

「香港低收入家庭青少年的生活狀況」研究  
A Study on the Livelihood of Young People from  
Low-income Households in Hong Kong

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# **A Study on the Livelihood of Young People from Low-income Households in Hong Kong**

## **Summary Report**

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In a knowledge-based economy, a person's social mobility largely depends on his/her level of knowledge and skills; and a society's competitiveness depends on the availability of a pool of talent needed for its development.

According to statistics of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, the number of low-income households, i.e. households with total incomes, as calculated by the number of members, below half of the medium household income, amounted to 441,460 in 2001. Within the low-income household population, the number of those aged between 15 and 24 increased from 76,290 in 1986 to 137,919 in 2001<sup>1</sup>.

By the end of May 2004, the number of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients had risen to 292,134, 56,902 of them aged between 15 and 24<sup>2</sup>.

Although Hong Kong's economy has shown signs of recovery, the unemployment rate among the youth remains high. According to statistics released by the Census and Statistics Department for the period August to October 2004, unemployment for young people aged between 15 and 19 stood at 27.6%, while the figure for those aged 20 to 24 hit 9.6%. There were 51,400 unemployed among those aged between 15 and 24. 32,200 of these had an educational level of senior secondary or below<sup>3</sup>.

According to information released for the same period, 75,500 young people aged between 15 and 24 were both unschooled and unemployed. As past reports of the Commission on Youth show, the problem of youth unemployment is more severe in families with lower incomes. Moreover, young people who are non-engaged youth (it refers to young people who were unemployed and unable to pursue further studies)

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<sup>1</sup> The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (2003) "A Statistical Profile of Low-income Households in Hong Kong", Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Council of Social Service.

<sup>2</sup> Abstract from Oxfam's Hong Kong Poverty Web, Website: [www.oxfam.org.hk/hkpoverty/index.d.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.hk/hkpoverty/index.d.htm)

<sup>3</sup> The Census and Statistics Department provided the statistical information on general unemployment and non-engaged youth for the period August to October 2004.

are more likely to come from low-income families<sup>4</sup>.

The youth nowadays are bracing for new challenges ahead. To fully participate in a knowledge-based economy, it is vital for them to have continuing learning opportunities, rich life experiences and broad social networks. On the other hand, will this highly competitive environment create more obstacles to the life of those young people who are either from low-income families or have left school and are without a job? And what will be the effect on their learning opportunities, life exposure and social networks? Those are subjects worthy of concern.

This study defines “youth” as young people between the ages of 15 and 24. “Low-income families” include families covered by the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme, or families with a total household income below half of the medium household income, according to the number of family members. With reference to the latest figures released by the Census and Statistics Department, the following families are all considered to be “low-income families”: a family of two with a total income below \$6,000, a family of three or four with a total income below \$8,000, and a family of five or more with a total income below \$10,000<sup>5</sup>. “Non low-income families” refers to families which are not on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme, and those with a household income not less than half of the medium household income, as calculated according to the number of family members.

The information used in this study was obtained by a questionnaire survey on the living standard for youth in Hong Kong, with a view to understand the life of those who are from low-income families or unemployed. The survey was conducted in December 2004. To help gather the survey samples, we have respectively invited students of F.4 to F.7 from 17 secondary schools and non-students between the ages of 15 and 24 from 21 youth sport run by the federation to answer the questionnaires. 836 and 340 completed questionnaires were returned from the students and non-students respectively. 783 of these could be used for analysis. Some of the returned questionnaires could not be accepted for analysis purposes as they failed to

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<sup>4</sup> Commission on Youth (2003) “Continuing Development and Employment Opportunities for Youth”, Hong Kong: Commission on Youth.

<sup>5</sup> According to the figures provided by the Census and Statistics Department for the third quarter of 2004, the medium family incomes for families comprising 2,3, 4 or 5 people are respectively \$12,000, \$16,000, \$19,000 and \$23,500. The figures for low-income families according to the number of family members are \$6,000, \$8,000, \$9,500 and \$11,750 respectively for families of 2, 3, 4 and 5. According to the categorization of “household income” in this present questionnaire survey, those low-income families of two should be included in Group 7 (5,000-5,999), families of three or four should be included in Group 8 (6,000-7,999), families of five or more should be included in Group 9 (8,000-9,999).

provide the monthly household income figures.

