



香港大學

社會工作學系

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

A REPORT ON
SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES
IN HONG KONG

by

KATHERINE P.H. YOUNG

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A
Report On
Single Parent Families
in Hong Kong

Katherine P.H. Young

with

Li Chi Kei

Maria Cheung

Lilian Law

Assisted by

Choy Bing Kong

Cheung Siu Kau

Department of Social Work

University of Hong Kong

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In February 1984, the Family Service Division of the Council of Social Services conducted a seminar on Single Parent Families. At the seminar, many social workers expressed their concern for this group of clients who have over the last few years increased in numbers significantly. While many social workers have a close and deep understanding of the personal experiences of clients who have undergone or are undergoing the process of coping with marital dissolution, they also felt the need for more factual information about the particular characteristics and needs of these single parents. A suggestion arose to conduct a small scale exploratory study to try to discover and describe the social circumstances of single parent families in Hong Kong.

The Family Service Division of the Council of Social Services offered to sponsor the Study. Six Family Service Agencies volunteered to participate. They were Caritas Family Services, Hong Kong Family Welfare Society, Hong Kong Christian Family Service, Hong Kong Christian Service, St. James Family Service, and the Society Against Child Abuse. The organisations offered access to the single parents served by them, and provided their social workers' service as interviewers.

The Social Security Division of the Social Welfare Department provides a basic allowance, subject to a means test. The Department kindly allowed us to approach Public Assistance recipients who were single parents to request their participation in the Study.

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FOREWORD

This is a Report on a field study on single parent families in Hong Kong conducted in 1984. The objectives of the study were :-

1. To discover and describe the life circumstances of single parent families in the sample.
2. To find out from these single parent families what the community can do to assist them in their endeavours to rebuild as a one parent family unit.

Chapter I presents - the Research Plan and Methodology.

Chapter II describes - Profiles of the Single Mother and the Single Father against their socio-economic backgrounds.

Chapter III provides the data on the - Financial and Living Circumstances of the families.

Chapter IV discusses - the Process of Becoming a Single Parent Family.

Chapter V examines the life style of - the Single Parent Family, how the family recoups and what it means to bring up young children as a long parent.

Chapter VI reports on - the Children's Experience.

Chapter VII investigates - the Social Network support systems of single parent families, enquiring into their personal and community network systems.

Chapter VIII summarises - the Recommendations to the two groups of organisations whose clients made up the sample of the single parents in the Study.

Each chapter has been written as a self contained essay addressing the topic stated in the chapter title. Factual data from the field Study is generally presented first. This data is then examined against the wider perspective of relevant findings from other research work either from local or overseas sources. Each chapter concludes with a discussion on interesting issues highlighted by the data derived from the field study.

It is intended that each chapter can be read on its own, though references across chapters are made whenever appropriate.

K. Young
22nd July, 1985

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Chapter I

The Hong Kong Single Parent Study

Many welfare organisations have been increasingly concerned over the growing numbers of single parent families experiencing various emotional and economic hardships in keeping the family together, and in bringing up their children. Family Service agencies report increasing caseloads of single parent families. The Outreach services observe increasing numbers of 'latch-key' children on the streets. Day care nurseries are responding to increasing applications for child minding. Residential homes are also responding to the needs of children for care when the remaining parent is unable to look after them due to illness, hospitalization or imprisonment. Correctional institutions have many adolescents from "broken homes", with one parent absent.

The Research Proposal & Criteria

The proposal for a study on single parent families in Hong Kong arose out of the need of social workers serving these families for further knowledge and understanding of their material and living circumstances, of the demands arising from marital dissolution and the coping responses required, of the effects of parent loss or departure on the children, and of the ways and means by which they could be assisted in the readjustment process.

When the research team met, we decided that our main objective would be to find some factual information that describes some of the single parent families in Hong Kong. We resolved to focus on :-

1. Single parents with the least available resources.
2. Single parents with dependent children.
3. Single parents who are still working on separation issues required in the transition from a married state to a single state.

