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A Study on Youth Gangs
in New Town Development

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SUMMARY REPORT

1. Introduction

Youth Gang problems have always been a concern for Hong Kong society. Many local studies that have explored the factors of young people joining or leaving juvenile gangs provide valid references.

Recently, a local scholar of youth gangs made the point that because of their dense population and high proportion of youth, public housing estates, are a breeding ground for youth gangs. Most public housing estates are located in New Towns. In fact, the Hong Kong Government has established nine New Towns since the launch of its New Town Development Programme in 1973, offering housing for about 43% of the total population in Hong Kong. To accommodate the growing population, concerned authorities have commissioned two studies to explore new development opportunities. Kwa Tung North and Hung Shui Kiu have been identified as the next generation of New Town development plans, whereas Fanling North will be an extension of the existing Fanling／Sheung Shui New Town.

In view of the continuous development of New Towns, the aim of this study is to find ways to prevent them from becoming breeding grounds for gangs. This study will pay particular attention to the following four areas: (a) the relationship between the characteristics of New Towns and the existence of youth gangs; (b) the importance of recreational facilities and services with respect to different demographic characteristics; (c) the stages of New Town development and the timing of the emergence of gangs; and (d) discussions on the various strategies adopted by communities to prevent youth crime.

In order to have an in-depth understanding of New Town development, this study took the 1996 Population By-census as the main reference, supplemented by details and findings on the latest built-up New Towns. According to the Territory Development Department, Hong Kong has developed nine New Towns in total. They are : Tsuen

Wan, Shatin and Tuen Mun in the early 1970s; Tai Po, Fanling/Sheung Shui and Yuen Long in the late 1970s; Teung Kwan O, Tin Shui Wai and Tung Chung in the 1980s. This study chooses Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai as targets. Tung Chung has not been used as a case study as her history of development is relatively short.

This study is undertaken through the collection of data from four areas: (a) basic demographic data of the New Towns; (b) statistics on youth crime and youth arrested in these two New Towns; (c) in-depth interviews with gang members to understand their participation in gang activities; and (d) in-depth interviews with specialists, concerned authorities and community leaders in Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai. This study hopes to be able to provide insight into the relationship between the stages of New Town development and timing of the emergence of gangs. It also aims to provide recommendations on improving New Town facilities and services planning strategies.

A self-administered opinion poll of eight secondary schools in Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai New Towns was conducted in November, 2000. A total of 852 students from F.1 to F.7 were successfully interviewed. Concomitantly, an in-depth interview of 16 gang members was also conducted in November, 2000, of which ten were males and six females. Each indicated an affiliation with triad societies.

2. Discussion

2.1 Compared with the overall population, New Towns have a higher proportion of youth, while the socio-economic status of residents is comparatively low. These two factors may contribute juvenile gangs.

a. New Towns have a particularly high youth population

With reference to the 1996 Population By- census, the population in New Towns is younger, in comparison, to that of the territory at large. Among the listed New Towns, the latest, Tin Shui Wai has the highest youth population.

The median age of New Town populations is 32, as compared with 34 for the rest of the territory. The median ages for Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai are 32 and 30 respectively. About 38% and 41% of the population of Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai are aged below 24.

b. Public Housing dominates New Towns, where the socio-economic status of new residents is considered low

As it is the policy of the Government to move populations from more crowded areas to New Towns through the establishment of public housing, it is this kind of housing that dominates. Many residents are obviously equally attracted by the lower rents. According to the 1996 Population By-census, 49% of New Town populations are living in public rental housing, while the corresponding proportion in the rest of the territory is only 39%.

Therefore, with reference of the 1996 Population By-census, the following features of New Towns can be identified: (1) a higher child dependency ratio but a much lower elderly dependency ratio; (2) a comparatively low median monthly income of domestic households; (3) a markedly lower proportion of managers and administrators, professionals and associate professionals; and (4) a lower educational attainment of the aged group, 15 or above. These features reflect a lower than average socio-economic status of households when compared to their counterparts in the rest of the territory. Hence, the resources available to young people living in New Towns are also limited.

