

# **Hong Kong people's understanding of and opinions on refugee and human rights issues**

## **Survey report 2020**

**Department of Asian and Policy Studies,  
The Education University of Hong Kong**

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## Background

The 2020 survey on local perceptions on asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong and human rights issues is the third biennial survey conducted by the Department of Asian and Policy Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong.

- Two earlier surveys were conducted in 2016 and 2018 to find out what Hongkongers thought of refugees and ethnic minorities, as well as various issues pertaining to these groups and human rights in general.
- The survey this year (2020) is intended as a follow-up to track possible shifts in the attitudes and opinions of Hongkongers on these issues.
- The data collected reflect developments on the ground since 2018, when the United Nations Human Rights Council last conducted its Universal Periodic Review.

## Objectives

To examine:

- How Hongkongers view asylum-seekers and refugees in the territory
- The extent to which Hongkongers understand issues concerning asylum-seekers and refugees
- Where Hongkongers obtain their information about asylum-seekers and refugees
- How Hongkongers view their government's policies on asylum-seekers and refugees
- What Hongkongers think is the stance of different political parties towards people of colour (i.e. non-Chinese ethnic groups)
- Hongkongers' views on the current human rights situation
- Potential changes in prevailing attitudes since the surveys in 2016 and 2018.

## Method <sup>1</sup>

- Commissioned by the Department of Asian and Policy Studies (The Education University of Hong Kong) and conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (PORI) between **6 April and 23 April, 2020**, interviewed over the telephone 1,002 Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong Chinese aged over 18.
- The overall response rate is 57.1%

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<sup>1</sup> All percentage figures rounded up. Percentage figures which do not add up to 100% refer to percentages of cases.

## Research results

### 1. Demographics

#### 1.1. Age

Age	
	Percentage
18 – 29	16.6%
30 – 49	33.7%
50 or above	49.7%
Total	100%

#### 1.2. Sex

Sex	
	Percentage
Male	47%
Female	53%
Total	100%

#### 1.3. Education level

Education level	
	Percentage
Primary school or below	19.2%
Secondary school	47.5%
Tertiary or above	33.3%
Total	100%

#### 1.4. Marital status

<b>Marital status</b>	
	<b>Percentage</b>
Single	33.6%
Married	58.6%
Separated	0.6%
Divorced	2.8%
Widowed	4.4%
Total	100%

#### 1.5. Individual monthly income

<b>Individual monthly income</b>	
	<b>Percentage</b>
HK\$0-9,999	39.3%
HK\$10,000-19,999	25.4%
HK\$20,000-39,999	23.8%
HK\$40,000 or above	10.3%
Unstable income	1.1%
Total	100%

### 1.6. District

<b>District</b>	
	<b>Percentage</b>
Hong Kong Island	17%
Kowloon East	17%
Kowloon West	11%
New Territories West	30%
New Territories East	25%
Total	100%

### 1.7. What is your political affiliation?

<b>Political affiliation</b>	
	<b>Percentage</b>
Democratic Camp	32%
Neutral/No affiliation	44%
Establishment Camp	10%
Localist Camp	10%
Others	1%
No idea/Difficult to say	3%
Total	100%

## **2. Hongkongers' attitudes towards and understanding of asylum-seekers and refugees**

### **2.1. What do you think of the asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong?**

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Positive	6%	5.1%	4.7%
<b>Neutral</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>64.1%</b>	<b>64.4%</b>
Negative	16%	26.8%	26.8%
No idea/difficult to say	4%	4.0%	4.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

### **2.2. Do you have the following impression(s) of asylum-seekers and refugees? (Multiple Choice)**

	Percent of cases	Percent of cases	Percent of cases
	2020	2018	2016
<b>They are fake refugees</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>61.5%</b>	<b>66.0%</b>
<b>Have been in Hong Kong for a long time</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>43.9%</b>	<b>44.6%</b>
<b>Criminals</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>50.5%</b>	<b>49.4%</b>
Government do not have enough resources to support them	44%	38.4%	40.7%
The USM process is very slow	44%	-	-
Abject life	40%	32.8%	37.2%
Muslims	28%	18.4%	18.3%
Others	3%	3.8%	0.9%
No idea/Difficult to say	9%	9.1%	8.7%

**2.3. Were you familiar with the issue of asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong before this interview?<sup>2</sup>**

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Yes	42%	45.9%	46.0%
No	51%	49.5%	47.8%
No idea/difficult to say	7%	4.6%	6.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%

**2.4. Do you think asylum-seekers can become Hong Kong citizens under the current Hong Kong immigration system?**

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Yes	46.4%	46.4%	46.9%
No	39.5%	42.3%	38.6%
No idea/difficult to say	14.1%	11.3%	14.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation of this question has been slightly modified from previous years, but the Chinese original remains the same.

