

Social Impact Assessment and Housing Outcomes of Transitional Housing: A Longitudinal Study in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Transitional housing (TH) has emerged as a promising solution to ease Hong Kong's severe housing pressures, particularly for low-income residents enduring substandard conditions while awaiting public housing. This study evaluates the social impact of United Court, Hong Kong's first large-scale Modular Integrated Construction (MIC) TH project, which provides 1,800 units to families and individuals on the public housing waiting list. A longitudinal quantitative study was conducted, including two waves of data collection (T1: 4 months post-move-in; T2: 22 months post-move-in) from 110 households. Inspired by the infrastructure turn of housing studies, this study attempted to provide a more holistic evaluation of TH housing outcomes and gathered data on living conditions, housing security, well-being, and social relationships by using structured questionnaires and validated tools. Results indicate significant improvements in residents' living conditions, including increased living space, reduced rent burden, and enhanced housing security. The median rent-to-income ratio decreased from 43.1% in prior residences to 28.5% by T2. Residents reported better ventilation, natural light, and access to community facilities. Psychological well-being were also improved, with lower rates of depression and anxiety (PHQ-2 and GAD-2). Increased participation in community activities and improved neighborhood relations further underscore the social benefits of TH. This study highlights the potential of TH as an effective stopgap measure, improving both living conditions and well-being for low-income residents in housing-stressed regions like Hong Kong.

Introduction

Persistent housing pressures and widespread substandard living conditions among low-income residents remain critical challenges in Hong Kong. Despite an extensive public housing system, supply consistently falls short of demand. In 2024, the average waiting time for public rental housing exceeds five years (Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2024). In response, the government has turned to transitional housing (TH)—a concept initially driven by community initiatives and formally supported since 2018. TH repurposes idle land and buildings into affordable, temporary housing, offering fixed-term tenures of two years. Units are either converted from existing structures or constructed using Modular Integrated Construction (MIC) methods, providing a cost-effective alternative to inadequate private housing. The TH initiative, alongside the Light Public Housing scheme, aims to deliver over 50,000 units to bridge the shortfall in public housing (Yau, 2023; Yung & Chan, 2020a). Unprecedented in scale and ambition, Hong Kong's TH program represents a hybrid model of grassroots innovation and state-led implementation in a non-emergency context. It raises important questions about the viability and replicability of such approaches in other housing-stressed regions. Given its recent emergence, with most projects operational only since 2020, empirical assessments of TH's impact remain limited. While concerns persist regarding cost-effectiveness, a critical dimension of evaluation lies in understanding its influence on residents' living conditions. TH seeks not merely to provide shelter, but to alleviate the acute hardships faced by low-income households awaiting permanent housing, making its social value a key subject for further research.

Building on a prior assessment of Hong Kong's first MIC TH project, an 89-unit site located in Hong Kong's urban core (Chan et al., 2023), this study presents the first evaluation of a large-scale MIC TH site comprising 1,800 units outside the urban core. Using two waves of surveys, it examines residents' living conditions and well-being before relocation and during their TH tenure, assessing the extent of improvement. The paper begins with an overview of Hong Kong's housing challenges and the emergence of TH as a policy response. It then outlines the characteristics of TH, compares it with related housing models, and highlights the importance of impact evaluation. A review of existing TH research and an introduction to the study site follow, leading into the methodology and findings.

1.1 Housing pressures in Hong Kong

In 2024, Hong Kong remained the world's most unaffordable housing market for the 14th year in a row, with median home prices at 16.7 times median annual household income (Li, 2024). Although over 40% of residents live in public housing, supply has lagged behind demand (Lau, 2020). As of 2024, approximately 214,600 households were on the waiting list, facing an average wait of 5.5 years (Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2024). This shortage has forced many low-income families into substandard housing, including subdivided units (SDUs), bedspaces (individually rented beds, including what are called cage homes and coffin homes), or various forms of temporary structures (Chan et al., 2023; Chow et al., 2023). In 2021, an estimated 215,700 individuals lived in 108,200 SDUs, with a median floor area of just 11 square meters and a rent-to-income ratio of 32% (Census and Statistics Department, 2023). Usually located in older buildings, SDUs often suffer from poor ventilation, structural problems such as water seepage, and unhygienic conditions (Chan et al., 2023; Chow et al., 2023). Typically located in aging buildings, SDUs suffer from poor ventilation, structural issues, and unhygienic conditions. These living environments have drawn increasing government concern, culminating in a pledge to eliminate subdivided flats and bedspaces by 2049 (Lin, 2024).

