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Insignificant or ignored? Antisocial behaviour in private housing in Hong Kong

Because of aggravating antisocial behaviour (ASB) or the neighbourhood problem in housing, many western governments have given ASB control a central place in their policy agendas. However, tackling ASB often involves a great deal of politics. Although ASB and controlling it have attracted much scholarly attention, the focus has almost always been placed on social housing. It is unclear whether this problem does not exist in other types of housing or if it is simply ignored. Drawing on a study of private housing developments in Hong Kong, this article examines the extent and seriousness of ASB as a problem in private housing. It shows that the problem does raise wide concerns among residents, and that many residents complain about noise nuisances and littering in their liv-

ing places. On the other hand, most residents feel that the efforts of housing management agents in countering the problem are in vain or inadequate. In fact, when reacting to ASB, housing managers inevitably face a number of issues that originate from the joint appointment of managers by all homeowners and the lack of enforcement powers. In particular, controlling some neighbourhood nuisances is difficult and costly. This article concludes with an agenda for empirical research to explain the proliferation of ASB from the transaction-cost perspective.

Key words: antisocial behaviour, neighbourhood nuisances, private housing, residents' perceptions, Hong Kong

1 Introduction

Enjoyment of a quality living environment is critical for all residents. However, the quality of housing is not only based on its design and the quality of construction. Residents' wellbeing in housing is largely contingent on the outcomes of housing management (Yau, 2010). Apart from residents' inactivity in building care and the agency problem in housing management, unacceptable behaviour by the residents themselves is another common issue that degrades the liveability of a residential neighbourhood. Residents' unacceptable behaviour is commonly referred to as antisocial behaviour (ASB) in Australia and the UK, but also referred to as incivility, social disorder, neighbourhood nuisances and quality-of-life crimes in other jurisdictions. Common ASBs include noise nuisances, littering, graffiti, abusive uses of communal space, irresponsible pet ownership and other acts of vandalism. The gravity of the problem has been vividly evidenced by the increasing number of complaints and growing dissatisfaction of residents with their residential neighbourhoods (e.g., Scottish Government Social Research, 2007; Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, 2008). The consequences of ASB can range from reduced housing satisfaction and negative impacts on physical and mental health to damage to social stability (Pacione, 1982; Curtis et al., 2004; Agyemang et al., 2007; Jacobson et al., 2008).

In the last decade, the problem of ASB has gained growing attention from policymakers, housing authorities, residents and academics in western countries. To address the issue, various measures such as injunctions, ASB orders, parenting orders, acceptable behaviour contracts, probationary tenancies, neighbourhood wardens and family intervention schemes have been devised in various jurisdictions. Although the effectiveness of these measures varies, it is evident that ASB control is tenure-biased even though ASB problems and disputes between neighbours are tenure-neutral in nature (Scott & Parkey, 1998; Flint & Nixon, 2006). In many cases, social-housing tenants, and not residents in other types of housing, are subject to the control. One study (Carr & Cowan, 2006) argues that identifying social housing as dangerous and productive of ASB is in fact a self-fulfilling prophecy. This author (Yau, 2011a) states that ASB also takes place in other types of housing tenure. Therefore, without any concrete evidence of the insignificant ASB problem in non-social-housing sectors, it is a misplaced assumption that ASB is a social-housing problem.

In Hong Kong, ASB was not an agenda item before 2003. After the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in early 2003, the government of Hong Kong decided that certain ASB or unacceptable behaviour by the residents could result in unhygienic conditions that in turn became the hot-

bed for epidemics. Therefore, a series of initiatives were taken by the government such as stepping up enforcement against behaviour that jeopardises community health such as spitting and deliberate littering in public areas (Team Clean, 2003). In addition, the Marking Scheme for Tenancy Enforcement in Public Housing Estates was implemented in August 2003, with the stated aim of improving the hygienic and living conditions in public housing estates in the territory. It is essentially a kind of control of ASB in housing. However, such control is discriminatory because only tenants in public rental housing are subject to the marking scheme. It is of no relevance to people in other types of housing tenure. In fact, nearly all literature on ASB in housing focuses on public or social housing. It is unclear whether the problem does not exist in other types of tenure or is simply ignored. Drawing on an empirical study on private housing developments in Hong Kong, this article examines the extent and seriousness of ASB problems in private housing.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows: a global overview of ASB problems is given in Section 2. This is followed by the design and findings of a questionnaire survey in Hong Kong in Section 3. Section 4 presents an analysis on the determinants of residents' intolerance towards ASB in their living places. The difficulties in managing ASB in private housing are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper and sets out an agenda for further research.

