



Title	Effective Intervention with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong
Author(s)	Lee, FWL
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Abstract

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of 'at-risk'](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

After a re-engineering exercise conducted in 2002, 16 district youth outreaching social work service teams were reformed to deliver the service in 16 prioritised communities in Hong Kong. A previous study ascertained the effectiveness of this service, but the public has generally taken that for granted without really understanding which of its elements had a positive therapeutic effect on youth-at-risk. This study investigates the therapeutic elements of the service with identified four essential elements such as (1) building of mutual trust, (2) social worker as a model, (3) encouragement of participation in the helping process and (4) allowing learning through trial and error.

Keywords

- [effective intervention](#),
- [youth-at-risk](#),
- [outreach youth service](#)

There are several indigenous welfare services in Hong Kong aimed at those who are regarded as 'at risk' (Lee, [2009](#)¹². Lee, F. W. L. 2009. *Initiatives with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Caring for Youth Series Hong Kong : CityU Press.

[View all references](#)), with youth outreach (OR) service considered the most representative. In the wake of a drastic increase in the juvenile crime rate in the 1970s, and in line with the recommendations of a study commissioned by the government (Ng *et al.*, [1975](#)²³. Ng, A. M. C., Lau, T. S., Lu, A., Tsoi, R. and Wong, K. H. 1975. *Social Causes of Violent Crime among Young Offenders in Hong Kong* , Hong Kong : Social Research Centre, CUHK.

[View all references](#)), outreaching social work (OSW) service for at-risk youth, primarily members of street gangs, was formally launched in September 1979. With reference to the youth crime rate, youth population and community population density, 18 priority areas were selected

as the service communities of 18 OSW teams run by different non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

OSW service in Hong Kong

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of 'at-risk'](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

The OSW involves a systematic helping process in which professionally trained social workers reach out to and establish contact and a relationship with the target young people, i.e. youth-at-risk (YAR), who are unattached to conventional social systems (e.g. family and school) and thus vulnerable to some 'undesirable' influences (e.g. from peers and triads), in places they are known to frequent (e.g. street corners, playgrounds, fast food restaurants, billiard rooms, video game centres and 24-h convenience shops). The initial service objectives were to identify the problems (personal, social, behavioural and emotional) that these young people may experience, to enhance their level of social functioning, and 'to provide counselling, guidance and other forms of service to help them overcome their problems, develop their potential and become socially re-integrated' (Social Welfare Department, [1999](#)²⁶. Social Welfare Department. 1999. *The Five Year Plan for Social Welfare Development in Hong Kong – Review 1998*, Hong Kong : Social Welfare Department.

[View all references](#), p. 51) through remedial, preventive and/or developmental measures (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, [1988](#)⁸. Hong Kong Council of Social Service. 1988. *Operation Manual for Outreaching Social Workers*, Hong Kong : Coordinating Committee on Outreaching Social Work, HKCSS. [online]. Available at: http://www.info.gov.hk/swd/html_eng/index.html

[View all references](#)). When going through the manual for OSW workers, there are basically five stages that a worker in the OSW will go through when he/she works with YAR and youth gangs. They are (1) observation, (2) initial contact, (3) building of social relationship, (4) engaging in working relationship and (5) termination (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, [1988](#)⁸. Hong Kong Council of Social Service. 1988. *Operation Manual for Outreaching Social Workers*, Hong Kong : Coordinating Committee on Outreaching Social Work, HKCSS. [online]. Available at: http://www.info.gov.hk/swd/html_eng/index.html

[View all references](#)). For OSW workers, different skills are required at different stages. Over time, the teams have changed, and their size depended on the population size of the district/community they served. A full-strength small team comprised of five OR workers and a large team comprised of 10.

In early 2002, there were a total of 34 OSW teams of different sizes serving different communities in the territory. In the light of the development and changes in society, following a re-engineering exercise, the government restructured the OSW service in September 2002.

Sixteen district youth outreaching social work teams (YOTs) were created to serve the YAR in 16 large districts (http://www.info.gov.hk/swd/html_eng/index.html). These YOTs are intended to address the needs of high-risk youth and to tackle the issue of juvenile gangs.

Lee and Cham (2002)15. Lee, F. W. L. and Cham, L. M. Y. 2002. The Possibility of Promoting User Participation in Working with High Risk Youth. *British Journal of Social Work* , 32: 71–92. [\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[CSA\]](#)

[View all references](#)) had further simplified the work with clients of the OSW service into three stages: the engagement, helping and termination stages. OSW workers have usually known clients in the engagement stage only for a rather short period of time (generally no more than 3 months). At this stage, the workers consciously try to establish a more trusting relationship and build rapport with clients to engage them in the helping stage. Thus, in the helping stage, clients generally trust their OSW workers, who have helped them to verbalise their problems, encouraged and supported them in facing/handling their problems in a positive way through different appropriate strategies. The effectiveness of the intervention at this stage may be seen in 2–3 years (Lee, 1997)10. Lee, F. W. L. 1997. *Working with Natural Groups of Youth-at-Risk* , Hong Kong : Department of Social Work, CUHK.

