

Hong Kong's Silent Epidemic

Public Opinion Survey on Air Pollution, Environment and Public Health 2008

Summary of Key Findings

In September and October 2008, the Hong Kong Transition Project conducted a survey on behalf of Civic Exchange of Hong Kong people's attitudes toward air pollution, environment and public health. The Hong Kong Transition Project had carried out a general survey of public attitudes on the environment for Civic Exchange in 2001, and where the questions asked were the same, it allowed for a comparison between 2001 and 2008 (as in the case of questions on air pollution). Telephone interviews of 1,020 randomly selected adults were conducted in Cantonese, Mandarin, English, Hakka and Fujianese.

1. Increased Concern

Increased public awareness has coincided with a dramatic rise in public concern about air pollution between 2001 and 2008.

2. Whole of Hong Kong

The public's concern about air quality is felt across all sectors of society and more than 90% of those concerned are born in Hong Kong or Mainland China.

3. Less Desirable Location

Hong Kong people believe that air pollution makes Hong Kong a less desirable location for both locals and international talent.

4. Damaging Quality of Life

Hong Kong people believe that air pollution is damaging their quality of life.

Eight Key Findings

5. Concerns Not Heard

The concerns of the vast majority are not reaching policy-makers or the media, indicating serious problems in trust and communication.

6. Public Sector Differs

Public sector employees tend to rate air pollution as of less concern than the general public.

7. Rising Dissatisfaction

Dissatisfaction with government and business efforts to deal with air pollution has risen significantly since 2001.

8. Ask the Experts

Hong Kong people believe the Government should listen most to independent environmental experts on air pollution.

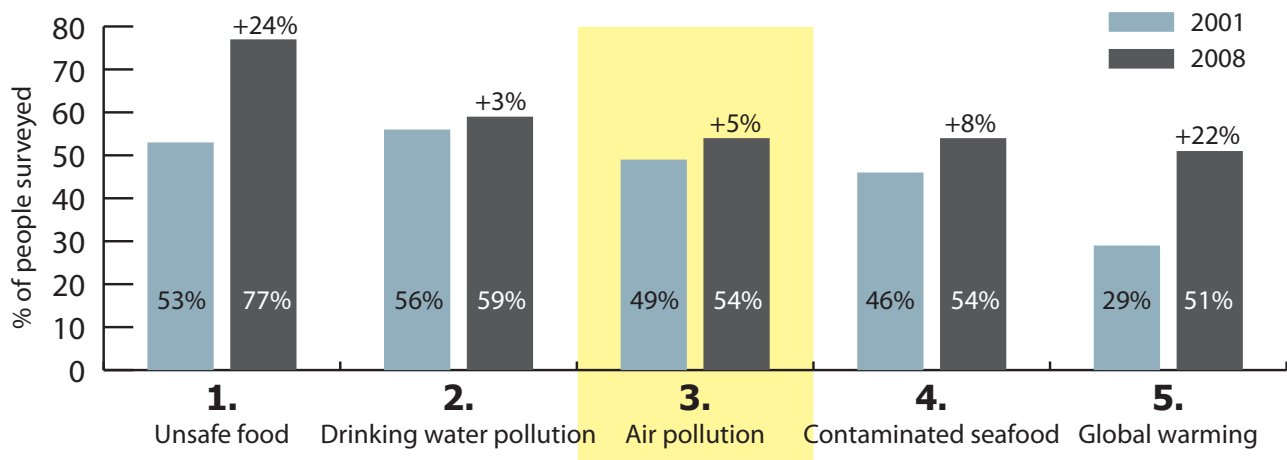
Conclusion and Recommendations

This report supports the findings of a range of other public health and air science research—that our air pollution carries real and considerable health and economic impacts for Hong Kong’s economy and society. The report demonstrates that the public is increasingly aware and concerned about air pollution, but feels its concerns are not being heard or addressed. By identifying such trends, this report serves to inform key stakeholders of the views of the public, and to point toward issues and immediate actions that key stakeholders might consider.

When people—local and expatriate—are considering leaving or refusing to come to Hong Kong because of air pollution, Hong Kong’s competitiveness as a knowledge-based economy must begin to suffer. Looking forward, the key to rebuilding trust for the traditional “trusted parties” appears to lie in putting the knowledge of the environmental experts into practice. Serendipitously, the Government’s current review of the air strategy and air quality objectives appears to provide an important opportunity.

