

Working with  
**Youth-at-Risk**  
in Hong Kong

Edited by Francis Wing-lin Lee



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The image shows the Chinese characters for '香港大學' (Hong Kong University) written in a square word calligraphy style. Each character is contained within a square frame, and the overall composition is a vertical column of four squares. The characters are '香', '港', '大', and '學' from top to bottom.

Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

"At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed."

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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# Contents

Foreword	vii
<i>Nelson Wing-sun Chow</i>	
Preface	xi
Contributors	xiii
1. Introduction: The Phenomena of “Youth-at-Risk” in Hong Kong	1
<i>Francis Wing-lin Lee</i>	
2. Service Programmes for “Youth-at-Risk” in Hong Kong	7
<i>Francis Wing-lin Lee</i>	
3. Working with Youth Gangs: An RGC Approach	15
<i>Francis Wing-lin Lee</i>	
4. Working with Young Substance Abusers: A Harm Reduction Approach	27
<i>Cecilia Wing-yin Ho</i>	
5. Strategies for Tackling School Bullying: A Whole-School Approach	39
<i>Dennis Sing-wing Wong and Sindy Sin-ting Lee</i>	
6. Police Diversion Measures for Juveniles at Risk	53
<i>Karen A. Joe Laidler</i>	

7. Community Support Service Scheme — Project Phoenix <i>Koon-mei Lee</i>	75
8. Effectiveness of Services to “Youth-at-Risk”: The Case of Outreaching Social Work <i>Howard Chi-ho Cheng</i>	87
9. Rethinking Youth Problems in a Risk Society: Some Reflections on Working with “Youth-at-Risk” in Hong Kong <i>Sammy Wai-sang Chiu</i>	99
10. Working with “Youth-at-Risk”: The Way Ahead <i>Francis Wing-lin Lee</i>	113
Notes	119
References	121
Index	145

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# 1

## **Introduction: The Phenomena of “Youth-at-Risk” in Hong Kong**

**Francis Wing-lin Lee**

From a developmental perspective, every one of us has different developmental tasks to fulfill at different stages in the life process and is prone to be at risk if the tasks are not fulfilled/satisfied. But why are young people or adolescents usually regarded as more at risk? Young people are typically perceived as immature, with low self-esteem, lack of coping ability and self-control (Dryfoos, 1990; Jessor et al., 1991; McWhirter et al., 1998). When youth-at-risk (YAR) is mentioned, it is usually associated with young people in the education system who are on the fringe of dropping out of schools (Capuzzi & Gross, 1996). McWhirter et al. (1998) provided a comprehensive definition of “at-risk”. They defined “at-risk” as:

A set of presumed cause-and-effect dynamics that place the child or adolescent in danger of negative future events ... a situation that is not necessarily current but that can be anticipated in the absence of intervention (P.7).

Under this definition, we can understand that, for example, young people who exhibit aggression (cause) run the risk of exhibiting anti-social behaviour (effect) if no appropriate intervention is provided. Young people who exhibit anti-social behaviour (cause) run the risk of committing delinquency (effect) if no appropriate intervention is provided. They further propose a five-tier at-risk continuum for young people. It ranges from minimal risk to remote risk, high risk, imminent risk to the ultimate at-risk category (McWhirter et al., 1998:7–9). Young people belonging to different at-risk levels have different socio-economic profiles. Lee (1994) mentioned some characteristics specific to different YAR groups. These include existing in natural groupings, strong group

cohesion, distinct subculture and exhibiting pro-delinquent/delinquent behaviour.

People often associate at-risk youth in Hong Kong with youth gangs/street youth, young substance abusers, school dropouts and young delinquents. As an introduction to this book, this chapter will present some phenomena of these groupings so that readers can acquire some basic understanding of their situations in the local context.

## Youth Gangs

Whenever youth gangs are mentioned in Hong Kong, they are typically linked to Triad societies (a kind of Chinese "heritage"). There are some 40 triad organizations with over 40,000 members (Ho, 1985). However, the number of youth gangs is not as accountable because they exist everywhere where there are young people, including public housing estates, schools, commercial centres, sitting-out areas, parks, football pitches and basketball grounds (Luk, 2002). Several studies have been conducted in Hong Kong (CSWCYISC, 1999; HKFYG, 1993; Lee et al., 1996/97; Lo, 1984, 1992 & 1993). Some common findings show they exist in groups with a core-fringe structure, and share Triad subcultures with varying degrees of delinquency. Youth gangs involved in less serious delinquency (e.g. shop-theft, blackmail for small sums, vandalism, etc.), are regarded as at-risk youth who need special attention and are of high intervention priority. Without proper intervention or services, they run a higher risk of being further influenced by Triads, and consequently heightening the severity of their delinquent acts. Ultimately they may end up as hard-core criminals. Luk (2002) pointed out that the "righteousness" and "brotherhood spirit" once strongly emphasized in Triad societies have long disappeared. Triads are now mainly concerned about monetary gains and rewards through illegal means. Groups of young people (youth gangs), who join or are affiliated with these societies, can easily be influenced by the subculture and commit serious criminal acts.