[View all references](#)). The final stage of work with these clients is the termination stage at which they are usually able to deal with their problems successfully. Workers' major focus is now on helping clients to evaluate and consolidate their learning from the helping process in the hope that they can transfer it to other contexts in future (Lee & Cham, 2002)15. Lee, F. W. L. and Cham, L. M. Y. 2002. The Possibility of Promoting User Participation in Working with High Risk Youth. *British Journal of Social Work* , 32: 71–92.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[CSA\]](#)

[View all references](#)).

In essence, OSW workers engage in casework that involves the provision of counselling, case management and other support activities. Their clients at YAR are aged 6–24 years. The workers need to pay regular ‘spot visits’ to gather and identify potential cases in an initiative and proactive manner.

Youth-at-risk

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of ‘at-risk’](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)

- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

Most young people who abuse substances, belong to street gangs, are potential or actual school dropouts, have exhibited anti-social behaviour, engage in casual sex and unwed pregnancy are regarded as YAR (Dryfoos, 1998). In fact, this measure of YAR is quite behavioural in nature, i.e. it depends on the exhibition of some types of socially unacceptable behaviour to allow a designation of 'at risk'. Of course, cultural differences do exist here.

It is well known that YAR groups are formed naturally in the environment (e.g. amongst peers, neighbours, schoolmates and gangs such as the triads). They are not purposely 'formed', and thus they exist well before the intervention of detached youth workers ([Lee, n.d14](#). Lee, F. W. L. n.d. *Lecture Notes on 'Working with Youth-at-Risk and Juvenile Offenders'*, Hong Kong : Department of Social Work and Social Administration, HKU.

[View all references](#)). Youth gangs (groups of YAR) in Hong Kong consist of groups of young people, all or some of them are members or followers of triad societies or have links with them (Lo, [198617](#). Lo, T. W. 1986. *Outreaching Social Work in Focus*, Hong Kong : Caritas-Hong Kong.

[View all references](#)).

Luk ([200218](#). Luk, W. K. 2002. "Three or five in a group" – the youth gang phenomenon". In *Hong Kong Youth Problems in the Early 21st Century – The Phenomena, Analyses and Solutions*, Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 19–30. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)), an experienced detached youth worker in Hong Kong, identified four types of indigenous youth groups/gangs of YAR: groups/gangs on public housing estates, groups/gangs in schools, groups/gangs in commercial complexes and groups/gangs on pitches and playgrounds. Lee *et al.* ([199616](#). Lee, F. W. L., Lo, T. W. and Wong, D. S. W. 1996. Intervention in the Decision-Making of Youth Gangs. *Groupwork*, 9(3): 292–302.

[\[CSA\]](#)

[View all references](#)) identified the three-layer structure of youth gangs (groups of YAR): the fringe (followers), the outer circle (old and new members) and the inner circle [leader(s)/core members].

It is believed that, depending on the social realities they are exposed to, some young people are at greater risk than others (Lee, [19949](#). Lee, F. W. L. 1994. Group work with "youth-at-risk". *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work*, 4(2): 31–40.

[\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#)

[View all references](#)), i.e. different social realities create different degrees of risk for young people. Theoretically, there is no 'no risk' youth/adolescent (Lee, [201113](#). Lee, F. W. L. 2011. *Nurturing Pillars of Society: Understanding and Working with the Young Generation in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)). All of us faced a variety of problems during adolescence. The main reason that the majority of us was not designated ‘problem youth’ is that we had the resources or training to handle the risks we faced rationally and through some socially acceptable means.

Definition of ‘at-risk’

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of ‘at-risk’](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

McWhirter *et al.* (1998) define ‘at risk’ as

[a] set of presumed cause-and-effect dynamics that place the child or adolescent in danger of negative *future events* ... a situation that is not necessarily current but that can be anticipated in the absence of intervention. (p. 7)

It can thus be postulated that early intervention (i.e. intervention before a problem occurs) is very important.

These authors also suggested an ‘at-risk continuum’, with each category in the continuum having a different degree of risk that runs from low to high: from ‘minimum risk’ to ‘remote risk’, ‘high risk’, ‘imminent risk’ and, finally, the ‘at-risk category activity’ (see Figure 1; McWhirter *et al.*, 1998).

