

A study of older people who collect recycling materials for financial returns

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ABSTRACT

Background. In Hong Kong, it is likely that daily, you will see older people who push a cargo cart carrying materials that they collected on the street. However, there is a lack of knowledge about who they are, why they do so, and how. This study aimed to explore the life experiences of a group of older people who collect recycling materials for financial return.

Methods. A survey method was adopted, in which 82 older people who self-reported that they were motivated to collect recycling materials for financial return were interviewed using a standardised questionnaire.

Results. Most of the respondents were female, living with family members, and not economically active during the time of the survey. Approximately 38% of the respondents indicated that they wanted the money for a living and the remainder regarded it as a perquisite. The majority of the respondents collected recycling materials daily and had done so for 1 to 10 years. About one-third of them reported that they had experienced injury in the process. The resulting median monthly income they derived was reported as HK\$350. More than 40% of the respondents said they had to compete with others during the collecting process.

Conclusion. Older people who collect recycling materials for financial return were mainly motivated by two factors: to earn money for a living or as a perquisite. Collecting recycling materials was basically like a 'job' they undertook frequently, during which they also experienced injury and competition.

Key words: Aged; Hong Kong; Poverty

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INTRODUCTION

In Hong Kong, on a daily basis it is common to witness older people collecting newspapers at bus stops, and piling cartons on cargo carts in front of grocery stores. They laboriously push their loaded cargo to other locations. Such activity is obviously not purposeless, but carried out for financial return by selling such materials to recycling businesses. Who are these older people? Why do they choose to do this? What are their experiences during the collection of such recycling materials? Descriptions

about such people are scarcely found in academic literature, but they are occasionally referred to in essays, personal reflections, poems, and Hong Kong fictions.¹⁻⁴ In international literature, collecting materials for recycling was reported to be associated with economic constraints, the informal labour market, and socially excluded populations.⁵⁻⁷ Studies in Mainland China and Taiwan revealed that collecting recycling materials was the last resource for marginalised urban populations.^{8,9} A recent publication by a non-government organisation described case studies of people collected recycling

materials in Hong Kong and seemed reveal that such persons suffered unmet needs, particularly related to poverty.¹⁰

Poverty among older people is a matter of public concern in Hong Kong. Because there was no local pension system until 2000, the current cohort of older people largely rely on their own savings and/or their families, in order to seek out a daily living. Official statistics show that only around one-third of persons aged 15 years or more support their parents financially; the median extent of support amounts to around HK\$25,000 to 30,000 per year.¹¹ In 2005, 31.5% of older people living in households that earned less than half of the median household income for the territory.¹² In addition, older people have always accounted for more than half of the total number of recipients on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), and increased from 84,243 in 1995/96 to 187,393 in 2006/07.¹³ A recent report by the Commission on Poverty re-affirmed that poverty among elderly people deserves attention from a social policy point of view.¹⁴

The present study therefore aimed to explore the life experiences of older people who collect recycling materials for financial return. It focused on two aspects: experiences on collecting recycling materials such as: motivation, frequency of such activity, difficulties encountered, monthly income through selling corresponding materials, and life conditions such as sources of financial support, perceived health status, and living arrangements.

METHODS

The study adopted a mixed approach, which included both quantitative and qualitative methods. In the quantitative part, a standardised questionnaire survey was conducted among 82 older people. In the qualitative part, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 older people. Because of limited space, this paper only reports results from the quantitative survey. Results from qualitative interviews can be retrieved from another report.¹⁵

The present study targeted older people who collect recycling materials for financial return. This operationalised definition excluded those who collect recycling materials not for financial return (e.g. for storage at home). Since Hong Kong lacks official

statistics on the population, a convenient sample was adopted for the purposes of this quantitative survey. Social work students were trained to approach people on the spot after they sold or were queuing to sell collected recycling materials. The survey was carried out in six geographical areas of Hong Kong, including Kwun Tong, Yau Ma Tei, Tai Po, Tuen Mun, Sai Wan, and Wan Chai. In each area, one to two waste materials recycle shops (or mobile trucks run by a recycling shop) were identified by social agencies that provide community services in those particular areas and/or by the researcher. A group of two to six trained interviewers conducted the field survey at each location and lasted 4 hours. To minimise sampling bias, interviewers were asked to approach any person they perceived as older than 60 years and to invite him/her to participate. A total of 245 people were approached and 116 surveys were successfully conducted, within which 82 were aged 60 years or above and reported that they were motivated to collect recycling materials for financial return.

