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UNDERSTANDING NON-ENGAGED YOUTHS IN
HONG KONG: A MIXED METHOD APPROACH

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Executive Summary (English)

The past decades have been marked by drastic social and economic changes in many countries, including the economic transformation and restructuring of labour markets, increases in demand for educated workers, growth in flexible employment practices, and withdrawal of welfare benefits. As a consequence of these changes, young people nowadays are facing enormous pressures and increasing uncertainties which their parents’ generation has not experienced. Transitions from school to work, which previously tended to be smooth and straightforward, are now becoming increasingly protracted and complex. New terms and categories, such as “status zero”, “freeter”, and NEET have been emerging to describe the patchwork experiences and the problematic and non-linear transitions encountered by today’s youths.

The NEET acronym refers to youths aged 15–24 who are neither in employment, education, or training. It has been used to describe non-engaged youths since the late 1990s in Hong Kong. The current study was designed to provide an up-to-date portrait of non-engaged youths, to examine their school-to-work transition processes, to analyze their experiences of non-employment, vocational training and employment, to gauge their work values, career aspirations, and views about Hong Kong society, and to understand their everyday lives in terms of spatial distribution, time use, and activities on the internet. The intention was to
develop evidence-based policy recommendations to promote better (re-)integration of such youths into mainstream society in general and to help them gain a foothold in the labour market in particular.

Data from the General Household Survey conducted between 1991 and 2010 and from 52 in-depth interviews with currently or previously non-engaged youths carried out in June to October 2011 were analysed. The major findings can be summarized as follows.

A Socio-demographic Profile of Non-engaged Youths in Hong Kong

- In 2010, among 837,700 young persons in Hong Kong, 7.0 percent (58,300 youths) were non-engaged. Of these, 67.7 percent were unemployed, 23.3 percent were categorized as “other inactive persons” (who were not pursuing study, keeping a house, nor suffering from sickness, injury, or disablement).
- Results from binary logistic regression reveal that, first, compared with females, younger youths (age 15-19), and those not living with their parents, male youths, those aged between 20 and 24 and living with their parents were significantly more likely to become NEET. Second, living in a household in the lower income quintile also increased one’s chances of becoming non-engaged. But educational attainment generally buffered youths against non-engagement, with degree holders the least likely to be non-engaged. Marital status and housing type did not pose any significant effect on non-engagement among youths.
- Time-series data from 1991 to 2010 show that the proportion of NEET youths in the total youth population was around 4–5 percent in the first half of the 1990s but rose dramatically from the late 1990s onwards.
The figures increased from 4.3 percent in 1997, to 6.8 percent and 8.5 percent in 1998 and 1999 respectively. After a brief decline, the percentage of NEET youths rose again in 2002. In 2003, it reached a record high which stood at 9.7 percent. Since then, the proportion has fallen and remained at 6–7 percent between 2005 and 2010.

- The fluctuations in the proportion of NEET youths in the total youth population have followed the changes in the level of youth unemployment and overall unemployment, which in turn reflected and were affected by the macro-economic environment.

**Leaving Full-time Education**

- Of the 52 youths interviewed, more than a quarter had left school before completing compulsory education (Form 3) (“early school leavers”) and another two-fifths withdrew without finishing Form 5 (“intermediate school leavers”). Unlike those who left school later, these two groups explained their departure from full-time education in terms of disinterest, boredom in the school environment, the perceived irrelevance of the school curriculum, the restrictive disciplinary regime, their rebelliousness or life events beyond their control (such as financial pressures, parental divorce, pregnancy, and problems with the police).

- Parents, friends, and social workers all played a role in delaying or urging our respondents to leave full-time education early and in coping with the negative aspects of early drop out. In the case of social workers, they provided some of these youths information about pre-employment training programmes, job vacancies, and recruitment fairs.
Experiences of Non-Engagement

- All of the youths we interviewed had experienced at least one period of non-engagement lasting at least three months. Cumulatively, one-seventh had spent less than 6 months disengaged so far, but almost half had experienced at least 1 year of non-engagement. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents started to be NEET before age 18.

- The respondents generally held individualistic explanations as to why they fell into non-engagement, preferring to view it as a choice, rather than the results of larger social forces beyond their control. Since many of them first became NEET before reaching adulthood, they believed that time was on their side and saw these non-engaged periods as a rite of passage.