In order to get a better understanding of the situations of the interviewees, the analysis was divided into “student” and “non-student” categories. The student group was further divided into “low-income families” and “non low-income families”, and the non-student group was divided into two sub-groups: being employed and pending to be employed/unemployed.

To further understand the living conditions and obstacles facing young people from a low-income family background and to make suggestions for improvement, the analysis was supplemented by interviews with experts and scholars and case studies on young people. 10 experts/scholars, including academics, legislators and members of non-governmental organizations were successfully interviewed in December 2004. For the case studies, we have conducted interviews with 16 young people aged 15 to 24, of which nine were males and seven were females.

This study focuses on the youth from low-income families. To secure adequate samples for analysis, the researchers have specially selected relevant subjects for completing the questionnaires. Furthermore, in order to obtain detailed information from the interviewees, each questionnaire included a large number of questions and some of these questions required the interviewee to answer from memories. Inadequacies are thus unavoidable and readers should bear this in mind.

In this chapter, we will integrate our observations from the survey, discuss the main findings, and conclude with relevant suggestions.

## **Summary of the Research Findings**

### **A. Characteristics of the socio-economic background of youth from low-income families**

#### **1. The parents of young people from low-income families tend to be less educated than those from non low-income families.**

Among the students from low-income families, approximately 42.2% have a father with education at the primary level or below (including those without any education), which is higher compared to the 27.3% for those from non low-income

families.

Similarly, for each of non-student sub-groups, i.e. those pending to be employed/unemployed and being employed, about 35% indicated that their fathers were educated below primary level (including those without any education).

On the other hand, among students from low-income families, 45.1% have a mother with education below primary level (including those without any education), which is higher than the 31.1% for those from non low-income families.

For each of the non-student sub-groups, i.e. pending-to-be employed/unemployed and being employed, about 46% indicated that their mothers were educated below primary level (including those without any education).

**2. The parents of young people from low-income families are more likely non-skilled labourers or unemployed, than those from non low-income families.**

Among the students from low-income families, 45.8% have fathers who are either non-skilled laborers or unemployed. This is higher than the 18.2% for those from non low-income families. The results are similar for mothers, with 31.5% for those from low-income families and a lower percentage of 13.7 for those from non low-income families.

For the non-student young people who are either pending to be employed or unemployed, 29.3% have fathers who are non-skilled laborers or employed, while the percentage for mothers in the same situation is 28.5%. For those who are working, 24.8% have fathers who are non-skilled laborers or employed, and 24.2% of them have mothers in the same situation.

**3. Nearly 30% of the students from low-income families are not living with their father, mainly due to his decease or the separation of parents. This occurs less often among students from non low-income families. The same reasons were given by young people in the non-student group who are not living with their father.**

The survey shows that 29.9% of students from low-income families are not living with their father; 46.8% said he had died and 41.9% said their parents had been

separated.

For the non-students, among the 17.6% of those who do not have a job and are not living with their father, 28.1% said their fathers had died and 31.3% had their parents separated. For the 28.9% of those working youth who are not living with their father, the percentages are 31.3% and 46.9% respectively.

**4. Among the students from low-income families, 43% were born in the Mainland, which is much more than the 12% for those from non low-income families. About 10% of young people from the non-student group were born in the Mainland.**

The survey shows that about 43.6% students from low-income families were born in the Mainland. 26.1% of them have lived in Hong Kong for less than 7 years. In comparison, only 12.2% of students from non low-income families were Mainland-born.

For the non-student group, 16% of those who do not have a job were born in the Mainland, while the percentage is 12.4 for the young people who are being employed.

**B. The expectations on education levels and attitudes towards poverty and getting out of poverty by young people from low-income families**

**1. Both Students from low-income and non low-income families have high expectations on their education levels; however, the former are less optimistic about achieving high education levels than the latter. The gap between expectations and estimated achievements is the same in the non-student group including young people who are pending to be employed/unemployed and being employed.**

Both students from low-income and non low-income families have very high expectations about their education levels. The survey shows 68.9% of students from low-income families expect to achieve an educational attainment level from degree to doctorate, and 71.1% from non low-income families share the same view.