People in Hong Kong prefer to turn to their informal networks of kin and clan for assistance in personal and family issues (Young, 1983). Only when lacking such resources, or when the situation grows beyond the ability of informal groups, do they turn to the more formal community provisions. Single parents receiving Public Assistance from Social Security, and single parents receiving family support services from Family Service agencies can be considered to be lacking the necessary personal and social resources for coping with everyday demands of living. We decided to define a single parent family, for the purposes of our study, as one where the single parent is head of household, and has two or more children age 15 or under. By setting this criteria, we ensure that we are including only family units with children within the age for compulsory school attendance, and not legally employable.

Before finally deciding on our focus and research approach a review of relevant information on the target population is a necessary preliminary.

Relevant Information on Single Parent Families in Hong Kong

1. The Census & Statistics Department, Labour Force Survey 1980 on Single Parent Households in Hong Kong

The only estimate of the numbers of single parent families in Hong Kong, is to be found in a Supplementary Report provided by the Census and Statistics Department, from Labour Force Survey data, for the Social Welfare Department. In March 1980, the Labour Force Survey included a question on "whether the household had children or youth aged 20 and below and whether they were living with their parents". The objective was to estimate the number of single parents or orphan households in Hong Kong and to investigate the characteristics of these households (Census and Statistics Department, Supplementary Report from Labour Force Survey, March, 1980.)

The Survey showed, of the 1,129,000 Domestic Households, 27,600 (2.4%) were Single Parent Households with persons aged under 20 whose Father was deceased.
10,000 (0.9%) were Single Parent Households with persons aged under 20 whose Mother was deceased.
92,100 (8.2%) were Non-Single Parent Households with Father and/or Mother not living together with the children in the Household.

129,700 (11.5%) Families with children and youth under 20 affected by at least by One Parent being absent.

The 3.3% (2.4%+0.9%) of total households which became single parent families as a result of death of one parent are clearly identified. However, the "non-single parent households with father or mother not living with the children in the household" include families whose parents are away from the family for occupational reasons, those whose parents are still in China or other country of origin, those whose parents are in hospital or prison, as well as those with one parent absent due to marital separation. These figures give us a picture of the number and percentage of Households in Hong Kong affected by one parent's absence. They do not provide an estimate of single parent families resulting from marital dissolution.

To show the population that the Census Survey and our Study managed to reach, we present the Single Parent Households characteristics according to the :-

1980 Labour Force Data:

Housing: Public & Aided : 57%
Temporary Housing : 6%
Private Housing : 37%
Average Rent Paid : \$200
Average Household Size : 4.7
Median Income : \$2,600
No Income : 2%
Number of Employed Persons : 2.4

The Survey covers families with children/youth aged up till 20.

1984 Our Study: - are

Housing: Public & Aided : 57.9%
Temporary Housing : 2.6%
Private Housing : 37.9%
Average Rent Paid : \$329.9
Average Household Size : 4.1
Median Income : \$2,002.5
Mean Income : \$2,314.47
Number of Employed Persons : 0.38
(74 persons in 195 Families employed)

This Study covers families with children aged up till 15.

2. A Review of all cases of Single Parents served by the six participating Family Service Agencies as at 30th May 1984 revealed 622 families.
Of these :-

125 were Single Parents with 1 child
286 were Single Parents with 2 or more children aged 15 and under.
127 were Single Parents with Eldest Child aged 15-20.
84 were Single Parents with children aged 20+.

Of the 286 single Parents with 2 or more dependent children aged 15 and under, 171 were single mothers and 115 were single fathers.

3. The Social Welfare Department's Study of Public Assistance Recipients 1984 which covered active PA cases with authorized payments as at 31 May 1984 showed the caseload to be 54,420. The data on Single Parents on PA was:

<u>Nature of Case</u>	<u>No. of Cases</u>	<u>% of Total</u>	<u>Average Age of Applicant</u>	<u>Average Amount of Monthly Needs</u>
Widow(er) with Dependent Children	2460	4.6	39.4	\$1,800
*Deserted/Separated/ Divorced Spouse with Dependent Children	1090	2	36.5	\$1,578

*This is a new classification of PA Recipients authorized in the summer of 1984.

The 1984 study of P.A. Recipients was released in 1985. Hence this information was not compiled or available at the time our field study was conducted in July/August, 1984.

The Research Plan & Methodology

The final proposal which the research team put to the relevant committees is summarised below.

