



Hong Kong Church Network for the Poor

Co-organised with Urban Peacemaker School of Missions

A Study of the Livelihood of the Grassroots in Central and Western District

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Founding Organization: Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union,
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Summary

- **Background of research**

1. Hong Kong Church Network for the Poor (HKCNP) builds a network platform for community partners to transform communities. The problem of poverty in Hong Kong is structural. The teachings are committed to alleviating the poverty problem in the 18 districts of Hong Kong through structural solutions.
2. The purpose of this study is to understand the housing distributions, living conditions, family structure, external support and mental health of the disadvantaged groups in the district, the problem of poverty and upward mobility of grassroots children, the impact of the MTR extension on the Western District and the survey allows appropriate partners and resources to effectively enter the district.
3. This study adopted a mixed approach, that is, both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied. In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 grassroots family representatives and young people; and we had also invited church workers, Christians and local people who are responsible for community care ministries from different churches or institutions to focus groups. The research team designed a questionnaire for collecting qualitative data. We collected a total of 234 questionnaires during the study period.
4. The Central and Western District often gives the impression of prosperity, prosperity and progress. Many people regard "Central Value" as the core value of Hong Kong. The professional and administrative personnel and the industrial and commercial operations and exchanges in this district have been the hallmarks of Hong Kong's prosperity and modernization. However, like some areas of other developed countries or regions, there are many social and livelihood issues hidden behind the prosperity of the community here, such as poverty, public safety and people's livelihood. Although in accordance with the figures provided by Commission on Poverty, the Central and Western District was the richest region in Hong Kong in 2017, the living conditions of many grassroots in the region are no better than those in other regions. For example, in the Central and Western District, especially in its western section, there are actually many tenants who have to pay for expensive rents, food, housing and transportation.

5. Like other parts of Hong Kong, some families in the Central and Western District are faced with the challenges of marital relations and parent-child relationships, and many of them are also facing tremendous pressure to take care of the frail older adults in the family. Teenagers at the grassroots level in the district are also faced with confusion and challenges in their studies and employment.

- **Analyses of the interview results**

6. Between May and June 2019, the research team had successfully conducted individual or small group in-depth interviews with 40 residents through the recommendation of the church and social service units in the Central and Western District to understand their perception of the Central and Western District, and also their daily lives, their daily difficulties and challenges in social networks, whether they were being discriminated against in the community, and their views and opinions on the services provided by the churches and social welfare agencies in Central and Western District.
7. Overall speaking, respondents' perception of the Central and Western District were quite diverse. The housewife respondents were not very impressed about the district because the rent and prices in this area were very expensive. They moved to this district because there were relatives here, and the school net of the Central and Western District has been quite renowned. Some had considered to move out of the Central and Western District before because of high rent, but they had to stay for the sake of their children's education. Young people also said that they had a good impression of the Central and Western District, because the shops they needed were all nearby, so it was very convenient to them. And in their sense, the area is really humanistic, and the relationship between the neighbours had been also very good.
8. Many housewives thought that the public utilities in the Central and Western District were not adequate to meet the needs of residents. They also mentioned about their poor living environment and high rent, as well as the costs of daily necessities were higher than other regions. Some youth respondents indicated that the living environment in the district was quite ideal. They felt that the small shops in the area still retained a kind of warm interpersonal relation, but these stores had gradually been replaced by chain stores and big corporations, so it was not easy to find a cheaper restaurant around.
9. Women and seniors interviewed usually did not go to work, and some occasionally went to the church. A small number of post-retirement life mainly focused on

volunteering service and part-time work in different social welfare organizations in the district. Some respondents also said that they had no other types of social networks. Many new arrivals pointed out that they were not familiar with community services in the district. Apart from this, they knew nothing about the medical system in Hong Kong, but they knew that it would take a long time to see a doctor in a public hospital, and it was very expensive to visit private clinics.