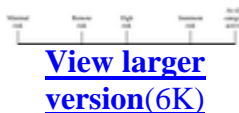


Figure 1 At-risk Continuum.

They suggested that young people with favourable social backgrounds (e.g. those from families with a high socio-economic status, those who attend good schools and those who have a loving and caring relationship with their family and friends) are assumed to be at ‘minimal risk’ of future trouble. Young people with more unfavourable demographic characteristics (e.g. those whose families are of a low socio-economic status and members of minority groups) are positioned in the ‘remote risk’ category. High-risk youth are those from unfavourable social

backgrounds who also have dysfunctional families, go to poor schools and have negative attitudes, emotions and behaviour, as well as deficient social skills and coping behaviour. Young people in the 'imminent risk' category share the same characteristics as high-risk youth but, in addition, exhibit more gateway behaviour and activities (e.g. aggression and alcoholism). Young people belonging to the 'at-risk category' have all of the characteristics of those in the previous three categories, but have further engaged in what can be regarded as delinquent behaviour, such as dropping out of school and abusing substances (McWhirter *et al.*, 1998, chap. 1). Although we do not know the exact figures of those young people who belong to the 'high-risk' and 'at-risk' categories in Hong Kong and believe them to be a minority, their 'at-risk' behaviour raises considerable public concern and deserves our attention.

Theories on working with YAR

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of 'at-risk'](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

Several studies have tried to suggest strategies for working with YAR (Capuzzi & Gross, [1996](#)³. D., Capuzzi and D. R., Gross, eds. 1996. *Youth at Risk: A Prevention Resource for Counselors, Teachers, and Parents* , 2nd, Alexandria, VA : American Counseling Association.

[View all references](#); Dryfoos, [1998](#)⁶. Dryfoos, J. G. 1998. *Safe Passage: Making It through Adolescence in a Risky Society* , Oxford : Oxford University Press.

[View all references](#); Dworkin, [2005](#)⁷. Dworkin, J. 2005. *Advanced Social Work Practice: An Integrative, Multilevel Approach* , Boston : Pearson.

[View all references](#); Lee, [2009](#)¹². Lee, F. W. L. 2009. *Initiatives with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Caring for Youth Series Hong Kong : CityU Press.

[View all references](#); McWhirter *et al.*, [2004](#)²⁰. McWhirter, J. J., McWhirter, B. T., McWhirter, E. H. and McWhirter, R. J. 2004. *At-Risk Youth: A Comprehensive Response – For Counselors, Teachers, Psychologists, and Human Service Professionals* , California : 3rd ed. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

[View all references](#); O'Brien & Donelan, [2008](#)²⁴. O'Brien, A. and Donelan, K. 2008. *Arts and the Youth at Risk: Global and Local Challenges* , Middlesex : Cambridge Scholars.

[View all references](#); Morris & Schultz, [1998](#)²¹. 1998. *A Resource Guide for Working with Youth at Risk* , Basel : Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Morris, R. C. & Schultz, N. (eds.)

[View all references](#); Quinn, [2004](#)²⁵. Quinn, W. H. 2004. *Family Solutions for Youth at Risk: Applications to Juvenile Delinquency, Truancy, and Behavior Problems* , New York : Brunner-Routledge.

[View all references](#)). Some also try to suggest some conceptual frameworks to work with YAR. Intervention with different systems, e.g. families, schools, peers, and communities (Capuzzi & Gross, [1996](#)³. D., Capuzzi and D. R., Gross, eds. 1996. *Youth at Risk: A Prevention Resource for Counselors, Teachers, and Parents* , 2nd, Alexandria, VA : American Counseling Association.

[View all references](#); Dryfoos, [1998](#)⁶. Dryfoos, J. G. 1998. *Safe Passage: Making It through Adolescence in a Risky Society* , Oxford : Oxford University Press.

[View all references](#); Dworkin, [2005](#)⁷. Dworkin, J. 2005. *Advanced Social Work Practice: An Integrative, Multilevel Approach* , Boston : Pearson.

[View all references](#); Lee, [2009](#)¹². Lee, F. W. L. 2009. *Initiatives with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Caring for Youth Series Hong Kong : CityU Press.

[View all references](#); McWhirter *et al.*, [2004](#)²⁰. McWhirter, J. J., McWhirter, B. T., McWhirter, E. H. and McWhirter, R. J. 2004. *At-Risk Youth: A Comprehensive Response – For Counselors, Teachers, Psychologists, and Human Service Professionals* , California : 3rd ed. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

[View all references](#); Morris & Schultz, [1998](#)²¹. 1998. *A Resource Guide for Working with Youth at Risk* , Basel : Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Morris, R. C. & Schultz, N. (eds.)