The questionnaire was developed based on two in-depth interviews by the researcher. Then the drafted questionnaire was pilot-tested (wording and sequence of questions) on about 10 respondents at a spot in the Kwun Tong area. The finalised questionnaire consisted of three parts, including experiences on collecting recycling materials (types of materials collected, length of collecting experiences, frequency of collecting, motivations, and difficulties encountered), life conditions (self-rated health, sources of financial support, living arrangements, and whether the interviewee joined activities organised by elderly centres), and the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

RESULTS

Profile of the respondents

Among the 82 respondents, 44% were aged 60 to 69 years and 16% were aged 80 years or above. In all, 87% were female. More than half of them (62%) were living with family members other than a spouse, and 82% did not have any other economic activity during the time of the survey (**TABLE 1**).

Experiences on collecting recycling materials

Over one-third (38%) of the respondents indicated

TABLE 1
Demographic characteristics of the respondents (n=82)

Characteristic	No. (%)
Age (years)	
60-69	36 (44)
70-79	33 (40)
≥80	13 (16)
Sex	
Male	11 (13)
Female	71 (87)
Formal education	
No	46 (61)
Yes	29 (39)
Missing data	7
Living arrangement	
Living alone	18 (22)
Living with spouse only	13 (16)
Living with family members other than the spouse only	50 (62)
Missing data	1
Housing type	
Public housing (rent)	39 (49)
Private housing	33 (41)
Other types	8 (10)
Missing data	2
Working status	
Full/part-time	8 (11)
Economically non-active	67 (89)
Missing data	7

* % based on the valid number of responses

that they would use the money they made by selling collected recycling materials for living expenses, whilst 62% said the money was to supplement family expenses. The most frequently collected recycling materials were used cartons (82%) followed by newspapers and cans (38% each). A few of the respondents collected other materials such as used clothes, scrap iron, and copper. They had been involved in collecting recycling materials for periods of 1 to 10 years. Approximately 47% had collected for more than 3 years, and more than half (62%) had been collecting every day. The scope of their collecting usually covered several blocks from where they lived, and centred on spots such as the market, grocery shops, public rubbish bins, or newspapers given by neighbours. About 30% of the respondents reported that they had experienced injury during the collecting process. Hands, waists, and legs

were the most frequent parts of the body reported to be injured. About 44% of the respondents felt that they had to compete with others in collecting recycling materials. The main difficulties that they encountered included: physical demands of pushing the go-cart full of heavy recycling materials, the long time it took to collect such materials, and sometimes the danger in crossing roads while pushing a heavy go-cart. In regard to financial returns, the reported monthly income varied from HK\$15 to HK\$2000, with a median of HK\$350 (TABLE 2).

Life conditions

Among all the respondents, 13% were on CSSA, and about 50% lived on their Old Age Allowance (OAA) alone or on their OAA and supplements from other sources (family, a job, or disability allowance). About

TABLE 2
Respondents' reported motivation of and experiences in collecting recycling materials

Motivation / experience	No. (%) [*]
Main motivation [†]	
For living expenses	31 (38)
For money to supplement living expenses	51 (62)
Types of materials collected [†]	
Carton	67 (82)
Newspaper	31 (38)
Cans	31 (38)
Plastic bottle/scrap iron/used clothes, etc.	20 (24)
Length of involvement in collecting recycling materials (years)	
Less than 1	9 (12)
1 to less than 3	31 (41)
3 to less than 5	11 (15)
5 and above	24 (32)
Missing data	7
Frequency of involvement in collecting recycling materials	
Daily	45 (62)
Several times a week	11 (15)
Several times a month	5 (6)
Irregular	12 (16)
Missing data	9
Sense of competition during the collecting process	
No	44 (56)
Yes	34 (44)
Missing data	4
Experiences of being injured during the collecting process	
Yes	26 (34)
No	50 (66)
Missing data	6
Monthly income by selling recycling materials (HK\$)	
≤199	13 (16)
200-299	11 (13)
300-599	9 (11)
600-999	10 (12)
≥1000	11 (13)
Not fixed	28 (34)

* % based on valid number of responses

† Participants could choose more than one choice

half rated their health as good or excellent; less than 20% rated it as poor or very poor. More than 76% of the respondents had no experience participating in activities organised by formal services (e.g. social centres for the elderly, neighbourhood elderly centres, District Elderly Community Centres) [TABLE 3].