10. Except for a small number of respondents who indicated that they did not face too much living difficulties, most of them faced challenges in different aspects. The biggest difficulty faced by the respondents at present was the housing problem. The environment of the subdivided units made them feel unwell. Some older adults interviewed said that the biggest difficulty was the rising costs of rent, and application for the government social security schemes was complicated and difficult.
11. Generally speaking, the biggest difficulties faced by residents were financial and medical shortages. As many older people had long-term illnesses, had mobility hindrances and needed to pay high medical expenses. In terms of emotional health, some respondents needed to go to the hospital for examination every week, and they needed to take regular medications for their emotional issues.
12. The people in the interviewed said that even though the children of the older people were very rich, their relationship with their parents is very alienated. They might live closed to their parents but rarely visited them. Couple relationships were also widely alienated amongst the grassroots, and many respondents with children said that one of the difficulties they faced was the education of their children. Many of their children were still young, and some of them entering secondary school had to adapt to the school life, and they are in rebellion, sometimes they will not listen to their parents.
13. The majority of the youth interviewees were mainly faced with three major difficulties. First, the pressure on their further studies, because their families hoped that they could at least attained university education. At the same time, they had busy daily schedules and feeling tired of going back and forth between school and tutoring classes. Also, they all said that the English was the biggest difficulty for them, and the results were often not ideal. Second, their preferred directions were different from what their parents expected. Third, they worried about the social situations, their own emotions and pessimisms about the future.

14. Some respondents indicated that they were rarely being discriminated by others in the community. The most serious incident indicated by an interviewee was about being ill treated verbally by a supermarket staff, but overall the interviewees were very satisfied with the attitude of the people in the community. Some new arrivals had observed that some shops in the district would make fun of people from the Mainland.
15. The women interviewed and the elderly as a whole were very satisfied with the assistance provided by the church, social welfare agencies and government departments. The church usually provided a lot of academic support to their children and gives them spiritual support. Some respondents had expectations of the church and believed that the role of the church in the community was very important, because the main role of the church was to help people, preach, and make community residents feeling less miserable. The church could also render crucial emotional support to the community members.
16. Most of the youth respondents were generally satisfied with the community facilities and services in the district, which could provide valuable advice and inspiration for their future career planning. However, some suggestions could provide more English classes and services related to emotional support and psychological counselling. Those interviewees who were Christians thought that the atmosphere in the churches in the district was very good. The brothers and sisters at church very tolerant of and held a kindred heart to each other, and the churches also put a lot of resources to organize activities. They told other respondents that they attended church since childhood and believed in Christianity since then. They were grateful for the nurturance of their character, knowledge and skills as they grew up.
17. In addition to conducting in-depth interviews with residents and service users in the district, the research team also conducted six focus group interviews with church pastors and evangelists in the Central and Western Districts, the Christians in charge of social ministry, and community stakeholders (district council members, representatives of social service units and other enthusiastic community activists) in May and June 2019.
18. Different church representatives had different perspectives about the district. The opinions were mainly divided into three service types: outreach services, service centres, and collaborations with the social welfare network in the region. The outreach services had been limited, such as visiting elderly homes, visiting training centres and hospitals

during major festivals. In addition, the service centres provided services for children, women and the older adults on a family basis, and often cooperated with the social welfare networks in the district.

19. In the focus group with the church pastors, we found that they generally faced a dilemma because many believers in the churches felt that social services had no strong associations between caring for poverty and evangelism. They reflected that many of the church members did not understand what their pastors were serving in the community. These members believed that community care must include evangelism. Therefore, the pastors needed to explain the meaning of social relations and support the community to the congregation.
20. The Christians interviewed by us held different ministries in the church, but they faced various difficulties at the same time. As most of their churches were situated in the middle class neighbourhoods, even if they were willing to serve the poor, it was difficult to reach them. Even if some churches were situated in the more grassroots areas and the church could reach the community members, the service they rendered were always unable to meet the needs of the grassroots.
21. We found in the interviews that the Central and Western District Church had few joint actions in recent years. Each church had a tendency to do their own gospel and community care ministries.
22. In the focus group with community stakeholders, most of the respondents thought that the community had undergone changes after the opening of the MTR extension in the Western District. Previously, there were more old buildings in the area, but now those were mostly demolished. The previous subdivided units had turned to be luxurious residences. Because of the high property prices, many families had to live together with generation, which might lead to family problems. Apart from the grassroots, the interviewees also found that there were some "poor middle class" in the Central and Western District. These people were not eligible for public housing because their income had already exceeded the income threshold, their lives were also very tight.

