

## ACA News

15 Jan 2018 SCMP

### In Hong Kong, most child abuse victims suffer at hands of parents

A recent spate of child abuse cases has cast the spotlight on the factors that cause adults, especially parents, to hurt minors in their care. But beyond getting tough on abusers, early intervention by teachers and social workers is key to preventing tragedy, experts say



It is a sunny Sunday afternoon at the Sai Ching Street Children's Playground in Yuen Long.

From a distance, giggles and squeals can be heard as wide-eyed children whizz down the slide or challenge each other to see who can go higher on the swings.

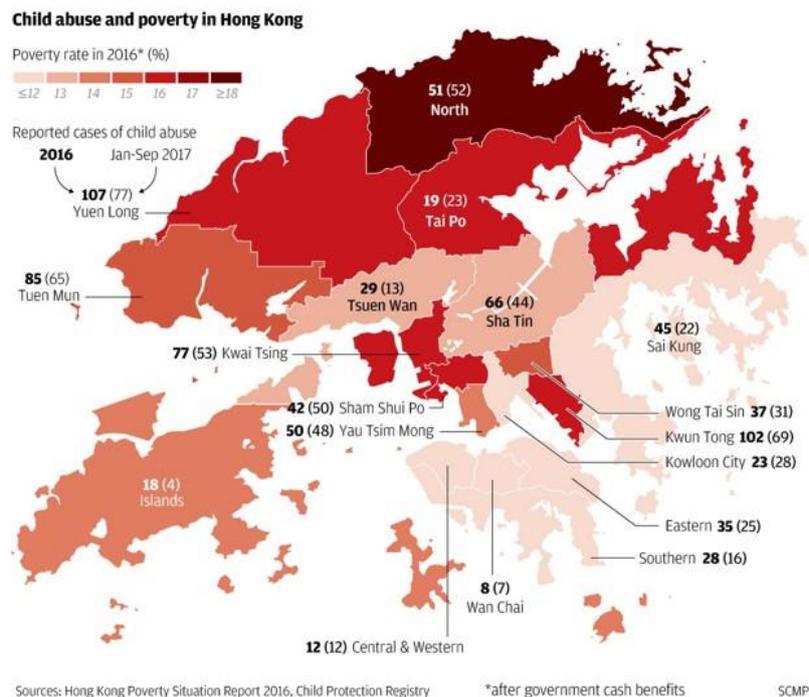
Close by are their parents and grandparents keeping a watchful eye to make sure fun is had by all without anyone getting injured.

But the life of children in Yuen Long is not always this blissful. The district – one of 18 residential areas in Hong Kong – consistently has the highest number of child abuse cases in the city.



Latest available full year figures from 2016 showed that 12 per cent – or 107 – of 892 incidents of abuse against children below the age of 18 took place in the New Territories district, followed by 102 in Kwun Tong, 85 in Tuen Mun and 77 in Kwai Tsing.

In contrast, there were 29 cases reported in Tsuen Wan and 8 cases in Wan Chai.



Last year's figures – which the Social Welfare Department's Child Protection Registry has tabulated only for January to September so far – show the same pattern.

It was barely a few weeks ago that a case in Tuen Mun shocked Hongkongers. A five-year-old girl died after being repeatedly thrown at the ceiling and poked in the chest with scissors at home.

Her father, 26, a transport worker, and stepmother, 27, a housewife, were charged with murder last Monday.

Subsequently, after four incidents of abuse were reported in three days, police arrested parents and a foster parent.

Indeed, the registry's statistics – which date back to 2005 – showed that in more than five out of 10 cases, the abuser was a parent. Family friends and unrelated persons were perpetrators about one in 10 times.

Physical abuse took place most frequently – in four out of 10 cases – followed by neglect and sexual abuse.

But social welfare workers said reported cases were only the tip of the iceberg and did not reflect the true situation on the ground.

A study by the University of Hong Kong from a decade ago estimated that about 70,000 children were subject to "severe violence" through corporal punishment by their parents each year, and these cases of abuse were almost always unreported.

Child protection advocates have long called for better policies to safeguard the interests of this vulnerable group.

### **Who would abuse children?**

A walk through a housing estate in Yuen Long reveals the stress factors that social workers say can turn people into real-life monsters towards children.

These include poverty, estranged relationships, living in close quarters with others in subdivided flats, for instance, and, for new immigrants, the struggle to adapt to life in Hong Kong.

Lee Yu-po, service manager at child protection group Against Child Abuse, said the districts with higher numbers of child abuse cases have more low-income families, and their living conditions would definitely make them more stressed out.

“Many live in cubicle apartments ... they might not be able to rest properly and the tight living space could also result in more family conflicts.”

She added that the other kinds of cases her group handles – including family violence – were also prevalent in poorer districts, with the addition of Wong Tai Sin and Sham Shui Po.



Social worker Raymond Fung Hing-kau recalled handling seven cases of child abuse in a primary school in Kwun Tong in just two months a few years ago. Two of the more serious ones were reported to police.

In one, a child was caned for not finishing homework while the other was hit with the wire from a phone charger for being naughty. Both had visible injuries on their hands and faces.

Fung, who is from the city’s Social Workers’ General Union’s concern group on primary school guidance services, said the districts with more cases of reported abuse tended to have a higher immigrant population – including those from the mainland who might be poorer and less educated.

“Some new immigrants tend to have a more traditional Chinese mindset, thinking that

beating a child is part of their upbringing,” he said.