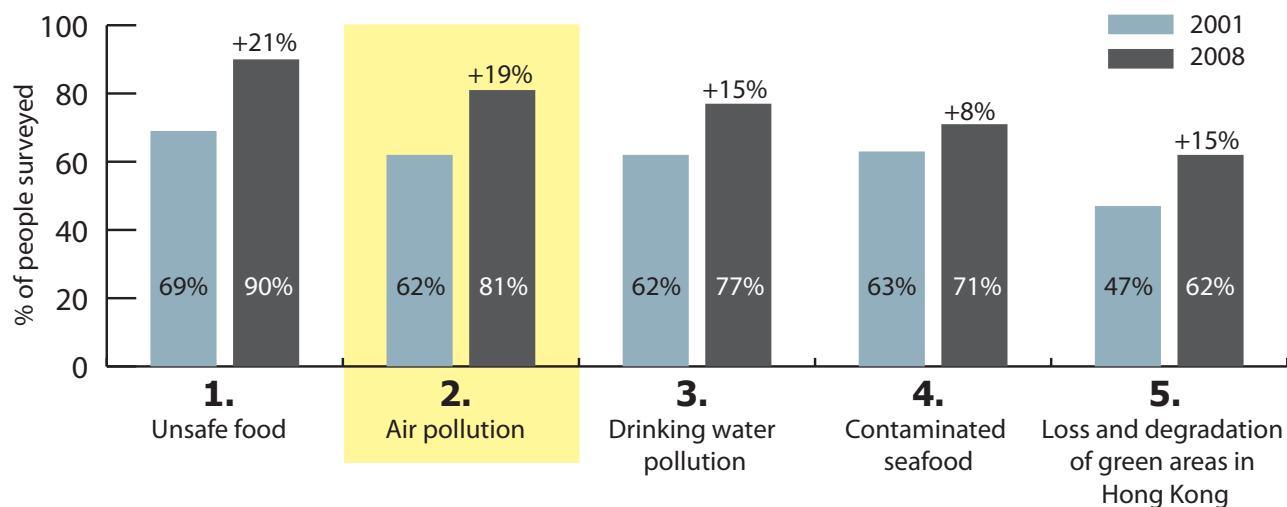
1. Air Pollution—Rising Concern 2001-2008

The top five environmental issues concerning Hong Kong people in 2008, compared with 2001:



Between 2001 and 2008, air pollution has moved from a minority concern to a majority concern. The biggest move in opinion was for Unsafe Food, which may have been influenced by melamine-contaminated milk from Mainland China that was topical in the news in Hong Kong about the time of the telephone surveys.

The top five environmental issues Hong Kong people want the Government to give priority to, compared with 2001:



Between 2001 and 2008, air pollution has consolidated its position as the top issue after food safety that Hong Kong people want the Government to give attention—81% of people surveyed think it should be one of the Government’s top priorities. Over the same period, Hong Kong people have become better informed on environmental affairs, with the number of people responding “Don’t Know” to environmental questions plummeting sharply.

The Bottom Line:

Air pollution is not going away as a major concern of Hong Kong people. In fact expectations about government action have increased dramatically since 2001.

2. Concern Felt Across All Sectors and Segments of Hong Kong Society

All parts of Hong Kong society are worried about air pollution, including the business community, with a majority of managers and administrators nominating it as of great concern. _

Who are most concerned about air pollution?



Older people (60-90 years old) are more concerned (greatly concerned) than younger people (18-29 years old): 65% vs. 38%. This likely indicates that the burden of environmentally-related health problems fall harder on older people than younger people. However, a vast majority of both older and younger people want the Government to treat air pollution as a top priority (90% and 75%, respectively).



The Bottom line:

- Concern about air quality is not isolated—it is a common concern across the community
- The burden of detrimental health effects falls heaviest on vulnerable groups such as the elderly.

3. Air Pollution Makes Hong Kong a Less Desirable Location

What Hong Kong people are saying about themselves:

One in five people surveyed are considering leaving Hong Kong due to air pollution. This exceeds the proportion who considered leaving Hong Kong before its reunification with China in 1997. Almost one in ten are *seriously* considering or *already planning* to move.

This equates to:

- About 1.4 million residents who are considering leaving, despite family, cultural and economic ties.
- More than half a million who are seriously considering leaving or already planning to leave, which is more than the number of people who demonstrated against the Government on 1 July 2003 or who emigrated from Hong Kong prior to 1997.

Of these, the propensity to leave increases for:

- Higher income earners,
- More highly educated people, and
- People in professional, management and administrative positions.

What the people surveyed are hearing from co-workers—About one in four have heard colleagues say they might leave Hong Kong due to air pollution affecting their health. People in professional, management and administrative positions hear these comments more frequently than those in other positions.

