**Children’s and Adults’ perceptions of child necessities**

**in Hong Kong**

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**Abstract**

There has been growing research interest in child poverty and child well-being in East Asia, however, empirical studies predominantly adopt ‘expert-led’ measures (such as adult-derived child deprivation measures). Parents or guardians are assumed to understand all their children’s needs. The traditional adult-reported child poverty measure assumes that intra-household resources allocation is effectively equal across all members. Studies of child poverty from a child rights and child agency perspective are rare in East Asia. This article aims to examine the extent of agreement between children and adults about which child items and activities constitute the necessities of life in Hong Kong using the consensual deprivation approach. The data are drawn from the second wave of the Strategic Public Policy Research project – *Trends and Implications of Poverty and Social Disadvantages in Hong Kong: A Multi-disciplinary and Longitudinal Study*. A total of 595 adults and 636 school-aged children were asked if they considered 16 items and activities as essential for children in contemporary Hong Kong. Adults are significantly more likely to believe that almost all material and social deprivation items are necessities compared with their children, even after controlling for individual-level (i.e., gender and birthplace) and household-level factors (i.e., number of children in the household, number of working adults and household income). The findings highlight the importance of incorporating children’s views into our understanding of child poverty.

**KEYWORDS**

Consensual deprivation, poverty, socially perceived necessities, child necessities, Hong Kong

1. **INTRODUCTION**

There has been growing research interest into child poverty and child well-being in Asia. The importance of a multi-dimensional poverty measure incorporating monetary poverty and child-specific deprivation indicators is widely recognised (Abe & Pantazis, 2014; Lau, 2005; Lau et al., 2015b; Qi & Wu, 2014; Saunders et al., 2014). However, empirical studies in the field predominately adopt ‘expert-led’ measures of child poverty and assume that parents or guardians understand all their children’s needs. Parents and children may differ in their beliefs about what possessions and activities are necessities. Parents tend to prioritise needs related to health, education and development (Lau et al., 2015a; Main, 2013). Children realise the importance of these needs but they also highlight resources needed for fitting into peer norms and building relationships (Main & Pople, 2012; Main, 2013; Redmond et al., 2016).

Recent scientific advances from national and international child well-being projects (e.g., Good Childhood Reports by the Children’s Society; Australian Child Well-being Project (ACWP); and the International Survey of Children Well-being (ISCWeB) by Children’s Worlds) add important insights to our knowledge of child poverty and child well-being based on children’s own views about their lives (Main & Pople, 2012; Redmond et al., 2016; Rees & Main, 2015). Some studies have also explored child poverty, deprivation and subjective well-being specifically from children’s own perspectives in the UK (Goswami, 2014; Main & Bradshaw, 2012) and South Africa (Barnes & Wright, 2012). However, no study in Asia has compared the judgement of children and adults in the same survey and only Main’s recent study has done this in the UK (Main, 2013).

In this article, we adopt Mack and Lansley’s consensual deprivation approach (Lansley & Mack, 2015; Mack & Lansley, 1985) to offer a comparative analysis of the necessities of life as determined by adults and children within the same households in Hong Kong. This article reports, for the first time, evidence of adults’ and children’s own assessments about what constitutes a minimum standard of living in contemporary Hong Kong.

1. **POVERTY AND DEPRIVATION MEASUREMENT: THE CONSENSUAL APPROACH**

The limitations of the conventional income poverty measures are widely recognised. Knowledge of a person’s income at a single point in time is not necessarily sufficient to determine if he/she is poor. The relative income approach identifies the ‘poor’ as those with a low income irrespective of the level of their actual living standards. As Ringen argued, “income is not the only resource that determines what we get, other relevant resources are skills, thrift, ‘connections’ and the like” (Ringen, 1988, p. 358). There is an imperfect relationship between economic resources and standard of living. The actual living standards may be different among different households with identical economic resources owing to different expenditure pressures and variations in the ability of transforming money into living standards. Both *direct* and *indirect* methods have been widely used to measure poverty but neither one of them is entirely adequate on their own (Bradshaw & Finch, 2003; Ringen, 1988). Whelan & Whelan argued that “the combination of the income and deprivation indicator approach offer the opportunity both to measure poverty more accurately and to provide a more complete picture of the life-style of the poor” (Whelan & Whelan, 1995, p. 48).