Nevertheless, there is a difference when it comes to the estimated education levels finally achieved. Students from low-income families are comparatively less optimistic about achieving high education levels than their counterparts from non low-income families. Only 34.8% estimate that they can meet the same goal, compared to the higher percentage of 48.8 for those from non low-income families.

In the non-student group, 32.8% of those pending to be employed/unemployed expect to achieve an educational attainment level from degree to doctorate, but only 13.3% think they can achieve what they expect; on the other hand, 40.1% of those being employed expect to obtain this educational level, but when asked about the likelihood of realizing their expectation, only 23% remain positive.

**2. Students from low-income families are positive towards the government's handling of poverty, while the opposite is true for those from the non-student group.**

Respondents were asked to evaluate the performance of the government in handling poverty on a scale of 0-10. Figures show that students from low-income families are more positive towards the government's performance in handling poverty with an average rating of 6.32, which is higher than the 4.04 given by those from non low-income families.

On the other hand, young people from the non-student group are generally more negative about the government's performance in handling poverty, with the respective average ratings being 3.82 for the unemployed, and 3.96 for the employed.

**3. Students from low-income families tend to believe in the existence of equal opportunities in the society, that personal efforts can improve one's living conditions, and remain optimistic about their future prospects. They do not agree with the notion that "poor parents can only have poor children". Young people from the non-student group, however, tend to agree they lack opportunities for improving living conditions in the present social environment. Yet, they also believe personal efforts can lead to better life chances and are optimistic about their future prospects. They too question the notion that "poor parents can only have poor children".**

This survey listed a series of descriptions to find out the position taken by the respondents on a scale of 0-10. Figures show that students from low-income families give an average score of 6.32 to the phrase “opportunities exist in the society to allow for social advances by personal efforts”, 7.49 to “personal efforts can lead to a better life”, 5.87 to “the respondent is optimistic about his/her future prospect” and 3.55 to “poor parents can only have poor children”.

For their non-student counterparts, the average ratings for “the present social environment does not offer opportunities for improving living conditions” are 6.38 for those pending to be employed/unemployed and 6.31 for those being employed. In response to “personal efforts can lead to a better life”, their respective average ratings are 7.10 and 7.71. Besides, most of them do not agree that “poor parents can only have poor children”, which is reflected by the low average ratings of 4.09 and 3.30 respectively, especially among the employed. At the same time, both groups gave positive ratings to “the respondent is optimistic about his/her future prospect”, as they gave the high average ratings of 6.06 and 6.21 respectively.

**4. More students from low-income families believe that “poor people are being discriminated against by the society” than their counterparts from non low-income families. Similarly, more employed young people than those who are not having a job believe that “poor people are being discriminated against by the society”.**

On a scale of 0-10, the respondents were asked to assess whether poor people are being discriminated against by the society. The findings show that the ratings score higher among students from a poor family background with 5.84 on average, as compared to 5.34 from those with a better-off background. On the other hand, more employed young people view that “poor people are being discriminated against by the society” as shown by the average rating of 5.79, higher than the 5.68 of their unemployed counterparts.

**5. Students from both low-income and non low-income families tend to agree that individual inertia leads to poverty, but the percentage is higher among the latter group. The same results are found among the young people in the non-student group.**

The survey listed out a number of factors leading to poverty, including “poverty is caused by individual inertia”, “poverty is caused by injustice in the society”, and



“poverty is the result of bad luck”. Among those three factors, students from low-income families believe more in “poverty is caused by individual inertia”, with an average rating of 5.82. The other two factors were respectively given 5.03 and 4.04.

This result is consistent among students from non low-income families. They gave the average rating of 6.31, higher than the 5.14 and 4.14 given to the other two factors.

For the non-students, those who are without a job tend to believe that “poverty is caused by individual inertia” with an average score of 5.99, higher than the 5.90 and 4.45 given to the other two factors.