- **Analyses of the Survey Results**

23. A total of 234 respondents answered the questionnaires designed by the research team. Among them, women accounted for 78.3%. Most of the respondents did not have a specific religious belief, and nearly 30% of them were Protestant Christians, followed

by Buddhists (11.1%) and other traditional Chinese beliefs (8.7%). For those who had religious beliefs, more than half of them believed in this particular religion for a decade or more. However, more than 70% of them only participated in religious worships or gatherings once a week or less.

24. Most of the respondents did not engage in paid work. The proportion of people who had paid work was about 37% to 38%. Most of them were tenants, but most lived in private buildings. Only 25% of them lived in public housing. However, it must be pointed out that about 14% of them lived in informal accommodations, such as "subdivided units". In addition, 41% of the respondents' income comes from employment or self-employment, followed by the old age allowance ("fruit money"). Only about 20% of them received Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), and 17.2% of them received other social security schemes.
25. Regarding the educational level of respondents, the largest group was those who completed secondary education (27.9%). There were 20% of them had not yet completed secondary school. In general, respondents were not highly educated as more than 38% of educated people had received primary education or below.
26. As for the respondents' views on the living conditions in the Central and Western District, more than half (57%) answered that they would stay in the district for the next three years. This meant that most respondents were willing to stay in this district. Very few of them said they would not or might not stay in the area for the next three years. In addition, 31.6% of them think that their living environment was still ordinary. However, when being asked to comment on current living standards (Table 25), the overall level was not high. More than 60% of the standard of living was only "general", but more than 20% of people pointed out that the standard of living was "low".
27. The research team used statistics from 11 indicators of family cohesion extracted from the *Index of Family Relations* (IFR). The average of the indicators was general very high, with no indicators falling below 3.5 (out of 5). Among the 11 indicators, those with the highest mean values were "I get along well with my family" (4.14), "My family members get along well" (4.13), and secondly, "My family members care about each other" (4.12) and "My family is full of love" (4.11). The lowest indicator is "I rely on my family" (3.57), "I am proud of my family" (3.87) and "My family is respected by others" (3.94). these meant that family members in our sample generally got along very well and have a strong emotional connection to each other.

28. The questionnaire also covers the psychological level of respondents by measuring their loneliness. It was found that among the individual loneliness indicators, the highest average is "I really want someone to accompany me" (1.75), but it is not high in numbers. Among the three indicators of interpersonal relationship, "there are enough people to make me feel close" has the highest average (2.30), and the average of the other two indicators is greater than 2 (3 points out of). Overall, the average individual loneliness is 1.67, while the average interpersonal relationship is 2.18. These indicate that, overall, the respondents in our sample did not feel a serious sense of loneliness and established an ideal relationship with the people around them.
29. Based on the data from the questionnaire survey, we tested the correlations between family cohesiveness, the frequency of having loneliness and interpersonal relationships, other personal socio-economic characteristics and the living environment in the Central and Western District. The tests on family cohesion showed that family cohesiveness was negatively correlated with the frequency of feeling lonely, which meant that the stronger the cohesiveness of respondents' families, the lower the sense of loneliness they felt. Family closeness was also positively correlated to the frequency of having strong social networks, so we could deduce that stronger family cohesiveness was associated with stronger interpersonal relationships.
30. Whether the resident was the owner of the accommodation might affect family cohesion, because their family closeness was negatively correlated to whether the respondent's residence was self-owned or rented, and whether they were satisfied with their living environment, and also positively correlated to their satisfaction with current living standards. In addition, if they were more satisfied with their accommodation and current living standards, their families would be closer. As for personal loneliness, it is highly correlated to family cohesion but the correlation was negative. This meant that a cohesive family might lead to a lower chance of people experiencing loneliness. The ownership of the accommodation was positively related to personal loneliness, which meant that tenants could often be more susceptible to personal loneliness. We could infer that the quality of housing and a better standard of living might help to reduce the frequency of individual loneliness.
31. These results of correlational analyses indicated that housing conditions and living standards might be important factors in relation to the family life and mental state of the respondents. Generally speaking, those households with home ownership were