[View all references](#); Quinn, [2004](#)²⁵. Quinn, W. H. 2004. *Family Solutions for Youth at Risk: Applications to Juvenile Delinquency, Truancy, and Behavior Problems* , New York : Brunner-Routledge.

[View all references](#)), is suggested basic effective intervention with YAR. McWhirter *et al.* ([2004](#)²⁰. McWhirter, J. J., McWhirter, B. T., McWhirter, E. H. and McWhirter, R. J. 2004. *At-Risk Youth: A Comprehensive Response – For Counselors, Teachers, Psychologists, and Human Service Professionals* , California : 3rd ed. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

[View all references](#)) have suggested an ecological model to understand and work with YAR. The use of arts (e.g. drama therapy and dance therapy) as therapeutic means for YAR has been advocated (O'Brien & Donelan, [2008](#)²⁴. O'Brien, A. and Donelan, K. 2008. *Arts and the Youth at Risk: Global and Local Challenges* , Middlesex : Cambridge Scholars.

[View all references](#)), and family therapy has also been advocated (Brawer, [1998](#)¹. Brawer, B. J. III. 1998. “Applying family therapy to the school setting: a systems approach to understanding and solving behavior problems”. In *A Resource Guide for Working with Youth at Risk* , Edited by: Morris, R. C. and Schultz, N. 81–82. Basel : Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

[View all references](#)). Early intervention to the identified YAR has also been promoted (Dryfoos, [1998](#)⁶. Dryfoos, J. G. 1998. *Safe Passage: Making It through Adolescence in a Risky Society* , Oxford : Oxford University Press.

[View all references](#); McWhirter *et al.*, [2004](#)²⁰. McWhirter, J. J., McWhirter, B. T., McWhirter, E. H. and McWhirter, R. J. 2004. *At-Risk Youth: A Comprehensive Response – For Counselors, Teachers, Psychologists, and Human Service Professionals* , California : 3rd ed. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

[View all references](#)).

‘One-on-one attention’, ‘developmentally appropriate’, ‘empowerment’, ‘reaching across generation’, ‘educational achievement’, ‘school-based social skills training’, ‘group counselling’, ‘community service’, ‘community outreach’, ‘cultural responsiveness’, ‘community policing’, ‘multiagency multicomponent’, and ‘intensive and long-term involvement’ (Dryfoos, [1998](#)⁶. Dryfoos, J. G. 1998. *Safe Passage: Making It through Adolescence in a Risky Society* , Oxford : Oxford University Press.

[View all references](#)) have also been suggested as effective intervention concepts to consider. As a concluding remark of this section, it depends on the contexts that the YAR are exposed to that determines the employment of different conceptual frameworks to work with them.

Elements of effective intervention with YAR

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of ‘at-risk’](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

There are different intervention approaches for working with at-risk young people (Lee, [2011](#)¹³. Lee, F. W. L. 2011. *Nurturing Pillars of Society: Understanding and Working with the Young Generation in Hong Kong* , Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)), but, on the whole, the followings are crucial elements in any effective therapeutic intervention, as indicated in the literature.

Community study and field observation

According to OSW working approaches, OR involves ‘work[ing] with young people in their natural environment’ (Chan, [2009](#)⁴. Chan, C. W. L. 2009. “District youth outreaching social work team”. In *Initiatives with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 1–16. Hong Kong : CityUHK Press.

[View all references](#), p. 6); thus, observing and understanding the dynamics of the communities to be served and finding the target groups are important before the actual intervention work is carried out.

Understanding the culture (subculture) of YAR groups

Because at-risk youth differ from other young people, they usually form a special group culture/sub-culture. Social workers emphasise that an understanding of the cultures/sub-cultures of the YAR groups is crucial for effective intervention (Lee, [1994](#)⁹. Lee, F. W. L. 1994. Group work with “youth-at-risk”. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work* , 4(2): 31–40.

[\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#)

[View all references](#), [2005](#)¹¹. Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)).

Relationship/mutual trust building

Almost all social workers admit that relationship/mutual trust building is the most crucial factor in effective interventions (Lee, [2005](#)¹¹. Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)). Because these clients are young people who are ‘detached from the conventional and formal system’ (Chan, [2009](#)⁴. Chan, C. W. L. 2009. “District youth outreaching social work team”. In *Initiatives with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 1–16. Hong Kong : CityUHK Press.

[View all references](#), p. 6), social workers need to work with them in their natural living environment. They thus need to build mutual trust and a relationship with them, and engage in dialogue. Although this work is time-consuming, building a trusting relationship with the YAR groups will allow social workers to provide effective intervention later on (Lee *et al.*, [1996](#)¹⁶. Lee, F. W. L., Lo, T. W. and Wong, D. S. W. 1996. Intervention in the Decision-Making of Youth Gangs. *Groupwork* , 9(3): 292–302.