1.2 The evolution of Transitional Housing

Faced with persistent housing pressures and slow public housing development, the Hong Kong government has adopted transitional housing (TH) as a scalable solution. TH involves collaboration among the government, NGOs, and private sector to convert idle land and buildings into temporary housing for low-income households. Originating from community-led initiatives in the early 2010s, TH gained formal support in 2017 when the government partially funded the Hong Kong Council of Social Service's Community Housing Movement, aiming to house 1,000 families in 500 units over three years (HKCSS, 2017; Lau, 2020; Yung & Chan, 2020a). With growing support, TH expanded to include newly built units using Modular Integrated Construction (MIC) technology. The first MIC TH site, Nam Cheong 220 (NC-220), launched by HKCSS, began operation in August 2020 (Chan et al., 2023).

Following the success of early community-led transitional housing (TH) initiatives, the Hong Kong government established a Task Force on TH in 2018 and launched a funding scheme in 2020 to support 20,000 NGO-run units (HKSAR Government, 2018; Legislative Council Panel on Housing, 2022a). In 2022, Chief Executive John Lee introduced the Light Public Housing (LPH) initiative to deliver 30,000 additional units using Modular Integrated Construction (MIC) technology (Lin, 2022a). In this paper, TH refers specifically to NGO-led projects under the Task Force, not including LPH, while TH in lower case will refer to TH in general, both in Hong Kong and abroad.

By 2025, over 18,000 transitional housing (TH) units were operational, with 3,358 more under construction across diverse projects—including converted buildings, hotels, and newly built Modular Integrated Construction (MIC) sites (Housing Bureau, 2025). An additional 17,000 Light Public Housing (LPH) units are also underway (Housing Bureau, 2025). In just over a decade, grassroots experiments in repurposing idle land and buildings have evolved into a large-scale, government-backed initiative to deliver 50,000 TH units. This marks a novel development both locally and globally, where such extensive temporary housing outside disaster contexts remains rare.

Mass transitional housing: A novel solution for a unique context

Hong Kong's transitional housing (TH) and Light Public Housing (LPH) initiatives represent novel responses to acute housing pressures. Globally, TH typically targets homeless populations, combining housing with intensive support services to facilitate transitions to permanent accommodation (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999). In contrast, Hong Kong's TH is transitional due to the temporary nature of its housing stock, repurposing idle land and buildings (Lau, 2020; Yung & Chan, 2020a). Early projects utilized underused properties from private landlords and public agencies, later expanding to Modular Integrated Construction (MIC) for rapid deployment. Government data estimates costs at HK\$200,000 per unit for conversions and HK\$550,000 for MIC-built units (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2019).

This model resembles post-disaster housing more than conventional homelessness interventions. While broader definitions like ETHOS may classify residents of subdivided units as homeless, Hong Kong's TH targets those facing moderate housing inadequacies—particularly households on the public housing waiting list for over three years (Chan, 2019; HKCSS, 2017). Notably, 27 TH sites have expanded eligibility to include those with severe housing needs, regardless of waiting time (Legislative Council Panel on Housing, 2025). Unlike Europe's residualized public housing, Hong Kong's system remains a mass provision model, and TH serves a wider demographic enduring prolonged waits for public housing (Malpass, 2014; Priemus & Dieleman, 2002).

While transitional housing (TH) programs using repurposed land exist globally, few match the scale or scope of Hong Kong's initiative. In Singapore, where over 80% of housing is government-built and nearly 90% of citizens are homeowners (Deng et al., 2013), two schemes—Interim Rental Housing Scheme (IRHS) and Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme (PPHS)—repurpose vacant public flats awaiting demolition (Lin, 2021; Teo & Chiu, 2016). IRHS, launched in 2009, served vulnerable groups with strict conditions, including shared units and short-term leases (Goh & Chang, 2018). PPHS, introduced in 2013, supports families awaiting new flats, expanding from 800 units in 2021 to 4,000 by 2025 (Housing & Development Board, 2024). Unlike Hong Kong's TH, which includes new construction and targets a broader population enduring long public housing waits, Singapore's schemes remain limited in scale and focus.