Those who are having a job feel the same. They gave an average rating of 6.45 to “poverty is caused by individual inertia”, higher than that of the remaining two which are 5.75 and 4.26.

### **C. Learning and living conditions for young people from low-income families**

#### **1. Students from low-income families do not participate as often and spend as much in learning enhancement activities such as tuition classes, hiring private tutors and purchasing reference books/materials as those from better-off families.**

It is found that students from low-income families do not attend after-school tuition classes or hire private tutors as often as those from non low-income families do. The participation rates are 34.5% and 10.3% for the former students, and 50.6% and 15.2% for the latter students respectively.

Furthermore, students from low-income families tend to spend less on average in attending after-school tuition classes, hiring private tutors and purchasing reference books/materials. The average amounts they spend on these three items are \$2,304, \$2,092.14 and \$206, which are lower than those spent by their non low-income counterparts who spend \$2,901, \$4,075 and \$253 respectively.

#### **2. Students from low-income families tend to consider tuition fees as an important factor in pursuing further studies; they also think their**

**family's financial background diminishes their chances for learning and life exposure. For the non-students, nearly 40% of those who are not employed and who are having a job regard their family's financial background as an obstacle for chances of learning. However, only about 20% of them think it will diminish their life exposure. Young people who are employed tend to place more emphasis on tuition fees as an important element for further studies than their unemployed counterparts.**

Respondents were asked to assess whether "tuition fee is an important factor for pursuing further studies?" on a scale of 0-10. The results reveal that 53.8% of students from low-income families agree, by giving 6 to 10 scores, that tuition fee is an important consideration for pursuing further studies. This represents a higher proportion than the 45.5% for those who are from non low-income families. On the other hand, 69.9% of those who are working regard tuition fee as a main factor, compared with only 55.4% for those who are not having a job.

The survey also shows that 45.8% of students from low-income families believe their financial situation reduces their chances of learning, while only 18.9% of students from non low-income families feel this way. In response to whether their family background places any obstacle to their life exposure, similar percentages appear for the two groups: 45.5% and 18.9%.

For non-students, 39.8% of the employed and 38.4% of the unemployed believe their families' financial situation is a hindrance for their learning opportunities. As to whether it will also diminish their chance for life exposure, only 28.8% of those employed agree, compared with the higher rate of 24.3% among those who are not employed.

**3. Students from both low-income and non low-income families more or less share the same experience in school. However, students from non low-income families engage more in other life experiences such as purchasing newspapers and magazines, participating in voluntary work, attending after-school interest and skill lessons, and traveling.**

The respondents were presented with a list of school activities including school picnic, interest classes, academic clubs, school teams and service teams, and were required to record their attendance over the past six months. Students from both

low-income and non low-income families have similar participation rates, which means whatever the family backgrounds students come from, they have equal chances for taking part in school life.

On the other hand, the same respondents were asked to record past attendance for a list of after-school activities, which include purchasing newspapers and magazines, participating in voluntary work, attending after-school interest classes/skills lessons, taking part in mainland or overseas exchange programmes and traveling overseas. Students from low-income families are less involved in such activities as those from non low-income families.

Students from low-income families spent on average \$1,147 on after-school interest/skill lessons over the past six months. This is less than half of the \$2,514 spent by their better-off counterparts.

As regards overseas traveling, students from low-income families are more likely to have visited their hometown in the Mainland and Guangdong Province rather than South-East Asia or further abroad like North America. On the contrary, although many students from non low-income families have visited their hometown and Guangdong, a large number of them have also gone to overseas destinations such as Southeast Asia, while some of them traveled to North America and Australasia.

**4. Students from low-income families, unemployed young people, and those who are working all have a positive attitude towards their communication skills, teamwork abilities, common sense and self-esteem.**

The respondents were asked to rate four personal attributes - communication skills, teamwork abilities, common sense and self-esteem on a scale of 0-10. All three groups of respondents gave either close to or above score 6 for most of the four items.

## Discussion

This study aims at finding out whether the disadvantaged financial situation of young people from low-income families has affected their life chances and thus impedes their upward social mobility. The effects come in two aspects: their attitudes and their living conditions.