## Young Substance Abusers

As there is a trend for young abusers to take multiple substances at a time, it is quite difficult for officials now to identify what kinds of substances they have abused. Ecstasy has now been identified as one of

the most abused substances, with nearly 200 different kinds available on the market. There were 2,049 reported young substance abusers under the age of 21 in the first half of 2000 (January-June), a 42.1% increase from 1,442 in the second half of 1999 (July-December), according to data provided by the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA). And there was an increase of 55.9% (from 700 to 1,091) newly reported young abuser cases in 1999 (Narcotics Division, 2000). "About half of the reported young abusers were within the age bracket 16-18" (Narcotics Division, 2000:6). Another report from the CRDA indicates that compared to the same period (January to June) in 2000, there was an increase of 24.7% reported young abusers (under age 21) in 2001; and newly reported young abuser cases also increased by 43.0% (Narcotics Division, 2001). Again, "about half (49.5%) of the reported young abusers were within the age bracket 16-18" (Narcotics Division, 2001:6). Ketamine and Ecstasy remain the most commonly abused substances by young people (Narcotics Division, 2002). It must be noted that there is significant under-reporting in this area so the actual number of young abusers is expected to be higher. Reports have revealed that discos and rave parties are popular occasions for young people to abuse illegal substances, and tighter substance abuse legislation for young people is needed (AOSWT, EDOSWT, SCOSWT & CWDOSWT, 2000; *Oriental Daily*, 16.7.2000; *Shing Pao*, 27.8.2000; *Sing Tao*, 27.8.2000 and *Sun Pao*, 27.8.2000). Unruly behaviour, such as promiscuity and gang fights are reported to be common among young substance abusers at discos and rave parties (*Oriental Daily*, 31.7.2000 and *Shing Pao*, 27.8.2000 and *Sun*, 27.8.2000). Through these observed cases, it is obvious that young people who abuse substances deserve our attention.

## School Bullies

Although bullying among school students is not a new phenomenon, the fact that some students are persistently rejected, harassed and physically hurt by other students has drawn much public attention and concern (*Oriental Daily*, 1997; *Hong Kong Standard*, 1998; *Ming Pao*, 1999; *Sing Tao*, 2001). Bullying occurs where there is an imbalance in power between people, and it is a repeated or continued behaviour (Olweus, 1994; Smith and Sharp, 1994; Rigby, 1996). There is evidence that continued or severe bullying can contribute to problems of neurosis, sleeping difficulties, study difficulties, truancy and depression as well as long-term problems such as permanent anxiety, low self-esteem,



school dropouts, delinquency and suicide (Sharp and Thompson, 1991; Olweus, 1993 & 1994; Smith and Sharp, 1994; Hugh-Jones and Smith, 1999). A more comprehensive local study on secondary teachers' and students' perceptions of school bullying in local districts was conducted in 2001 (Wong and Lo, 2001). Another community-wide research report on the prevalence of school bullying in primary schools in Hong Kong was also published in October 2001 (Wong et al., 2001). These studies reveal the severity of the problem among students in Hong Kong and this deserves our attention and intervention.

### **Young Delinquents**

The last YAR group to be introduced in this chapter is young delinquents in Hong Kong. As shown from police statistics, the number of young people under the age of 21 that have been arrested between 1998 to 2000 contributed about 30% of the total arrested population, with 29.3% (12,447) in 1998, 30.7% (12,524) in 1999 and 31.0% (12,694) in 2000. (Commissioner of Police, 1999, 2000 & 2001). It can be observed that both the number of young arrests and the percentage are increasing steadily, so the situation deserves attention. Of the different categories of crime committed, "Shop-Theft" remains the most frequently committed offence. In 1998, there were 2,782 young persons arrested for the offence; and in 1999 and 2000, the number was respectively 2,433 and 2,451 (Commissioner of Police, 1999, 2000 & 2001). As juvenile delinquency has been a concern for society, the government has commissioned a study to explore the possible causes and solutions (Vagg et al., 1995). The study suggested that the problems that exist within different systems, including law enforcement, have caused an increasing number of juvenile delinquents. The study proposed the development of more measures to dispose at-risk young people so they do not enter the criminal justice system pre-maturely (Vagg et al., 1995). Other studies (Au, 1997 and Cheung, 1997) have indicated that the external social systems, e.g. family, school, peer groups and media, are also causes for deviance.