Empirical evidence underpins the concept that income poverty and deprivation are two interrelated but distinct indicators of vulnerability in society**.** A relatively low overlap between income poverty and deprivation measures in cross-sectional surveys indicates that both measures play distinct roles in identifying vulnerable social groups (Bradshaw & Finch, 2003; Pantazis et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2008; Saunders et al., 2014; Dermott & Main, 2018).

The deprivation approach to poverty measurement was built largely upon the work of Peter Townsend who sought to define poverty in terms of objective contemporary living standards and social norms. He argued that (Townsend, 1979, p. 31):

“Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns and activities.”

Townsend’s deprivation approach to poverty is understood to be both a relative and multi-dimensional sociological phenomenon which is defined relative to a generally accepted standard of living in a specific society at a particular time period. Townsend’s approach has laid the foundation for further poverty studies in the UK (Bramley & Bailey, 2018; Dermott & Main, 2018; Gordon et al., 2000; Gordon and Pantazis, 1997; Pantazis et al., 2006) and extended its influence into different parts of the world, informing poverty studies in Europe (Nolan & Whelan, 2010; van den Bosch, 2001), Australia (Saunders et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2008), Asia (Abe & Pantazis, 2014; Saunders & Chen, 2015; Saunders et al., 2014). Chow’s (1982) pioneering study of Poverty in an Affluent City made use of Townsend’s relative deprivation approach and he developed culturally relevant deprivation indicators reflecting the “style of living” of Hong Kong. A brief review of Hong Kong poverty research has been described in detail elsewhere (Chow, 2015; Lau et al., 2015b).

In response to a critique that Townsend’s operational method failed to adequately distinguish choice from constraint (Piachaud, 1987), Mack and Lansley developed the consensual deprivation or socially perceived necessities approach, which emphasizes that a minimum standard of living should be determined by the public rather than by academics or professional experts (Lansley & Mack, 2015; Mack & Lansley, 1985). This consensual approach to poverty assumes that there is “a high degree of consensus amongst different groups in their perceptions of what are necessities” (Pantazis et al., 2000, p. 4). An “unacceptable” standard of living “may cover not only the basic essentials for survival (such as food) but also access, or otherwise, to participating in society and being able to play a social role” (Pantazis et al., 2000, pp. 3–4). The consensual approach places public assessment about the necessities of life at the centre of the research process. Using a representative survey, the consensual method aims to capture public understanding of what is an unacceptable minimum standard of living. Items and activities attracting 50% or more public support were considered consensually agreed and thus categorised as socially perceived necessities. This approach subsequently laid the foundation for academic surveys of poverty in Asia (Abe & Pantazis, 2014; Lau et al., 2015b; Saunders & Chen, 2015; Saunders et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2015). However, these previous studies adopted adult-reported child poverty measures which assume that intra-household resources allocation is effectively equal across all members (Bennett, 2013; Pantazis et al., 2006). Recent empirical evidence has confirmed that parents and children may sometimes differ in their emphasis of children’s needs (Lau et al., 2015a; Main & Pople, 2012; Redmond et al., 2016; Sixsmith et al., 2007).

There is an increasing recognition of the value of measuring children’s own views of their daily lives and well-being (Main & Pople, 2012; Redmond et al., 2016). However, there has been only limited evidence of child-derived deprivation indicators (Barnes & Wright, 2012; Main & Bradshaw, 2012; Saunders et al., 2018). Such a focus on children’s perspectives not only takes into account children’s feelings but also supports children’s rights as enshrined by the normative framework of the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (Main, 2018; Minujin et al., 2006; Rees & Main, 2015; Ridge, 2002; UNICEF Office of Research, 2007). This paper aims to examine the extent of agreement between children and adults on which child possessions and activities constitute the necessities of life in Hong Kong, using the consensual approach. The research provides evidence of how and why children’s voices should be integrated into child poverty studies and poverty reduction strategies.