The poll findings reveal that about 60% of respondents live in public rental housing and about 24% of their fathers are non-skilled workers, with nearly 20% unemployed or retired. About 61% of respondents' mothers are housewives. To a certain extent, these figures show that respondents' families are not well off.

2.2 Concomitant to the increase in population and commercial activities in Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai, youth gangs emerged accordingly. Crime figures also increased at the same time. Figures show that young people for unlawful offences began as early as the second year of the establishment of New Towns, suggesting that triad activities take root almost as soon as people move into the New Towns.

The crime figures of Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai, together with information gleaned from interviews with specialists and community leaders, provides the basic reference for this study.

There is a parallel development between the increase in population and commercial activities in Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai, and the emergence of youth gangs. In order to strengthen their power, triad societies try hard to recruit youth as new members. Youth who are new to the community, and with little knowledge of triad societies, turn to triad societies for protection, thereby breeding youth gangs in the

newly communities.

Data from the Police Force show that crime figures increased in line with the establishment of Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai during the first four or five years of their development. In Tin Shui Wai, this phenomen was particularly obvious amongst those aged between 7 and 11. The above figures reveal that youth crime increased in line with the establishment of public housing and the increase of population. What catches the attention is that during the first and second year of the establishment of the two New Towns, some young people were arrested because of their connection with unlawful societies, seeming to suggest that triad activities took place ever since people moved into the New Towns.

2.3 **According to the Poll, " high risk areas" that gangs easily have access to: estate shops, fast food restaurants, football pitches and parks. Students wandering around in the community have a higher chance of being encountered, illustrating how gang members are recruited within the local community.**

51% of respondents said they return home immediately after school, while 25% said they stay in school after lessons. 10% to 23% of respondents, however, stated their preference to go to estate shops, fast food restaurants, football pitches or simply wander about.

40% of respondents said that they got along with suspected youth gangs, while 12% said that they had been invited to join youth gangs. Cross tabulations show that:

a. **Most "high risk areas" are located within the community, indicating that youth gangs too could easily breed in the community.**

As seen in the findings, respondents who loiter in shopping centers, fast food restaurants, football pitches and parks after school have a higher chance to mix with youth gangs, or suspected youth gangs, than those who did not. This also reflects that respondents who frequent football pitches, parks or game centers, have a higher chance of being invited to join youth gangs than those who did not.

b. **Gang activities are not confined to specific public housing estates. They are present over the entire New Town.**

One scholar indicated that the relatively low socio-economic conditions in public housing estates are most likely to be the breeding ground for youth gangs. This Poll reveals that 40% of respondents

living in "public rental housing ", "Housing Authority or Housing Society subsidized-sale flats " or "private rented housing", said that they had encountered youth gangs or suspected youth gangs.   This indicates that respondents, regardless of the type of housing, have the same chance of being in contact with gangs.   Youth gangs are not restricted to public rental housing alone, but are present in the entire area.

2.4 **Cross tabulations show that respondents visiting the homes of friends or schoolmates after school, have a higher chance of being invited to join youth gangs.   40% of respondents' parents have no knowledge about their friends.**

The Poll showed that 26% of respondents who stayed in the homes of friends or schoolmates after school, had encountered youth gangs or suspected youth gangs, a figure 17% higher than their counterparts. 35% had been invited to join youth gangs, a figure 22% higher than their counterparts.

This reflects that: a) triad societies make use of personal contacts among friends to absorb new members.   This mode of networking absorbs a greater number and wider variety of members; b) triad societies breed in residential units.   If youth gangs are dispelled from public areas, they may turn to more private areas making intervention more difficult.