Overall, it can be concluded that the exhibition of different kinds of behavioural problems, e.g. hanging out with gangs, abusing substances, dropping out of schools and committing delinquency, are indicators of the at-risk situation of young people. They are actually signals for help and assistance. If appropriate help and assistance can be offered to these YAR and we can shift their energy to positive and

constructive focuses from negative and destructive ones, these young people would have unlimited potential in our society.

After introducing different service programmes currently available to YAR in the next chapter, concepts and methods on how best to work with YAR with different behavioural exhibitions will follow.

## 2

# Service Programmes for “Youth-at-Risk” in Hong Kong

Francis Wing-lin Lee

The destructive power of young people had caught the government's attention by the mid-1960s after a series of youth riots, which demonstrated how destabilizing a force youth power could be on society (Commission of Inquiry, 1967). By the late 1970s, the delinquent behaviours of young people had become so alarming that it led to the formation of a working group by the government to investigate the problem (Working Group on Juvenile Crime, 1981). In fact, the problem of juvenile delinquency in Hong Kong has been a big concern for the government, with the latest official commissioned research on the phenomenon in the early 1990s, and a published report in 1995 (Vagg et al., 1995). Because of its disturbing effect on society, the government has put much emphasis on handling the problem of juvenile crime. A few years ago, the government commissioned a study on the effectiveness of different rehabilitation programmes for young offenders (Lo et al., 1997). But it should be noted that the problem of “youth-at-risk” was not part of the government's priorities until a report on young night-drifters, a form of “youth-at-risk” (YAR) was released (Lee and Tang, 1999). The Secretary of Health and Welfare then stressed the problem had become part of the government's top agenda (*Ming Pao*, 29.5.2000). In early 2001, the Social Welfare Department announced that “Care for the Youth-at-Risk” would be the main theme of forthcoming youth services. In the new millennium, the development of youth services would follow the trend of integration of all disciplines, with youth-at-risk and juvenile delinquents considered top priorities.

## Service Programmes for Youth-at-risk in Hong Kong

Ideally, before presenting different service programmes for YAR, the policy on YAR should be discussed first. However, it is regrettable that there is no such thing as an overall policy for YAR in Hong Kong. Policy-makers believe that different YAR service programmes already have their own policies so there is no need to have a separate policy to address YAR specifically. At-risk youth are, to a large extent, not official delinquents whose wrong-doings need to be punished under the legal system. They fall under the social welfare services who attempt to fulfill their developmental needs. To have an overview of different service programmes for at-risk youth, it is best to refer to the Five Year Plan for Social Welfare Development in Hong Kong published bi-annually by the Social Welfare Department.

According to the Five Year Plan for Social Welfare Development in Hong Kong (SWD, 1998), there are six service programmes that target youth-at-risk in different groups. They are: 1. Outreaching Social Work service, 2. School Social Work service, 3. Integrated Teams, 4. Community Support Service Scheme, 5. Hotline Service for Youth at Risk, and 6. Outreaching Social Work Service for Young Night Drifters (SWD, 1998). In fact, several services for YAR exist in the territory. These will be introduced in this chapter.

### Outreaching Social Work Service

Outreaching Social Work (OSW) service is run by some non-governmental organizations subvented by the government. Through the use of casework, groupwork, mass programmes and activities, it aims to provide guidance services to individuals and groups of street youth (youth-at-risk) who are detached from conventional social systems (e.g. family and school) and hang around in groups in public premises such as street corners, parks, football fields, video game centres, billiard rooms and fast food shops, etc. (Coordinating Committee on Outreaching Social Work Service, 1989). The ultimate goal is to help these young people regain more sociable life styles. These young people, who do not normally participate in conventional social or youth activities, and who usually have a Triad background, are vulnerable to undesirable influences. They have created much public nuisance to the local communities and are in need of social work service. Historically, in a full OSW team, ten professionally trained social workers are allocated