more cohesive, with a healthier mental state and a weaker sense of loneliness, and also having stronger interpersonal relationships. Moreover, if the interviewees were satisfied with the living environment and had experienced improvement of their living standards over the years, they would also have better family life and interpersonal relationships.

- **Recommendations**

32. Through in-depth interviews with relevant residents, group discussions and survey, the research team found that the housing expenses were quite heavy for the grassroots in the Central and Western District, and many of their living environments were not desirable, which would affect the family relationships and student's after-school studies. Poor living conditions could have a negative impact on family cohesiveness, personal loneliness and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, a large number of parents and young people opined that there were not sufficient learning and leisure facilities and emotional support in the community for the youths, especially for learning English language. In response to the above situations, the research team had proposed recommendations for the social service measures, the future roles of the social welfare organizations and the church in Central and Western District.
33. Regarding the **housing problems**, we suggest that the government departments and the relevant social stakeholders should pay more attention to the housing needs of the grassroots. For them, the burden of rent in the Central and Western District is quite heavy, and living environment might not be desirable. There are also many subdivided units in the district, which will affect the quality of life, family relations and psychological conditions of the grassroots. Government and social service organizations and churches should proactively explore the promotion of social housing sharing in the district. For example, by adopting the model of social enterprises "Light Be", interested homeowners could be invited to rent out properties at concessional rents for the grassroots families in need to share the flats.
34. We recommend that volunteers in the district should be mobilized to supplement the deficiencies of regular community-funded services for older people. In terms of resources and policies, the Administration should coordinate and promote innovative and flexible community care services with organizations and churches in the district to help with the home cleaning for the families concerned, such as mobilizing volunteers

or part-time staff to carry out home cleaning and simple care services to relieve the pressure on the formal services. With regard to churches, they could consider opening up places for children and adolescents as their study room, so that they could do homework and have spaces for activities. Churches and institutions can co-organize regular "festival dinners". A free dinner should be available during festivals to allow low-income families to enjoy a delicious dinner, and let them to have a rich dinner away from their congested living environment.

35. With regard to **promoting the relationship between members of the grassroots family**, we recommend that social service units and churches in the district should pay more attention to the need of family harmony, especially for couples with long working hours as they need more time to get along with and understand each other, and break through the barriers. We also recommend that social welfare organizations and churches should walk more closely together with the parents face the challenges of getting along with their children together with them. For example, more parent workshops can be organized to enable them to understand the traits and mind-sets at different stages of children's development, so that parents can master the skills of communication and crisis management with them, and let new arrival parents understand Hong Kong's education system and lifestyles. The congested living environments have brought a lot of tensions to the family, and the financial pressures on the parents also affect family relationships.
36. **The needs of young people and learning English** are closely related to the growth and career development of young people. Therefore, the social welfare units and churches in the district can play a more active role, such as providing free or affordable English tutoring services. The social welfare units and the churches can recruit university students, retired or other enthusiastic people with English proficiency in the district to prepare English for the grassroots, so that they are not too lonely in the learning process.
37. Social welfare organizations and churches should be more aware of the preferences and needs of young people in providing services and activities, so as to engage and support them more effectively. The content of services and activities must keep pace with the times in understanding what teenagers need and what they prefer. The social welfare units and churches in the district also need to strengthen publicity of services in the

community to increase visibility and enable more families and youths to identify the services they need.