[\[CSA\]](#)

[View all references](#); Lee, [1997](#)¹⁰. Lee, F. W. L. 1997. *Working with Natural Groups of Youth-at-Risk*, Hong Kong : Department of Social Work, CUHK.

[View all references](#)).

Focus on the groups

According to the HKCSS Operational Manual, OSW is a group work approach (HKCSS, [1988](#). Hong Kong Council of Social Service. 1988. *Operation Manual for Outreaching Social Workers*, Hong Kong : Coordinating Committee on Outreaching Social Work, HKCSS. [online]. Available at: http://www.info.gov.hk/swd/html_eng/index.html

[View all references](#)). As noted above, social workers first need to build a trusting relationship with the youth in question, after which they can ‘design some tailor made programmes or services for the group’ (Chan, [2009](#)⁴. Chan, C. W. L. 2009. “District youth outreaching social work team”. In *Initiatives with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong*, Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 1–16. Hong Kong : CityUHK Press.

[View all references](#), p. 7). Through these programmes, the workers can obtain more information on the group members (Lee, [2005](#)¹¹. Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong*, Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)). Many types of programmes can be used to assist workers in knowing and understanding the target groups in greater depth, such as band-training, football matches, hip-hop dancing, rock climbing, beauty courses, adventure voyages and war games (Lee, [2005](#)¹¹. Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong*, Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#); Chan, [2009](#)⁴. Chan, C. W. L. 2009. “District youth outreaching social work team”. In *Initiatives with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong*, Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 1–16. Hong Kong : CityUHK Press.

[View all references](#)).

Working with individuals in groups

After building a stable relationship with the entire group, the social worker may employ an individual or casework approach to help certain youth (Chan, [2009](#)⁴. Chan, C. W. L. 2009. “District youth outreaching social work team”. In *Initiatives with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong*, Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 1–16. Hong Kong : CityUHK Press.

[View all references](#)). Here, it should be emphasised that this individual casework should be undertaken in the context of the group. A majority of social workers interviewed reported that the most effective length of time for such an approach is from 1 to 2 years (Lee, [1997](#)¹⁰. Lee, F.

W. L. 1997. *Working with Natural Groups of Youth-at-Risk* , Hong Kong : Department of Social Work, CUHK.

[View all references](#), [200511](#). Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)).

Quality of social workers

Last but not the least, the quality of a social worker is also essential to the effectiveness of intervention work in OSW, particularly in terms of three aspects: knowledge, skills and personality (Lee, [200511](#). Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)). First, an OSW worker dealing with YAR should have knowledge in the areas of ‘small group theories, development characteristics, the needs of adolescents and triad/gang's subcultures and norms’ (Lee, [200511](#). Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#), p. 19) to facilitate the intervention work. Second, working methods/skills are also important. If an OSW worker lacks such skills, then he/she may find it difficult to build a good relationship with the target group or to grasp useful information about the group's members. Thus, equipping oneself with different working skills can ensure the effectiveness of intervention (Lee, [200511](#). Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)). Lastly, social workers with certain types of personality are better at working with YAR, with those who show initiative and are easy-going, open, accepting, patient, alert, flexible and willing to learn having the most success with this target group (Lee, [200511](#). Lee, F. W. L. 2005. “Working with youth gangs: An RGC approach”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong* , Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 15–26. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)).

Effectiveness of OSW

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of ‘at-risk’](#)

- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

The only evaluation of the OSW service for YAR in Hong Kong took place in the mid-1980s. The upsurge in juvenile crime in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Working Group on Juvenile Crime, [1981](#)²⁷. Working Group on Juvenile Crime. 1981. *Report of the Working Group on Juvenile Crime*, Hong Kong : Government Printer.

[View all references](#)) led to a significant amount of resources, money and manpower, being invested in the programmes to address the issue of YAR. Later, both the government and the public grew more cautious, and there was increasing pressure to provide evidence of the effectiveness of YAR services to justify the allocation of limited resources. Against this backdrop, the OSW service, as a subvented youth programme for YAR, undertook its first evaluation in mid-1980s (Cheng, [2005](#)⁵. Cheng, H. C. H. 2005. “Effectiveness of services to youth-at-risk: the case of outreaching social work”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong*, Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 87–98. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)). Ng and Man ([1985](#)²². Ng, A and Man, P. 1985. *The Report on the Evaluation of Outreaching Social Work*, Hong Kong : Centre for Hong Kong Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

[View all references](#)) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong were commissioned by the government to conduct a service evaluation of the OSW, the only official evaluation study of the service to date. Its main objective was to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the OSW programme. For reasons of practicality, a multiple time series design was chosen, with the significance of the changes between a control group and an experimental group compared. The experimental group consisted of clients served by the then 18 OSW teams at that time and the control group comprised young people with similar demographic characteristics, but who had not received the intervention of OSW workers (Cheng, [2005](#)⁵. Cheng, H. C. H. 2005. “Effectiveness of services to youth-at-risk: the case of outreaching social work”. In *Working with Youth-at-Risk in Hong Kong*, Edited by: Lee, F. W. L. 87–98. Hong Kong : HKU Press.