## 2.5. Which country are they mainly from?

Countries	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	<b>2020</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2016</b>
<b>Pakistan</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>19.3%</b>	<b>26.0%</b>
<b>African countries</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>12.3%</b>	<b>12.6%</b>
Vietnam	11%	12.0%	11.3%
India	7%	11.2%	7.1%
South Asia	6%	-	-
Southeast Asia	4%	12.9%	6.9%
mainland China	4%	2.6%	2.1%
Middle-East	3%	1.9%	4.4%
Nepal	2%	1.4%	1.6%
Syria	2%	2.2%	-
Bangladesh	2%	1.3%	2.4%
Others	2%	2.8%	2.6%
No idea/Difficult to say	22%	18.6%	21.0%



### 3. Media

#### 3.1. Have you been watching closely on news regarding asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong?

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Never	22%	18.3%	14.6%
<b>Once a month</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>38.1%</b>	<b>30.5%</b>
Once every two weeks	11%	12.3%	13.3%
Once a week	10%	10.0%	15.3%
Almost every day	6%	8.6%	17.4%
No idea/difficult to say	8%	12.7%	8.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%

#### 3.2. Where do you obtain information about asylum-seekers and refugees? (Options are not provided, respondents can suggest more than one answer)

	Percent of cases	Percent of cases	Percent of cases
	2020	2018	2016
<b>Internet</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>38.5%</b>	<b>33.6%</b>
<b>TV</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>59.6%</b>	<b>62.9%</b>
<b>Print media</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>40.5%</b>	<b>39.8%</b>
Radio	11%	11.9%	11.5%
Family/friends	2%	3.2%	3.4%
School	<1%	0.7%	0.4%
None of the above	10%	6.5%	6.7%
Others	1%	2.8%	2.4%
No idea/difficult to say	4%	2.7%	4.2%

**3.3. How much do you agree with the statement that “reports from print media, radio and TV on the asylum-seekers and refugees are negative”?**

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
<b>Disagree</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>31.7%</b>	<b>28.4%</b>
Partly agree	20%	18.6%	25.5%
<b>Agree</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>36.5%</b>	<b>36.2%</b>
No idea/difficult to say	18%	13.1%	9.9%
Total	100%	100%	100%

**3.4. How much do you agree with the statement that “reports about asylum-seekers on social media like Facebook and WeChat are negative”?**

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
<b>Disagree</b>	<b>28.1%</b>	<b>25.8%</b>	<b>25.7%</b>
Partly agree	19.8%	14.5%	19.0%
<b>Agree</b>	<b>26.5%</b>	<b>30.4%</b>	<b>27.5%</b>
No idea/ difficult to say	25.6%	29.3%	27.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%

#### 4. Hong Kong people's policy suggestions on refugee issues

4.1. Which policies should the government implement to solve the issue? (Multiple Choice)

	Percent of cases	Percent of cases	Percent of cases
	2020	2018	2016
Arresting snakeheads and members of human trafficking syndicates	63%	62.4%	64.5%
Allowing those who have been here for more than 5 years to work in low-end jobs so that they can help solve the labour shortage problem and improve their quality for life	45%	33.9%	32.2%
Reforming the USM (Unified Screening Mechanism) system and retrain staff	43%	36.6%	36.9%
Hiring more staff to speed up the USM process	38%	38.3%	30.6%
Building a detention camp	24%	23.6%	26.5%

4.2. Do you think the children of asylum-seekers born and educated in Hong Kong should have the right of abode?

	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018
Yes	61%	51.6%
No	28%	38.5%
No idea/difficult to say	11%	9.9%
Total	100%	100%