The Definition of Single Parent Families

1. The Study would focus on single parents whose single status arises from marital dissolution. That is from the death of one spouse/parent, or from the departure of a spouse/parent following divorce, separation or desertion.
2. The Study would seek out single parents with two or more children aged 15 or under.
3. The Study would approach single parents with the "least available resources", such as those who have applied for assistance either from Social Security or from a Family Service Agency or both.

The Objective of the Study is to describe the families' life style through building up data on household, finances and housing, health and nutrition, work and child care, and the reorganisation necessitated by the transition from a two parent to a single parent family.

However, research into human conditions all carry certain ideological pre-suppositions. We believe it is necessary to state this explicitly so that the reader may view the research findings in that perspective.

We are interested in the idea of the ratio of adults to children in a family as an important variable influencing the parent-child interaction and child rearing practices. A family is built from two adults getting together. A family functions with 2 adults to whatever number of children. With a reduced ratio of 1 adult, this would lead to either overload of the lone adult, or under provisions for the children, or attempts to draw in other adults. We seek therefore to find out what the single parents in Hong Kong resort to in bringing up children without the support of a partner. Following from this, whether and what disadvantage the children experience because of the lack of one parent during their formative years.

We see marital dissolution as a disorganising - reorganising experience that makes certain demands calling for certain coping responses. Through this Study, if we can learn what problems and needs arise in this process and what responses may prove adaptive, we could incorporate this understanding into our work with families, in supporting them through disruptive separation towards adjustment to a new life style.

In summary, through this Study :-

1. we seek a clearer understanding of life in single parent families.
2. We hope to discover some indicators as to what the community can do to support and supplement these families in their endeavours.
3. In their counselling role, many social workers hope to learn from the parents and the children, what they find to be helpful in managing the pain and fears of separation and loss, and what coping responses may prove effective.

The Single Parent Sample

We had access to the single parents through the sponsorship of six Family Service Agencies and through the auspices of the Social Security Division of the Social Welfare Department.

a) The Single Parent on Public Assistance

Each of the 30 Social Security Field Units was to identify approximately 6 single parents known to them, and forward on our behalf a letter from the Research Team requesting their participation in our Study. The names and addresses of the 115 who replied indicating consent (either by a signed return slip or by telephone) were included in our Study. Approximately half of the single parents were widowers, the other half were divorced, separated and deserted spouses. A review of these 115 showed 7 families had children over 15 years old, hence they did not fall into our criteria, and 5 had already been assigned to the Family Service Agencies group for interviews.

We proceeded to contact the remaining 103 families between 21 July - 4 August 1984.

Of these 7 families - Unable to Contact (Phoned minimum 3 times, visited once)
1 " - Returned to Mainland
3 " - Refused to Participate
92 " - Interviewed.

4 of these 92 families were rejected by the computing process as having children aged over 15. The remaining 88 Single Parents on PA were included in our Sample.

b) The Single Parents Served by Family Service Agencies

Of the 171 single mothers and 115 single fathers known to Family Service Agencies on 30th May 1984, we included every family whose social worker indicated may be willing to participate or whose social worker did not indicate may not be unwilling. This came to just under half of all the families. We therefore approached :-

80 single mothers and 50 single fathers = Total 130 single parents served by Family Service Agencies.

Of these, by the time the Field work was completed:

3 Families reunited.
2 Single parent remarried.
2 Partially completed. Too emotional.
5 Staff resignations. No interview replacement.
11 Refusal/Unable to contact.

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The Single Parents from Family Welfare Agencies included in the sample was 107.

Thus, each single parent in our study can be considered to be self selected. This, of course presented a certain bias. However, we hold firmly to the view that study of an intimate relationship can only be ethically justified by the explicit consent of the participants. We respected the position of those who refused. The refusal rate among the groups forming our sample was :-

Single Mother - PA	Single Parents - Family Service
2.9% (3 out of 103)	8.5% (11 out of 130)

The final Sample of 195 was made up of :-

Single Mothers - PA	Single Mothers - Family Service	Single Fathers - Family Service
88	68	39

The Field Work

We conducted a Pilot Study from 18th June till 7th July at the Hong Kong Christian Family Service Centre, Kwuntong. Following this we revised some of our plans and procedures somewhat, and we revised the Interviewing Schedules substantially.