[View all references](#)). The evaluation report contains the following statements.

The effectiveness of out-reaching social work is measured by the successfulness of problem solution for the youths at risk. Results of data analysis on information gathered from the major instrument (Clientele Information System – CIS) show that out-reaching service has some effects in reducing youths' behavioural problems such as ‘gambling’, ‘anti-social’, ‘association with undesirable peers’ and ‘poor family relationship’. Out-reaching social workers are able to help clients develop their social skills, choose their career and constructively use their leisure time.

Insufficient evidences are found on the effectiveness of out-reaching social work in the problems of drug, sex and truancy. The overall results of out-reaching social work, in comparison with the non-treatment for youths in the control group, is significantly effective as suggested by the regression analysis... Based on the information gathered and analysis made it is confirmed that youths in the out-reaching programme were, in general, curbed from further deterioration in their behaviour problems. Out-reaching social work programme was able to help youths reduce their gambling habits and anti-social behaviour. The out-reaching social workers were also quite successful in helping youths to disassociate with undesirable peers and provided them with opportunities for constructive leisure activities. Through which, youths were able to develop their social skills. They also were found having better relationship with their family and becoming more serious with their career choice and working attitudes. However, out-reaching social work service has not been very successful in dealing with the problems of drug, sex and truancy for this group of youth. (Ng & Man, [1985](#)²². Ng, A and Man, P. 1985. *The Report on the Evaluation of Outreaching Social Work* , Hong Kong : Centre for Hong Kong Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

[View all references](#), p. 219)

It is clear that this, which was commissioned in the 1980s, confirmed the effectiveness of the OSW with YAR in certain aspects. It is rather unfortunate that since this early study, no other official study has been carried out to measure the effectiveness of the programme.

Research design

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of 'at-risk'](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

The study reported herein was qualitative in nature.

Research objective. The objective of this study was to identify the main effective therapeutic elements of the OSW service.

Target population. OSW workers and their clients were the targets of this study.

Research method. In-depth individual interviews with sampled workers and clients for the purpose of data collection were conducted with the help of two interview schedules (Appendices I and II) by a Research Assistant who possesses a Master in Criminology. All

interviews of sampled workers and clients took place in the offices (interviewing rooms) of the teams.

Of the 16 YOTs, one quarter (four teams) were sampled randomly for this study. In each sampled team, two experienced social workers (who had been in the service for 3 or more years) and four clients who had received successful intervention (it was assumed that if they were more 'successful' cases, they would have more to say) and were at the termination stage (whose cases would be closed within 6 months) were also sampled randomly for in-depth individual interviews. Thus, a total of eight OSW workers (W1–W8) and 16 OSW clients with successful intervention and were at the termination stage (C01–C16) were interviewed. Confidentiality was assured, and thus the names of the sampled YOTs, OSW workers and clients are not disclosed here. The purpose of the interviews was explained to all interviewees who were requested to sign consent forms of the interviews which were recorded. The verbatim of the interviewees were written down immediately after the interviews for analyses.

Ethics approval. The ethics approval of the study was obtained from the concerned Committee of the University.

Data collection instrument. Two sets of interview schedules (Appendices I and II) were developed for guiding the interviews.

Data analysis. Thematic analysis was used for the data analysis.

Research findings and analysis

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of 'at-risk'](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

OSW workers

Four male and four female OSW workers were interviewed. Their ages were between 25 and 40 years. The highest academic qualifications they had achieved in social work were higher diploma (one person), associate degree (three persons), undergraduate degree (two persons) and master degree (two persons). Their OSW service duration was between 4 and 16 years (see Table [1](#)).

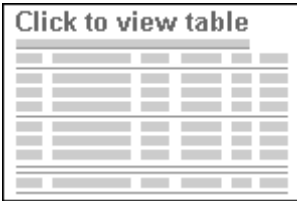


Table 1 OSW Workers

Effective therapeutic intervention: therapeutic elements of OSW

Analysis of the interview data led to the following discovery. There are four crucial elements that appeared frequently in clients' and workers' responses, identified in effective therapeutic intervention for YAR: (1) the building of mutual trust, (2) the social worker as model, (3) the encouragement of participation in the helping process and (4) allowing learning through trial and error.

