

(2010 Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development)

Working with Young Night Drifters in Hong Kong

(Sub-theme: “Adolescence and Youth Development”)

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Abstract

As societies develop, the life patterns of people change. Late night life has become a pattern in most developed and developing places; and the phenomenon of young night drifters (YNDs) occurs. The disturbances, nuisance and problems created by and related to the YNDs have aroused much public concern.

With reference to the increase concern over the phenomenon and related problems – e.g. drugs taking, prostituting, bullying, thefting, creating public nuisances, personal safety, etc. – of YNDs in the territory, and supported by some studies, the Social Welfare Department of the Government funded the set up of 18 YND teams in September 2001 to serve the YNDs in priority communities in the territory.

About 10 years ago, it had been estimated that there were about 10,000 to 20,000 YNDs, who drifted at night, in the whole territory. But a more recent figure estimated that there are about 50,000 to 60,000 YNDs in the territory each night.

By reviewing and comparing some significant studies, both governmental and non-governmental, of the phenomenon, the profile of the YNDs, their nocturnal activities, their reasons for engaging in the activities, their service needs and demand, and the services provided to them are presented in this paper.

What different systems – e.g. family, school, police, welfare service, and district – can do to reduce the negative impacts of YNDs are discussed at the end of the paper.

I. The Phenomenon

As societies develop, the life patterns of people change. Late night life seems to have become a pattern in most developed and developing places (YMSSC, 1997). And this is also a cause of the phenomenon of young night drifters (YNDs).

With reference to the increase concern over the phenomenon and related problems – e.g. drugs taking, prostituting, bullying, thefting, creating public nuisances, personal safety, etc. – of YNDs in the territory, and supported by some studies (Lee and Tang, 1999; YMSSC, 1997), the Social Welfare Department of the Government funded the set up of 18 YND teams in September 2001 to serve the YNDs in priority communities in the territory.

If more information are wished to know more about the culture/subculture of the YNDs, Lee’s studies (1998 and 2000) can be consulted.

About 10 years ago, it had been estimated that there were about 10,000 to 20,000 YNDs, who drifted at night, in the whole territory (Lee and Tang, 1999). But a more recent figure (three years after) estimated that there are about 50,000 to 60,000 YNDs each night in the territory (Chan, 2002).

i. ‘Young Night Drifters’ (YND) Defined

With reference to the local situation, the operational definition of a YND is a young person of or under the age of 18 who is either fond of ‘playing’ outside home after 00:00 (mid-night) to 06:00 (morning) for fun seeking (Chan, 2001; Lee and Tang, 1999; YMSSC, 1997) or who have actually stayed away from home occasionally without parental approval.

According to Lee and Tang (1999), YNDs could be classified as ‘One Night Stand Drifter’ (having nocturnal activities for less than one time in a week), ‘Occasional Night Drifter’ (having nocturnal activities for 1-2 times in a week), and ‘Persistent Night Drifter’ (having nocturnal activities for 3 or more times in a week) (Lee and Tang, 1999).

ii. Perceptions of the ‘Night’

We use to associate ‘night’ with ‘darkness’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘unsafe’, and ‘fear’. Lots of negative connotations are used to describe ‘night’ across different cultures. That’s why the phenomenon of YNDs has solicited much public concern.

No matter how ‘night’ is being perceived, this night drifting young people, as a kind of ‘youth-at-risk’, deserves our attention and interventions, especially when their service needs are being identified as reported below.

II. Profile of Young Night Drifters

When comparing the data from various studies, we can see that most YNDs were male. But the trend of increase in female among the YNDs deserves to be noted (Table 1).

Table 1: Gender of YNDs

Study	Gender	
	Male	Female
Lee (1996) (N=60)	81.7%	18.3%
YMSSC (1997) (N=151)	72.2%	27.8%
Lee and Tang (1999) (N=1477)	56.7%	43.3%
Chan (2001) (N=231)	65.4%	34.6%

Table 2: Main Age Range of YNDs

Study	Main Age Range
Lee (1996) (N=60)	13-17
YMSSC (1997) (N=151)	15-17
Lee and Tang (1999) (N=1477)	14-17

Chan (2001) (N=231)	14-16
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Concerning the main age range of the YNDs, different studies revealed that 13-17 was the main age range of the YNDs (Table 2).

Table 3: Age when First Night Drift

Age	Studies	
	Lee (1996) (N=60)	Chan (2001) (N=215)
5	0.0%	1.4%
6	0.0%	0.0%
7	1.7%	1.9%
8	0.0%	4.2%
9	0.0%	3.8%
10	0.0%	4.6%
11	1.7%	20.5%
12	23.3%	12.5%
13	21.6%	19.1%
14	25.0%	20.5%
15	18.3%	8.8%
16	6.7%	1.8%
17	1.7%	0.9%

Among the studies reviewed, only Lee (1996) and Chan (2001) asked the respondents about their age of first engagement in night drifting. Table 3 reveals their reports. For Lee's study (1996), it revealed that most of the YNDs started off their night drifting between the age of 12-15; and those below 12-year-old were 26.7%. But the study of Chan (2001) revealed a decrease in age trend. The study revealed that most of the YNDs started off their night drifting between the age of 11-14; and those below 12-year-old drastically increased to 48.9% (Table 3). That means they started engaging in the night drifting behavior when they were only in primary.