Lawmaker Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung, who chairs the Legislative Council’s Subcommittee on Children’s Rights, said other traits of abusers included drug abuse, mental health problems, having undergone a teenage pregnancy and having a history of being abused. New immigrants, he said, were at risk as they had weaker family networks and lacked support.

### **Helping families in need**

Lee said that in families where there was a risk of child abuse, guidance and counselling for adults could prevent children from becoming victims.

Her agency currently provides monthly home visitation services for one year by trained volunteers for residents in Wong Tai Sin, Tuen Mun, Kwun Tong, Kwai Tsing, Tsuen Wan and Sham Shui Po. They are aimed at new arrivals to the city, low-income residents, families with a new child on the way and those that have recently had a new baby.

The group is now working with hospitals, maternal and child health care centres and new immigrant groups to identify families most in need of the service.

Volunteers would, during their visit, discuss issues such as home safety, management of emotions and how to take care of young children with parents and other family members, Lee said.

Lee’s colleague Donna Wong Chui-ling added that volunteers could also talk to the families on the phone in addition to the visits, under the guidance of social workers.

However, there is a waiting list for such services and both women said there was an immediate need for more of these resources. Funding could also be channelled to more widespread public education on ways to manage children.

### **Preventive measures**

But along with helping parents navigate the stresses of raising a family, child protection advocates want the government to get tough on abusers, while empowering other adults to rescue children from tragedy before it is too late.

One proposal that has surfaced again is to ban corporal punishment in homes. Currently, it is banned in schools and correctional institutions in the city.

Advocates said that, while many Asian parents subscribe to the mantra “spare the rod and spoil the child” only as a deterrent for bad behaviour, others had taken caning and beating too far. Already, in 53 countries – including Germany, Spain and New Zealand – it is a crime to mete out corporal punishment to children at home, they noted.

Those who work directly with children added that it was crucial to boost the numbers and quality of child protection advocates, to ensure prevention of abuse or early intervention.

Fung, who supervises primary school social workers, said there was a 30 per cent turnover rate for school-based social workers each year due to low pay and the lack of job security.

Saddled with a heavy workload, social workers had to decide which cases to follow up on, and make difficult decisions, including dropping cases that “seem to be settled”.



School social workers – while trained to handle abuse cases – had recounted facing resistance when they tried to refer cases to the Social Welfare Department for follow up.

Fung’s wish list included giving social workers the right to send children to hospital, and for schools to have, at minimum, one teacher-counsellor and one social worker.

A lack of money means schools usually have either one or the other, he said.

Cheung Yung-pong, chairman of the Hong Kong Aided Primary School Heads Association, said teachers must be given clearer guidelines so they know when to raise alarm bells.

“The current guidelines are over 300 pages long and seem more targeted at social workers,” he said, adding that teachers should also be trained in dealing with abuse cases step-by-step.

There are also concerns about the disparity in how the Education Bureau handles younger pupils who miss school.

Education lawmaker Ip Kin-yuen urged the Education Bureau to institute guidelines so that kindergartens would track down children who had missed classes to check on their well-being, similar to what primary and secondary schools are expected to do.

A bureau spokeswoman explained that, as kindergarten education is not compulsory in Hong Kong, it was not suitable for the bureau to require them to follow the same regulations as primary and secondary schools. But she agreed that it could study how kindergartens should improve tracking of pupils who consistently missed classes.

Others have called for mandatory reporting of suspected abuse with the city's welfare chief, Dr Law Chi-kwong, writing in his weekly Sunday blog, pledging to improve the system for flagging abuse cases and training teachers and welfare workers to identify signs of abuse.

But experts say this will not be enough if neighbours, friends and family members do not raise a red flag when they see signs of abuse. Staying silent could cost a child their life.

*Additional reporting by Ernest Kao*

Past cases of child abuse

- **March 2013:** [Five-year-old Yeung Chi-wai, who had Down's syndrome, died of poisoning](#) by direct ingestion of crystal methamphetamine. His mother, 35, and her boyfriend, 37, who lived in a public housing estate in Sheung Shui, were habitual users of the drug. They were cleared of child abuse charges in 2014 but the man was charged with possessing dangerous drugs.
- **July 2015:** [A mainland born seven-year-old girl was sent unconscious to the intensive care unit](#) at Princess Margaret Hospital in Kwai Chung. She was malnourished, had multiple bedsores on her back and buttocks, and abrasions across her body and limbs. There were ulcers on both her thighs. The girl lived with her family in a subdivided flat in Tsuen Wan and the parents were charged for child abuse in March 2016.
- **January 2016:** [A three-month-old girl was discovered to have four broken ribs and internal bleeding](#). The girl's father, 40, worked as a cook and was under a lot of stress, the court heard. He admitted that he shook the infant and hugged her tightly to keep her warm. He was jailed for two years.
- **October 2016:** [A man, 41, was sentenced to nine months in jail for abusing his ex-girlfriend's 13-year-old son](#). The boy said in court that he was forced to drink two cups of urine while the man photographed him. The boy also said the man swore at him and hit him on the head and penis multiple times with a wooden stick used for back scratching.
- **December 2017:** [A four-year-old girl was admitted to an intensive care unit in Yau Ma Tei](#) after she was found to have multiple bruises on her body and bleeding in the brain. Two women – aged 36 and 41 – who had been asked to take care of the girl for two weeks by her mother, were arrested.

*Compiled by Shirley Zhao*

Reference:

<http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/2128210/when-care-turns-cruelty-hong-kong-most-child-abuse-victims>