Building of mutual trust

The following are representative quotes from the interviews with the OSW workers that indicate the importance of mutual trust building:

First, you have to build up mutual trust with the client; otherwise, nothing can be done. (W4)

Building up a mutual trusting relationship with the client is the foremost thing one needs to do.

Without this trusting foundation, you simply can do nothing. (W7)

Without the foundation of mutual trust, your intervention will surely fail. (W8)

Social worker as model

The following are representative quotes from the OSW workers' interviews that indicate the importance of the social worker as model as an intervention element:

You can be a model for the client. If he/she takes you as a model to face/handle his/her problems, he/she may use some positive methods to face/handle those problems. This is positive learning. (W1)

You can also make use of clients' emotional experiences and teach them to face/handle their problems. If you faced similar problems before, you can share with them how you handled them. You can be their model to help them to face/handle problems positively. (W4)

Briggs (2009). Briggs, S. 2009. Risks and opportunities in adolescence: understanding adolescent mental health difficulties. *Journal of Social Work Practice* , 23(1): 49–64.

[\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[View all references](#)) has reminded us of the importance of using the emotional experiences of adolescents to assist them.

Encouragement of participation in the helping process

Lee and Cham (2002). Lee, F. W. L. and Cham, L. M. Y. 2002. The Possibility of Promoting User Participation in Working with High Risk Youth. *British Journal of Social Work* , 32: 71–92.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[CSA\]](#)

[View all references](#)) advocate encouraging clients to participate in the helping process. This is

also a crucial element in OSW and one that the OSW workers interviewed in this study regard as important for effective therapeutic intervention. The followings are representative quotes:

The client is the person who understands his/her problem(s) best. Encouraging him/her to actively participate in the helping process, such as by analysing the causes of his/her problem(s), can make the intervention more effective. (W5)

Make sure the client actively participates in the helping process, such as by expressing his/her opinions on the intervention and its possibilities, and evaluating the intervention. Doing so can make him/her understand that the problem(s) is/are his/hers. This is also a positive learning process. (W6)

Allowing learning through trial and error

The last, but not the least, factor that the OSW interviewees regularly mentioned as essential for effective therapeutic intervention with YAR clients is ‘allowing clients to learn through trial and error’. The followings are representative quotes.

The hardest thing for a social worker to do is to allow his/her clients to make mistakes. But this is what OSW workers need to do. You need to let young people learn and grow through trial and error. Although it is difficult, it is a must. (W2)

It is not easy to let clients fall and then stand up again. But we need to have faith in them and allow them to make mistakes. This is a must. (W6)

OSW clients

There were 10 males and 6 females amongst the clients interviewed for this study. Their ages were between 13 and 21 years, and all were in the termination stage of intervention. The problems that they faced at the beginning of the intervention varied with problems pertaining to the emotion (boy–girl relationship), undesirable peers' influence, triads (joining/quitting), gambling (indulgence), substance abuse and family (quarrels with members) (see Table 2).

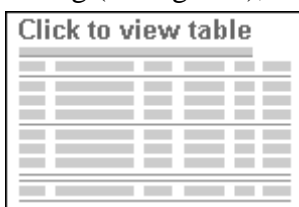


Table 2 OSW Clients

Effective therapeutic intervention: therapeutic elements of OSW

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of ‘at-risk’](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)

- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

Analysis of the client interview data identified the same four crucial elements of effective therapeutic intervention. The followings are representative quotes from the client interviews that pertain to these four elements.

Building of mutual trust

At the beginning, I did not trust him. But I knew that without mutual trust, he couldn't help me. Later, he helped me to solve some issues, so we started to build mutual trust. (C03)

[This client finally settled his issues with the triad with the advice of the worker.]

Mutual trust is very important. I believe in him, so I follow his suggestions to solve my problems. And finally, my problems were satisfactorily solved. (C11)

[Finally, this client was freed from the 'undesirable' influence from his peers with worker's advice.]

Social worker as model

Adults often think that we hate them. But actually we are imitating them so that we can solve our problems. She [the worker] is a good model for us to imitate in facing/handling problems positively. (C02)

[This client was eventually freed from her 'undesirable' peers' influence with worker's advice.]

Y Sir is my idol. He evaluated my experiences with me; and told me what I have done good and less good. I model myself after him and have learnt how to positively face/handle problems. (C09)

[This client stopped gambling with worker's advice.]

I had thought about how to stop gambling. But I always failed! Then I imitated his [the worker's] determination to do things. Finally, I succeeded. (C15)

[This client quitted gambling with worker's suggested methods.]

