CENTRAL POLICY UNIT
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE HONG KONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION

A STUDY ON FAMILY-CENTERED PREVENTION OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS’ AND BOYS’ PROSTITUTION

CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
MARCH 2011
Executive Summary

This is a report of findings and recommendations concerning government policies and practices related to family-centered prevention of adolescent prostitution. The findings evolve from quantitative analysis of survey data obtained from 387 youths and qualitative analysis of data obtained from 30 youths, 30 parents, and 58 professionals provided in personal interviews or focus groups. Specifically, the 387 surveyed youths (including 259 girls and 128 boys), as referred by some social service units, included 30 youths selected for qualitative interviews due to their experience in compensated dating and/or prostitution. The survey and interviews with the youths and parents occurred between May and October 2010.

Background

Prostitution is a social problem involving young people, beginning in adolescence, and made worse by the development of an unscrupulous form of compensated dating which refers to a girl’s or a boy’s dating for the purpose of receiving compensation. This typically occurs among adolescents and is facilitated by individualized contact using modern information and communication technology. Prostitution is harmful to the adolescent physically, mentally, and spiritually. The problems afflict girls and boys as well. Because of this, adolescent prostitution engenders problems in health, labor, education, law and order, social ethos, and other areas in society. A promising way to prevent the problem is a family-centered approach, in view of the potential impacts of the family on adolescent development, harmonious family relationships, and related issues. However, knowledge about family-centered prevention of adolescent prostitution is lacking.

In his address at the Legislative Council meeting on October 14, 2009, the Chief Executive, The Honourable Donald Tsang said, "Many social problems, including juvenile drug abuse, prostitution …, can be traced back to the family. Better family relationships mean fewer social problems. I will ask the Family Council to focus on these problems and find new policy options to alleviate them at the family level.”

With this background, the Family Council, in association with the Central Policy Unit, commissioned this research team to conduct this study. Upon completion of this study, it is expected that the findings should include information and analyses on the following four themes:

1. family antecedents of the problem;
2. experiences of families in the process;
3. how families can play a role to solve the problem; and
4. recommendations for family related policy.

Objectives
The overall aim of the study is to explicate family factors related to adolescent prostitution in order to inform policies and practices for family-centered prevention of adolescent prostitution. Specifically, the study intends to fulfill the following objectives:
1. Clarifying family-centered factors that are useful for practice and policy to tackle adolescent prostitution and its risks;
2. Verifying the influences of family or parental factors on adolescent prostitution and its risks;
3. Exploring relationships among the family and parental factors and suggestions from social work and other professionals which are relevant for practice and policy; and
4. Developing practical knowledge to inform the prevention of adolescent prostitution and mitigate its risks.

Data Collection
Research about adolescent prostitution is remarkably sensitive and difficult to conduct. A pragmatic approach is necessary to collect data, typically through social service units. As a result, the sample for this study was not a representative sample. Therefore, the results of this study can only be used and interpreted with great caution. By the end of October 2010, the study surveyed 387 youths mostly about their experiences before age 18. They included 289 youths not involved in prostitution or compensated dating and 98 involved in prostitution or compensated dating before the age of 18.

Results
387 youths who responded to the survey had the following characteristics:
- 81.6% of those experienced in compensated dating and/or prostitution were girls, whereas 61.9% of those having no such experience were girls.
- Among the youths, an average age of 16.6 years was found in those experienced in compensated dating and/or prostitution, whereas an average age of 16.3 years was found in those not having the experience.
• An average formal schooling of 8.3 years (since primary school) was found in both groups (those experienced in compensated dating and/or prostitution and those not having had this type of experience).

• 71.1% of those experienced in compensated dating and/or prostitution lived with mothers. For those not having the experience, the percentage was 84.8%.

• 66.0% of those experienced in compensated dating and/or prostitution lived with fathers. For those not having the experience, the percentage was 65.4%.

The survey found the following among adolescents interviewed in the sample:

• 25.3% (98) of the adolescents had compensated dating with or without sexual relationships under the age of 18. The percentage for the girls was 30.9% (80) and the percentage for the boys was 14.1% (18).

• 16.8% (65) of the adolescents had prostitution or compensated dating with sexual relationships under the age of 18. The percentage for the girls was 19.7% (51) and the percentage for the girls was 10.9% (14).