2 An overview of ASB problems worldwide

The rising concerns about neighbourhood problems or ASB in housing may be attributed to the large numbers of complaints about various types of ASB. For example, approximately 25% of the population of Australia have complained about vandalism such as graffiti and damage to property in their neighbourhoods (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). In Northern Ireland, 101,561 incidents of ASB were reported in 2006/07 (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, 2008). In 2009, the American Housing Survey revealed that about 25.4 million and 9.8 million occupied housing units in the U.S. suffered from typical problems of noise and litter, respectively (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

In spite of the prevalence of ASB problems, "ASB" is a term that lacks a universal definition (Millie, 2009). Its definition varies with the defining body and situation. For example, the Chartered Institute of Housing (1995) defined ASB as acts conducted in opposition to society's norms and accepted standards of behaviour. ASB was defined by the Local Government Information Unit (1997: 5) as "behaviour that causes harassment to a community; amounts to antisocial criminal

conduct, or is otherwise antisocial; disrupts the peaceful and quiet enjoyment of a neighbourhood by others; intimidates a community or section of it.”

Alternatively, ASB in the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 in Ireland was broadly defined as behaviour

that constitutes the commission of an offence, being an offence the commission of which is reasonably likely to affect directly the well-being or welfare of others ... that causes or could cause fear, danger, injury, damage or loss to any person living, working or otherwise lawfully in the dwelling concerned or its vicinity and, without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, includes violence, intimidation, coercion, harassment or obstruction of, or threats to, any such person ... persistently ... prevents or interferes with the peaceful occupation by any other person residing in the dwelling concerned, of that dwelling; by any person residing in any other dwelling contained in the property containing the dwelling concerned, of that other dwelling; or by any person residing in a dwelling in the vicinity of the dwelling or the property containing the dwelling concerned, of that neighbourhood dwelling. (Candy Murphy and Associates, 2007: 6)

Similarly, the police in Western Australia have defined ASB as any “behaviour that disturbs, annoys or interferes with a person’s ability to go about their lawful business” (McAtamney & Morgan, 2009: 1). In another definition (Millie et al., 2005: 3), ASB is behaviour that “causes harassment, alarm or distress to individuals not of the same household as the perpetrator, such that it requires interventions from the relevant authorities; but criminal prosecution and punishment may be inappropriate because individual components of the behaviour are not prohibited by the criminal law or in isolation constitute relatively minor offences”.

From the above, it is clear that the definition of ASB can be rather elastic and there has been a blurring of the boundary between criminal and non-criminal acts in delineating the scope of ASB (Brown, 2004). In Hong Kong, the government has never used the term “ASB”. Instead, those misdeeds defined as ASB in other countries are commonly referred as neighbourhood nuisances in Hong Kong. Before 2003, there was no clear and consolidated policy to control ASB in the city, and ASB was dealt with in a rather piecemeal and ad-hoc manner, mainly by statutory means. For example, noise nuisances in residences and deliberate littering in public places were regulated by the Noise Control Ordinance and Fixed Penalty (Public Cleanliness Offences) Ordinance, respectively. Some other incivilities such as drunkenness, graffiti, vandalism and throwing objects from heights were regulated under the Summary Offences Ordinance.