Australia's emerging “pop-up housing” initiatives offer a community-led model of transitional housing by repurposing idle properties and land for individuals facing homelessness (Housing All Australians, 2024; London et al., 2019; Pablo & London, 2022). Though limited in scale, these projects—led by developers, housing associations, and activists—include temporary shelters in vacant buildings and mobile homes on government land. They serve diverse groups, such as students, vulnerable women, and low-income families (London et al., 2019; Pablo & London, 2022). While sharing Hong Kong's approach of mobilizing idle resources, Australia's initiatives lack comparable scale, institutional support, and research on their effectiveness.

Despite its distinctive features, Hong Kong's transitional housing (TH) initiative faces challenges common to other TH models, including those for the homeless and post-disaster contexts. A central concern is whether investment in temporary housing diverts resources from permanent solutions (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999; London et al., 2019; Felix et al., 2013; Johnson, 2007). Similar critiques have emerged around Light Public Housing (LPH), where unit costs rival or exceed those of permanent public housing, raising questions about long-term value and post-demolition resource efficiency (Lin, 2022b). The costs of TH demolition and efficiency of resource reuse post-demolition have also been questioned (Lin, 2022b). Like Australia's pop-up housing and Singapore's IRHS, Hong Kong's TH also grapples with resident precarity (London et al., 2019; Teo & Chiu, 2016). The temporary nature of TH has led to concerns among residents uncertain about securing public housing after their tenure, prompting calls for extendable stays (Chow et al., 2023). To evaluate the value of TH, a holistic assessment of its effectiveness is essential—particularly its impact on residents' living conditions and well-being. Understanding whether TH improves quality of life for those enduring prolonged public housing waits is critical not only for guiding future investment in Hong Kong but also for informing similar initiatives globally. As TH expands, its success must be measured not just by unit numbers, but by its capacity to alleviate housing hardship.

2.1 Third-sector housing in the Hong Kong context

Beyond its scale and form, Hong Kong's transitional housing (TH) initiative is notable for its unprecedented third sector involvement. Defined as voluntary, non-governmental housing provision distinct from public or private sectors (Yung & Chan, 2020a), third sector housing is rare in Hong Kong, unlike Europe where housing associations commonly fill gaps left by residualized public housing (Malpass, 2014; Pablo & London, 2022). In the early 2010s, local NGOs began mobilizing private landlords to offer underused properties for affordable housing—marking a new direction in Hong Kong's housing landscape (Lau, 2019). While the recent Light Public Housing (LPH) initiative returns to a government-led model, earlier TH projects were primarily NGO-driven, with government support (Legislative Council Panel on Housing, 2022a; 2022b).

NGOs operate TH sites on a largely self-financing basis, coordinating housing provision, resident welfare, and outsourcing property management tasks to private firms. Some seek external funding for resident services, such as the JC PROJECT LIFT, which adapts the Graduation Approach to urban poverty alleviation. Supported by the Jockey Club Trust, it has benefited over 14,000 TH residents (Chan et al., 2025). This model highlights the evolving role of civil society in housing provision and the potential of NGO-led initiatives to address urban housing challenges.

While Hong Kong has seen limited community involvement in housing, NGO-led transitional housing (TH) marks a shift from its traditionally public-private landscape (Yung & Chan, 2020a, 2020b). Comparing NGO-led TH with government-led Light Public Housing (LPH) may reveal how third sector participation

influences housing quality, with resident experiences offering valuable insight for future evaluation.

2.2 Examining residents' experiences of Transitional Housing

Given the recent emergence of transitional housing (TH) in Hong Kong, with large-scale projects only operational since 2022, research remains limited (Housing Bureau, 2025). Existing studies focus on development practices and third sector involvement (Seo, 2022; Seo & Kim, 2024; Yung, 2023; Yung & Chan, 2020a; 2020b), while resident perspectives are only beginning to be explored (Chow et al., 2023). Aside from one small-scale impact study (Chan et al., 2023), evidence on TH's effects remains scarce.

