

EDITORIAL

Poverty and social disadvantage in Hong Kong

The political tensions that have erupted in recent years in Hong Kong overlay longer-term concerns about the imbalance between its strong economic and poor social performance. Although Hong Kong is well-known as a dynamic economy that has generated considerable prosperity for many, evidence on entrenched poverty and high and in many cases, growing inequalities—in income, wealth, housing, and health—indicate that not all have benefitted equally, and some not at all. In responding to the escalating concern over poverty, it should be acknowledged that the Hong Kong Special Administration Region (HKSAR) Government has taken several important initiatives. These include establishing a minimum wage in 2010, re-establishing (and paying increased attention to) the Commission on Poverty in 2012, and the recent launching of a new living allowance for the aged and a family allowance targeted at the working poor. These policy initiatives have raised the incomes of many low-income families but, so far, have failed to lower the headline poverty rate significantly.

Poverty is a complex problem, which is closely linked with other forms of social disadvantage and is a key component of the broader canvas of social inequalities. Effective policies to alleviate poverty, deprivation, and inequality remain a global and local concern. The Hong Kong experience can shed light on the nature, extent, and profile of poverty and social disadvantage, their social and economic causes and consequences, and the role that policy can play in addressing the underlying problems. Although Hong Kong's unique historical experience, cultural practises, and institutional and administrative arrangements have resulted in a highly distinctive policy architecture, the issues it currently confronts and the responses being explored are of wide interest to social policy scholars, practitioners, and activists.

Against this background, the papers in this regional issue represent the collective efforts of academics from multiple disciplines to address (some of) the above concerns. Most of the data used in the papers that follow were generated from surveys conducted as part of the *Trends and Implications of Poverty and Social Disadvantages in Hong Kong: A Multi-disciplinary and Longitudinal Study* project that was funded under the Strategic Public Policy Research Funding Scheme of the Research Grants Council and Central Policy Unit of the HKSAR Government. This research is a coordinated effort that spans several disciplines (social policy, social work, applied economics, public health, and geography) and was conducted across institutions in three countries (The Chinese University of Hong Kong and Lingnan University in Hong Kong, the Universities of Bristol and York from the United Kingdom, and the University of New South Wales, Sydney from Australia). The underlying aim was to design and conduct a comprehensive and longitudinal research study in order to measure and gauge current and recent trends in poverty and social inequality, identify which groups are most adversely affected, assess alternative policy interventions, and draw out the overall implications for how poverty and other forms of social disadvantage in Hong Kong should be formulated, identified, measured, analysed, assessed, debated, and responded to.

The project was organised around three key research challenges. The first involved developing specific measurement and calibration approaches to poverty, material deprivation, and social exclusion in Hong Kong and to estimate the impact of existing policy initiatives in tackling them. The second involved examining in detail the complex interrelationships between poverty and other forms of social disadvantage on the health and housing status of adults and children, with a specific focus on the well-being of children and youth. The third was on exploring the interaction between poverty and health inequalities by adopting a social determinants of health framework to evaluate the health equity impacts of different forms of social policy and action.

Traditional studies on poverty have focused mainly on identifying those with incomes below a poverty line that defines an adequacy standard below which needs cannot be met. The deprivation approach shifts the focus away from the level of resources (income) available and onto the outcomes in terms of the acceptability of the living standards achieved. The social exclusion approach is more concerned with the impacts of these income and material deprivations (and other factors) on the patterns of behaviour and social processes that create and tolerate social exclusion as well as the social policies that construct and legitimise these drivers. Moreover, poverty (lack of money), deprivation (being not able to fulfil the commonly accepted essential needs), and social exclusion (not being able to participate in customary activities) are interrelated but different concepts, but each will interact differently with other forms of social support (e.g. in health, housing, and personal support services) and lead to different policy implications. This requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort to better understand the dimensions, consequences, and policy implications of social disadvantage—in the Hong Kong context, as elsewhere.