## 5. Hongkongers' views on ethnic minorities

### 5.1. When compared with new arrivals from China, you are:

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
More sympathetic to the asylum-seekers	25%	19.9%	18.1%
More sympathetic to the new arrivals	12%	17.3%	19.7%
<b>Not sympathetic to neither group</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>36.3%</b>	<b>31.7%</b>
Both	22%	17.1%	20.0%
No opinion	6%	4.4%	6.9%
No idea/difficult to say	5%	5.0%	3.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%

### 5.2. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the statement that “Generally, Hong Kong people is prejudiced towards people of colour (i.e. non-Chinese ethnic groups)”?

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Disagree	34.3%	32.2%	39.4%
Partly agree	9.1%	5.7%	9.1%
<b>Agree</b>	<b>54.3%</b>	<b>59.4%</b>	<b>48.6%</b>
No idea/difficult to say	2.3%	2.8%	2.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%

**5.3. To what extent do you agree with the statement that “Hong Kong people need to know more about other ethnic groups”?**

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Disagree	10%	10.9%	10.4%
Partly agree	5%	3.7%	5.7%
<b>Agree</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>82.8%</b>	<b>80.8%</b>
No idea/difficult to say	2%	2.6%	3.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

**5.4. Do you think any political parties in Hong Kong are prejudiced towards people of colour?**

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Yes	29%	31.1%	28.8%
<b>No</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>44.6%</b>	<b>42.7%</b>
No idea/ difficult to say	22%	24.3%	28.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%

**5.5. Which political camp do you think is prejudiced towards people of colour?  
(Multiple Choice)**

	Percent of cases
<b>Pro-establishment camp</b>	<b>56%</b>
Localist camp	27%
Pan-democratic camp	19%
Others	1%
No idea/Difficult to say	17%

## 6. Hongkongers' views on human rights issues and policies

6.1. Do you think that the Hong Kong government should improve its human rights policy?

	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018
Yes	65%	59.1%
No	25%	31.0%
No idea/difficult to say	10%	10.0%
Total	100%	100.0%

6.2. What are the human rights problems that Hong Kong is facing now? (Options were not provided, respondents could suggest more than one answer)

	Percent of cases	Percent of cases
	2020	2018
Freedom of speech	17%	16.2%
Police abuse of power and misconduct	10%	-
Political freedom	10%	4.4%
Racial discrimination	5%	3.5%
Asylum-seekers' and refugees' rights	3%	8.1%
Electoral system and voting rights	3%	2.9%
Freedom of publication	3%	3.9%
Freedom of assembly and demonstration	3%	1.4%
Hong Kong people's rights are violated	3%	1.8%
Personal safety	2%	-
Freedom of press	2%	1.2%
Injustice	2%	-

**6.3. Do you agree that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be included in local legislation?**

	Percentage
Yes	49%
No	18%
No idea/difficult to say	33%
Total	100%

**6.4. Do you think that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) protects the children of asylum-seekers and refugees under the current system?**

	Percentage
Yes	33%
No	24%
No idea/difficult to say	43%
Total	100%

**6.5. Do you agree that Hong Kong should lift its reservations on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding immigration issues?**

	Percentage
Yes	24%
No	33%
No idea/difficult to say	43%
Total	100%

**6.6. Which political camp is not concerned about the human rights issues in Hong Kong? (Multiple choice)**

	Percent of cases
<b>Pro-establishment camp</b>	<b>42%</b>
Localist camp	16%
Pan-democratic camp	15%
None	7%
No idea/difficult to say	32%

**6.7. Do you think we have a humanitarian crisis in Hong Kong?**

	Percentage
<b>Yes</b>	<b>51%</b>
No	39%
No idea/difficult to say	10%
Total	100%

**Analysis**

Close to half (44%) of the anonymous respondents to this 2020 survey professed a neutral political stance and/ or no political affiliations.

***1. Positive change in attitudes positively correlated with increased importance attached to human rights-related issues***

The polling results show an increasing interest in human rights-related issues and more positive perceptions of asylum-seekers and refugees on the part of Hongkongers. For example, the top terms to which respondents related asylum-seekers and refugees in the 2016 and 2018 surveys were “criminals” and “fake refugees” respectively. Although “fake refugees” still remains the most frequent association among respondents to the 2020 survey, the percentage of respondents who supplied that term has dropped 5% from the 66% of 2016. “Criminals”, the second-most popular association in previous years, has been overtaken by the perception that the refugees and asylum-seekers “ [h]ave been in Hong Kong for a long time” (55%) .