The concept of housing as infrastructure has gained prominence, emphasizing its role in shaping urban life and enhancing health outcomes (Amin, 2014; Power et al., 2022; Power & Mee, 2020; Bergan & Power, 2024; Lawson et al., 2024). Viewing housing as an infrastructure of care, this study incorporates social relationships into key indicators to more comprehensively evaluate the impact of Hong Kong's transitional housing (TH) programs on residents' well-being.

This study offers an early, holistic evaluation of Hong Kong's first large-scale transitional housing (TH) project, assessing pre- and post-move-in conditions to determine how effectively TH improves low-income residents' living standards.

2.3 United Court: Hong Kong's first large-scale modular Transitional Housing project

This study examines United Court, Hong Kong's first large-scale transitional housing (TH) site, comprising 1,800 Modular Integrated Construction (MIC) units on idle land leased by Sun Hung Kai Properties. Operational since May 2022 and expected to run until 2028, the site accommodates up to 3,800 residents. Operated on a self-financing basis by the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Council, the NGO oversees resident welfare and coordinates outsourced property management services and social support programs (Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui, 2024).

United Court, Hong Kong's first large-scale transitional housing (TH) site, comprises eight elevator-equipped blocks with 1,800 Modular Integrated Construction (MIC) units, located a 10-minute walk from a metro station. Designed for diverse household sizes, units range from 130 to 324 sqft and include private bathrooms, open kitchens, air conditioning, and water heaters. The site accommodates up to 3,800 residents and offers extensive shared facilities, including a social service center, mini-mart, laundry, communal kitchen, plaza, farm, and waste stations (Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui, 2024). Operated by the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Council, the NGO manages resident welfare and coordinates outsourced property services. Compared to smaller projects like Nam Cheong 220, United Court exemplifies the scale and integrated service model of newer TH sites, closely resembling upcoming Light Public Housing (LPH) developments.

Method

3.1 Data and sample

This study employed a longitudinal quantitative design to assess the impact of transitional housing (TH) on residents' living conditions and well-being at United Court. Data were collected in two waves: the first (T1) from October to December 2022, four months post-move-in, with 168 valid household responses; the second (T2) from February to March 2024, averaging 22 months of residency, yielding 133 responses, including 110 matched with T1. Surveys captured pre- and post-move-in conditions, with T2 focusing on current living situations. Data collection was conducted by trained university students and social workers, ensuring professional standards. The matched dataset enabled robust analysis of TH's impact over time.

The study of this paper is a critical component of the research program titled "Promoting Tenants Sense of Security, Empowerment and Wellness (SEW) in Hong Kong Transitional Housing Project," ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed to ensure the protection and respect of participants involved. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Hong Kong Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), which rigorously reviewed the research proposal to ensure compliance with established ethical standards. The committee granted approval under HREC Reference Number EA220318, with the approval period extending from 25 July 2022 to 24 July 2025. This approval confirms that the research adheres to ethical guidelines regarding participant consent, confidentiality, and overall welfare. Researchers followed all stipulated ethical procedures throughout the study duration. Informed consent was obtained in written form from one adult member (aged 18 or above) of participating household, immediately prior to the survey, by trained volunteer interviewers. Participants signed a declaration on the first page of the questionnaire after reviewing a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and data confidentiality. For further information or inquiries regarding the ethical aspects of this research, interested parties are encouraged to contact the committee directly at hrec@hku.hk.

3.2 Measurements

Socio-demographic background: Socio-demographic data collected included age, gender, education, employment, marital status, household size, income, and public housing wait time, providing essential context for evaluating the impact of transitional housing on residents' lives.

Housing characteristics: The T1 survey collected data on participants' former housing type, size, rent, and living conditions before and after moving into transitional housing (TH). The T2 survey, conducted nearly two years later, focused on current TH conditions. Questions assessed indoor features (e.g., kitchen, private bathroom, light, ventilation, space), outdoor environment, pest issues, community services, and neighborhood relations. Each aspect was evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "very dissatisfied" and 5 indicated "very satisfied." Pest issues were identified via a checklist.

Transportation accessibility: Transportation accessibility was assessed at T1 and T2, with participants rating convenience to key destinations—public transit, hospitals, supermarkets, schools, and workplaces—using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "very dissatisfied" and 5 represented "very satisfied." No pre-move-in data were collected.