• During the most recent 2 months or the last two months before the age of 18, the adolescents with compensated dating experience without sexual relationships had an average of 3.7 dates (4.1 dates for girls and 2.3 dates for boys).

• During the most recent 2 months or the last two months before the age of 18, the adolescents with prostitution or compensated dating with sexual relationships had an average of 1.1 experience (1.1 times for girls and 1.3 times for boys).

Analyses of the quantitative and qualitative data identified some common factors in prostitution, including risk or signaling factors and protective or impedance factors (respectively found related to prostitution positively and negatively).

Important risk or signaling factors (positively related to prostitution) were:

• Parental abuse (which might create strain and inducement to handle the strain by such a delinquent means, including prostitution)

• Parental crime (which might show approval and even tutelage, cajolament, instigation, or aid to delinquency, including prostitution)

• Talking about sex (notably parents’ promiscuous affairs) with parents (which might reduce scruples about prostitution)

• Working in indecent clubs (which might provide opportunities for prostitution)

Important protective or impedance factors (negatively related to prostitution) were:
• Paternal and maternal parenting competence (which might curb prostitution)
• Parent-child recreation (which might facilitate parent-child bonding and thus protection against prostitution)
• Parental moral guidance (which might discourage prostitution)
• Mother-child secure and not anxious, ambivalent interaction during arrest (which might prevent or facilitate desistance from prostitution)
• Parent-child joint counseling (which might prevent prostitution)

Moreover, findings also identify a service gap in specialized services committed to preventing adolescent prostitution, in view of the following limitations in existing services:
• Integrated family services: having little room for strengthening families that are not imminently risky, because of the heavy workload for tackling crisis cases.
• Youth outreaching social work service: difficulty in involving families.
• School social work service: difficulty in following up or referring adolescents who leave or drop out from school too quickly.
• Services related to Care and Protection Order: difficulty in sustaining services because the Order is too short.
• Various services: difficulty in identifying adolescent prostitution and coordinating efforts for preventing adolescent prostitution.

Policy Recommendations
Ten policy recommendations emerge, based on evidence culled from the data analyses and professional views. The first two recommendations are about the mission of the policy for preventing adolescent prostitution in general. Recommendation Numbers 3, 4, 5 specify the target of the policy, related to the risk of adolescent prostitution. The next two recommendations then identify the mission of the policy for the prevention of prostitution among at-risk adolescents. Lastly, Recommendation Numbers 8, 9, 10 indicate general policy strategies for preventing adolescent prostitution.

1. **Strengthening efficient parenting.** Efficient parenting means effective parenting under constraints of limited time or opportunity. Effective parenting needs to strike a balance between being too strict and too lenient. Caring, love, affection, reasoning, and explanation are all essential to effective parenting. Importantly, parenting needs to be conducive to communication with adolescents. Parents need to be competent in parenting
and achieve a consensus within the family concerning parenting and rules in the family. Moreover, competent fathering is especially important.

1.1. Raising moral character, values, and reasoning. Prostitution is a moral problem, and its solution requires parental contributions as well as moral education in the school. Parental moral guidance, in line with moral education in the school, is effective in preventing adolescent prostitution. Parental moral guidance is crucial in parents’ inculcation of moral values to their children.

1.2. Raising competence. Internet contact is usually a sufficient condition for engaging in compensated dating or prostitution eventually. An initial checkpoint would be the monitoring of Internet activity and discouraging the adolescent having face-to-face contact with someone acquainted only through the Internet and other information technologies. The raising of parental competence needs to take account of the rapid change of information communication technologies.

1.3. Preventing early sex. Early prevention or discouragement of sex is important for preventing further involvement. It is because once the adolescent experiences a sexual debut, he or she will be less cautious about sexual involvement or protection of chastity. Particularly, early marriage or cohabitation, and therefore even romantic love and dating, deserve attention.

2. Strengthening parent-child bonding. Attachment to the parent requires the child’s interaction with the parent and the parent’s concern for the child. Particularly, attachment to the father is important for fostering moral development.