Aside from a decrease in negative perceptions of the group, Hongkongers appear more ready to recognise the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees. For example, there is a marked increase in support for granting the right to work to adult asylum-seekers and refugees and the right of abode to their children (each up more than 10% compared to 2016 and 2018), suggesting a growing sympathetic attitude towards the group.

This positive change in attitudes towards the marginalised may be a direct result of the social movement that started in June 2019, around which time the Hong Kong government attempted to pass a now-defunct extradition bill.

The proposed bill, which would allow Hong Kong citizens to be sent for trial in mainland China, was met with a massive backlash from Hongkongers. The primary reason is that if the proposed bill had been passed, it would have affected judicial independence in Hong Kong. Amidst the failure of the Hong Kong government to enter into genuinely constructive dialogue and cooperation with the community to defuse the hostility amongst different groups, human rights-related issues have been brought to the fore in the territory, once known for its tolerance, effective governance, and freedom.

Hongkongers, who had generally been apathetic towards human rights in the past and viewed these as not immediately relevant to their daily lives, have increasingly come to view them as crucial to the functioning of their society as these rights come under threat. In turn, this could have made the general public increasingly conscious of how Hong Kong's official policies on refugees reflect their government's approach to human rights in general, the latter of which has implications for both locals and non-locals alike. In addition, in a time where Hongkongers themselves face displacement, they could have developed greater empathy for refugees. These factors taken together may possibly explain Hongkongers' increased willingness to extend greater freedoms and entitlements to refugees and asylum-seekers in their midst.

## ***2. Increased sympathy towards the marginalised does not equate to more knowledge about their situation***

Interestingly, while Hongkongers are growing more sympathetic to refugees and asylum-seekers in the territory, their awareness of issues relating to the group shows no perceptible increase since the previous two surveys. Half of the respondents (51%) evaluated themselves as not being familiar with the topic, while close to half (46.4%, incidentally unchanged since 2018) answered incorrectly that "asylum-seekers and refugees can become Hong Kong citizens under the current Hong Kong immigration system".

The results further bolster the proposal made above that the general public's changed attitudes towards asylum-seekers and refugees result more from a sense of emotional affinity and empathy than from an improved understanding or knowledge of the group.

## ***3. Knowledge of definitions and legal applications of human rights likewise lacking***

The survey revealed Hongkongers' top three human rights concerns in 2020 to namely be: freedom of speech (17% of respondents), police abuse of power and misconduct (10%), and

political freedom (10%), seemingly reflecting recent political and social events that made headlines in Hong Kong. The influence of these happenings is evidenced by how asylum-seekers' and refugees' rights, which came second in 2018 (8.1% of respondents), has slipped to fifth place in 2020 (3%).

However, the caveat is once again due that respondents attaching increased importance to human rights-related matters does not imply a correspondingly improved awareness of these matters. Case in point, close to half (49%) supported incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into local legislation at the same time that around the same proportion (43%) professed ignorance towards how it was already being interpreted in Hong Kong with a reservation on immigration issues.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis clearly shows that the Hong Kong public do not sufficiently understand how concepts like human rights and democracy are defined and applied both locally and internationally.

In this time of turmoil, misconstruals of what these terms entail have led to people of differing political persuasions frequently talking past each other. This has only impeded the search for solutions acceptable to all on hotly debated issues that have caused deep rifts in Hong Kong society. At present, we urgently need level-headed and open public dialogue, supported by civic education, on how human rights can feasibly be defined and guaranteed in the local context. Only then will the Hong Kong government be able to allay Hongkongers' fears and enable them to continue contributing to society in meaningful ways.

To sum up, we appeal to the governments of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and China to adopt a constructive approach towards rebuilding trust with the people of Hong Kong, sincerely considering compromises where these are essential for the restoration of normalcy and public confidence in the state. Such an approach is indispensable if China is to remain a competitive and respected member of the international community.