Housing Security: Housing security was assessed using 14 items across three dimensions: stability, physical security, and financial security. Participants rated statements on a 5-point Likert scale, where a score of 1 indicated strong disagreement, and a score of 5 indicated strong agreement with the statements. At T1, respondents evaluated both their former and current housing conditions. At T2, only current conditions were assessed. Items covered tenure feasibility, safety, affordability, and environmental factors, with pest issues identified via checklist.

Well-being: Well-being of the residents was assessed using validated instruments, specifically the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2), Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2), and the Veterans RAND 12 Item Health Survey (VR-12). These tools were administered at both T1 and T2 time points to evaluate changes in mental health and quality of life.

PHQ-2: Depression risk was screened using two PHQ-9 items assessing loss of interest and hopelessness over the past two weeks (Arroll et al., 2010). Scores range from 0–6, with score of 3 or higher indicating elevated risk and warranting further assessment.

GAD-2: Anxiety was screened using GAD-2, assessing nervousness and uncontrollable worry over two weeks (Plummer et al., 2016). The scoring for GAD-2 also ranges from 0 to 6, with a score of 3 or more indicating a potential clinical anxiety disorder.

VR-12: This 12-item measure assesses health-related quality of life across eight domains, generating Physical and Mental Component Scores (PCS and MCS) (Selim et al., 2009), and capturing general health, functioning, pain, energy, and emotional well-being.

Social relationships: At T1 and T2, participants reported on neighbor interactions, community activity participation, and the perceived impact of social services on personal growth, offering insight into social relationships and community engagement.

3.3 Data analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 29.0. Repeated Measures ANOVA assessed changes across three time points, while Paired Samples T-tests compared T1 and T2. McNemar's Test was used for categorical variable comparisons between matched survey responses.

Findings

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the demographic and socioeconomic profiles of TH residents. Females comprised approximately two-thirds of the sample, with the largest educational group holding Senior Secondary qualifications (over 40%). Married individuals represented the predominant marital status (40%). These figures reflect the diversity of TH's service population, extending beyond marginalized groups such as single-parent families. Due to prioritization criteria, over 90% of households were on the public rental housing (PRH) waiting list, rising by 1.7% from T1 to T2. At T1, the median duration of residence in TH units was 4 months, increasing to 22 months by T2.

4.2 Improvement in living conditions

The results indicated significant improvements in living conditions following the move into TH, particularly in housing affordability, satisfaction with housing conditions, and housing security. Table 2 demonstrates marked improvements in residents' living conditions after relocating to TH, particularly in housing affordability, satisfaction, and security. Median living space increased from 130 to 153 square feet, while median rent fell from HKD 4,200 to HKD 2,850. Consequently, rent per square foot dropped by over half, from HKD 38 to HKD 18.6. The rent-to-income ratio declined from 43.1% in former residences to 34.3% at T1, and further to 28.5% by T2, suggesting rising household incomes during tenancy. These shifts reflect TH's effectiveness in enhancing housing quality and reducing financial burdens.

Table 3 reveals significant improvements in residents' satisfaction with both interior and exterior housing conditions after moving into TH. Ratings for kitchen, bathroom, natural light, ventilation, soundproofing, indoor space, outdoor environment, social services, neighborhood relations, cleanliness, and overall housing quality were consistently higher at T1 and T2 than in former residences. Accessibility—initially a concern for non-central sites like United Court—was generally rated above 3 (on a 5-point scale) at both time points. While hospitals, shopping, and schools scored slightly below 3 at T1, all categories exceeded 3 by T2, with notable gains in access to public transport, supermarkets, and schools. Overall accessibility improved significantly from T1 ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.90$) to T2 ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.89$, $p = 0.004$), likely reflecting residents' growing familiarity with the area, improved transport knowledge, and infrastructure development around the TH site.

