

Press Release

“Creating a Discrimination-free and Barrier-free Living Environment for the ‘Little People’ in Hong Kong” Release of Research Findings

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CityU research reveals inadequate understanding of little people in Hong Kong creating discrimination

To investigate the social and physical challenges facing the little people (or those who are commonly known as “people with dwarfism”) in Hong Kong, the Department of Public Policy, City University of Hong Kong carried out a study. The research project was funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission under its “Funding Programme of Research Projects on Equal Opportunities 2017/18”. Between November 2017 and July 2018, ten little people or their family members participated in in-depth interviews and a questionnaire survey with 523 members of the general public was conducted. Research findings reveal that although Hong Kong’s built environment has been designed barrier-free pursuant to the prevailing building standards, those standards do not cater for the special anthropometric characteristics of little people. As a result, little people face a lot of challenges when using built facilities. From the social perspective, Hong Kong’s general public still have quite many misconceptions and preconceptions about little people. These wrong beliefs often lead to discriminatory attitudes and behaviour against little people. As indicated by the research findings, we are still far away from providing a discrimination-free and barrier-free living environment for the little people in Hong Kong. To make Hong Kong society more inclusive to the little people, there is a need for further tailored actions.

Dwarfism: Definition and Overview

Dwarfism generally refers to a condition in which an adult has a height of 4 feet 10 inches (around 147 centimeters) or below. It is a kind of rare disease associated with skeletal dysplasia resulting from some medical or genetic conditions. People with dwarfism usually have short limbs and short stature. In many places, people with this condition are also known “little people”.

So far, it has been found that dwarfism can be caused by any of over 400 conditions which affect skeletal growth. The types of dwarfism that are commonly seen include growth hormone deficiency (1 in every 3,800 births) and achondroplasia (1 in every 26,000–40,000 births). Most of these conditions originate in spontaneous genetic mutation in the egg or sperm cell prior to conception. Therefore, there is no preventative measure against the mutation.

Scope of the Study

The research aimed to explore the social and physical challenges encountered by little people in Hong Kong in different aspects of daily life excluding education, employment and medical care. These excluded areas are very specialized, warranting more intensive or lengthy research. As such, these areas were not covered in the current research.

Key Findings of the Research

The key findings of the research are as follows:

- (1) The design of many buildings and public facilities do not cater for little people's special needs.
- (2) Little people and their family members participated in the in-depth interviews expressed that they experienced discrimination in different forms. 60% of respondents in the questionnaire survey thought that little people in Hong Kong were discriminated in different extents and over 20% viewed the degree of discrimination as serious or very serious.
- (3) More than 80% of the survey respondents were willing / very willing to work with little people or to befriend with little people.
- (4) Over 80% of the survey respondents expressed that they had inadequate / very inadequate understanding about little people.
- (5) The general public still had some misunderstandings about little people. For example, they thought that "all dwarfism cases are inherited genetically from the parents", "the difference in height between a child with dwarfism and an average-sized child could be narrowed as they get older" and "poor quality diet and deficit of calcium intake are causes of dwarfism".
- (6) More than 40% of the survey respondents perceived that little people belonged to a special species, looked like children who would never grow up, looked strange in appearance and had an unpleasant look.
- (7) Sex, age, religious belief, frequency of contact with little people and being a person with disability were significant determinants of the level of misunderstanding about dwarfism. Keeping other factors constant, women, being younger, Catholics, Protestant Christians or Buddhists, respondents having frequent contact with little people, or those not having any disability tended to have a significantly lower level of misunderstanding about dwarfism.
- (8) Respondents who were female, with higher education level, Catholics, Protestant Christians or Buddhists, having frequent contact with little people, or those not having any disability tended to have a significantly higher level of acceptance towards little people.

Recommendations

With reference to the research findings, a number of recommendations are made:

- (1) To deepen the general public's understanding of and connection with little people;
- (2) To stop the presentation of a negative image of little people by the press and game designers;
- (3) To adopt the principle of universal design to promote inclusive buildings in new construction and building renovation; and
- (4) To foster the general public's understanding of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance.

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