Characteristics of respondents who collect recycling materials for living expenses

Among the 82 respondents, 31 reported that they collected recycling materials for living expenses (e.g. food, rent, and gas and electricity bills). Respondents

TABLE 3
Life experiences reported by the respondents

Life experience	No. (%) [*]
Sources of financial support	
CSSA [†] only	10 (13)
Old Age Allowance only	27 (34)
Family support only	19 (24)
Multiple sources	23 (19)
Missing data	3
Self-rated health status	
Excellent	13 (16)
Good	31 (39)
Fair	23 (29)
Poor	12 (15)
Very poor	1 (1)
Missing data	2
Participation in formal activities organised by elderly centres	
No	58 (76)
Yes	18 (24)
Missing data	6

* % based on valid number of responses

† CSSA denotes Comprehensive Social Security Assistance

who collected recycling materials for living expenses were less likely to belong to the 70-79 age-group ($\chi^2=6.65$, $p<0.05$). Of those aged 70 to 79 years, only 21% indicated that they wanted the money for their living expenses, 79% regarded it as a perquisite. Those in the for-living expenses group were all economically inactive during the time of the survey, as compared to the not-for-living expenses group where 17% were economically active ($\chi^2=5.34$, $p<0.05$). In all, 67% of the for-living expenses group lived on CSSA or OAA, which was almost double the number in the not-for-living expenses group (35%) [$\chi^2=7.64$, $p<0.01$]. The for-living expenses group respondents were also more likely to collect recycling materials every day (74%), while among the not-for-living expenses group, only 43% collected recycling material every day ($\chi^2=7.51$, $p<0.01$). Comparatively speaking, the for-living expenses group reported a higher monthly income; 60% earning more than HK\$500 per month versus 38% in the not-for-living expenses group ($\chi^2=9.09$, $p=0.06$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that about one-third of the respondents were motivated by financial returns for their living expenses, while the remaining two-

thirds wanted the money to supplement their living expenses. Those who collect recycling materials for living expenses showed no significant differences in terms of age, sex, living arrangement, or health status. However, those in the for-living expenses group were economically inactive during the time of the survey, and two-thirds relied on CSSA or OAA. Respondents, who collected recycling materials for living expenses, seemed to regard this as a main source of income for daily necessities. In this group, poverty reflected a living issue rather than one for comparison with the average life of the general public in Hong Kong. When people feel that they are lacking in financial support for living expenses, they are more likely to overcome the negative side of the 'job nature' such as being involved in collecting recycling materials, regarded by some as disgusting. This finding was consistent with findings in China, Taiwan, and India, which reported that collecting recycling materials for financial return was the last coping strategy individuals adopt to fight poverty.⁷⁻⁹

The median amount of money the respondents earned by selling recycling materials (about HK\$350 a month) was very limited. For those who rely on such returns for living expenses, life could be really hard considering the average cost of living in Hong

Kong.¹⁶ Though this group of older people play a role in the chain of waste recycling in Hong Kong, their contribution has not been constructively recognised by society. They lack a voice in the system, as well as a means of collective protection. They live in poverty and cope with a difficult 'working environment'. Among them, women were identified as the most vulnerable and deserve special attention from both social service and policy aspects.¹⁵

This study has several limitations. First, it adopted a convenient sampling method, which could introduce bias. Second, because our trained interviewers had to approach the potential respondents, invite them to participate in the study, and conduct interviews on the street, where unexpected circumstances were frequently encountered; some interviewees were actually interviewed while walking on the street and others were rushing to collect cartons and hardly paying attention the questions. Hence, there were missing data in respect of some of the questions.

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