

# **Longitudinal Study on Civic Engagement and Social Networks of Youth in Hong Kong**

## **Executive Summary**

**Prepared for  
The Commission on Youth**

**Prepared by  
Policy 21 Ltd., The University of Hong Kong**

**March 2010  
Hong Kong**

## **I. Introduction**

### **Background**

1 The Commission on Youth (COY) is undertaking a study to systematically and comprehensively track the accumulation and development of social capital of youth in Hong Kong. The present longitudinal study is a follow-up to the first benchmark study - the Benchmark Study on Civic Engagement and Social Networks of Youth in Hong Kong (the Benchmark Study) - conducted in 2004-05. The Benchmark Study has developed a structured and systematic range of social capital indicators for evaluation of youth services, and also provided COY and the Government with very good and useful information and a clear baseline for future research on civic engagement and social networking of youth in Hong Kong. The Longitudinal Study helps track the changes in civic engagement, social networks and other related characteristics of youth, and identify related factors affecting their civic engagement and social networks.

### **Observations of profile of respondents**

2 More than half of respondents in 2008 either continued schooling (accounting for 46% of respondents) or working (18%). A further 27% left schools and became employed and about 1% of those previously employed resumed schooling. About 5% were non-engaged in 2008, little changed from the level in 2004-05.

3 The proportion of youth aged 18 – 26 who were non-engaged in 2008 hovered at around 3.8% to 5.6%. As high as 10% of respondents were only employed in temporary or part-time jobs, or were previously unemployed in the 12 months prior to enumeration. Furthermore, in addition to 5% of respondents who were non-engaged, a further 2% were potential dropouts.

### **Civic engagement and social networks**

#### **Network qualities**

4 Network qualities refer to the extent of social trust youths have on the community. The respondents' perception of trust in and attachment to different segments of the community, including their families, colleagues, classmates, friends, neighbours and other people in Hong Kong, government officials, politicians, institutions, the political system and the society in general were studied.

#### ***Index of trust in people***

5 An overall index of trust in people, at 5.19 in 2008 (similar to 5.18 in 2004-05), in a Likert scale of 7, was quite high. Comparing 2004-05 and 2008, the index of trust in people was slightly higher in 2008 for those who were employed and those who were non-engaged.

#### ***Index of trust in institutions***

6 An index of trust in institutions, at 5.01 in 2008 (as compared to 4.63 in 2004-05) in a Likert scale of 7, was above average. The index was higher for those who were students in 2008 at 5.05 (4.71 in 2004-05), employed in 2008 at 5.00 (4.42 in 2004-05) and non-engaged in

2008 at 4.73 (4.28 in 2004-05). In other words, the index of trust in institutions has increased over time and possibly with age.

7 It appears that any change in economic activity status of youth would have impact on their trust in institutions. Furthermore, as the school or working environment of youth changes following their change of schools or employers, even if their economic activity status remains unchanged, their trust in institutions would also be affected. Apparently, this calls for heightened support to youth when they reach transitions in life from studying to employment, in order to ensure that their civic engagement and social networks would not be adversely affected.

### ***Sense of control and efficacy***

8 Closely related to trust in institutions is the feeling of control and sense of efficacy, as far as government affairs are concerned. Respondents were quite divided as about 54.4% in 2008 (46.3% in 2004-05) believed that they did not have a say in government policies.

9 While about 45.6% in 2008 (38.5% in 2004-05) considered the people like them could not possibly understand government policies, a higher proportion 50.9% in 2008 (57.9% in 2004-05) of respondents did not think so. Furthermore, more than half (66.6% in 2008 and 63.7% in 2004-05) considered that the government treated them fairly. In other words, comparing 2004-05 and 2008, the respondents' sense of control and efficacy has increased over time and possibly with age.