to a priority area where the service need is identified. As of March 2000, there were 34 OSW teams, serving in 34 priority areas/communities with relatively higher juvenile crime rate, and unserved youth population in the territory (SWD, 2000). "Outreaching social work aims to establish contact with these young people in the places they are known to frequent, ... and to provide counselling, guidance and other forms of service to help them overcome their problems, develop their potential and become socially reintegrated" (SWD, 1998:51). A geographically-based Integrated Team (IT) mode of service has been developed to meet the changing needs of children and youth. At-risk youth identified in the community are also served by the ITs. (For more detail on ITs, please refer to the relevant section below.) The establishment of OSW in the territory has to be changed. After some re-arrangement of the service districts and organizations, in September 2002, 16 Youth Outreaching Teams (YOTs), that work basically the same as OSW teams before, were formed to serve identified at-risk youth and street gangs in 16 priority districts in the territory (SWD, 2002).

### **School Social Work Service**

School Social Work (SSW) service is provided to students in secondary schools. A social worker is usually attached to a secondary school, and provides individual and group counselling and guidance services to students. Most SSW services are provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) but the SWD also has a school social work unit with a few workers who deliver direct service to some secondary schools. In September 2002, there was one school social worker in every one of the 468 secondary schools in Hong Kong. Casework, groupwork and mass programmes/activities are employed in the service delivery process. The service aims "to identify and help students whose academic, social and emotional development is at risk. It seeks to assist them to solve their personal problems and to make maximum use of their educational opportunities and prepare them for adulthood" (SWD, 1998:51).

### **Integrated Teams/Integrated Children and Youth Service Centres**

After conducting a two-year evaluation of children and youth centre services, a report published in 1994 recommended the service delivery

model of integrated team (IT) for children and youth services (Working Party on Review of Children and Youth Centre Services, 1994). This model has become a development trend for the provision of children and youth services in the territory. For a standard full team, an IT would have 13 social work staff to service a youth population of 12,000. The IT model basically draws manpower from a child and youth centre, OSW and SSW, while some teams also have a Family Life Education Officer (FLEO). One of the IT's advantages is its flexibility to deploy resources to form sub-teams and employ different working approaches, e.g. reaching-out, attachment to school, centre-based, etc., to serve the indigenous young people with reference to their life/behavioural patterns. At-risk youth form part of the 12,000 youth population, and consequently, they also fall under the team's service target. At the end of June 2003, there were 130 ITs/ICYSCs (Integrated Children and Youth Service Centres in the territory (HWFB/SWD, 2003). There should be around 133 ITs/ICYSCs (Integrated Children and Youth Service Centres in the territory in 2003–2004 (HWFB/SWD, 2003). "With the flexibility in deploying the manpower and other resources pooled, and through adopting different service models and approaches, integrated teams can, ideally, effectively meet young people's multifarious needs and, at the same time, be responsive to community demand" (SWD, 1998:50).

### **Community Support Service Scheme**

This Community Support Service Scheme (CSSS) was also recommended by the Working Party on Review of Children and Youth Centre Services (1994). The Scheme aims to help children and youth who have infringed the law or on the verge of law infringement to re-integrate into society. Counselling, structured supportive group programmes and intensive supervised activities are provided by the Scheme to supplement the existing casework and youth services for marginal youth (YAR) and young delinquent (SWD, 1998). In October 1994, the SWD started to subvent a CSSS project — Project Phoenix — of the Methodist Centre as a two-year pilot project (Lo, 1998). At the same time, the SWD also ran two units of CSSS at Kowloon East and Kowloon West for young probationers and subvented the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG) to run another unit of CSSS — Youth Support Scheme — at New Territories West. All these CSSS units were the review targets of an evaluation research (Lo et al., 1997). After the review, all units became long-term subvented schemes. Non-

governmental organization (NGOs) schemes target young delinquents who have been cautioned by the police (Police Superintendent Discretion Scheme – PSDS), while SWD-run units target young probationers. In April 2000 the Project Phoenix agreed to confine the service targets who receive PSDS and live in the Hong Kong Island region (Methodist Centre, 2000). In 2001, three more units of CSSS run by 3 NGOs were set up in the territory. They are attached to the Tai Wo Integrated Team of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Social Service (serving Shatin, Tai Po/North & Yuen Long); Tsz King Integrated Team of the Hong Kong Playground Association (serving Wong Tai Sin/Sai Kung & Kwun Tong); and Cheung Sha Wan Integrated Team of the Boys' and Girls' Association of Hong Kong (serving Yau Tsim Mong, Kowloon City & Sham Shui Po).