Most people surveyed thought Hong Kong's air pollution is:



Hong Kong: a less preferred destination—Almost one in ten people across all sectors (and most of them professionals, managers or administrators) have heard of occasions when their company tried to hire someone who turned down the job specifically due to Hong Kong's air pollution-related health problems.

What else do we know about people's seriousness and capacity to move:

- **A Local Issue**—More than 90% of people surveyed who have heard of co-workers say they might leave Hong Kong or potential recruits turning down Hong Kong as a preferred career destination are born in Hong Kong or Mainland China.
- **Concern about Air Quality**—Other research shows that more than half of registered voters in the functional constituency sectors that drive the economy (financial services, accountancy, legal, insurance, medical, educational, and business-oriented) are worried about air and water pollution, with highest levels of concern amongst voters in the medical functional constituency.
- **Right of Abode**—One in five registered voters in functional constituencies (dominated by professional and business elites) have right of abode outside of Hong Kong.

The Bottom Line—A Brain Drain

- Well-educated, well-paid people in positions crucial to Hong Kong's long-term economic prosperity are planning to leave Hong Kong because of air pollution.
- International professionals are refusing to come to Hong Kong because of air pollution.

4. Air Pollution Damages Quality of Life

What Hong Kong people are saying about themselves:

The approximate number of people surveyed who reported that they:

2/3 close their windows and turn on the air conditioning during high pollution days.



2/3 stay indoors and limit their activities to avoid air pollution.



1/2 suffer coughing, choking, and stinging and itchy eyes.



1/3 have gone to a clinic with air pollution-related health problems (mostly productive working-age people).



1/4 buy lozenges, cough medicines, Chinese medicines to deal with pollution-related health concerns.



1/5 suffer shortness of breath and sore chest after outdoor activity or suffer asthma.



1/10 miss school or work because of breathing difficulties, coughing, or feeling ill from air pollution.



1/10 have gone to hospital with air-pollution related health problems (mostly productive working-age people).



The Bottom Line

- Air pollution damages the quality of life of significant numbers of Hong Kong people.
- As many of these people are in productive working-years, air pollution is a disproportionate drain on the economy.

5. Voices of Concern Are Not Reaching the Policy-Makers

Most people surveyed think air pollution is a major environmental concern; most think it should be high on the list of government priorities; and many are personally affected by pollution. Yet most people feel unable to voice this high level of concern to those who could make the most difference—i.e. policy-makers and government representatives.

Voicing air pollution concerns (ranked by 'Never' responses):

Concern voiced to ...	Frequently	Occasionally	Seldom	Never
Media	--	2	3	95
Chief Executive other officials	--	2	5	93
Legco members	--	1	5	93
Mutual Aid Committees, Homeowners Assoc.	1	4	4	91
Dist Council members	1	5	5	89
Friends & fellow workers	14	43	9	34
Family	16	38	12	34

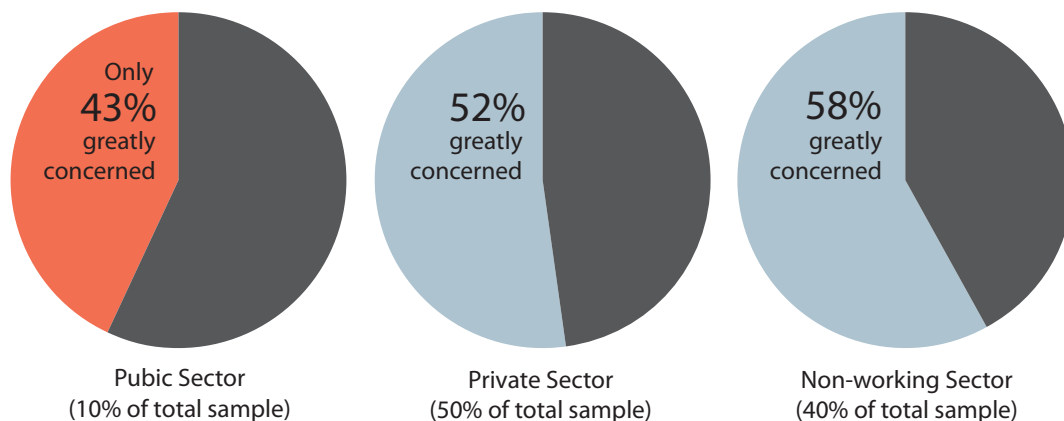
74% of people have complained to someone about air pollution. Most of these people have complained because of effects on their own or their family's health.