### ***Observations of network qualities***

10 The survey findings show that the strength of bonding social capital extended to family members, friends, classmates and neighbours has increased over time and possibly with age. The percentage of respondents totally trusted or quite trusted various institutions in Hong Kong, apart from the local mass media, was higher in 2008. In other words, the survey findings indicate that the strength of linking social capital extended to institutions in Hong Kong has increased over time and possibly with age. The index of trust in institutions has increased over time and possibly with age. In short, what may be observed from the survey findings is that network qualities of respondents have increased in 2008, as compared with 2004-05.

## **Network structure**

11 Network structure encompasses three areas of civic engagement and social networks, namely associational involvement, diversity of friendship and informal socializing.

### ***Associational involvement***

12 A higher proportion of respondents had joined church/religious organizations (accounting for 15.1% in 2008 (18.0% in 2004-05) of respondents), parent/teacher associations (PTA), alumni, school boards and other educational groups (9.7% in 2008 and 10.2% in 2004-05), uniformed groups (5.6% in 2008 and 10.9% in 2004-05) and social services groups (5.3% in 2008 and 7.9% in 2004-05). A lower proportion of the respondents were members of cultural/recreational organizations and ethnic associations (3.1% in 2008 and 5.9% in 2004-05), professional associations (2.8% in 2008 and 2.7% in 2004-05), pressure groups/other interest groups (2.3% in 2008 and 3.5% in 2004-05), labor unions and trade associations (2.6% in 2008

and 1.5% in 2004-05), mutual aid committees, Kai Fong associations and owners' corporations (1.5% in 2008 and 1.6% in 2004-05) and political parties (1.0% in 2008 and 0.9% in 2004-05).

13 Taking all civic associations together, about 29.4% in 2008 (36.7% in 2004-05) of respondents had participated in civic associations. The percentage was the highest for students (39.5% in 2008 and 39.9% in 2004-05), lower for those who were employed (20.4% in 2008 and 26.1% in 2004-05) and those who were non-engaged (20.4% in 2008 and 29.2% in 2004-05).

#### *Diversity of friendship*

14 An index of diversity of friendship may be compiled incorporating respondents' willingness to make friends with different segments of the community. The index was 5.41 in 2008, little changed from 5.35 in 2004-05, in a Likert scale of 7, which was fairly high. The index was slightly higher for students in 2008 at 5.47 (5.36 in 2004-05). On the other hand, the index remained more or less the same for those who were employed in 2008 at 5.36 (5.34 in 2004-05) and non-engaged in 2008 at 5.23 (5.22 in 2004-05). In other words, the extent of diversity of friendship for those who were students has increased slightly over time and with age.

15 While the diversity of friendship was lower for those who were non-engaged (5.23), the index was even lower for students who had intention to drop out (4.98). The index was higher for other students (5.49) and other respondents who were employed (5.34 – 5.37).

#### *Informal socializing*

16 Informal socializing refers to informal social activities with friends, classmates, co-workers. The majority of the respondents (74.3% in 2008 and 78.1% in 2004-05) had social activities with these groups every week, and a further 19.7% in 2008 (13.9% in 2004-05) did so every month. About 0.5% in 2008 (0.9% in 2004-05) did not have social activities with these groups in the past 12 months. In other words, most respondents had social activities with friends, classmates and colleagues every week or every month.

#### *Observations of network structure*

17 The extent of informal socializing for respondents on weekly basis for students slightly declined from 83.3% in 2004-05 to 81.8% in 2008 but for non-engaged youths, the extent increased from 50.0% in 2004-05 to 57.1% in 2008. Apart from ex-prisoners and drug addicts, the proportion of youth willing to make friends with people of different backgrounds has increased over time and with age. In other words, the extent of diversity of friendship for those who were students and employed has increased slightly over time and with age.

#### **Network transactions**

18 Network transactions encompass four areas of civic engagement and social networks, including conventional politics, civic rallies, giving and volunteering and faith-based engagement.