### **Hotline Service for Youth-at-Risk**

Since August 1995, SWD has subvented the HKFYG to run a hotline service for youth-at-risk in order "to provide hotline service for youngsters to call for help and advice instead of pending up their negative emotions leading to desperate acts, ... to prevent youth suicide by offering timely intervention through counselling" (SWD, 1998:52). An NGO, the Youth Outreach, also runs a 24-hour hotline for young people without subvention (Youth Outreach, 2001).

### **Outreaching Social Work Service for Young Night Drifters**

A study commissioned by SWD to Lee and Tang (1999) on Young Night Drifters (YNDs) in the territory estimated that there were more than 10,000 YNDs who are at-risk of undesirable influences of various kinds, and are drifting in open space locations at night. Some 35–55% of them have service demands (Lee and Tang, 1999). With reference to the report, 18 night-shift OSW teams run by 13 NGOs, with the subvention of the SWD, especially targeting the YNDs have been set up in different districts in the territory. Their jobs include offering tangible assistance (e.g. escorting home) and referral, counselling and guidance services to the YNDs. Without subvention, Youth Outreach has been operating its own night outreach team with the support of two crisis centers since 1991 (Youth Outreach, 2001). However, with government subvention since July 2002, it now operates an overnight centre — The Hangout — for young people.

## **Working Group on Services for Youth at Risk**

In the Five Year Plan, the Working Group on Services for Youth At Risk has been recognized as a kind of youth-at-risk service (SWD, 1998). This Working Group in fact has an advisory role and is not involved in any direct service delivery. The Group is formed to identify and examine major issues relating to young people. Recommendations to the government on the handling methods of different issues of youth-at-risk are made by the Group.

## **District Coordinated Projects**

There are also projects at the district-level that are involved with different organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, to provide services to youth-at-risk. These district-based projects have adopted a multi-disciplinary approach and cooperation to serve the youth-at-risk at the district-level. Examples of these projects are Youth Action Network in Shumshuipo, Project Headway in Shatin, Community Youth Enhancement Scheme in Tai Po, Project Polar Star in Yuen Long, Project "X" in Tuen Mun, Scout Teams in Eastern District and Shatin, and so on. These projects basically have the involvement of some youth service organizations (of NGOs), the police, social welfare and schools. Through referrals, some identified at-risk youth are introduced to relevant services or activities for guidance purposes.

## **Understanding Adolescents Project**

With government backing, the Understanding Adolescents Project (UAP) is now running in some primary and secondary schools following two years of experimentation in 11 schools in Shatin. The project is of a primary preventive nature. The purposes of UAP are for early identification and intervention of youth-at-risk in the school setting. Through the use of a set of screening tools (questionnaire), the youth-at-risk are identified. Different relevant service programmes, both at individual and group levels, are provided to these young people by social workers affiliated with the schools in order to direct them on to the right track.



## Hostel Service

The Youth Outreach provides short-term hostel service to young people who have run away from home or who are temporarily unable to return home. It has two "crisis centres", one for boys and another for girls. Services in the centres basically include case and group counselling, school and career guidance and recreational activities (Youth Outreach website). Another NGO, the Hong Kong Student Aid Society, also runs three hostels for young people who, for various reasons, cannot live with their families and require accommodation.

## Police Superintendent's Discretion Scheme

Although the Scheme is for juvenile offenders who admit to minor crimes, these juveniles can still be regarded as "at-risk" at the top level — "at-risk category activity" (McWhirter et al., 1998) as mentioned in the previous chapter. The Scheme can be regarded as a diversion measure "that seeks to avoid formal processing of the offender by the criminal justice system" (Clear and Dammer, 2000:27). This Scheme provides power of "a police officer of or above the rank of superintendent to issue a caution to a juvenile offender (under 18 at the time of caution) rather than initiate a criminal prosecution" (HKPF, 1995). There are some pre-requisites that the police officer needs to observe before deciding on the cautioning. These are: 1. there is sufficient support for prosecution which is the only alternative, 2. the juvenile voluntarily and unequivocally admits the offence, and 3. the juvenile and his or her parent/guardian agree to the cautioning (HKPF, 1995). Upon the officer's decision, the case can be referred to the Juvenile Protection Section of the Force for follow-up visits for a period of up to two years or until the eighteenth birthday of the juvenile. Upon the consent of the juvenile's parent/guardian, the case can also be referred to the SWD or Education Department (ED) for relevant services (HKPF, 1995).