Table 4: Types of Night Drifters

Types \ Studies	YMSSC (1997) (N=150)	Lee and Tang (1999) (N=1477)	Chan (2001) (N=231)
One Night Stand Drifter	44.4%	18.0%	8.3%
Occasional Night Drifter	26.5%	37.0%	25.5%
Persistent Night Drifter	29.1%	19.8%	66.2%

Three of the studies reviewed have classified the respondents into different types of night drifters (Table 4). It can be seen from Table 4 that, as time proceeds, more YNDs had more persistent pattern of night drifting behavior.

Two points here need to be noted:

- i. There is an increasing trend of females engaging in night drifting behavior; and
- ii. There is also a trend that more younger people engage in night drifting behavior.

III. The Nocturnal Activities

The studies reviewed (Chan, 2001; Lee, 1996; Lee and Tang, 1999; YMSSC, 1997) have all indicated the night drifting behavior of YNDs were mainly influenced by the peer system, family system, and the school system.

Based on data collected from the interviews with the 330 YNDs of Lee and Tang (1999), the night drifting behavioral patterns of YNDs are listed below: 'Chatting with friends' (184, 55.8%), 'Sleeping outdoor' (170, 51.5%), 'Idling around' (163, 49.4%) and 'Hanging around' (134, 40.6%). The reported disturbing negative behavior in the interviews include 'Bullying one another' (50, 15.2%), 'Fighting' (35, 10.6%), 'Vandalizing' (30, 9.1%), 'Engaging in sexual behavior' (18, 5.5%), 'Thefting' (12, 3.6%), 'Robbery' (6, 1.8%) and 'Prostituting' (1, 0.3%).

About half of the YNDs interviewed (55.5%) stated that they would return home after drifting the night. 'Friend's home' (234, 70.9%) and 'Park/Playground' (183, 55.5%) were popular places the YNDs would stay for the night. 'Having no money' (164, 49.7%) and 'Having played enough outside' (126, 38.2%) were the 1st and 2nd given reasons why the YNDs returned home. It is interesting to note that 'Feeling homesick' (67, 20.3%) was also a reason given by one-fifth of the YNDs for going home. Seemingly, these YNDs appeared to have attachment to their families.

i. Places for Night Drifting

The places where YNDs like to drift the nights have not changed much over the years. They mainly include 24-hour convenient stores, park/leisure playground (near residences), entertainment complexes (complexes still open after mid-night), 'private nests' (private homes of friends), etc. One thing that needs to be noted is that when the YNDs drift the nights at 'private nests', intervention from helping agents becomes difficult.

IV. The Reasons of Night Drifting

The reasons for YNDs to drift the nights outside remain to be similar in the studies reviewed. Data from the study of Lee and Tang (1999) revealed that 'Accompanying friends' (233, 70.6%) and 'Seeking for excitement/Wanting to play' (154, 46.7%) were the 1st and 2nd given reasons for the young people to engage in the nocturnal activities. However, other reasons concerning the family, for examples, 'Feeling bored at home' (120, 36.4%), 'Feeling lonely to stay at home' (49, 14.8%), 'Avoiding control from parent(s)' (47, 14.2%), 'Avoiding family problem(s) and conflict(s)' (27, 8.2%), 'Physically punished by family member(s)' (21, 6.4%) and 'Being expelled by family member(s)' (13, 3.9%).

V. The Service Needs and Demand

The service needs and demand of YNDs can be understood with reference to the study of Lee and Tang (1999) which had the largest sample (1477) and was a commissioned study by the Government.

i. Service Needs of YNDs

Based on assessing the 1477 cases served and the 330 YNDs interviewed, the service needs of the YNDs were:

- a. in need of assistance to be off the street so as to prevent them from exposure to possible physical and moral danger;
- b. in need of assistance to handle their problems in the family context (e.g. relationship with family members and parental care), i.e. family service is an outstanding service need of the YNDs;
- c. in need of assistance to handle negative peer influence;
- d. in need of services for promoting their mental health (e.g. increasing social functioning, reducing anxiety and depression);
- e. in need of services for preventing the occurrence of at-risk behavior (e.g. negative school behavior, misdemeanor and delinquent behavior) among the YNDs having these negative behavior;
- f. in need of assistance to reduce their nocturnal activities particularly for those YNDs cases with full-time student status (746) i.e. school social workers may have an important role to play in this aspect; and
- g. in need of employment service for those who were not working (399) or working irregularly (32).

ii. Service Demand of YNDs

Based on analyzing the data submitted by the two Teams in the experimental stage of 16.5 months, 10,277 YNDs under the age of 18 had been identified in the territory. Case breakdown of the YNDs identified is:

- a. 4713 (45.9%) cases had been assessed to have no need for further services;
- b. 1905 (18.5%) cases had been assessed to have no immediate crisis or no further services to them because night drifting was their normal behavior or they revealed to have been known to other social services in the day-time;
- c. 2182 (21.2%) cases had been assessed to be in need of welfare service but they had declined the services offered; and
- d. 1477 (14.4%) cases served i.e. they had been assessed to be in need of services and had received services.

