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## Public transport and job-seeking range of the poor in older urban districts in Hong Kong

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### A B S T R A C T

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This study investigates the influences of urban decline and public transport provision on the geographical extent of job seeking amongst the poor in older urban districts in Hong Kong. Urban decline is characterised by obsolete housing stock, an ageing population, population decline, the immigration of lower-income families and the economic decline of urban neighbourhoods. The interactions amongst these variables create commuting barriers for employed residents. Public transport dominates daily work trips, which gives rise to keen competition to live near railways and drives up the value of land near railway stations, and the spoke-and-hub nature of the public transport network in less accessible areas incurs high travel costs. These two characteristics of public transport provision prevent low-income workers from reaching distant employment. A survey was conducted on seven older urban districts, and the results of a regression model indicate that respondents with higher qualifications and who paid higher travel fares, took faster transport modes, spent longer on travel and transfers, and lived near transport hubs could travel longer distances to employment. Respondents with young children could travel longer distances to employment because they were younger and received support from their family network. In light of the findings, it is recommended that the government subsidise the travel of the working poor by using the income from land premiums; conduct social impacts appraisals on public transport to ensure equal mobility for all; and revitalise and create jobs in the older urban districts.

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### Introduction

In the 1960s, when masses of refugees migrated to Hong Kong from mainland China, the government built 1.8 million units of public housing in the New Territories and less accessible urban locations. To provide adequate labour for industrial development, the public housing estates were planned near the then manufacturing zones, such as in Kwun Tong, Shamshuipo and Tsuen Wan (Housing Authority, 2007, 2009). However, after 40 years of urban development, many of these urban districts are now suffering from severe decline. The process of urban decline started in the 1980s, when the manufacturing industry started to move its operations to mainland China and the job market became dominated by the service-based economy, leaving many low-waged and unskilled middle-aged residents without employment in the urban areas. This problem has been compounded by the deterioration of the housing stock in urban areas over time, resulting in higher income families moving away. To combat the problem of ageing buildings, the government set up the Urban Renewal Authority in 2001 to oversee urban renewal.

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However, between 1996 and 2005, only about 8.8% of older buildings were redeveloped, and the projects undertaken have mainly focused on prime residential and commercial sites in the Central, Western and Yau Tsim Mong districts, which are highly accessible and command high land rents. The slow rate of redevelopment in Hong Kong means that the problem of urban deterioration has not been adequately resolved (Hui, Wong, & Wan, 2008; Planning Department, 2000). The obsolete physical environment has caused rents in older urban areas to decline, thus encouraging lower-income families to move in. The impact of low wages and the concentration of poverty is further perpetuated as the demand for local retail facilities and services is reduced. This lessens the job opportunities available in these areas, and forces residents to compete for a shrinking pool of jobs (see Census and Statistics Department, 2007d, 2007e, 2007f; Phillimore & Goodson, 2006; Rosenthal, 2008).

This study looks at 7 of the districts that were developed in the 1970s to examine the relationships between urban decline, transport provision and job-seeking range. Of the research districts, 5 were developed by the government as housing neighbourhoods, that is, Tsuen Wan and Kwai Chung new towns in the south-western New Territories and Wong Tai Sin, Kwun Tong and Shamshuipo in Kowloon. The other two research districts were Yau Tsim Mong and

Kowloon City, where private premises account for over 80% of the total housing stock (see Fig. 1). Poverty in these older districts is on the increase, and the single parents, new immigrants and poorly qualified middle-aged workers who predominate feel unable to pay the transport fares to seek employment elsewhere. This is backed up by official figures that indicate that the low incomes of these groups cannot cover the public transport fares to travel across Victoria Harbour to seek jobs on the more affluent Hong Kong Island (Labour Department, 2009).

Although over half of the population of Hong Kong had moved from the urban areas to the new towns by 2006, nearly 56% of jobs remain in the urban centres (Census and Statistics Department, 2007c). Thus, the factor of spatial proximity to employment is the main attraction for workers, both professional and low skilled, who choose to remain in the urban areas. In 2006, nearly 68% of workers in Hong Kong took either the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) or buses to employment. Compared with the buses, the MTR provides a faster, more comfortable and reliable service for passengers (Census and Statistics Department, 2007c). Furthermore, to make the MTR more affordable for low-income workers, the government grants the MTR the right to develop properties above its stations, and the profits are used to subsidise rail fares (Legislative Council, 2007a, 2007b). As a result of the advantages of the MTR, many workers in urban areas compete to live above the MTR stations, and the prices of properties built above the stations are at a level that few low-income workers can afford. Furthermore, to avoid congestion and reduce operation costs in the densely populated urban areas, a high proportion of public transport routes are connected in spoke-and-hub networks, which means that workers using these networks have to make more transfers than those who choose point-to-point transport routes

(Imai, Shintani, & Papadimitriou, 2009; Lee & Meakin, 1998). The high travel costs of the public transport network and the inaccessibility of the residential neighbourhoods of the poor contribute to their inability to afford transport fares for distant work trips. This study hypothesises that the limited job-seeking range of the working poor in older urban areas in Hong Kong is the product of urban decline and certain transport provision variables. In view of the increasing proportion of working poor in labour market, it is hoped that this study will provide some evidence-based suggestions for the improvement of urban transport planning to enhance the ability of the working poor to seek distant employment.

**Urban decline and the working poor in the research districts**

The increasing income inequality in Hong Kong reflects the wide gap between the incomes of professionals and unskilled workers. For example, between 1996 and 2006, the Gini Coefficient for Hong Kong increased from 0.518 to 0.533 and the average monthly household income decreased from US\$2245 to US\$2210, whilst in the same period the proportion of ‘working poor’ households (those earning about two-thirds of the average household monthly income of about US\$1290) increased from 18.2% to 27.9%. In Shamshuipo, Kwun Tong and Wong Tai Sin districts, the proportion of working poor account for 37.1%, 34.6% and 34.3% of the district households, respectively. Furthermore, the sizes of certain sub-groups of working poor, such as middle-aged workers, single parents with young children, new immigrants and workers with low qualifications, are on the increase due to the processes of urban decline and economic restructuring in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2007a; OECD, 2006).



Fig. 1. Hong Kong transport system and research districts. Source: Modified from Google Maps (2009).

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