### **A. The existence of room for upward mobility**

In terms of attitudes, figures show that young people from low-income families see prospects for upward mobility owing to the following five reasons:

1. Those interviewed have high expectations for further education with a hope to obtain from degree to doctorate.
2. Most of the interviewees do not agree to the notion “poor parents can only have poor children”.
3. Most of the interviewees believe “personal efforts can lead to a better life”.
4. Most of the students from low-income families believe “equal opportunities exist in the society for people to move upward by personal efforts”.
5. Students from low-income families have positive comments on the work of the government in handling poverty.

The above results show young people from low-income families believe equal opportunities do exist in the society and are confident that they can improve their living conditions and get out of poverty by personal efforts. Therefore the SAR Government should make an endeavor in helping them to climb up the social ladder and also, mind the following potential problems:

1. Young people from low-income families, though having high expectations on their education level, are not optimistic they can achieve what they expect.
2. Young people from low-income families, on average, rate above 5 in response to the notion “poor people are being discriminated by the society”.
3. School-leavers, regardless whether they are employed or not, have a rather negative view towards the government’s performance in handling poverty with an average rating below 4.
4. The non-student interviewees gave an average rating above 6 for the description “our society failed to offer people opportunities for improving living conditions”.

## **B. Tackling the barriers to social mobility**

The above figures show that in order to effectively improve the living conditions of young people from poorer families and increase social mobility we should at the same time remove the obstacles that get in the way. These obstacles include:

### **1. The financial barrier**

First, according to the figures, students from low-income families have less access to learning enhancement activities, such as attending tuition classes, hiring private tutors and purchasing reference books, which are common among their better-off counterparts. Therefore, those students and young people from a poorer background are more likely to view their family's financial situation diminishes their chance of learning, or even reduce their choice of learning.

Second, recent education reform aims at enhancing students' learning abilities by exposing them to diverse experiences. In terms of life experiences, students from low-income families are in a less advantaged position than those from a better-off background, thereby weakening their competitiveness.

Third, experts/scholars point out that young people from low-income families lack a sense of aspirations for their career. Those who are not doing well at work or school feel there is no way out and are sceptical about their prospects. However, they do have expectations about their educational achievement. Regrettably, tuition fees are an important consideration for further studies for young people from low-income families. Although alternative paths are available such as Project Yi Jin and associate degree programmes, the high fees and the time gap between applying for a place and applying for assistance under the "Local Student Finance Scheme" discourages many of them to pursue further studies.

### **2. The barrier to qualification recognition**

With the development of a knowledge-based economy, knowledge and skills are two cornerstones for people to climb up the social ladder. As pointed out by the interviewed experts/scholars, helping young people from low-income families to enhance their qualification levels will allow them to find jobs for career development and is therefore the best way to improve their life. Without a formal mechanism for qualifications recognition at present, it is difficult for young people to make any

decisions on planning and investing.

### **3. The barrier to obtaining assistance**

Improving the life of young people from poor families cannot do without providing assistance for their basic needs. Timely assistance is vital for those who are bereaved of the bread-winning father, are left with a single-parent family when parents separated, or those who come from the Mainland. On the other hand, it is equally important to provide them with chances for education advancement, so they can improve their life and climb up socially.

There are now different kinds of training opportunities for unemployed youth who have left school, including the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme, Project Yi Jin, the Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme, and the Youth Self-employment Support Scheme. Although each of them works in some way, these programmes have different points of emphasis and durations, and therefore, fall short of giving comprehensive and effective training to those who need the basic vocational skills, specific occupational skills and work experience to get better exposure.

Besides, for some poor young people who are capable to get a place in tertiary institutions, problems arise when they cannot apply for the subsidies for tertiary students in time to pay for the tuition fees. They can only apply for the subsidies after the university term started, thereby putting financial and psychological burdens on them.

Facing the above obstacles, apart from encouraging those young people to persevere and find their ways, we may also ask what can be done by, for example, the Social Welfare Department, the Labour Department, the Education and Manpower Bureau, youth service organizations and the business sector? In fact, helping less advantaged young people in climbing up the social ladder by providing education and training not only helps them but also results in an improved human resources investment in the long term.