#### *Conventional politics and civic rallies*

19 A number of questions were included in the survey to obtain information on respondents' participation in conventional politics and civic rallies, including voter registration, voting behaviour and attendance at public meetings or rallies. For those who were aged 18 or above, about 48.3% in 2008 and 53.3% in 2004-05 had registered as voters. The percentages were higher for those who were students (44.5% in 2008 and 50.5% in 2004-05) and those who were employed (53.2% in 2008 and 58.5% in 2004-05). As regards those who were non-engaged, the percentage was much lower, at 36.7% in 2008 and 48.8% in 2004-05).

20 Comparing the survey findings in 2008 and 2004-05, it may be worth noting that the extent of participation in conventional politics and civic rallies for respondents who were students and employed has declined over time and with age. On the other hand, the extent of participation in conventional politics and civic rallies for respondents who were non-engaged has increased over time and with age.

#### *Giving and volunteering*

21 Participation in volunteer work has an impact on social trust. For those who had participated in volunteer work, either in 2008, 2004-05 or previously, their index of trust in people was higher than those who had not done so in 2008, 2004-05 and previously but their index of trust in institutions was similar. As remarked by several social workers interviewed, volunteer work helped connect youth to the outside world, having a beneficial impact on their self-confidence and their perception of life. It also helped youth establish their social support network by getting to know more friends who could render emotional support and other kind of advice to youth.

22 About 47.9% in 2008 (64.5% in 2004-05) of respondents indicated that they had made donations in the past 12 months. Among these respondents, the majority (74.5% in 2008 and 70.0% in 2004-05) had made donation to social services or charitable organizations and about 32.5% in 2008 (59.3% in 2004-05) had also made donations to schools or school sponsoring bodies. More than half of them (59.4% in 2008 and 69.9% in 2004-05) had donated less than \$100, and a further 25.9% in 2008 (23.5% in 2004-05) had donated \$100 - \$500.

#### *Attitudes towards volunteering*

23 The index of attitude towards volunteering, at 5.13 in 2008 (5.23 in 2004-05) based on a Likert scale of 7, was fairly high. The index was higher for non-engaged in 2008 at 4.92 (4.73 in 2004-05) but lower for employed in 2008 at 4.94 (5.03 in 2004-05). On the other hand, the index remained more or less the same for those who were students, at 5.34 in 2008 (5.31 in 2004-05).

24 The index of attitude towards volunteering for respondents who were employed has declined over time and with age. On the other hand, the index for those who were non-engaged has increased over time and with age.

#### *Faith-based engagement*

25 About 20.8% in 2008 (27.6% in 2004-05) of respondents indicated that they had religious belief. Among these respondents, the majority (80.4% in 2008 and 77.0% in 2004-05) were Protestants. The extent of faith based engagement has declined over time and with age. For those respondents who had religious belief, the percentage distribution of devotion in 2008

and 2004-05 were similar.

### ***Observations of network transactions***

26 The extent of informal socializing, participation in conventional politics and civic rallies, participation in volunteering and donation for respondents who were students and employed has declined over time and with age. On the other hand, the extent of informal socializing for respondents who were non-engaged has increased over time and with age.

27 Furthermore, the index of attitude towards volunteering for respondents who were employed has declined over time and with age. On the other hand, the index of attitude towards volunteering for respondents who were non-engaged has increased over time and with age. In addition, the extent of faith based engagement has declined over time and with age.

## **Use of community services and social support network**

### **Use of services**

28 A variety of services targeted at youths are organized by different community organizations and government departments. This has helped enhance youths' civic engagement and raise their social capital.

#### *Use of community services*

29 More than half (69.8% in 2008 and 83.0% in 2004-05) of respondents had used services or facilities provided by or participated in activities organized by community organizations. About 29.5% in 2008 (16.0% in 2004-05) had not used such services because they considered them unnecessary and a further 0.7% in 2008 (0.8% in 2004-05) had not done so because they were not aware of them.

30 For youth who regularly or sometimes used community services in 2004-05 but did not use or seldom used community services in 2008 as well as those who did not or seldom used community services in both 2004-05 and 2008, their index of trust in people was lower. On the other hand, for those who regularly or sometimes used community services in both 2004-05 and 2008, as well as those who did not use or seldom used community services in 2004-05 but who regularly or sometimes used community services in 2008, their index of trust in people was higher.