Table 4 illustrates significant improvements in housing security following residents' relocation to TH. Satisfaction with accommodations rose markedly (from 2.76 in former residences to 4.15 at T1 and 3.96 at T2; $F = 70.413$, $p < 0.001$), alongside better adaptation and adherence to landlord rules ($F = 3.093$, $p = 0.048$). Despite these gains, perceptions of TH as a temporary solution persisted ($T1 = 3.72$; $T2 = 3.94$). Physical security improved notably, with personal safety scores increasing from 3.14 to over 4.0 ($F = 28.644$, $p < 0.001$), and confidence in property security also rising. Financial pressures eased, as rent burden scores declined from 3.59 to 2.77 at T1 and 2.83 at T2 ($F = 14.74$, $p < 0.001$), while confidence in rent payment and receipt of government stipends increased significantly ($F = 20.169$, $p < 0.001$). Worry about rental issues dropped from 3.05 to 2.26 by T2 ($F = 9.69$, $p < 0.001$). Perceptions of rental arrangements supporting future housing plans also improved modestly over time, reflecting enhanced stability and financial resilience.

4.3 Well-being and social relationships

Table 5 shows notable improvements in physical health following the move to TH, with PCS scores rising significantly from T1 to T2 ($p = 0.044$). Mental health indicators (MCS, PHQ-2, GAD-2) showed slight, non-significant declines, with over 80% scoring below clinical thresholds at both time points. These

findings suggest enhanced physical well-being, while mental health remained stable, reflecting the positive impact of improved housing conditions and security.

Table 6 highlights significant improvements in social relationships and community engagement after residents moved into TH. Familiarity with neighbors, ability to seek help, and perceptions of harmonious relationships all increased significantly by T2 ($p < 0.01$). Communication frequency rose notably ($p < 0.001$), and community participation strengthened, with higher willingness to join activities, belief in their meaningfulness, and readiness to contribute (all $p < 0.001$). Participants also felt better equipped to impact their community ($p < 0.001$). While TH social services were viewed as supportive of engagement, confidence, and employment opportunities, changes between T1 and T2 were modest, with a slight decline in willingness to participate. Overall, the data indicate enhanced neighborhood ties and civic involvement, suggesting that TH not only improved housing conditions but also fostered personal growth and social integration.

Discussion

5.1 Impact of Transitional Housing on Living Conditions and Well-Being

This study evaluates the extent to which Transitional Housing (TH), particularly a newly constructed large-scale modular integrated construction (MIC) complex, fulfills its mission to improve the living conditions of low-income households in substandard housing. Survey findings indicate substantial improvements in residents' living environments and overall well-being following their move into TH. Respondents reported significantly higher satisfaction with both internal and external housing conditions, enhanced housing stability, and greater physical and financial security. Despite the site's New Territories location, perceived accessibility at United Court was satisfactory and improved over time—likely aided by its proximity to an MTR station and the Yuen Long town center. However, this may not reflect accessibility at other TH sites in more remote areas.

Well-being outcomes showed significant gains in physical health between T1 and T2, while mental health remained stable, possibly due to low initial distress levels. Social relationships improved over time, with increased familiarity and interaction among neighbors. Community engagement also rose, though participation scores were slightly higher at T1 than T2, potentially reflecting initial enthusiasm upon move-in. Importantly, TH's social services were perceived as beneficial across multiple domains of personal development, including community involvement, confidence, and employment readiness. Overall, the findings suggest that TH not only enhances material living conditions but also supports social integration and personal growth.

In general, this study provides evidence of the positive effect of TH as the essential infrastructure for improving the living conditions and well-being of low-income residents, most of whom are awaiting public housing allocation (Power et al., 2022; Power & Mee, 2020; Bergan & Power, 2024; Lawson et al., 2024). By incorporating the social relationship into the housing outcome indicators, this study demonstrates that TH, and in particular a large-scale MIC TH project that typifies a significant portion of the TH units recently put into operation, can deliver significant improvements in residents' living conditions, housing stability, well-being, community support and engagement. Results from the study largely corroborate the results of an earlier social impact study on the smaller NC-220 TH site, which was also able to deliver significant improvements in residents' physical living conditions, housing stability, well-being, and social relationships (Chan et al., 2023). While this alone cannot justify that TH is worth its cost, it provides important evidence for policymakers to consider as they weigh the value of TH for addressing the problem of substandard housing and the near-term insufficiency of public housing supply. This is particularly important in the context of the recently-announced policy of phasing out substandard subdivided units that do not meet a set of new government-defined minimum standards over the coming two years. The results provide evidence that TH and LPH can provide a good alternative for any residents displaced during the phase out process (Chan, 2024).