26% have never complained to anyone. Yet most of these non-complainants do believe air pollution affects them but they don't believe complaining would do any good and about half don't know whom to complain to.

6. At Odds About Air Quality — Public Sector vs. The Public

There was a statistical difference between the environmental concerns nominated by public sector employees and those nominated by private and non-working sectors. A minority of public sector respondents nominated air pollution as an issue that they were greatly concerned about. This compares with a majority of respondents in the private and non-working sectors. This suggests that the public sector (who made up only 10% of the sample) is out of touch the general population (90% of the sample), who take the issue of air pollution more seriously.

Percentage of respondents who have a great deal of concern about air pollution by sector:



Interestingly, there was a convergence of views amongst the three sectors about the priority these sectors believe the Government should give to air pollution—all agreed it should be a high priority.

7. Rising Dissatisfaction with Government and Business Efforts to Deal with Air Pollution

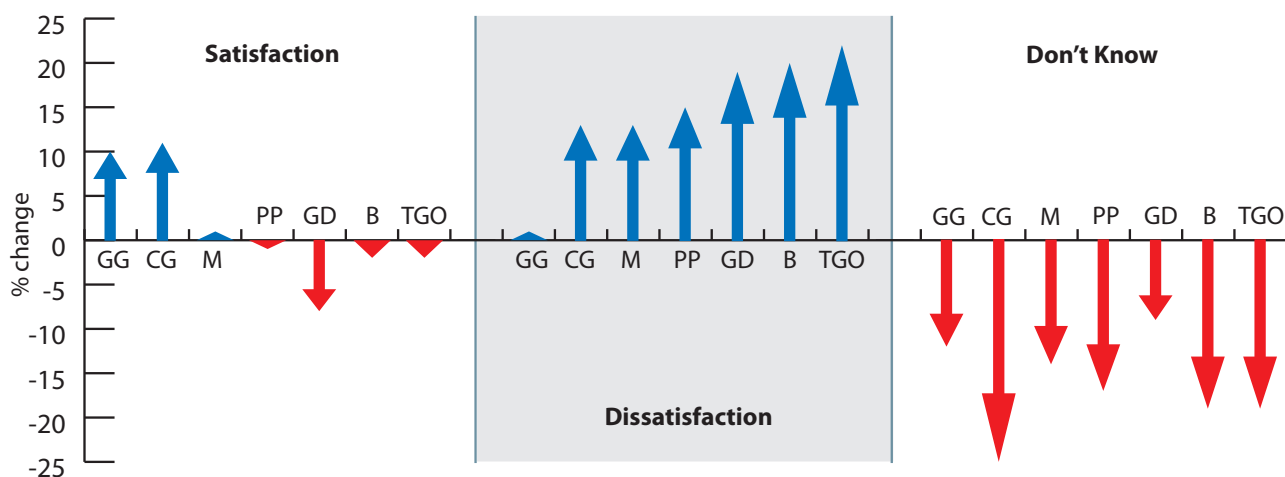
The 2008 Survey shows dramatic reduction in the “Don’t Know” category since 2001, suggesting that Hong Kong people are better informing themselves on the issues. However as they have become more informed the public has become markedly more dissatisfied, especially with the Government, business, political parties and the media. Conversely, most people are satisfied with the efforts of green groups and about half are satisfied with the efforts of community group—both groups having seen a rise in satisfaction since 2001.

Percentage of people surveyed who are satisfied or dissatisfied with the efforts of various groups to deal with air pollution:

Category	% Satisfied			% Dissatisfied			% Don't Know		
	2008	2001	Change	2008	2001	Change	2008	2001	Change
Green Groups (GG)	79	69	↑ 10	16	15	↑ 1	5	17	↓ 12
Community groups (CG)	50	39	↑ 11	38	25	↑ 13	12	37	↓ 25
Media (M)	48	47	↑ 1	44	31	↑ 13	8	22	↓ 14
Political parties (PP)	27	28	↓ 1	62	47	↑ 15	10	27	↓ 17
Govt Depts (GD)	28	36	↓ 8	67	48	↑ 19	6	15	↓ 9
Business (B)	19	21	↓ 2	69	49	↑ 20	11	30	↓ 19
Top Govt Officials (TGO)	16	18	↓ 2	77	55	↑ 22	7	26	↓ 19

(Changes of less than three points +/- are statistically insignificant)

Percentage change in satisfied, dissatisfied, and don't know categories, 2001-2008:

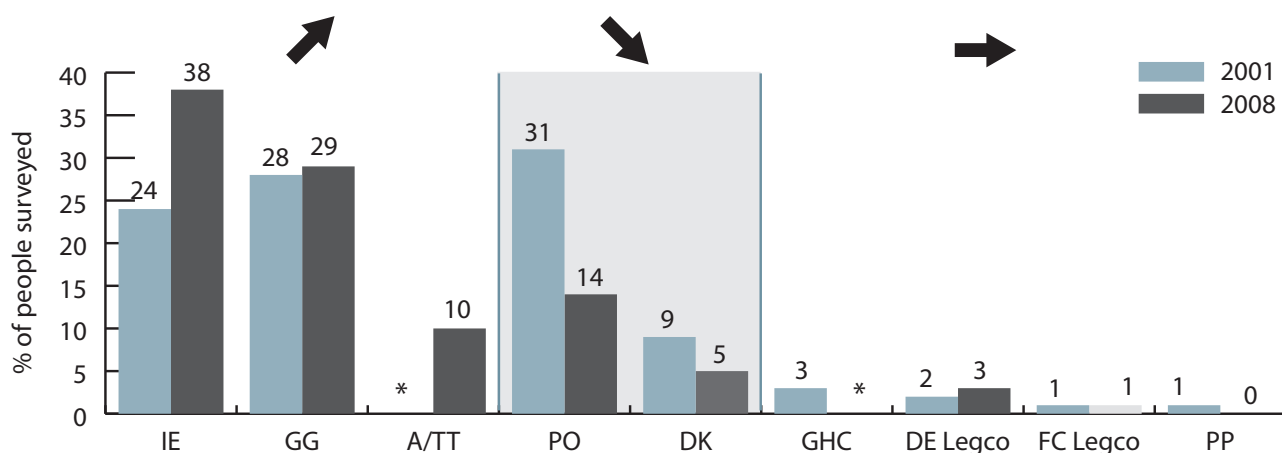


8. Independent Expertise Builds Public Trust

In the 2001 survey, the viewpoint on air pollution that held top place as the one that people surveyed thought the Government should listen to most was **'Public Opinion'**.

In 2008, the most popular viewpoint on air pollution was **independent environmental experts**, followed by **green groups**—these two groups make up more than two thirds of responses of people surveyed. In the public's eyes, the value of environmental experts has increased by 14 percentage points between 2001 and 2008. Interestingly, the value of 'Public Opinion' has reduced in the eyes of people surveyed by about the same amount. This is consistent with the findings that there is much uncertainty and confusion about the causes, sources and solutions to air pollution and they want the Government to take account of independent expertise. Indicative of this is that when asked to rank the contribution of the various sources to Hong Kong's air pollution problems, no clear consensus could be found, with respondents scattering their rankings among all potential sources.

Groups that Government should listen to:



IE = Independent environmental experts
 GG = Green groups & other pressure groups
 A/TT = Academics/Think-tanks
 PO = Public opinion
 DK = Don't know

GHC = Government-hired consultants
 DE Legco = Directly elected Legco members
 FC Legco = Functional constituency Legco members
 PP = Political parties

* Not a category in that year's survey

The Bottom Line:

- Although it's a major issue, Hong Kong people are disillusioned with the prospect that their concerns about air quality will be answered by policy-makers.
- There is a disconnect between the views of public sector employees and the rest of the general public about the seriousness of air pollution as a major environmental and health issue for Hong Kong.
- These two factors have compounded to produce a dramatically heightened sense of disappointment with government and business efforts to arrest air pollution. Instead, Hong Kong people are now turning away from government for solutions and pointing to independent environmental experts and green groups to provide guidance on solutions.

Survey methods and management

Survey methods and management—The completion rate of interviews was 65% (1,564 respondents identified; 1,020 interviews completed). At the 95% confidence interval, the range of error is +/- 3.1 percentage points. Michael DeGolyer wrote the survey brief, with input from Christine Loh, Simon Ng, Alexis Lau, and Bill Barron. The survey questionnaire was designed by Michael DeGolyer, Christine Loh, Yanyan Yip, Cheung Pui Ki, Andrew Lawson, and Mike Kilburn. The project was managed by Cheung Pui Ki, with statistical analysis by Michael DeGolyer. This Project was commissioned by Civic Exchange. This Project was commissioned by Civic Exchange.

To download a copy of the full report in English, please visit the Civic Exchange website:

www.civic-exchange.org/eng/upload/files/200901SilentEpidemic.pdf

To download a copy of this summary report, go to:

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