The outbreak of SARS in 2003, which claimed 299 lives in Hong Kong, aroused public concern about public cleanliness

in high-density urban areas. To improve environmental hygiene, the Hong Kong government set up an inter-departmental taskforce, the Team Clean, in May 2003. The Team Clean taskforce was chaired by the chief secretary for administration, and key departments involved included the Buildings Department, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, the Home Affairs Department and the Housing Department. One of the recommendations made by the Team Clean was to step up enforcement against the public housing tenants that repeatedly breached the health codes. Following this recommendation, the Hong Kong Housing Authority implemented the Marking Scheme for Tenancy Enforcement in Public Housing Estates in August 2003, with the stated aim of improving the hygienic and living conditions in public housing estates in the territory (Team Clean, 2003). The scheme operated as a penalty-point system in which sitting tenants would receive penalty points for committing the prescribed misdeeds, and would be expelled from their public housing units if their penalty points accumulated up to a certain level.

Nevertheless, the marking scheme has been criticised for its low acceptability, unfairness and negative social impacts (Yau, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). More importantly, it is a kind of ten-



Figure 1: a) New Town Plaza in Shatin, b) Tai Po Centre in Tai Po (photo: Yung Yau).

ure-biased control, with the tenants living in public rental housing (including interim housing) being the only subject of the regulation. As a matter of fact, this selective control is not justified unless it is proven that ASB problems in the non-social-housing sectors (e.g., subsidised home ownership

and private housing sectors) are not serious. Although ASB incidents in private housing can occasionally be seen from the government and news reports (e.g., Information Services Department, 2009; Chiu, 2011), there has been no scientific study on the extent of ASB problems in Hong Kong's non-so-

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by socio-demographic characteristics

Characteristic*	(0) Tenants		(1) Owner-occupiers		Overall	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Sex (<i>MAL</i>)						
(= 1) Male	33	58.9	143	61.9	176	61.3
(= 0) Female	23	41.1	88	38.1	111	38.7
Age (<i>AGE</i>)						
(= 1) 18–24 years old	7	12.5	11	4.8	18	6.3
(= 2) 25–34 years old	8	14.3	33	14.3	14	14.3
(= 3) 35–44 years old	11	19.6	68	29.4	79	27.5
(= 4) 45–54 years old	17	30.4	77	33.3	94	32.8
(= 5) 55–64 years old	12	21.4	30	13.0	42	14.6
(= 6) 65 years old or above	1	1.8	12	5.2	13	4.5
Education level (<i>EDU</i>)						
(= 1) Primary or below	10	17.9	30	13.0	40	13.9
(= 2) Lower secondary	2	3.6	11	4.8	13	4.5
(= 3) Upper secondary	15	26.8	61	26.4	76	26.5
(= 4) Matriculation	6	10.7	34	25.5	40	13.9
(= 5) Tertiary or above	23	41.1	95	41.1	118	41.1
Average monthly household income (<i>INC</i>)						
(= 1) Below HKD 5,000	2	3.6	7	3.0	9	3.1
(= 2) HKD 5,000–HKD 9,999	2	3.6	8	3.5	10	3.5
(= 3) HKD 10,000–HKD 14,999	3	5.4	15	6.5	18	6.3
(= 4) HKD 15,000–HKD 19,999	5	8.9	18	7.8	23	8.0
(= 5) HKD 20,000–HKD 24,999	4	7.1	28	12.1	32	11.1
(= 6) HKD 25,000–HKD 29,999	15	26.8	64	27.7	79	27.5
(= 7) HKD 30,000–HKD 34,999	6	10.7	39	16.9	45	15.7
(= 8) HKD 35,000–HKD 39,999	7	12.5	24	10.4	31	10.8
(= 9) HKD 40,000 or above	11	19.6	24	10.4	35	12.2
(NA) Refuse to answer	1	1.8	4	1.7	5	1.7
Ethnicity (<i>LOC</i>)						
(= 1) Chinese that were born or grew up locally	51	91.8	200	86.6	251	87.5
(= 0) New immigrants from mainland China	3	5.4	14	6.1	17	5.9
(= 0) Other ethnic groups	1	1.8	15	6.5	16	5.6
(NA) Refuse to answer	1	1.8	2	0.9	3	1.0
Number of cohabiting family members (<i>FAM</i>)						
(= 1) One	4	7.1	8	3.5	12	4.2
(= 2) Two	5	8.9	26	11.3	31	10.8
(= 3) Three	14	25.0	64	27.7	78	27.2
(= 4) Four	21	37.5	97	42.0	118	41.1
(= 5) Five	10	17.9	26	11.3	36	12.5
(= 6) Six or above	2	3.6	10	4.3	12	4.2
Total	56	100.0	231	100.0	287	100.0