5.2 Challenges and Recommendations for Transitional Housing

While residents' experiences in Transitional Housing (TH) are generally positive and represent a marked improvement over previous substandard conditions, not all secure public housing by the end of their TH tenures. This underscores Hong Kong's persistent housing shortage, with public housing wait times exceeding five years (Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2024). The quality of TH living environments supports the case for extendable tenures. Longer lease models—such as Singapore's three-year Provisional Parenthood Housing Scheme—could offer greater residential stability. The introduction of Light Public Housing in 2025 presents a promising pathway for transitioning TH residents into permanent housing and warrants further study.

TH provides a significantly better living experience, but tenure insecurity remains a concern. Extending leases could strengthen TH's role as a stable bridge to public housing. Additionally, site selection is critical. While some New Territories TH sites offer quality facilities, their remoteness may deter residents due to limited access to employment and education. United Court's proximity to an MTR station and Yuen Long town center enhances its accessibility, but this may not be representative of other sites. To address this, transportation support—such as shuttle services and improved transit—or prioritizing urban TH development is essential. These measures would ensure TH remains a viable and attractive option for low-income households.

5.3 Comparison with Other Housing Models

In the future, as LPH rolls out, the study results also suggest that it may be valuable to compare how NGO-run TH and government-led LPH compare in terms of their impact on resident well-being and social relationships. In general, the NGOs responsible for TH operations have put great effort into providing a wide variety of services for residents and into promoting community involvement. These inclusive social services operate as necessary soft infrastructure to promote TH residents' engagement and integration in their communities. This poses a stark contrast with Singapore's Interim Rental Housing Scheme, where Teo and Chiu (2016) found that residents were excluded from local community activities and experienced strict conditions that restricted autonomy and privacy (Goh & Chang, 2018). Our findings highlight the crucial role played by NGOs, social workers, and social service teams in supporting residents and facilitating poverty alleviation for low-income families. As third sector involvement in housing provision has thus far been relatively uncommon in Hong Kong, study of NGO-run TH is valuable as a way to gain new insight into the contribution the third sector can potentially make as housing operators or participants

in the social housing development process. This aligns with Yung and Chan's (2020a; 2020b) and Seo and Kim's (2024) observations that third-sector housing initiatives represent a novel development in Hong Kong's housing landscape. The anticipated transition from TH to LPH may alleviate the construction-related burdens currently faced by NGOs at the beginning stage. The collaboration between the social service sector and property management in the operation of LPH may compromise both the quantity and quality of social services provided to residents—many of whom belong to vulnerable populations. Therefore, further investigation is warranted into how the shift from TH to LPH, as well as the operational model of LPH, affects residents' quality of life and overall well-being.

Survey results show that TH social services positively influenced residents' community engagement, confidence, and employment prospects. This holistic support model distinguishes NGO-operated TH in Hong Kong from basic housing provision, addressing the multifaceted needs of low-income households. The recently implemented Urban Graduation Approach (UGA), adapted from its rural counterpart, offers integrated support through Family Capacity Building Planners (FCBPs) and merits further study. By combining housing with tailored social services, TH represents an innovative strategy for tackling urban poverty and promoting long-term stability and personal development among vulnerable populations.

5.4 Hong Kong's Transitional Housing as a Global Model

Finally, the results of this study provide evidence that the model of TH development adopted in Hong Kong may be a worthwhile example for other regions to consider, in light of their particular housing conditions. Hong Kong's TH model involves both the conversion of idle buildings and the construction of temporary housing using modular methods, designed and managed by third sector organizations. Conversion of idle buildings has been trialed elsewhere, including in Singapore and Australia, and provides a cost-effective way of making use of underutilized resources. On the other hand, newly built TH using modular construction methods—the subject of this study—is less common. Unlike Australia's pop-up housing initiatives, which London et al. (2019) noted remain limited in number and small in scale, Hong Kong has successfully implemented TH at scale. Pablo and London (2022) highlighted that these small-scale initiatives in Australia serve diverse populations but lack the institutional support and scale of Hong Kong's approach. The results of the study suggest that such newly built temporary housing can provide positive housing conditions for residents with dire housing needs. Despite the more significant costs involved in new construction as compared to refurbishing existing structures, in situations of sufficient need, and where land shortages pose a problem but temporary land use is possible, the MIC model of TH can provide an option that offers adequate housing conditions. This approach resembles housing projects for disaster victims more than typical homeless-serving initiatives, as noted in our literature review, but serves a distinct population suffering less severe housing inadequacies (Barrow & Zimmer, 1999; Felix et al., 2013; Johnson, 2007). While cost, political will, and land availability will all have to be considered in light of the particular contexts, this study suggests that Hong Kong's TH model may be a worthwhile reference for addressing housing shortages in other regions, particularly those experiencing similar challenges of land scarcity, high housing costs, and slow production of permanent affordable housing.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that may affect the interpretation and generalizability of its findings. First, the use of a convenience sample comprising 110 households from a single large-scale TH site potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to other TH projects. Second, the absence of pre-move-in mental health baseline data restricts the ability to assess changes in well-being over time. Third, the geographical specificity of United Court, which benefits from proximity to urban amenities despite its location in the New Territories, may not capture the unique challenges faced by residents at other TH sites. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported questionnaire data introduces potential response biases, including recall bias regarding pre-TH conditions and social desirability bias.