1. **METHODS**
   1. **Procedures and sample**

Data used in this article is drawn from the second wave (Time 2) of the Strategic Public Policy Research (SPPR) project, *Trends and Implications of Poverty and Social Disadvantages in Hong Kong: A Multi-disciplinary and Longitudinal Study*. This project aims to investigate the current trends and implications of poverty and social exclusion in Hong Kong. The project has developed three specific research streams: (1) to measure the extent and nature of poverty, deprivation and exclusion in Hong Kong (i.e., Poverty, Social Disadvantages and Exclusion, PSDE); (2) to assess the association between poverty and health inequalities (i.e., Poverty, Disadvantages and Health Inequality, PDHI); and to investigate the impacts of poverty, inequality and social disadvantages on children’s well-being (i.e., Poverty, Disadvantages and Children’s Well-Being, PDCW).

The sampling procedure of the first wave of the *Living Standards Survey* has already been described in detail elsewhere (Chung et al., 2018; Lau & Bradshaw, 2018; Wong et al., 2018). The second wave of this survey re-interviewed the first wave survey respondents between February 2016 and March 2017. The total number of re-interviewed adults and children from the sample households was 2,282 (response rate of 67%) and 804 (response rate of 79%), respectively.

This article focuses on adults’ and children’s perceptions of child necessities by drawing upon adult-reported PSDE and child-derived PDCW survey data in the second wave survey. A total of 595 adults and 636 children living in the same households were included in this analysis. The adult sample included those whose age was 18 or above and who answered at least 17 out of 19 child necessity items. The child sample covered those whose age was between 10 and 19[[1]](#endnote-1) and answered at least 20 out of the 21 child necessity items (**Table 1**).[[2]](#endnote-2) The socio-demographic profiles of the study sample are summarised in **Table 2**..

**<Insert TABLE 1 here>**

This comparative analysis has three specific objectives: (1) to present, for the first time, evidence of the differences and/or similarities between adults and children in their perceptions of the minimum acceptable living standards for children in Hong Kong; (2) to examine the extent to which the generational differences were manifested *within* the same household, considering that adults and the children were exposed to the same contextual factors; and (3) to explore the factors which account for any of the differences that existed. Heatmaps, scatterplots and relative risk analyses were produced to explore the differences in perceptions of child necessities between adults and children. Multi-level logistic regressions were performed to address the issue of generational differences in the perception of necessities within the same households.

* 1. **Measures**
     1. **Child- vs. adult-derived necessities of life**

**Table 1** shows a full list of the child- and adult-reported child-specific items and activities derived from PDCW and PSDE questionnaires, respectively (i.e., a total of 21 and 19 items and activities, respectively). A total of 16 material and social deprivation items and activities were included for further analyses. Items 1 to 12 were designed to measure material deprivation and the remaining four activities were used to gauge social deprivation (Guio et al., 2017; Lau et al., 2015b; Main & Bradshaw, 2014; Pantazis et al., 2006). The items include:[[3]](#endnote-3)

1. Properly fitted shoes *(fitted shoes)*
2. Able to have some new clothes *(new clothes)*
3. Enough warm clothes for cold weather *(warm clothes)*
4. Brand name trainers (*brand name trainers*)
5. Outdoor leisure equipment *(outdoor leisure equipment)*
6. Your own mobile phone *(mobile phone)*
7. A computer device with internet connection at home *(a computer with internet)*
8. Some pocket money each week to spend on yourself *(pocket money)*
9. School uniform of correct size *(school uniform)*
10. Educational games *(educational games)*
11. Books at home suitable for your ages *(suitable books)*
12. A suitable place at home to study or do homework *(suitable place to study)*
13. A meal out with friends at least once a month *(meal out with friends)*
14. A family day trip at least four times a year *(family day trip)*
15. Participation in extra-curricular activities *(extra-curricular activities)*
16. Tutorial lessons after school *(tutorial lessons)*

