who are in the habit of staying out overnight. Nevertheless a qualitative analysis of their behaviour patterns and opinions can shed light on the issue in a way that can never solely be done quantitatively. Since the respondents showed no hesitation in answering the questions, we are confident that their replies are honest and reliable.

3. RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

- 3.1 The 25 young respondents were made up of 11 males and 14 females.
- 3.2 The age range of the respondents was from 10 to 17.
- 3.3 The respondents lived on Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories.

- 3.4 Only 3 families had made a report to the police that their child had not come home at night. While away from home, 13 of the young people had still provided a channel of communication with their families, such as a pager number to enable their parents to call them.
- 3.5 Most respondents had repeatedly stayed away from home for periods ranging from a few months to 2 or 3 years. However, in our sample also one respondent who was away from home for just 3 days, whereas a few other respondents had stayed away for more than four years.
- 3.6 Sixteen teenagers were attending school, five were unemployed and four were working.

4. HOW THEY SPENT THEIR TIME OVERNIGHT

- 4.1 The waterfront by the Cultural Centre at Tsim Sha Tsui and the McDonald's Restaurant in Sai Yeung Choi Street, Mongkok, are the two 'hot spots' where most teenagers gathered and stayed out overnight. Most of the respondents we interviewed had been approached at one of these two places.
- 4.2 The majority of the respondents had nothing in particular to do during the night. Some of them would pass the time in groups chatting and laughing, drinking and smoking, while others would sit on their own doing nothing. When they got tired, they might just fall asleep on the spot. Those who had money might go to a karaoke bar with friends.
- 4.3 Most respondents indicated that they never planned their trips beforehand. They just went where the mood took them at that particular moment. That was why every night there were different faces at the same time in the same spot.
- 4.4 Selling fake CDs was one way of earning money for some of the respondents which could bring in around two to three hundred dollars a night. One respondent reported earning as much as a thousand dollars a night.
- 4.5 Most of the respondents liked to stay around Tsim Sha Tsui and Mongkok because of the large choice of places of entertainment. Transport facilities were also convenient.
- 4.6 Though the majority chose to stay overnight repeatedly, many of them suggested that they did not necessarily enjoy doing so. Some even indicated that they found it boring.
- 4.7 Even though they were aware that night life on the streets could be dangerous, most respondents believed that they could handle it.
- 4.8 Although it had been their own choice to stay out overnight, some respondents still regarded their behaviour in a negative light. Although they knew there was nothing wrong with it legally, they still felt uncomfortable about their way of life.
- 4.9 Other respondents indicated that they liked their nocturnal life style because it gave them the freedom to smoke, use foul language, to date, as well as freedom from parental control.

- 4.10 Most respondents had negative attitudes towards their family and parents. They did not like their parents' child management styles, which mostly were authoritarian and controlling rather than supportive and affectionate. They also in general wanted to escape from the boredom, stress and tension of family relationships. Once they had started to stay away from home overnight, they found themselves in a dilemma and were afraid to face their parents again. So they stayed away from home for longer.
- 4.11 A typical precipitating factor which led to staying away from home was a quarrel breaking out between respondents and their parents. Peer invitations and influence were also common factors when respondents started to stay away.

5. ATTITUDES TOWARD PEERS AND FAMILIES

- 5.1 Most respondents were badly in need of friendship, care and concern. Their ideal friends or companions were considerate, able to communicate and share their ideas. They could easily make friends and find companions at night but they did not necessarily trust these people.
- 5.2 The majority of the respondents thought that their way of life was something they had decided on by themselves. It was not that they had been influenced by their peers as their parents thought. They were upset by their parents' lack of trust in them. They further believed that whether they were good or bad was in their own hands.
- 5.3 All the respondents recognized the importance of their families. They also needed their families where they treasured the feelings and relationships. They were also very sensitive to comments from parents and other members of the family. In general, the influence of the family, whether it was positive or negative, was considerable.
- 5.4 Nevertheless, most of the respondents had a negative attitude towards their families and some felt alienated from them. Some were disappointed by the parenting styles of their parents. There were discrepancies in expectation on the part of parents and children.
- 5.5 Most respondents thought their parents were demanding and authoritarian. For instance, they asked their children to stay at home or to work hard at school, but were themselves unable to set an example of responsible adulthood. One respondent said her father was a wife abuser, while another respondent had a runaway mother.
- 5.6 Most respondents also thought their parents placed too much emphasis on material things, but concerned themselves too little with their emotional needs.
- 5.7 Some respondents criticized their parents for being unreasonable, for using corporal punishment and for being extremely judgmental. They said that their parents seldom bothered to listen to their children or tried to communicate with them. They were also insensitive to the emotional needs of their growing children. Though they may have meant well, their parents' way of handling the parent-child relationship was ineffective.