31 A similar pattern was observed for the index of trust in institutions. For youth who regularly or sometimes used community services in both 2004-05 and 2008, their index of trust in institutions was higher. On the other hand, for those who did not use or seldom used community services in both 2004-05 and 2008, their index of trust in institutions was lower.

32 The study findings also show that use of community services by youth have other positive impact. The associational involvement of those who regularly used community services on a weekly or monthly basis was higher, as compared to those who seldom or never used community services. Furthermore, the index of diversity of friendship was higher for those who regularly used community services on a weekly or monthly basis was higher, as compared to those who seldom or never used community services. In other words, those who often used community services and participated in activities of civic associations were more

willing to make friends with people of different background.

*Participation in programmes organized by government*

33 The majority (67.7% in 2008 and 75.3% in 2004-05) had not participated in employment and training programmes provided by government because they considered them unnecessary and a further 0.6% in 2008 (0.9% in 2004-05) had not used because they were not aware of them.

34 The proportion of respondents who were employed having used employment services or training programmes provided by government departments has decreased over time and with age. On the other hand, for those who were students and non-engaged, the proportion of respondents having used employment services or training programmes provided by government departments has increased over time and with age.

35 For youth who participated in employment and training programmes in both 2004-05 and 2008, their index of trust in people was lower. On the other hand, for those who did not participate in employment and training programmes in both 2004-05 and 2008, their index of trust in people was higher.

36 A similar pattern may also be observed for index of trust in institutions. For youth who did not participate in employment and training programmes in 2004-05 but did so in 2008, their index of trust in institutions was lower. On the other hand, for those who did not participate in employment and training programmes in both 2004-05 and 2008, their index of trust in institutions was higher.

37 Apparently, while use of community services has a positive impact on the social trust of youth, participation in employment or training programmes organized by government does not seem to have a positive impact on the social trust of youth. It should nevertheless be noted that the casual relationship observed above could be mediated by the fact that those who had low social trust were likely to be enrolled in employment or training programmes which are designed to provide vocational training to youth who are more likely to have difficulties finding employment or the non-engaged youth. As remarked by a number of social workers interviewed, while vocational training for youth was useful, it is also desirable to provide counseling and support services to youth in order to engage them and strengthen their civic engagement and social networks. As demonstrated above, youth with temporary or part-time employment had a lower social trust compared with other employed youth.

*Channels of information about government services to the public*

38 The majority of the respondents knew about services provided by the government to the public through television or radio (80.6% in 2008 and 83.0% in 2004-05) and newspapers (71.8% in 2008 and 74.2% in 2004-05). About 16.8% in 2008 (5.5% in 2004-05) knew about government services from the internet. Only about 1.1% (2.1% in 2004-05) of the respondents admitted they had no knowledge about services provided by government.

*Expectation of community/government services*

39 More than half respondents (51.6% in 2008 and 59.8% in 2004-05) hoped that services provided by the government could help them find employment. About 37.8% in 2008

(51.4% in 2004-05) hoped the government services could help increase their knowledge about employment or further education opportunities, help them find further education places (31.2% in 2008 and 43.1% in 2004-05) and relieve mental pressure (25.0% in 2008 and 36.2% in 2004-05).

### ***Observations of use of services***

40 The proportion of respondents who had used community services has decreased over time and with age. For respondents who were employed, the proportion of them who had used employment services or training programmes provided by government departments has decreased over time and with age. On the other hand, for those who were students and non-engaged, the proportion of respondents having used employment services or training programmes provided by government departments has increased over time and with age.

41 The study findings also show that use of community services has a positive impact of the social trust of youth, though participation in employment or training programmes does not seem to have such an impact. As remarked by several social workers interviewed, the present approach adopted by government is largely problem-based, with specific services mounted to help tackle problems of youth which catch the attention of the community and policy-makers. While such approach may be effective, at least over the short run, in helping youth at risk, they are not meant as preventive measures for the personal development of youth who are not yet at risk. There may be a need to place more emphasis on promoting community services to youth in general, packaging such activities in a format attractive to youth in general.