Note: (*) Values in parentheses denote input values for the respective categorical or dummy variables for the subsequent ordered probit analysis.

cial housing. To bridge the gap, this study explores the seriousness of ASB in non-social housing perceived by the residents.

3 Seriousness of ASB problems in Hong Kong's private housing

3.1 Survey design and profile of the respondents

Opinions from private-housing residents were collected through a self-administered face-to-face structured questionnaire survey conducted between April and June 2011. This approach was used with an eye to gaining the highest possible number of participants in the survey. A questionnaire was devised to collect the information necessary for the empirical study. Before the survey, the present questionnaire had been pretested and amended according to the testers' feedbacks. A total of 287 residents living in private housing in the Tai Po and Shatin districts were interviewed. Figures 1a and 1b show two housing estates in which some of the respondents lived.

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the respondents. On average, the respondents had been living in public housing for 14.8 years at the time of interview. Most respondents belonged to the high- and middle-income class because more than 75% of the respondents had a monthly household income in excess of HKD 17,250, the median monthly domestic household income of the entire population in Hong Kong in 2006 (Census and Statistics Department, 2007). About half of the respondents were below 45 years old. Those with a tertiary education (including a bachelor's degree or higher certificate) or above accounted for 41.1% of the respondents. The sample was dominated by households with three to four members (41.8%). Thirty-three respondents (11.5%) were either non-Chinese or new immigrants from mainland China. As far as housing tenure is concerned, 231 respondents (80.5%) were owner-occupiers. Over half of the respondents (58.2%) lived in estate-type housing, with another 98 (34.1%) and

22 (7.7%) living in single-block developments and village houses, respectively.

3.2 Perceived seriousness and causes of ASB problems

In the face-to-face interviews, the respondents were asked whether they agreed that a specific type of ASB was serious in their residential developments on a five-point scale (with 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree). As shown in Table 2, "noise nuisances" was the most frequent cited ASB by the respondents, followed by "litter or rubbish" and "unrepaired drainage or water seepage". Among the twelve problems studied, "dripping water" and "waste accumulation" were not considered serious ASB problems because their mean scores were below three.

Moreover, the respondents were asked about their perceived causes of the neighbourhood problems in their housing developments. Again, the answer was measured on a five-point Likert scale (with 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree), and Table 3 summarises the findings. In the opinion of the respondents, "ineffective policing or management" was considered the main cause of ASB problems in their living places. The mean score returned for that cause was 3.92, which was the highest among the causes. Second and third to "ineffective policing or management" were "poor parenting" (mean = 3.78) and "mental illness or disorder" (mean = 3.63), respectively. On the other hand, "alcohol or drugs" (mean = 2.38) and "unemployment" (mean = 2.75) were regarded as the least relevant causes of ASB problems.

From the above, it is clear that the respondents regarded effective housing management as an important counterforce against ASB in private housing. Moreover, poor parenting was considered one of the main causes of ASB problems in private

Table 2: Perceived seriousness of specific ASB problems ($n = 287$)

Problem	Mean	σ
Noisy nuisances	3.72	0.96
Litter or rubbish	3.68	0.87
Unrepaired drainage or water seepage	3.57	0.96
Abusive uses of communal space or facility	3.53	0.93
Objects thrown from a height	3.41	0.90
Vandalism or graffiti	3.28	0.87
Illegal dealings	3.21	0.97
Uncontrolled dogs	3.18	0.94
Gangsters	3.10	1.01
Burglary	3.09	0.91
Dripping water	2.99	0.96
Waste accumulation	2.89	1.11