- 5.8 In conclusion, the majority of the respondents expected respect and trust from their parents, care and concern and a friendly attitude, rather than authoritarianism and rigid preaching from day to day.

6. ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCHOOL LIFE

- 6.1 Most of the respondents were not very committed to their daytime activities such as going to school or to work. Those who were students found school meaningless which was reflected in the fact that most of them were low achievers. Although their relationships with classmates and teachers were not necessarily poor, they were not really motivated to pursue studying.
- 6.2 Some respondents mentioned that they were quite enjoy school life and their teachers were supportive and considerate. One respondent expressed that she would talk to teacher when she wanted someone to share. Some respondents showed their appreciation to their teachers who had tried great effort to teach and gave them care and concern. One respondent rated 10 marks (full mark) for a teacher because who was willing to help him and trust him. He would escape from class if he knew that teacher was absent for the day.
- 6.3 School life was quite a stressful situation for some respondents who indicated that they felt guilty about their failure at school. They would blame their own incompetency, being influenced negatively by peers, and most had low self-images.
- 6.4 Some respondents had quite a number of aspirations for the future in spite of their unsatisfactory academic results. Their aspiration was ranging from lifeguard, fashion model, hair stylist, musician, sales, cartoonist to starting their own business. However, most had very little confidence that they could achieve it. It took courage for them to have hopes and dreams in the current circumstances.

7. ATTITUDES TOWARDS SELF AND VALUE SYSTEMS

- 7.1 In general, most respondents perceived their life styles negatively. They were not very happy with the image of the peers around them, who had been labelled "bad friends" by their parents.
- 7.2 Most respondents chose to stay away from home at night to protect themselves from the stress and tension around them. Smoking, drinking, using foul language, singing karaoke, going to a disco or bar were ways of escaping from reality.
- 7.3 The stop-out syndrome, with night life taking over from home life, was in fact a preface for runaway behaviour. However, it was also a complicated alternative form of the runaway phenomenon. In these cases parents of many respondents did not report their runaway child to the police. Some parents accepted their behaviour in return for keeping in contact with their children through a pager number. In addition, respondents would come home from time to time to have something to eat or to change their clothes. Thus their behaviour differed from that of the "traditional" runaway.

- 7.4 Most respondents expressed the view that they had grown up and no longer needed their parents' control and protection. They believed in their ability to control themselves and wanted to be autonomous. They felt it was up to them to be good or bad.
- 7.5 Most respondents felt that money was important and said they would try to get money when they needed it. Selling fake CDs was one way regardless of the fact that it was illegal. Friendship and affection were important for most respondents. The majority of the respondents indicated that they did not go in for casual sex, though one respondent said she had been a prostitute just for fun. Most of the respondents were not rebelling against social norms in general, but simply resented authoritarian parents. What they expressed a desire for was some personal freedom and autonomy.

8. UNPOSTED LETTERS

- 8.1 Respondents were asked to imagine a hypothetical situation in which they would write a letter but would not post it. To whom would they write and what would they say? Twenty-four respondents answered this question.
- 8.2 The respondents who said they would write to their parents said they would write about the dilemma they felt, or their guilt feelings or their love for their parents. Some would write about their expectations that their parents would respect and trust them.
- 8.3 Those who would write to friends would express their feelings of affection and concern. One would express his love for his girl friend.
- 8.4 Of those who would write letters to someone else, one respondent expressed the view that the police should not intervene in the fake CD business. Another respondent said he would write to himself to ask questions about what he should do in the future.

9. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

DISCUSSION

9.1 The Stop-out Syndrome: a Variation on Runaway Behaviour

Almost all respondents reported that they had stayed away from home overnight for a few days repeatedly for the previous four to five years. Nearly half of them still kept in contact with their parents. This syndrome of staying away for a few days is in fact a variation on runaway behaviour.

9.2 The Stop-out Syndrome Reflects Tension in Family Relationships

Although some respondents indicated that they stayed out overnight just for fun, a greater majority expressed disappointment or frustration about their family relationships. The majority of the respondents were bored and unhappy with their home life. They had negative attitudes about their family and felt alienated from them. The different expectations as regards behaviour and parenting methods were the core of the family conflict. Parents of most respondents were authoritarian and controlling to the dissatisfaction of their children. This was one of the precipitating factors making the respondents want to escape from their home life.

9.3 The Need for Parenting Education

As the research indicated, the principal conflict came from their parents' child management styles. Most respondents complained that their parents were demanding and authoritarian, but were themselves unable to set an example of responsible adulthood. Some parents emphasized material support to the neglect of the emotional needs of their children. Some used corporal punishment, but did not try to communicate with their children. Some demanded that their children behave properly, without trusting their capacity for self control or their need for autonomy. All these conflicts would create huge tensions within a family. The inadequacy in parenting skills was quite obvious for parents of most respondents and indicated an urgent need for parenting education.