### **Social support network**

42 Social support network of youth is closely related to the bonding social capital of youth and their relationship with family members, friends and neighbours.

#### *Help seeking behaviour*

43 When faced with financial problems, the majority of respondents (75.0% in 2008 and 80.4% in 2004-05) would seek the help of parents. Slightly more than half (51.9% in 2008 and 51.2% in 2004-05) would seek the help of good friends and about one third would seek the help of brothers or sisters (32.6% in 2008 and 33.5% in 2004-05).

44 When faced with emotional problems, the majority of respondents (87.4% in 2008 and 82.0% in 2004-05) would seek the help of good friends. About 33.3% in 2008 (39.4% in 2004-05) would seek the help of parents and about 21.5% in 2008 (25.1% in 2004-05) would seek the help of brothers or sisters.

45 The proportion of respondents who would seek help to solve their financial and emotional problems from parents, brothers or sisters has decreased over time and with age. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents who would seek help to solve their financial and emotional problems from good friends has increased over time and with age.

#### *Availability of help from friends*

46 Based on a Likert scale of 7, an index of availability of help or support was 5.27 in

2008 and 5.31 in 2004-05, indicating that on the whole respondents were able to obtain help or support from friends. The index was lower for employed, at 5.27 in 2008 (5.42 in 2004-05). On the other hand, the index remained more or less the same for those who were students, at 5.31 in 2008 (5.30 in 2004-05) and non-engaged, at 4.96 in 2008 (4.99 in 2004-05).

#### *Rendering help to friends and neighbours*

47 Expressed in a Likert scale of 5, an index of rendering help to friends and neighbours was 1.54 in 2008 (1.63 in 2004-05), indicating that on average youth seldom or never rendered help to friends or neighbours. The index was slightly lower for those who were employed, at 1.52 in 2008 (1.71 in 2004-05) and non-engaged, at 1.57 in 2008 (1.70 in 2004-05). On the other hand, the index remained more or less the same for those who were students, at 1.55 in 2008 (1.60 in 2004-05).. The index of rendering of help has decreased over time and with age.

#### *Contacts with neighbours*

48 More than half of respondents (69.1% in 2008 and 84.2% in 2004-05) had contacts with their neighbours. About 22.1% in 2008 (12.0% in 2004-05) never had any contact with their neighbours. In other words, the extent of contacts with neighbours has decreased over time and with age.

49 As regards the nature of contacts with neighbours, the great majority of the respondents (92.4% in 2008 and 84.8% in 2004-05) contacted their neighbours in the form of greetings. Only a small proportion of the respondents contacted their neighbours through instrumental assistance rendered to each others in the form of buying things (6.6% in 2008 and 6.6% in 2004-05) or taking care of family members (4.2% in 2008 and 5.0% in 2004-05).

#### *Observations of social support network*

50 For social support network, the majority of respondents would seek help from their parents or family members to solve their financial problems. Nevertheless, it is of interest to note that the proportion of respondents who would seek help to solve their financial and emotional problems from parents, brothers or sisters has decreased over time and with age. On the other hand, the majority of respondents would seek help from their good friends to solve their emotional problems. Furthermore, the proportion of respondents who would seek help to solve their financial and emotional problems from good friends has increased over time and with age.

51 While the index of availability of help remained more or less the same between 2004-05 and 2008, the index of rendering helping has decreased over time and with age. In addition, the extent of contacts with neighbours has decreased over time and with age. In other words, there are signs that the social support network of respondents has worsened in 2008, as compared with that in 2004-05.

#### **Personal well-being and family functioning**

52 Social capital has an impact, positive or negative, on the personal well-being of individuals, including mental health and family functioning, or vice versa.