- Some youths spoke about their non-engagement as an opportunity to re-connect with friends and family and to develop themselves educationally or enrich their experiences by travelling and volunteering. On the other hand, others reported being “socially withdrawal” or “hidden” at home and feeling bouts of extreme isolation and fear of going out.

- After a period of non-engagement, some youths reported feeling a greater sense of responsibility toward their family and a need for more cash because they were getting older and had begun to view their disengagement as a period of time wasting. These feelings pushed them to leave non-engagement and to take up training or work.

Participation in Vocational or Employment-related Training Courses

- Many early and intermediate school leavers joined vocational or employment-related training programmes held by the government and
social service organizations. However, most did not find them useful for gaining the experience needed for employment.

- When asked to compare and contrast their experiences and perception of vocational training with those of academic education, respondents provided mixed responses. A point to note is that, whether they spoke positively or negatively about these two types of training and education largely depended on which they felt could best help them to secure a decent job.

**Early Labour Market Experiences**

- Forty-six of the youths studied had work experience. However, two-thirds of them had quit their first job within 3 months, and more than half had worked in at least 3 jobs so far. One of the reasons for their high job mobility is that most of the respondents reported little immediacy about finding work as they had little family pressure or financial burden. This is supported by the fact that over half of the respondents took more than 6 months to take up their first job.

- Regardless of the respondent’s educational level, most of their first jobs were entry-level positions. Many of the interviewees complained about the working and employment conditions, the lack of training and career prospects.

- Regardless of their educational qualifications, these respondents found difficulties in finding a job they liked. While less educated youths mostly attributed their predicament to their own personal problems, such as low educational level and lack of persistence, more educated youths tended to blame society, the media, and the government.
Career Aspirations and Perceptions of the Future

• Most of the respondents cited good relationships with colleagues and good career prospects as being important criteria in job selection. Many had some ideas about their ideal job. For the early school leavers, ideal jobs were constructed in opposition to the poor working conditions they had known in their current job situation. Some, however, pointed out that financial pressures and lack of sufficient educational qualifications prevented them from obtaining their ideal jobs. Their more educated counterparts felt more confident.

• Although most interviewees expressed optimism about their future, they realized the possible challenges or obstacles. While less educated respondents tended to take into account personal factors such as their lack of skills and low educational qualifications, more educated respondents tended to give a structural critique.

Attitude about Inequality and Perceptions of Opportunities

• Underpinning the overwhelming optimism shown in the qualitative interviews, over half of the respondents believed that Hong Kong is a meritocratic society. Most, however, disagreed with the statement that “Hong Kong is a fair and just society.” More than half also expressed discontent about kids from rich families, the Hong Kong government, and “big business”.

• Statistical tests reveal that older youths (age 20–24), degree holders, employed respondents, and those who were first engaged in their 20s were significantly more likely to hold negative evaluations about the rich and those in power in Hong Kong.
**Spatial Distribution, Temporal Scheduling, and Activities on Internet**

- Currently non-engaged youths had lower geographical mobility than their engaged counterparts. They also kept unconventional hours, sleeping late at night and waking late in the late morning or even afternoon.

- Our respondents spent a considerable amount of time on the computer. Many of them used the computer for playing computer games and social networking.

**Policy Recommendations**

- To launch a territory-wide longitudinal study to gain a full understanding of the mechanisms and processes of problematic and non-linear school-to-work transitions in Hong Kong. Longitudinal data on a representative youth population are needed not only to track changes in the activity of school leavers in general and early dropouts in particular, but also to contrast the educational and labour market outcomes between groups of youths with different educational levels and different educational tracks, be they academic or vocational.

- To revamp and strengthen the vocational training system by integrating it into the overall educational system and planning in Hong Kong in order to offer young people real choices and alternative paths to academic education in their school-to-work transition.

- To introduce systematic career guidance and counselling in the secondary schools to provide students and school leavers with timely advice about planning future work and learning.
• To increase the flexibility in the educational system in order to offer early school leavers opportunities to return to formal education later in life.

• To explore different ways to increase the competitiveness of non-engaged and poorly-educated youths so as to better integrate them into the mainstream economy in Hong Kong.

• To provide more support to outreach social workers assisting non-engaged youths in finding courses and jobs and overcoming social isolation. Authorities concerned and social service organizations need to be proactive in recruiting more female outreach social workers so that more suitable services can be provided for non-engaged women.