9.4 What Teenagers Need is Personal Space and Affection

What the majority of the respondents were looking for when they chose to stay away from home was personal space and affection. They also wanted to escape from family tensions and stress. At the same time as they wanted to develop their autonomy, they also had expectations of care and concern from their parents. Their wish for support for their emotional needs was obvious and explicit.

9.5 Support from Society would be Helpful to Teenagers

For those who indicated a wish to return to normal home life, the path was full of obstacles. Usually they were low achievers at school. Getting back on track required greater effort than for most other people. Their unsupportive family environment and their average grades at school would also hinder their resolve. Some social support would be helpful to enable this group of teenagers to return to normal home life.

9.6 Different Reaching-Out Services Can Meet the Needs of these Teenagers

There are different reaching-out and proactive services which can meet the needs of these teenagers such as on-the-spot or crisis intervention services. On-the-spot service refers to service which can provide somewhere for these overnight activity-seekers to gather, such as a midnight drop-in children's and youth centre. Crisis intervention service includes counselling services, temporary shelter services for those who do not wish to go home, or mediating with parents for those who want to go home but are afraid of their parents' response. The mediation and intervention of professional social workers at this point will be extremely helpful, particularly in smoothing family tensions and rebuilding family relationships. According to the Royal Hong Kong Police Force statistics, the number of missing persons under the age of 15 was 3,315 for 1992, 3,557 for 1993 and 3,099 for 1994. The unreported figure could be much larger. According to estimates from Youth Outreach, a specialized agency for runaway youth, the figure could be as high as 20,000 per year. The need for On-the-Spot and Crisis Intervention services is obvious.

It will be impossible for teenagers with unsupportive families to return to normal home life. To help these teenagers live independently, a long-term hostel would be a useful half way service. Experience from other countries such as the United States or Britain have demonstrated the success of such hostels.

9.7 Inadequate Support for Second Chance in Education

It will be quite difficult for teenagers over 15 to re-enter the normal school system. In spite of evening secondary schools, there is inadequate support for those wanting a second chance in education. Resources such as counselling services and financial subsidies are far from adequate when the size of this group of teenagers is taken into account.

9.8 Legal Regulations will not be Effective in Dealing with the Stop-Out Syndrome.

The research findings indicate that teenagers who want to stay out have a choice of many places to go. Trying to curb the tendency by regulation will not be effective. Restrictions in the use of public places after midnight, such as a curfew, would not be appropriate in the Hong Kong context. The population density and the high concentration of people in consumption spots in Mongkok and Tsim Sha Tsui would make restrictive measures impossible. Such control on young people's behaviour would in any case only drive them

from open places to hidden places where the risk of physical or moral danger is even higher. Legislation is not the answer in problem-solving. It would be more appropriate to tighten control on the entertainment places to prevent the abuse of underage teenagers.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The Government Should Consider Providing Reaching-Out and Proactive Services in Response to Teenagers' Needs

As discussed earlier, reaching-out and proactive services would be effective options. The provision of an On-the-Spot counselling service could include a midnight children's and youth centre, a mobile counselling centre in a bus or container, temporary shelter, a McDonald's restaurant type youth corner, and so forth. The characteristic of these services should be flexibility, with minimum necessary regulations so as not to impinge on freedom and autonomy. The minimum necessary regulations might include a ban on drugs, sexual intercourse, alcohol and fighting inside the service premises. The accessibility of, as well as the management by, professional social workers will be another key characteristic of the service. The Crisis Intervention service will be crucial for those teenagers who wish to return home. The mediation of professional social workers in the parent-child relationship will be indispensable in this situation.

10.2 The Government should Consider to Strengthen Parenting Education, and to Ensure Adequate Manpower and Resources for the Family Life Education Service

The research finding clearly shows that parent-child relationships are crucial in the stop-out syndrome. It also reveals that push factors from the family are of greater significance than the pull factors from the street. Tension in family relationship, as arised from ineffective child management styles, indicate the urgent need for parenting education. It is already fifteen years since the introduction of family life education service as part of the personal youth services in 1980. During that time, the family structure, family relationships and the pattern of family problems have changed a lot. The emergence of the stop-out syndrome is an example of this rapid change. The government should consider to strengthen the parental education, and to ensure adequate manpower and resources for the family life education service.

10.3 The Government should enable Teenagers to live Independently by Providing a Long-Term Hostel Service

A hostel would be a solution for those teenagers who cannot return home. The government should assist these teenagers to live independently by considering the provision of low-cost long-term hostel services. In a well-managed living environment, the teenagers would gradually develop independent life skills. Professional social work services would also be accessible in these government run or subcontracted hostels.