Table 3: Perceived causes of ASB in housing ($n = 287$)

Problem	Mean	σ
Ineffective policing or management	3.92	0.86
Poor parenting	3.78	0.88
Mental illness or disorder	3.63	0.91
Poor discipline at school	3.58	0.98
Boredom	3.31	0.77
Unemployment	2.75	0.82
Alcohol or drugs	2.38	0.99

housing in Hong Kong. This finding echoes those by other researchers (Millie et al., 2005; Ipsos MORI, 2006) in which poor parenting was also found to be the most imperative cause of ASB in the United Kingdom. Similarly, this author (Yau, 2011b) also found that poor parenting contributed a great deal to ASB problems in public housing in Hong Kong. As he explained, long working hours and lack of community support of the parents were conducive to this predicament. In light of these findings, the local government should offer more community services to support working parents through child custody and youth development.

4 Level of intolerance towards ASB and its determinants

To determine who is intolerant of ASB problems in living places, multivariate analysis of the survey data was performed. In the structured questionnaire survey, each respondent was asked whether he or she agreed that ASB problems or neighbourhood nuisances in his or her housing development were very serious and intolerable. The respondent had to express his or her answer using a five-point Likert scale (with 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree). A higher score indicates a higher level of intolerance of the respondent to ASB problems in the place of residence. Among the 287 respondents, 99 (34.5%) stated that ASB problems in their housing developments were intolerable, whereas 115 (40.1%) thought the opposite.

It is hypothesised that the levels of intolerance (INT) of a respondent are functions of a number of socio-demographic factors of the respondent such as gender (MAL), age (AGE), education level (EDU), household income (INC) and ethnicity (LOC), and housing experience and characteristics such as length of residence in public housing (LOR), number of cohabiting family members (FAM), residential satisfaction (SAT) and type of housing he or she is living in (TYP). Mathematically (Equation 1),

$$INT = \alpha_1 MAL + \alpha_2 AGE + \alpha_3 EDU + \alpha_4 INC + \alpha_5 LOR + \alpha_6 LOC + \alpha_7 FAM + \alpha_8 SAT + \alpha_9 TYP + \alpha_{10} OWN + \varepsilon$$

where α_i (for $i = 1, 2, \dots, 10$) are coefficients to be estimated, and ε is the stochastic term. LOR stands for the respondent's length of residence, measured in years, in the current housing development. SAT denotes the respondent's satisfaction with the overall quality of his or her housing development, and is measured on a five-point scale (with 5 = very satisfied and 1 = very dissatisfied). TYP is a dummy variable that equals 1 if the respondent was living in a high-rise apartment building, and 0 if otherwise. OWN is a dummy variable that equals 1 if the respondent was an owner-occupier, and 0 if otherwise. For other dummy variables, their meanings and measurements are detailed in Table 1. Table 4 summarises the mean values of all variables in Equation 1. Because the dependent variable INT is ordinal in nature, an ordered probit technique can return a more robust model estimation compared with the conventional ordinary least squares technique. After truncation of the missing data, 280 observations were included in the analyses. The estimation results for Equation 1 are presented in Table 5.

The estimated coefficients of the variables MAL and EDU are statistically significant at the 1% level. Coefficients that are significant at the 5% level are returned for the variables LOR and TYP . The coefficient of the variable FAM is marginally significant at the 10% level. On the other hand, age (AGE), household income (INC), ethnicity (LOC), residential satisfaction (SAT) and housing tenure (OWN) do not show any significant impact on the level of intolerance, even at the 10% level. As implied from the estimation results, male respondents were less tolerant of the prevailing ASB problems in their housing developments, *ceteris paribus*. Moreover, residential satisfaction did not exert any significant impacts on the level of intolerance. Surprisingly, these findings contradict another study on public housing (Yau, 2011b) that found that males were more able to endure ASB problems and that the level of intolerance increased with residential dissatisfaction.