Based on the above data, around 35-55% of YNDs identified demand services. For more elaboration and discussion of the service needs of the YNDs, Lee (1997) can be consulted.

VI. The Services

As briefly introduced by Chow (2009:20-1), “(t)he operation hours of different YND Teams will have slight differences, but generally, they are from 10:00p.m. to 6:00a.m. of the following day. Each Team is equipped with a private car to facilitate its touring around the service community for identifying YNDs. During the service hours, the Team will drive around the community, especially the hot spots for YNDs, and carry out its services, such as group or individual counselling, escorting to homes, service introduction, etc. Some cases may need follow-ups and be referred to daytime services, e.g. family service, school social work service and centre service, etc.” For fuller accounts of the history, operation, strengths and weaknesses of the

YND teams, Chow (2009) can be consulted.

VII. The Ways Forward

In Hong Kong and most other developed and developing countries, there are lots of overnight convenience stores, fast-food shops, and entertainment establishments. With good establishments of traffic network in these places, it is quite convenient for people to access to different places wherever they want at any time, even after midnight. It is also convenient for people to involve themselves in nocturnal activities indoors and outdoors (Chan, 2002).

In the past, the main intervention objective of the YND service was focused on bringing the YNDs back to the “normal” living pattern of daytime. However, YND workers no longer take negative view of the nocturnal pattern of the YNDs. It is believed that this nocturnal pattern is a trend and inevitable. It would be better to help the YNDs to tackle the problems they encounter in their daily lives.

Apart from focusing its core concern on the potential risks of the YNDs who engage in the nocturnal activities and the related negative influences caused, the YND service should also extend its services to other youth groups such as the working youth who may also engage in nocturnal activities (Chow, 2009).

Popular methods of entertainment of young people change fast. As net bars are recent popular places of entertainment for young people, a recent study suggested concerned NGOs/YND teams to establish connection and cooperation with the net bars so as to approach the YNDs who spend most of their nights in the net bars (Youth Outreach, 2007).

More studies should be conducted to increase our understanding of the nightlife patterns of young people. In Hong Kong, if concerned NGOs/YND teams can be allowed to have more scope for innovative service delivery, e.g. adopting other means for monitoring service effectiveness, reducing some output standards that hinder service delivery, it will definitely be beneficial for developing a new scope of YND services (Chow, 2009).

In order to assist the YNDs to re-gain a normal pattern of lifestyle of their choices, the recommendations made by Lee and Tang (1999) do need to be seriously considered. They recommended a multi-system cooperation approach at district level.

i. On family system: As it has been found that night drifting among young people is much related to the problems in the family context, promoting family life education, enhancing communication in families and encouraging parents to care for the children should be strengthened through the media, family life education and family counseling service. Cooperation and coordination with other youth services should be further promoted for helping the families and the concerned young people.

ii. On school system: If teachers have spotted possible symptoms of night drifting on students (e.g. tiredness, lack concentration), appropriate attention should be given to these students. Prompt referral to counseling teachers or school social workers should be done for further intervention. Cooperation and coordination with other youth services and police should also be further promoted so that appropriate and prompt attention and care for these young people can be achieved.

iii. On police: Increase patrol to night drifting spots of YNDs might serve

preventive purpose for reducing unruly behavior of YNDs. Better coordination, cooperation and division of labor between police and youth workers in local communities should be promoted so as to provide appropriate intervention to the indigenous YNDs with the effective use of manpower and expertise.

iv. On welfare services:

Five necessary conditions for the proposed mode of welfare services to YNDs are recommended.

- a. Back-up shelters for short-term stay of the YNDs and crisis intervention/counseling should be made available.
- b. In order to be more manageable, services to YNDs should be operated in smaller communities.
- c. Local resources should be utilized to deliver services to YNDs who are indigenous.
- d. Continuous intervention with YND cases is needed for guaranteeing better service process.
- e. The trend of service integration of social welfare services in the local context should be considered in developing more effective service mode for YNDs.

v. On district coordination: A coordination group titled such as “Coordination Group on Services for High-risk Youth” with membership of local leaders, representatives from welfare services, schools and police could be set up at district level for promoting better coordination of services for high-risk youth of different nature (Lee and Tang, 1999).

The role of the YND service in meeting the developmental and preventive needs of concerned young people has been overridden by the emphasis on crisis intervention and the remedial function of the service. It is time for the service to assess its roles and functions for the YNDs (Chow, 2009).

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