The programmes introduced above are some main services for YAR in Hong Kong. At a glance, it seems that Hong Kong has quite a number of service programmes for this group of young people in different forms and with various approaches. The effectiveness and adequacy of these different service programmes for YAR will be discussed in a later chapter (Chapter 8). However, one thing is certain. "Care for the Youth-at-Risk" has been designated as the main development theme for youth services in the coming years, and further service programmes and diverse forms and approaches will emerge.

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# Notes

## CHAPTER 3

1. As at March 2003, there were 34 Outreaching Social Work Teams serving 34 priority areas with relatively higher juvenile crime rate and youth population in the territory.
2. These 30 OR teams had been serving in the prioritized communities for more than one year at the time of study. It is believed that one-year service experience was basic for a team to develop an appropriate work system for its workers to follow.
3. Originally, an experienced worker (with more than three-years of service experience) from each of the 30 OR teams was invited for the interview. However, only 19 teams responded energetically.
4. In working with youth gangs, OR workers will design particular treatment goals for particular gangs with reference to their particular assessed needs. Effective or successful intervention means the treatment goals designed have been achieved.

## CHAPTER 5

1. See *Hong Kong Standard*, April 10, 1998; *Oriental Daily*, June 2, 1999; *Ming Pao*, February 5, 1999.
2. See *Oriental Daily*, May 19, 1997.
3. See *Ming Pao*, February 14, 1999.
4. See *Sing Tao Daily*, September 18, 2001.
5. A whole school approach is widely known in the field of education. For more information, please see:
  - Rogers, B. (1995). *Behaviour Management: A Whole-School Approach*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.
  - Humm J., & I. Mocoft (2001). *Bully-Proofing a School*. London: Community Development Foundation.

- Arora, C.M.J. (1994). Is there any point in trying to reduce bullying in secondary schools? *Educational Psychology in Practice*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 155–162.
6. This centre is a non-profit making organization, which is very active in anti-bullying movement in recent years.

## CHAPTER 8

1. Comments from a youth worker in a sharing session.
2. A service unit refers to a unit which the subvention is allocated at the snapshot. The size of units may vary while a full team should comprise of 10 social workers.

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# Index

- Adolescence 115
- Approach continuum 116–7
- At-risk  
definition 1
- At-risk youth  
concepts of 103–5, 114
- Bullying  
definition 39  
intervention strategy 41–3  
research 40–1  
theoretical framework of a  
whole-school approach 44–7  
whole-school approach of  
anti-bullying programmes in  
Hong Kong 48–50
- Club drugs 29–30
- Community Support Service  
Scheme 10–1, 75–86
- Criminalization process 114–5
- District coordinated projects 12
- Ecstasy 28
- Harm reduction 30–2  
practice 35–7
- Hotline service for youth-at-risk  
11
- Hostel service 13
- Integrated Teams/Integrated  
Children and Youth Service  
Centers 9–10
- Intermediate intervention 114–5
- Juveniles  
arrests 59–60  
cautioned 59–60  
in custody 63–4  
recidivism 62–3
- Outreaching Social Work  
Service 8–9, 16, 94  
service evaluation 89–95  
service for young night  
drifters 11
- Police diversion measures for  
juvenile at risk  
Hong Kong experience 57–65  
international experience 55–7  
philosophy and debates 53–4
- Police Superintendent's  
Discretion Scheme 13, 58–63

- Prevention continuum 116-7
- Project Phoenix 75-86
  - effectiveness 82-5
  - guiding concepts 78-9
  - historical development 76-7
  - service contents 80-2
  - service objectives 78
- Project X 65-73
  
- Quality of youth gang worker 19-20
  
- Recreational drugs 28-9
- Reflections for social work 110-1
- RGC approach in working with youth gangs 21-6
- Risk continuum 116-7
- Risks faced by youth 107-10
- Risk society
  - concepts of 105-7
  
- School bullies 3-4
- School Social Work Service 9
  
- Unattached/marginal/at-risk youth concepts of 101-3
- Understanding Adolescents Project 12
  
- Working Group on Services for Youth at Risk 12
  
- Young delinquents 4
- Young people (also see Adolescence)
  - perceptions of 1, 115
- Young substance abusers 2-3
- Youth-at-risk 1-5
  - perceptions of 2
- Youth gangs 2
  - definition 15
  - profile of 17