As suggested by the respective positive and negative signs for the coefficients of the variables EDU and LOR , respondents that were better educated and had a shorter duration of residence were more likely to think that ASB problems in their places of living were intolerable. Moreover, respondents living in high-rise housing tended to be more intolerant of ASB

problems compared with those residing in village houses. This association is self-explanatory. The living environment in private high-rises in Hong Kong is more densely populated and so the misbehaviour of a resident can affect many other residents in a more direct manner. For example, accumulation of waste in an apartment unit can easily cause the people living nearby to suffer from the odour and unhygienic conditions. In addition, as an aftermath of the painful lesson of the 2003 SARS outbreak, people in Hong Kong became more aware of the dreadful consequences of a poor-quality living environment, particularly in high-rise housing. Therefore, ASB is less tolerable for residents in high-rise housing in the city.

5 Difficulties in managing ASB in private housing

As discussed above, most respondents ascribed the proliferation of ASB to ineffective policing or management, implying

that proper housing management was thought to alleviate ASB problems. However, managing ASB in non-social housing is not straightforward compared to the case in social housing. In social or public housing, tenants' behaviour is usually regulated by social landlords through strict tenancy control. On the premise of welfare conditionality, a tenant can be evicted from social housing for repeated incidents of ASB or unacceptable behaviour (Yau, 2011a). Alternatively, to encourage responsible behaviour by tenants, some social landlords offer incentives such as priority maintenance, gardening kits or shopping vouchers to tenants that have not received any complaints for a specific period of time (Lupton et al., 2003; Jacobs et al., 2005; Jacobs, 2008). In the private rental sector, the main way to control ASB is through the terms and conditions of the tenancy agreements (Wright, 2011). Although powerful sanctions like lease termination are available to private landlords, landlords seldom make resort to such means because lease termination can result in voids, reducing their rental incomes. Termination of tenancy is sought if the nuisances or ASB adversely

Table 4: Mean responses for the variables for the ordered probit analysis

Variable	Range	Mean	σ
<i>INT</i>	5 = strongly agree ... 1 = strongly disagree	2.92	0.27
<i>MAL</i>	1 = male; 0 = female	0.61	0.49
<i>AGE</i>	6 = 65 years old or above ... 1 = 18–24 years old	3.49	1.22
<i>EDU</i>	5 = tertiary or above ... 1 = primary or below	3.64	1.41
<i>INC</i>	9 = HKD 40,000 or above ... 1 = below HKD 5,000	5.98	2.03
<i>LOR</i>	28 years ... 1 years	14.82	7.90
<i>LOC</i>	1 = Chinese that was born or grew up locally; 0 = others	0.88	0.32
<i>FAM</i>	6 = six or above ... 1 = one	3.60	1.10
<i>SAT</i>	5 = strongly satisfied ... 1 = strongly dissatisfied	3.08	0.87
<i>TYP</i>	1 = living in high-rise housing; 0 = living in a village house	0.92	0.27
<i>OWN</i>	1 = owner-occupier; 0 = tenant	0.80	0.40

Table 5: Estimation results of the ordered probit analysis on the level of intolerance

Variable	Standard error	z-statistic	p-value
<i>MAL</i>	0.1322	4.1867	0.0000
<i>AGE</i>	0.0645	-0.9523	0.3409
<i>EDU</i>	0.0494	7.1892	0.0000
<i>INC</i>	0.0362	0.5404	0.5889
<i>LOR</i>	0.0114	-2.0021	0.0453
<i>LOC</i>	0.2463	-0.8411	0.4003
<i>FAM</i>	0.0673	-1.7223	0.0850
<i>SAT</i>	0.0756	0.9163	0.3595
<i>TYP</i>	0.2238	1.9861	0.0470
<i>OWN</i>	0.2172	0.0235	0.9812
Dependent variable:	<i>INT</i>	Number of observations:	280
Pseudo R-squared:	0.1001	Schwarz criterion:	3.1456
Akaike info criterion:	2.9638	Hannan–Quinn criterion:	3.0367
LR statistic:	89.2218	p (LR statistic):	0.0000

affects the rentals by creating a bad reputation for the properties concerned.