It is important to note that more than half of the respondents' parents have little knowledge about their friends, while 10% have no knowledge at all.   About 40% of respondents said that their parents do not actively get to know their friends, whereas 37% said that their parents try to know their friends.   The result shows that parents of the respondents have little concern over their children's friends, and this in turn has little effect in how to prevent their children from getting involved with youth gangs.

2.5 **Some respondents show little alertness against triad societies. In New Towns, triad societies present themselves as symbols of power in order to attract youth members who lack a sense of security.**

The survey shows that some respondents are receptive to triad society culture.   24% of respondents agree that it is not a matter for youngsters to belong to youth gangs, as long as they do not join any triads.   12% of respondents believe that they can get protection by joining a triad society and that triad members will not harm others if they do not break the law.   Further, those students who associated with youth gangs, show little objection against triad societies, indicating that they are relatively receptive to the culture of triad societies.

Some of the gang members indicated that they had joined triad societies. More than half of them said that they were recruited within the community where they lived. As new comers in this community, they were in a weaker position to refuse to join the triad societies. They joined to seek protection and for a sense of security. However, some indicated that they were already members of triad societies before moving. They even boasted how powerful and active the triad societies were in their old areas of residence.

2.6 **Respondents felt that the social facilities and social services are adequate in the New Town. The greater the satisfaction with facilities and services, the higher the sense of belongings to the community. Public swimming pools and libraries are considered the most important youth facilities in New Towns, yet both Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai do not have a public library.**

The Poll reveals that 62% of respondents tended to be satisfied with the recreational facilities and 54% with community services in their community. The finding may be in part due to the "balanced development" concept developed by the Planning Department. Under this concept, fundamental services and public facilities are self-contained.

Over 50% of respondents have a sense of belonging to their community. The study shows that respondents who believe that "facilities and services are well provided", have a relatively higher sense of belonging to the community.

Respondents state that shopping malls, cinemas, schools, public swimming pools and libraries should be the five main facilities in a New Town. About 38% and 35% of respondents respectively claim a library and a public swimming pool as the main facilities. However, even though a public swimming pool and a library are considered the most important facilities in a New Town, neither is available in Tseung Kwan O, while there is no library in Tin Shui Wai

Sources for a local newspaper say that restrictions imposed by the Planning Department is the reason for a lack of a library. According to the "Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines", a library is built only for a community with population of over 200,000 people. The standard gives no preference to the number or needs of youth in the community. Hence, the Government equates the needs of aged people with children. The Planning Department claims that land has already been reserved for a library in these communities. The building of the library is the responsibility of the Recreational and Cultural Department.

They also blame the closure of the two urban councils to the delay of building the library.

According to the Manual of Planning Department, "Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines", a library will be built for a community with population over 200,000 and a standard public swimming pool will be built for a community with population over 287,000. In the year 2000, Tseung Kwan O has a population of 250,000, while in 1999 Tin Shui Wai has a population of about 150,000.

2.7   As problems of youth gangs emerge in the early stages of New Town development, the reaction of the community can critically affect the problem.   Kowloon City District has set up a cross- profession mechanism to deal with the issue in a comprehensive way.

Specialists and community leaders who were interviewed indicated that both the two New Towns play an active and important role in tackling the problem of youth gangs and marginal youth.

The Police Force also plays an important role in tackling the problem of youth gangs.   In recent years, a number of police stations organized campaigns on a wide variety of topics to combat and prevent youth crime.   These campaigns are diversified in terms of: (1) timing (one-off programmes, annual events or those held once in three years); (2) nature (education, preventive); (3) target (wandering youth, youth with criminal records, youth under the police superintendents' discretion scheme, deviant youth, kindergarten students); (4) role of police (direct counseling, case referral); (5) degree of police involvement (number of interventions, grade of police involvement, on duty or off duty involvement); (6) main intervention point (patrol in black spots for youth gangs, set up scouts); (7) involvement of community (parents, District Board, Fight Crime Committee, colleges); (8) involvement of professions (teachers and social workers).   This reflects the role of police in fighting youth gang is not confined to law enforcement, but is active in prevention work.