Encouragement of participation in the helping process

Miss X is really good. She encouraged me to express how I saw the causes of the problem and the feasibility of her intervention. This makes me feel that in the entire helping process, I have the power to participate. (C10)

[This client has re-established a harmonious relationship with the family after worker's intervention.]

X Sir asked me what I thought the causes of my problems were and what the possible solutions were. I tried the solutions I proposed. Strangely, they worked! (C13)

[With worker's advice, finally, the client faced and handled his problems directly and quitted abusing substances for escaping from his problems.]

Allowing learning through trial and error

I tried the solution I proposed, but it did not work. The problem was still there. I discussed it with Miss X, and I learnt and reflected a lot. (C08)

[With worker's advice, this client finally reconciled with her family.]

Miss X is really good. Although I did not do what she told me to and failed to solve the problem, she still patiently discussed with me the reasons why I had failed. (C12)

[With worker's advice, this girl can positively face her separation with her boy-friend.]

Although I failed to solve my problems many times, X Sir always discussed with me the reasons why I had failed and what I have learnt from the 'matches' [trials]. (C14)

[With worker's opinions, this client finally aware of the unfavourable consequences of joining the triad and decided to quit.]

Conclusion and recommendations

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of 'at-risk'](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

Based on the analysis the interviews with both OSW workers and clients, Figure 2 shows the dynamics of the factors at work in effective therapeutic intervention with YAR.



[View larger version\(17K\)](#)

Figure 2 Dynamics of Effective Intervention Factors in Outreaching Social Work Service for Youth-at-Risk.

As an exploratory study, this study had not explored the weighting of these four crucial effective factors in the intervention. But this study has given us a better understanding of what constitutes effective social work intervention amongst YAR of OSW. These elements are (1) the building of mutual trust, (2) the social worker as model, (3) the encouragement of participation in the

helping process, and (4) allowing learning through trial and error. Hence, none of these elements can be left out if OSW wishes to serve this vulnerable client population effectively.

Some recommendations are made here:

1. *Evaluation of the service.* With a formal evaluation of the service being held some more than 25 years ago, the government needs to consider another formal evaluative study of the service programme so as to ascertain its effectiveness.
2. *Staff (OSW workers') training.* With the crucial and effective therapeutic elements of work with YAR being identified in this study, special promotion of developing these elements in the work with YAR should be emphasised in the staff training of OSW workers.
3. *Working with YAR.* We all aware that the problems faced by YAR may change over time and in different cultures. But with the four main therapeutic elements of working with them being identified, it is believed that with appropriate promotion of them in the working stage, they are universal. With appropriate use, they can assist the therapeutic intervention of all kinds of problems encountered by YAR. With the main therapeutic elements of working with YAR being identified, the employment of these elements in working with YAR should be consciously promoted.
4. *Further studies.* As the sizes of the sampled workers and clients of the present study were limited, it would be desirable to conduct this kind of study in a larger scale so that the validity could be more ascertained. To explore the weighting of these crucial effective therapeutic elements is also a direction for further studies. Less successful cases can be sampled for interviews in future studies so as to explore if other factors are essential for effective intervention.

Appendix I: Interview schedule for outreaching workers (English version)

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of 'at-risk'](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

Interview schedule for outreaching workers

1. How should I address you?

2. How many years have you been in the OSW service?
 3. What are your academic qualifications?
 4. During all of your years in the OSW service, you surely must have handled many cases. How would you rate your percentage of success?
 5. What do you think the key factors in successful intervention are?
 6. Please describe in detail two typical successful cases that you have handled.
 7. Is there anything you would like to add?
- Interview ends! Thank you!!

Appendix II: Interview schedule for outreaching clients (English version)

Jump to section

- [OSW service in Hong Kong](#)
- [Youth-at-risk](#)
- [Definition of 'at-risk'](#)
- [Theories on working with YAR](#)
- [Elements of effective intervention with YAR](#)
- [Effectiveness of OSW](#)
- [Research design](#)
- [Research findings and analysis](#)
- [Effective therapeutic intervention:...](#)
- [Conclusion and recommendations](#)
- [Appendix I: Interview schedule for...](#)
- [Appendix II: Interview schedule for...](#)

Interview schedule for outreaching clients

1. How would you like me to address you?
2. How long have you known X Sir/Miss X?
3. How did you come to know him/her (OR worker)?
4. What problem(s) did you face?
5. Do you think he/she (your OSW worker) has been successful in helping you to handle/solve your problem(s)?
6. If yes, then please describe in detail how he/she has helped you to handle/solve your problem(s).
7. Is there anything you would like to add?

Interview ends! Thank you!!

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