Even worse, many residents in the private sector in Hong Kong are owner-occupiers. For this group of residents, eviction can represent an infringement of the right to private property. Virtually, the only remedies available in non-social housing are reporting the cases to the authorities (e.g., the police, the Environmental Protection Department and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department) and asking the court for injunctions. Certainly, complaints can be lodged to housing managers, but their power to deal with ASB issues is limited. Even worse, the bidirectional relationship between housing managers and owner-occupiers makes managers hesitate to intervene in disputes between neighbours arising from ASB. On the one hand, a housing manager is supposed to protect the rights and interests of the co-owners in a private residential development. The manager is delegated the power to enforce the deed of mutual covenant (DMC), which is a legal document setting out the rights, interests and obligations of co-owners, residents and housing managers of a multi-owned development with respect to the control, maintenance and management of the development (Home Affairs Department, 2001). On the other hand, in principle the manager is jointly appointed by all the co-owners in the development. Therefore, the manager regulates the behaviour of the co-owners but, at the same time, is the agent for all the co-owners. Handling disputes between neighbours often makes one party happy and the other party upset.

At the same time, although housing managers are the “enforcer” of the DMC, they have no power to penalise the perpetrators. In case of ASB, managers must rely on the legal system for remedies (e.g., injunctions against perpetrators or claiming damages from perpetrators). Nonetheless, the litigation process is very often lengthy and consumes resources. Therefore, the difficult position of housing managers makes them reluctant to get involved in ASB and disputes between neighbours. Housing managers tend to stay away from such matters unless they affect a significant number of residents. This is vividly reflected in the survey results. For respondents that had lodged complaints about ASB to housing managers, only 22% thought that the housing managers could help them solve the ASB or nuisances concerned, which mainly affected only the complainants. On the other hand, 67% of this group of respondents felt that the housing managers could end or lessen the ASB effectively after receiving the complaints if the ASB in question affected many residents in their developments.

6 Conclusion and agenda for further research

Neighbourhood nuisances and ASB problems in housing have long been creating many troubles for local residents and governments globally, but much attention is placed on social or public housing. This unbalanced focus is perhaps a result of the marginalisation of social housing (Forrest & Murie, 1988; Malpass, 1990). However, whether the issue does not exist in other types of tenure or is simply ignored remains unanswered. In fact, the Labour Party (1995: 7) acknowledged that “plenty of those guilty of antisocial behaviour are private tenants or owner occupiers”. Therefore, this article contributes to the body of knowledge by exploring the views of 287 residents in private housing in Hong Kong towards the neighbourhood problems in their places of residence. As indicated by the survey findings of this study, private-housing residents complain about serious neighbourhood problems such as noise nuisances and littering. In addition, multivariate analysis reveals that residents with higher education levels, with shorter lengths of residence and living in high-rise housing were less tolerant to ASB problems in their living places. Moreover, although tackling ASB in private housing depends on the willingness of neighbours and the community to report the behaviour to the proper agencies (Wright, 2011), most respondents thought that their housing managers could not handle their complaints about ASB properly.

Although this study has its limitations, such as a small sample size, it may stimulate a new wave of research on ASB or neighbourhood nuisances in various types of housing. Perhaps, when determining directions for further studies, scholars will focus on why certain types of ASB (e.g., noise nuisances) persist and which measures are effective in controlling the problem. As a matter of fact, these issues can be investigated from a transaction cost perspective. For example, litter or rubbish has been perceived one of the most serious misdeeds in this study and many others (e.g., Lovbakke, 2007; Innes, 2011; Yau, 2011b). This is likely because the costs of enforcement (including rule setting, violation identification and evidence gathering) are very high. As one can image, it is difficult to prove whether a lump of rubbish in the corridor was disposed by a particular household unless the disposal was witnessed by someone. Following the same logic, control measures incurring prohibitively high transaction costs (e.g., use of statutory ASB orders) fail to tackle the nuisance problem.

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