Some district police stations have formed special teams or cross-professional cooperation units in dealing with the problem.   For example, Kowloon City District has organized a "Concerning the Youth in Kowloon City Networking Scheme", which is a cross- professional establishment dealing with youth problems.   The spirit of the scheme is that no one profession can tackle the issue alone.   Under the scheme, a memorandum is drafted for the police, in which the police will not make use of the network to obtain information for criminal cases, nor to control the activities of youth (see attachment 4).   Even though this police district is not in a New town, the experience can be of value for

other communities.

With reference to foreign experiences, there is one other co-operation method that should be mentioned. America has set up "The National Youth Gang Centre". Members of the Center from 17 different states are experts in gang problems, representing over 15,000 associations. The mission of the Center is to co-ordinate expertise all over the country, to exchange related data, information, and anti-gang strategies. The Center also supports work at the district level and provides training, strategies and recommendations to reduce problem from gangs. This is a networking method that gathers resources to tackle problem together.

Recommendations

1. **The youth gang problems in New Towns should be dealt with proactively, by the setting-up of long term cross- profession mechanisms and formulating early strategies to prevent youth from joining gangs.**

Youth gangs and triad society culture are closely related. This study reveals that triad societies exist in line with the establishment of New Towns, while youth gangs are active in the early stage of New Towns. In New Towns, youth who live in different types of housing have the same chance of being attracted by triad societies. The study also reveals that New Towns have a higher youth population, with a lower socio- economic status. These characteristics help contribute to the growth of youth gangs.

Tseung Kwan O and Tin Shui Wai both react early in tackling juvenile delinquency, with efforts that are highly appreciated. Indeed, many communities have launched different campaigns to combat and prevent juvenile delinquency. However, most of these campaigns are occasional and are not specifically set up to deal with youth gangs.

We recommend that the problems of youth gangs in New Towns be dealt with proactively. With reference to some successful experiences, setting up long term cross-profession mechanisms, which may include police, Fight Crime Committees, schools, the Social Welfare Department, social workers and medical practitioners together and formulate strategies to prevent youth from joining gangs as necessary.

2. **Widely use an out- reach approach and prevent the growth of juvenile delinquency**

The study shows that respondents who frequently go to football pitches, parks and game centers after school have a higher chance of being invited to join youth gangs. Therefore, we suggest a wide use of out-reach approaches to contact youth exposed to these high risk areas.

In practice, social workers normally use an out-reach approach to contact youth in crisis and to help them to solve problems and return to everyday life in the community. The Government laid down one out-reaching team for every 100,000 people. In 1994, the Government has issued the "Implementation Guide on Review of Children and Youth Center Services". Under this Guide, the internal deployment of manpower, part of the out-reach social work, is built in integrated youth services. As a result, resources allocated for out-reach service has been indirectly decreased.

3. **Encourage parents to participate more in school affairs, which will help them understand the daily lives of their children.**

The Poll reveals that respondents who visit the homes of friends and schoolmates have a higher chance of being invited to join youth gangs. Most respondents indicated that their parents do not actively try to get to know their friends. As most respondents' mothers are housewives, they can play a more active role and be a rich resource to the community. We recommend parents to participate more in school affairs, familiarize themselves with their children's school lives and increase conversation and communication with their children.

4. **Provide services and facilities in New Towns to help youth to develop a healthy lifestyle as early as possible.**

The study reveals that public swimming pools and libraries are important facilities in New Towns for youth. However, both are absent in Tseung Kwan O, while there is no library in Tin Shui Wai.

As New Towns are highly populated with youth and the youth population is expected to grow, the Government should consider being more flexible in handling existing planning standards to prioritize services and facilities in the establishment of New Towns. These public facilities, like libraries and swimming pools are important to the growth of youth, and should be incorporated into the planning, so that the youth can grow up in a healthy and active environment.