3. Targeting broken families. Adolescents who are not living with both parents are at risk of prostitution. The family with an absent parent suffers from the adequate creation of the parent-child bond and provision of effective parenting and control. Conversely, advice for reunion or remarriage is a way to assuage problems of the broken family, who requires the strengthening of parenting.

4. Targeting problematic families. Problems in families that predict adolescent prostitution include parental abuse of the child, committing crimes, and as such drawing the attention of the police. Such problems would harm effective parenting. Tackling these family problems, such as through counseling, is a necessary step toward prevention of adolescent prostitution.

5. Targeting adolescent problems. Adolescent problems predictive of adolescent prostitution include cohabitation, marriage, working in indecent clubs, and earlier compensated dating. Such problems can be gateways to prostitution. Mobilizing family
coping with adolescent problems is essential. Notably, strengthening parents’ communication and conflict management skills are essential.

6. **Crisis intervention.** A crisis is an opportunity for families to help and divert their adolescent children from prostitution, importantly in partnership with professionals such as police and social workers. The goal is to erect parental understanding of the crisis, support for the adolescent, and collaboration with professional services to make the crisis a turning point for the adolescent’s rehabilitation. Crises include:

6.1. **During police arrest.** Police sanctions create a crisis for the adolescent, which requires the family and other professionals to collaborate in crisis intervention. Both punishment and caring are necessary for prevention of at-risk adolescents’ prostitution. Families and various professionals can provide complementary inputs to enhance the effectiveness of each input.

6.2. **During pregnancy.** The adolescent girl’s pregnancy is distressing condition for families and other professionals to intervene. In this connection, the girl’s physical and emotional needs for care provide the opportunity for intervention to demonstrate its effectiveness.

6.3. **During injury or infection.** Physical suffering in the adolescent, especially due to prostitution, is a crisis in need of intervention. Treatment of the physical suffering is an entry point for diverting adolescents from prostitution.

7. **Parent-child joint counseling or service involvement.** Family-wide intervention involving parents and adolescent children is most effective. For one, collaboration between the family and professionals is a key to successful prevention. Counseling and other services are required to resolve the family problem. Professionals trained in family counseling would be most appropriate to provide counseling services.

8. **Supporting specialized services for wraparound prevention of adolescent prostitution.** Such services can be extensions of existing specialized services for preventing adolescent prostitution. Their merits consist in providing direct services and coordinating efforts of families and various professionals to generate synergistic effects, based on the expertise of the services.

8.1. **Proactive approaches to service delivery.** The proposed specialized service unit needs to mobilize and engage families identified in Recommendation Numbers 3 and 4 for preventive work in order to help needy families. It can include reaching out work to engage hard-to-reach families.
8.2. **Assessing needs and risks and allotting services.** Early detection of needs and risks of families and their children concerning adolescent prostitution is the first step to render preventive services. For this purpose, schools, youth and family services are helpful. With the detection and assessment, services are useful when they match the needs and risks.

8.3. **Delivering parent education for needy parents and families with at-risk children.**

The proposed specialized service unit needs to provide educational services to the target parents about their duties and skills of moral guidance, crisis intervention, Internet monitoring, and other appropriate parenting performances, and most fundamentally about the values of family and parenting. Subsidized parenting education, as modeled after retraining in the Employee Retraining Board, can provide incentives for parents and would-be parents admitted by the education services.

8.4. **Minimizing any labeling effect on participants.** Ways to minimize any labeling effect on participants include situating specific services within general-purpose premises and packaging the services in an appealing and non-sensitive manner.

9. **Facilitating the partnerships of professionals or units with families.** Instituting laws or regulations is a requisite to facilitate professionals and their partnerships in preventing adolescent prostitution. It needs to formalizing protocols for partnership in crisis intervention during such crises as police arrest and hospitalization. An important condition for partnership is the sharing of information. Particularly, adolescents aged 16 and 17 are of concern, because their prostitution is within a grey area between prostitution and sexual abuse.

10. **Mobilizing community support for the prevention.** The target of mobilization includes employers, managers, and professionals, as well as residents. Sustaining family and moral values for parenting and adolescent development in society is essential to champion efforts to prevent adolescent prostitution and other problems. School has a role to strengthen moral education for cultivating family and other moral values, and eradicating immoral values like selling virginity for money, in order to prevent adolescent prostitution.