To obtain accurate point and error estimates we took into consideration the complex-sample-design features of the study, including sampling weights, clusters and strata (see Chung et al., 2018; Lau et al., 2015b; Saunders et al., 2014). Child respondents reported “which items are necessary which all children should not have to do without” with responses –– “Necessary” vs. “Desirable but not necessary”. Adult respondents reported “which items are essential for children in Hong Kong today” with responses –– “Yes” vs. “No”. Items and activities attracting a positive response from 50% or more children were considered consensually agreed and thus categorized as socially perceived “necessities”. The child deprivation indicators encompass 14 items and activities which allow for children’s social participation and development of relationships with family, friends and teachers. The reliability of the items were tested and was found to be satisfactory. The KR-20 Cronbach’s alpha of the 14 child deprivation items was .83, (Cronbach’s alpha’s > 0.8 indicate high reliability in social science research).[[4]](#endnote-4),[[5]](#endnote-5)

* + 1. **Socio-demographic characteristics: Control variables for multilevel logistic regression**

Age (in years), gender (male vs. female) and migrant status (non-Hong Kong born vs. Hong Kong born) of children and adults were used as control variables for regression analysis. All respondents were asked where they were born. Since children and adults in each of non-Hong Kong born groups (including “Mainland China”, “Macau”, “Taiwan” and “elsewhere outside Hong Kong”) consisted of only a small proportion of the study sample, this group was combined as “non-Hong Kong born” and the rest as “Hong Kong born”.

Data derived from the PSDE household survey was used to identify the number of children living in the household and whether the children were living in households experiencing income poverty and/or having no adults in paid work (i.e., jobless households). Income poverty was measured by equivalised household income quintile from the subsample of families with children.[[6]](#endnote-6) Children were defined as poor if they were living in families in the bottom quintile.

1. **RESULTS**
   1. **Socio-demographic profiles of the study sample**

In total, 636 children together with 595 adults in the same households answered questions about children’s necessities. Among the children, 288 (45%) were female; 285 (45%) were between age 10 to 14, 250 (39%) aged 15-17 and 101 (16%) aged 18-19 (their age was below 18 in the first survey wave). About 85% of the children (*N* = 541) were born in Hong Kong, while the others were born in mainland China or other places. Among the adults, 66% were female and their average age was 47.3 (*SD* = 13.3). About 58% of the adults (*N* = 346) were in the non-Hong Kong born group (**Table 2**). Weights are applied to correct any sampling bias.

**<Insert TABLE 2 here>**

* 1. **Overall differences between adults and children**

Both adults and children believed that minimum needs extended beyond basic subsistence and also incorporated social roles, obligations and participation in contemporary Hong Kong society. Possessions and activities include those to meet children’s basic needs, such as: “school uniform”, “fitted shoes” and “warm clothes”. Technology items (e.g., “mobile phone” and “a computer device with internet”) and participation in social and extra-curricular activities (e.g., “meal out with friends”) were perceived as essential for children’s education and fitting into societal norms.

**Table 3** shows that adults perceived all items and activities as necessary (ranging from 69% to nearly 100% support). By contrast, children viewed most items and activities as necessary (ranging from 53% to 95%), except “a family day trip” and “brand name trainers”. Hence, only 14 items had the majority support of both adults and children.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, adults, compared with children, were more likely to believe that all 14 material and social deprivation were necessities. The ranking of the 14 items *within* each group demonstrated some degree of congruence in adult and child opinions about the necessities of life for children. Despite the seeming agreement, it is noticeable that all the items showed significant generational differences, except “mobile phone” (relative risk = .97, *p* = .31). For instance, there is a striking contrast between children and adults’ perceptions of child necessities concerning “school extras” (e.g., “participation in extra-curricular activities”, “a computer with internet” and “tutorial lessons”) which are resources and activities considered essential for children’s educational and social development in many rich societies (Bramley and Besemer, 2011). It is also noticeable that two items/activities –– “brand new trainers” and “a family day trip” –– were considered necessities by less than 50% of children, but by a majority of adults (circa 70%). It is important to test if these univariate differences in adult and child perceptions of necessities persist once the variances in individual characteristics and household contextual factors are taken into account.