#### **Mental health status**

### *Mental health*

53 The status of mental health of respondents covered aspects like anxiety, depression and inadequate coping and respondents' perception of life were studied in the survey. Expressed in a Likert scale of 4, an index of mental health was 3.34 in 2008 (3.20 in 2004-05), indicating that the respondents were in general quite healthy mentally. The index for students, at 3.29 in 2008 (3.21 in 2004-05), employed, at 3.39 in 2008 (3.22 in 2004-05) and non-engaged, at 3.18 in 2008 (3.05 in 2004-05) increased over time and with age.

### *Perception in life*

54 Expressed in a Likert scale of 6, an index of perception of life was 3.45 in 2008 (3.52 in 2004-05), indicating that respondents' perception in life was just average. The index was higher for employed at 3.44 in 2008 (3.32 in 2004-05) but lower for those who were students 3.51 in 2008 (3.59 in 2004-05) and non-engaged 2.94 in 2008 (3.16 in 2004-05). In other words, the perception in life for respondents who were students and non-engaged decreased slightly over time and with age, but increased slightly for those who were employed.

### **Self-esteem**

55 Expressed in a Likert scale of 4, an index of self-esteem was 2.91 in 2008 (2.86 in 2004-05), indicating that respondents' self-esteem was quite high. The index was slightly higher for employed, at 2.91 in 2008 (2.84 in 2004-05). On the other hand, the index remained more or less the same for those who were students, at 2.94 in 2008 (2.88 in 2004-05) and non-engaged, at 2.65 in 2008 (2.64 in 2004-05). In other words, the self-esteem of respondents who were employed increased slightly over time and with age, and remained more or less the same for those who were students and non-engaged.

### ***Observations of mental health status and self-esteem***

56 Two measures were used in the study to assess the respondents' mental health status, namely the index of mental health and perception in life. As regards perception in life, the index for respondents who were students and non-engaged decreased slightly over time and with age, but increased slightly for those who were employed.

57 For self-esteem, the index for respondents who were employed increased slightly over time and with age, and remained more or less the same for those who were students and non-engaged.

### **Family functioning**

#### *Family relationship*

58 Expressed in a Likert scale of 5, an index of family relationship was 3.97 in 2008 (3.86 in 2004-05), indicating that respondents' perception of their family relationship was quite good. The index was higher for students, at 4.01 in 2008 (3.88 in 2004-05) and non-engaged, at 3.88 in 2008 (3.46 in 2004-05). On the other hand, the index remained more or less the same for those who were employed, at 3.94 in 2008 (3.88 in 2004-05). Comparing the survey findings in 2008 and 2004-05, there was an improvement in family relationship over time and with age.

### *Parent-child relationship*

59 An index of parent-child relationship was 3.93 in 2008 (3.83 in 2004-05), in a Likert scale of 5, indicating that respondents' perception of their parent-child relationship was quite good. The index was higher for students at 3.97 in 2008 (3.83 in 2004-05), and non-engaged at 3.93 in 2008 (3.58 in 2004-05) but remained more or less the same for employed at 3.89 in 2008 (3.91 in 2004-05).

60 The index of parent-child relationship for respondents who were students has increased slightly and for those who were non-engaged increased significantly over time and with age. On the other hand, the index remained more or less the same for those who were employed.

### *Family functioning in general*

61 Respondents were asked in the survey to indicate their perceived management of relationship in their families, using a Likert scale of 5, with "5" indicating functioning very well together and "1" indicated not functioning well together and the respondents required help. The majority of the respondents 77.3% in 2008 (72.1% in 2004-05) gave a score of 5 or 4, on their perceived management of relationship in their families indicating that they considered their family relationship functioning very well. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents 75.2% in 2008 (69.7% in 2004-05) gave a score of 5 or 4, on their perceived interdependence among family members indicating that they considered that there was close interdependence among family members.

### *Observations of family functioning*

62 Comparing the survey findings in 2008 and 2004-05, it may be noted that there was an improvement in family relationship over time and with age. For parent-child relationship, it may be of interest to note that the index for respondents who were students has increased slightly and for those who were non-engaged increased significantly over time and with age. On the other hand, the index remained more or less the same for those who were employed.