38. At the same time, the government departments should also work closely with the social welfare organizations and churches to provide more recreational and recreational facilities for the youths in the district. According to many respondents, the cultural facilities in the district are not geographically concentrated enough, and the study rooms are also not sufficient. Institutions in the district should also find more spaces to do hold activities, so the churches can provide venues, as they should have room to share space on weekdays.
 39. The research team found that many respondents have a high degree of trust in social workers and churches. They all believe that churches and Christians are not only responsible for resolving their daily needs, but they are also important in emotional support, personal character nurturance, and mediation of family relationships. Therefore, churches need to win the trust of the residents and let them agree with the fact that churches and Christians could walk with them. Churches can set up special fellowships for the youths in the community (not necessarily evangelistic at first) to provide them with a platform full of love for them to talk about their concerns and voices.
 40. **For families with older people**, we believe that the main strategy should be providing tangible services to support their health and long-term care needs. For example, churches can collaborate with social welfare agencies and Christian doctors in the community to provide the medical services they need. Churches should also stay in liaison with government agencies and social welfare units in the community and mobilize them to provide home care services such as meal delivery and cleaning. Churches or institutions recruit volunteers to serve older grassroots elders.
- **Further work plans of joint church network**
41. **Strengthening the participation of church members in the district to care for and serve the community:** There are 34 Chinese-speaking churches under The Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union. We suggest that the churches in the district should strengthen their participation in caring for and serving the community.
 42. **Establishing a cross-sector platform for supporting the grassroots:** Two meetings should be held each year in the district to discuss how to serve the grassroots; and invite

relevant speakers to share in order let the churches know about other social welfare organizations, schools, enterprises and government departments. They will have the opportunity to know each other.

43. **Mobilizing English-speaking churches in Central and Western District:** English-speaking churches in this district can provide extracurricular courses for children from grassroots families, such as English tuition and music lessons. It would be more ideal if they can provide training to volunteers from the English church.
44. **New concepts for church community services:** The churches in the district can consider opening spaces to serve the grassroots of the community and they are mostly housed in spacious buildings with long history. They should explore how to open up their spaces and meet the needs of the community.
45. **Unearthing hidden resources in the community:** Mobilize and encourage enterprises in the Central and Western District to support the grassroots and enable other businesses to understand more about the living conditions of grassroots.

Acknowledgment

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Christian & Missionary Alliance Elim Church	Caritas Mok Cheung Sui Kun Community Centre
Sheung Wan Baptist Church	Caritas Community Centre - Caine Road
Assemblies of God West Point Church	橋下祝福站
Western District Evangelical Church	Hong Kong Family Welfare Society
Tsung Tsin Mission Of Hong Kong Kennedy Town Church	Grace and Joy Integrated Family Service Centre
Hong Kong Baptist Church	YWCA Western District Integrated Social Service Centre
Hong Kong Baptist Church Good Neighbour Chapel	Love & Care for the Sick Foundation Limited
Church of the Saviour (Methodist)	HKSKH St. Matthew's Neighbourhood Elderly Centre
West Point Ling Liang Church	St. James' Settlement People's Food Bank
Tsung Tsin Mission of Hong Kong Kau Yan Church	TTMSSD Reedfield Growth Centre
Hong Kong Kennedy Town Baptist Church	Kau Yan Service Centre
HKSKH St. Stephen's Church	HKSKH Western District Elderly Community Centre
Chinese Rhenish Church Hong Kong	HKSKH St. Luke's Settlement Neighbourhood Elderly Centre
Sai Ying Pun Free Methodist Church	BGCA JC Sheung Wan C&Y Integrated Social Centre
EFCC - Kong Fok Church	KATA Industries Limited
Western District Peace Evangelical Center	SWD Central Western, Southern & Islands District Social Welfare Office
Western District Alliance Church	
Solomon's Porch	