**<Insert TABLE 3 here>**

**<Insert FIGURE 1 here>**

* 1. **Differences between adults and children within the household**

To investigate this question, we conducted a series of multi-level logistic regression analyses. Multilevel modelling is applied as it enables to distinguish between the within- and between-level effects on the outcome and logistic regression is suitable when the outcomes are binary (Sommet & Morselli, 2017). In this study, the within-household comparisons only make sense when both the adults(s) and the child(ren) have participated in the surveys. For this reason, this part of analysis was based on those households from which at least one adult and one child had answered the relevant questions. This pairing-procedure reduced the total sample to 996 individuals (*N*children = 574, *N*adults = 422) from 422 households.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The logistic regression analyses were performed using *MPlus*, the default of which for regressions with categorical outcomes is maximum-likelihood estimation (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). The outcome variables were binary for which “no/not necessary” was coded as “0” and “yes/necessary” was coded as “1”. The predictive variable (i.e., Group) was also binary with “being a child” as “0” and “being an adult” as “1”. We controlled for two individual-level characteristics, i.e., gender and birthplace and three household-level factors, i.e., number of working adults (one adult, two adults, three or more than three adults –– dummy coded), number of children in the household, and equivalised household income (ranging from 1 to 5 –– household in higher quintile were more affluent –– dummy coded).[[8]](#endnote-8)

For each outcome (i.e., an item or activity perceived as necessary or not), we started with a null model which only included the intercept (i.e., M1). In the second model (i.e., M2), we included all the control variables at both levels. The third model (i.e., M3) incorporated the predictor (adult vs. child). To examine the possibility that the regression coefficients between the predictor and the outcome may vary across households, in the final models (i.e., M4s), we allowed for random slopes. We repeated the above analysis procedure for all the 14 items and activities. Given that the models were nested, the improvement of the fitness of a model in comparison with the previous one was examined by the changes in deviance (i.e., -2\*log-likelihood) and degrees of freedom which correspond to a chi-square distribution (see Muthén, Muthén, & Asparouhov, 2016).

For all 14 sets of models, M2s (the models with only control variables) showed significant improvement over M1s (the null models), and M3s (the fixed-slope models with both the predictive and the control variables) again significantly improved by comparison with M2s. For M4s (the random-slope models), some of them demonstrated slight improvements over M3s. However, none of the variations of the slope between the predictor and the outcome was significant, indicating that the regression coefficients did not vary significantly across households. Thus, for parsimony, we only reported the fixed-slope models (i.e., M3s) in **Table 4**.[[9]](#endnote-9)

To interpret the results, take the first logistic model (Fitted Shoes) as an example. In this model, the regression coefficient was 2.90 (*SE* = 0.65, *p* < .000), which corresponds to an odds ratio of 18.2. It suggests that the odds of adults perceiving “fitted shoes” as necessary were about 18 times higher than those of the children in the same household. Overall, consistent with the previous univariate analyses, being an adult or a child significantly predicted if an item or activity was perceived as necessary, after controlling for individual- and household-level confounding variables. In other words, the generational differences in perception of child necessities were clearly manifested within the same households in Hong Kong.

**<Insert Table 5 here>**

1. **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This article draws upon the findings of the second wave of the SPPR study to examine the trends and implications of poverty and social exclusion in Hong Kong. The article reports the extent of agreement between children and adults on which children’s possessions and activities constitute the necessities of life in contemporary Hong Kong. These empirical findings from adults’ and children’s perspectives on what conditions are good for their lives provide important insights which are of relevance to the newly launched Commission on Children (CoC)’s agenda.[[10]](#endnote-10) It is an important and timely opportunity to advance the practice of poverty measurement in Hong Kong and contribute to the CoC’s development of child-specific indicators for monitoring health and well-being .