Recent developments in poverty measurement have assisted this task by providing clearer linkages between how poverty is identified and measured and the factors that cause or contribute to it. The deprivation approach in particular has facilitated this by including among the list of community-consensus necessary items several that relate specifically to the health, accommodation, and service needs of individuals. Although the enforced lack of these items are used as indicators, not measures, the composition of the list provides a valuable insight not only into prevailing community priorities but also into where people's needs are unfulfilled, and this in turn helps to forge a link between poverty studies and those studies that focus directly on health, housing, and support needs. The deprivation approach can also be applied to individuals as well as to households, and this provides an avenue for exploring within-household differences in how needs are perceived (and hence which items are necessities) and in how different household members (e.g. men and women; adults and children) perceive their needs as being met adequately. These features are exploited in two of the papers that follow to highlight differences in adult-child perceptions of necessities and in the degree of deprivation experienced.

Much of the research on the negative impacts of poverty and social disadvantage has been conducted independently of that focusing on the adverse health effects of social inequality. Yet there are clear links between the two issues that require a broader approach that encompasses both. It is widely recognised, for example, that children in the 21st century face tremendous challenges and opportunities in responding to the rapid socio-economic transformation, which affects both their material (including income poverty and material deprivation) and nonmaterial (including education, physical health, overall life satisfaction, exposure to risk, and risk behaviour) well-being. There is considerable public concern about the effects of radical socio-economic and demographic changes on the circumstances and behaviour of children and young people. Empirical evidence has established associations between child poverty and well-being, adolescent health behaviours and parental socioeconomic status, the quality of family and peer relationships and adolescent health and risk behaviours, and between family and community social capital and children's and young people's educational achievement.

More generally, there is also a substantial body of evidence showing that people with poorer socio-economic status have poorer health outcomes, including higher morbidity and mortality, poorer access to health services, and poorer health behaviour. People living in deprived areas are more likely to smoke, eat less nutritious meals, take less physical exercise, and be more susceptible to drugs and alcohol abuse. There is considerable evidence that many populations, particularly those living in areas of high socio-economic deprivation, suffer on three counts: They use poor-quality services; they have relative difficulty in securing access to services; and they suffer from multiple external disadvantages. Because of the higher burden of illness among socially disadvantaged populations, there is a need to make the provision of health services not only more accessible and affordable but also more responsive to their needs. Systems of disease control and health service provision (including of primary health care) can either exacerbate existing health inequalities or act as a powerful positive force for inclusion and empowerment. Without also addressing these concerns, efforts to tackle poverty alone will be of limited effectiveness.

Similar to other world cities, under the impacts of globalisation and neo-liberalism, Hong Kong is facing long-lasting problems related to deteriorating housing conditions as factors such as housing costs, living density, and

living quarters significantly influence deprivation and social exclusion outcomes. There is a need to better understand the role that these housing-related factors play in reinforcing existing forms of disadvantage by cutting off escape routes out of poverty and entrenching—often exacerbating—existing inequalities. Other forms of social provision that affect the profile of social disadvantage include the mediating effects of communication and social support provision on the impacts of objective disadvantages (poverty and deprivation) on subjective well-being. Again, these issues are often the focus of research that is not integrated within a broader framework that examines social disadvantage in a holistic and integrated manner. Several of the papers that follow address this deficiency.

By drawing these strands together, the papers in this regional issue not only provide an improved understanding of the nature of social disadvantage in Hong Kong, they also pave the way for the development of policy interventions that are evidence-based and designed to exert maximum impact on the forces that result in and perpetuate different forms of social disadvantage. Hong Kong experience to date shows the limitations of piecemeal, underresourced interventions that fail to grapple adequately with the complex realities that determine adverse social outcomes. More must be done if current trends are to be not merely capped but reversed. A new approach is required that combines an integrated diagnosis of the underlying causes with improved but practical policy remedies that provide increased assistance where needed, tackle the multiple sources of existing problems, and prevent the emergence of new ones.

Note

The article on Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship in this issue of *Social Policy & Administration* is not part of the regional issue, but I have decided to publish it here since it also deals with social policy in Hong Kong.

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