## **Recommendations**

This study shows that low qualification, low income and unemployment are the main obstacles for the youth from low-income families to climb up the social ladder. Several statistics reveal that there are now tens of thousand of teenagers aged between 15 and 24 who are living in low-income families. If they are not taken care of in the present development of a knowledge-based economy, they will be trapped in a low-income spiral and lose vision on their future prospects. It is detrimental to the long-term development of our society if we fail to match the drive for a knowledge-based economy with a compatible pool of human capital. In view of this, it is imperative to improve the opportunities for these young people and enable them to move up the social ladder. For a start, we must acknowledge the value of the safety net provided by our existing Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme for the needy families. Next, further assistance should be considered on the basis of the following five principles:

- 1. All pertinent policies should uphold the core values of equal opportunities and personal efforts in the Hong Kong society.**
- 2. Such policies should focus on providing opportunities and assistance, so that young people from low-income families can be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for moving up the social ladder.**
- 3. In the quest for a knowledge-based economy, the government should eliminate the current obstacles through providing qualifications bridging programmes and formulating a clear qualifications framework, and inform the young people of the choices they have. This way, they can find out how to get the right qualifications or work experiences for gradually achieving their aspirations.**
- 4. In light of the barriers faced by the young people from poor families, the government should reinforce inter-departmental cooperation and coordination on areas like youth services, educational services and training initiatives.**
- 5. To effectively tackle the adversities facing those poor young**

**people, extensive cooperation among the government, business corporations and non-governmental organizations is a must.**

We have the following recommendations under the aforesaid five principles:

- 1. At present, the financial barriers affect both poor students in their exposure to the after-school life, and those who have left school wanting to embark on further studies. Therefore, we suggest the implementation of a learning-oriented subsidy scheme, so that young people who aspire to continue studying while lacking financial support will be able to raise their competitiveness on an equal footing. The policies should be formulated to help only those in need, for example, by careful screening procedures, to make sure equal opportunities are given to the right recipients for further learning. Overseas experiences provide an example. In the United Kingdom, the needy are given “smart cards” for access to the learning aid services subsidized by the government. Locally, we suggest the government conduct further studies for similar measures in Hong Kong.**
- 2. The requirement for prospective students to pay the full or partial fee before they can enroll in Project Yi Jin or other tertiary institutions discourages many young people from low-income families. Therefore, we suggest that the period between the application for study loans and subsidies and the enrollment period of those tertiary institutions be bridged, so as to eliminate the financial and psychological burdens placed on the young people who are pressed to pay for the tuition fees in advance.**
- 3. The current governmental policies designed for young school-leavers who cannot afford to pursue further studies and which provides them with various vocational training or on-the-job training programmes, should be commended. However, the fact that those programmes are being held at intervals is undesirable and they fail to consolidate the three**



essential skills, i.e. interpersonal, teambuilding and problem-solving skills; specific occupational skills; and work experience into a systemic training programme designed for those teenagers. Therefore, in our opinion, the government should join hands with business corporations and non-governmental organizations to provide comprehensive learning and training opportunities, which can pave the way for those young people in getting the necessary qualifications and experiences. We suggest that industrial and commercial enterprises provide “trainee” or “apprenticeship” positions to young people in need, while non-governmental organizations work with the Vocational Training Council to run basic and occupational training courses, with the government being the provider of appropriate resources and subsidies.

4. Enhancing individual qualifications is an important aspect in facilitating social mobility under the knowledge-based economy. The Education and Manpower Bureau did address this point when it released the “Consultation Paper on the Proposal to set up a Qualifications Framework and the Associated Quality Assurance Mechanism in Hong Kong” in February 2003. In a similar move, the Executive Council resolved to set up a cross-sectors seven-tier qualifications recognition scheme and associated quality-assurance mechanism on 10 February 2004. We welcome these initiatives and hope they will soon be materialized to enable young people from low-income families to make choices in forging ahead with clearer goals and visions.
5. Young people from a poor family background need the support and concern of the society. We call on parents to give their children wholehearted encouragement to make the most of the learning and training opportunities provided, so that those young people can move ahead and build a brighter future.