In line with previous studies, adults and children perceived that minimum needs extended beyond basic subsistence needs and also incorporated social roles, obligations and participation into contemporary Hong Kong society (Main & Bradshaw, 2012; Redmond et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). The generational differences between adults and children were also manifested *within* the household. Adults placed more emphasis on needs related to education and development (e.g. “suitable books” and “outdoor leisure equipment”) (Lau et al., 2015a; Main, 2013). Children realised the importance of these needs but they also highlighted resources needed for fulfilling their social roles and obligations (e.g. “meal out with friends”, “mobile phone” and “a computer with internet”) (Main & Pople, 2012; Main, 2013; Redmond et al., 2016). There is an increasing recognition of the potential policy value of people’s assessment on their well-being (See Stiglitz et al., 2010). This research adds important insights to our knowledge of child poverty and child well-being through the lens of children’s own views about their lives.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. All the child respondents were aged between 10 and 17 at Time 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The selected 595 adults were significantly younger than the non-selected 3,249 adults (*t* = 2.26, *p* = .02). Moreover, the adult sample contained more female (*t* = -7.62, *p* < .00) and non-Hong Kong born participants (*t* = 2.11, *p* = 0.04) than the non-selected one. The 636 children did not differ significantly from the other 397 children who did not answer the survey questions in terms of sex (*t* = 1.44, *p* = .15) or birthplace (*t* = .14, *p* = .89). However, as this study focused on school-aged children, the selected sample was, not surprisingly, significantly older than the non-selected one (*t* = -28.54, *p* < 0.00). The selected 1,231 individuals belonged to 656 households. The selected 656 households, compared with the 823 non-selected households, had significantly more children (*t* = -32.71, *p* < .00) and more working adults (*t* = -4.96, *p* < .00). However, the household income of the selected households was not significantly different from the non-selected households (*t* = 1.08, *p* = .28). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Abbreviations are in the brackets at the end of the items. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. We also tested the internal consistency of the items in different age groups of children. The results showed that the items demonstrated an acceptable level of consistency across different age groups. Likewise, the KR-20 score of the 16 adult-deprivation items was .79, with that of .73 for the 12 material-deprivation items and .71 for the four social-deprivation items. The results thus indicated that the items were a reliable measure of child- vs. adult-derived necessities for life. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. An item or activity was considered as “necessary” when its absolute value passed the 50% cut-off point (i.e., over 50% of the sample saw it as “necessary”, see Lansley & Mack, 2015; Pantazis et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2008). Within the complex-sample framework, we were able to examine the 95% CI of classifying an item or activity as a necessity. For instance, about 53% of child respondents viewed “outdoor leisure equipment” as necessary. Despite that this absolute value was above 50%, the lower bound of its 95% CI was only 47%, which failed to pass the 50% threshold. Hence, although we still included this item as a necessity, it is worth noting that this item may not be a necessity in other samples. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This study uses an equivalence scale which divides household income by the square root of household size (OECD, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The reason why some logistic regression results are different from the overall relative risk test results was because the logistic regression sample was a reduced sample in which only households having one adult respondent and at least one child respondent were included. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 1st quintile included households which had an annual income below 7500.00 HKD, 2nd quintile included households which had an annual income from 7501.00 HKD to 9389.71 HKD, 3rd quintile included households which had an annual income from 9389.72 HKD to 11500.00 HKD, 4th quintile included households which had an annual income from 11500.01 to 13863.62, and 5th quintile included households which had an annual income above 13863.63 HKD. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The only exception was “warm-clothes”. There was no variation in this variable for the parental group, because all the parents included in the analysis agreed that this item was necessary for the children. For this reason, logistic regression was not performed for this item. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The Commission on Children was established in June 2018. Its target group covers children aged under 18 with a specific focus on children aged 14 or below. The Commission’s initial work plan covers the following issues: (1) children’s education needs (e.g. support for special education needs); (2) initiatives for ethnic minority children (e.g. support for Chinese language learning); (3) children’s healthy development (e.g. medical needs and mental health); (4) protection of children (e.g. prevention of violence or neglect; and social work services for kindergartens and primary schools); and (5) compiling data on children (For details, please refer to this link at: https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201805/31/P2018053100340.htm?fontSize=1). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)