

Press release

For immediate release

“Reaching Out and Inspiring Lives” HKU Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention releases latest figures and prevention recommendations on suicide

September 10 (tomorrow) is the World Suicide Prevention Day. The HKJC Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention (CSRP) of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) held a press conference today (September 9, Wednesday) with the theme “Reaching Out and Inspiring Lives” to release the latest figures and prevention recommendations on suicide. The press conference was co-organised by the Boys and Girls Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA) and Caritas Youth and Community Service (CYCS).

According to data from the Coroner’s Court, CSRP estimated that there were about 12.3 per 100,000 people died by suicide in 2014. Standardizing the rate to the World population for comparing with overseas figures, the age-standardized suicide rate in Hong Kong in 2014 was estimated to be 8.6 per 100,000. This is lower than the global figure released by the World Health Organization (WHO)’s in its latest report at 11.4¹. The standardized suicide rates in Hong Kong have been below this number for four consecutive years. Comparing to other developed Asian countries such as Japan (18.5) and Korea (28.9), the suicide rate in Hong Kong was relatively lower. In comparison to other developed Western countries, Hong Kong suicide rate was lower than those reported by the United States (12.1) and Australia (10.6), but higher than that of the United Kingdom (6.2).

The suicide rates in Hong Kong have dropped significantly since 2003 and remained a downward trend for over 10 years. The decline in suicide rates might relate to multiple factors, including recent work by the government and other organizations in the community. For example, some new outreach services have adopted a proactive approach to reach out to those in need, different stakeholders in the community have been working closely together for better communication and implementation of suicide prevention strategies. In addition, Professor Paul Yip, CSRP Director pointed out that since 2003, there have been more evidence-based suicide prevention research papers published every year, and the decline of suicide rates in Hong Kong could be the best evidence to show that accumulated knowledge could improve application in real-life contexts.

On the other hand, according to the most updated record from the Coroner’s Court, there were 5 suicide cases of youths aged below 15 in 2014. The number was slightly higher than two years ago. Review of death investigation documents showed that all 5 youths suffered from emotional distress before committing suicide. Unfortunately, their stress or suicidal thoughts were not expressed to or noticed by their families, teachers or friends. This indicates that youth social services should focus

¹ World Health Organization. 2014. Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative. URL: http://www.who.int/mental_health/suicide-prevention/world_report_2014/en/

more on improving communication and problem-solving skills of youths and their families and friends.

New modes of outreaching

Two youths, Ah Ho and Wang Shue (both alias), who had had suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviours, shared their experience at the press conference. Suffering from different distressful situations since adolescence, both had been reluctant to leave home nor go to school for a long time. Neither had they sought help from social workers or psychiatrists. In 2011, Wang Shue incidentally expressed his emotional distress on his blog which was read by a social worker from the BGCA's CyberYouth Outreaching Project. The social worker contacted him and built rapport chatting with him online until one day Wang Shue found himself willing to go to BGCA for assistance. As for Ah Ho, he read a post about mental health and consultation service by a social worker from the Caritas CyberYouth Outreaching Project on an online forum in 2013. He left a comment and was surprised to receive a private email from the social worker promptly. They have built up a trusting relationship gradually since then. Both Ah Ho and Wang Shue said they feel more secured to communicate with people through internet.

The social workers of Ah Ho and Wang Shue said it would be difficult for traditional outreach services to get to this type of youths. Professor Yip cited the findings of a CSRP telephone survey in 2013. The survey randomly interviewed 1,010 young people (aged 12-29) in Hong Kong. Results showed that 30.9% (i.e. 313 people) of the total respondents experienced emotional distress in the past four weeks before the interview. Among these 313 people, 28% (i.e. 89 people) did not seek any help. However, in this group of people who did not seek help, 71.9% (i.e. 64 people) had expressed their distress online. This showed that online platforms could enhance the opportunity to reach out to individuals in distress who feel more comfortable interacting with people online.

Tailor-made services

Apart from online engagement, the organizations of the two social workers also have programmes tailored made to fit the life style of youngsters to attract them to their long-term services. Mr. Eddie Wong, a social worker of Caritas said his organization has developed a group activity mixed with online game elements to encourage game lovers to step out of their comfort zone. As a service user, Ah Ho enjoyed this type of activities. BGCA counsellor Mr. Humphrey Lui said service providers at BGCA aim to provide company and support. Encouraged by his BGCA social worker, Wang Shue went back to school, took examinations and successfully secured a job.

Improve distribution of social resources for long term well-being

Ah Ho and Wang Shue are still facing various challenges in life. Wang Shue is working on improving communication with his family. Ah Ho has worries about his future. Professor Yip referred to research findings by CSRP published recently in an article in *Social Sciences & Medicine*. A positive correlation was established between suicide rates and socioeconomic status at the large street block level (a geographic unit) in Hong Kong. The correlation was especially significant among young people. Suicide rates were higher in large street blocks with indicators of socioeconomic deprivation (population with non-professional jobs and low median household income), and social fragmentation (proportions of unmarried adults and divorced/separated adults)². Therefore, Professor Yip has called for better allocation of social resources for use in inducing hope in young people, which could more effectively prevent suicide.

Professor Yip further pointed out that the current examination system might not be suitable for all young people and society needs people with different vocational skill sets. Higher education should not be seen as the only way out for young people. If the government could raise minimum wages, the business sector could hire more people with specific skills, so as to open more opportunities, social mobility of our underprivileged youths could be improved and more grassroots families would be given hope.

In summary, Professor Yip emphasized that suicide prevention, across all age groups, is not only about saving lives, but also helping people in need to find solutions to their problems, hence giving them hope and confidence. This approach would ultimately promote wellbeing in society.

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About HKJC Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention (CSRP), HKU

Founded in 2002, the CSRP has been promoting the use of Public Health Approach in tackling suicide problems in Hong Kong. The CSRP has established its reputation in suicide research and prevention worldwide and extended its research scope to well-being of individuals as well as the whole society. The CSRP believes in that empirical research would optimize practices and ultimately contribute to the improvement of a society.

About the Co-organizers

The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA) was founded in 1936. With the mission "Nurture the Young Create the Future", the Association strives to provide children, youth and their families with various and professional services to nurture their growth. The Association will continue

² Hsu, C-Y.; Chang, S-S.; Lee, EST; & Yip, PSF. 2015. Geography of suicide in Hong Kong: Spatial patterning, and socioeconomic correlates and inequalities. *Social Science & Medicine*. 130:190-203. URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.02.019>.

to strive and to create a child-friendly environment for the children and youth. As one of the most reputable NGOs in Hong Kong, we have 75 service units located across the territory and on the mainland, having over 51,226 registered members with 848,267 core attendance.

Caritas Youth and Community Service (CYCS) carries the mission to foster holistic development in the youth and the community through understanding, caring, participating and undertaking of responsibilities. CYCS encourages the youth to participate and build up a sense of responsibility to themselves and the community. This promotes mutual aid and eventually integration in the community. To realize its mission, CYCS provides a wide range of services for children, adolescents and the community at large. Examples include, Community Centres, Integrated Service Centres for Young People, District Youth Outreaching Social Work Services, Children and Youth Centres, School Social Work Services, School Support Services, Counselling Centres for Psychotropic Substance Abusers, Libraries and Study Rooms and After School Care Programme.

The softcopy of this press release and the slides used in the press conference can be downloaded from the below URL after 14:30 on Sept 9, 2015:

<http://csrp.hku.hk/wspd2015/>

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