Conclusion

Survey results show that TH social services positively influenced residents' community engagement, confidence, and employment prospects. This holistic support model distinguishes NGO-operated TH in Hong Kong from basic housing provision, addressing the multifaceted needs of low-income households. The recently implemented Urban Graduation Approach (UGA), adapted from its rural counterpart, offers integrated support through Family Capacity Building Planners (FCBPs) and merits further study. By combining housing with tailored social services, TH represents an innovative strategy for tackling urban poverty and promoting long-term stability and personal development among vulnerable populations.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from each respondent in the survey.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests

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Author Contribution

Siu-Ming CHAN (SC), as the first author, was responsible for Conceptualisation, Methodology, Research design and Data collection, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision, Project administration. Kwok Yu LAU (KY) was involved in Conceptualisation, Methodology, Research design and Data collection, Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision, Project administration. Jasmine ZHANG (Jasmine) was involved in performing the formal analysis and contributed to both the writing of the original draft and the reviewing and editing processes. Yuen-Ki TANG (YK) participated in the formal analysis and investigation, and assisted in reviewing and editing the manuscript, ensuring the accuracy and scientific rigour of the data presented. Heng XU (HX) was involved in performing the formal analysis and contributed to both the writing of the original draft and the reviewing and editing processes. Jin ZHU (JZ), Eric Lu Shek Chan (Eric), Cheng SHI (CS), and Kin Kwok LAI (KK) focused on reviewing and editing the manuscript. All authors had access to the full dataset, participated in the analysis, and approved the final manuscript for submission, ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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Data Availability

Data available on request from the authors

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Tables

Table 1
Demographic and socioeconomic background

		Transitional Housing (T1) (N = 110)		Transitional Housing (T2) (N = 110)	
		N	%	N	%
Gender	Male	36	32.7	37	33.6
	Female	74	67.3	73	66.4
Education Level	Primary or below	12	10.9	16	14.5
	Junior Secondary	42	38.2	35	31.8
	Senior Secondary	45	40.9	46	41.8
	Post-Secondary Certificate/Sub-Degree	8	7.3	10	9.1
	Bachelor's Degree or Above	3	2.7	3	2.7
Martial Situation	Single	32	29.1	26	23.6
	Married	44	40.0	47	42.7
	Separated/ Divorced	27	24.5	30	27.3
	Widowed	7	6.4	7	6.4
Employment Situation	Full-time employed	11	10.0	11	10.0
	Part-time employed	9	8.2	17	15.5
	Self-employed	3	2.7	3	2.7
	Retired	28	25.5	31	28.2
	Homemaker	27	24.5	24	21.8
	Full-time student	1	.9	1	0.9
	Unemployed (currently looking for work)	21	19.1	12	10.9
	Unable to work due to illness/ injury/care duties	8	7.3	8	7.3
	Other	1	0.9	3	2.7
On PRH Waitlist	Yes	102	92.8	104	94.5
	No	8	7.3	6	5.4
		Median		Median	
Age		48		50	
Income		10000		10000	
Move-in Time		4 months		22 months	
Wait time for PRH		52 months		63 months	

Table 2
Living area and housing expenses

	Residence in former housing (N = 110)	Transitional Housing (T1) (N = 110)	Transitional Housing (T2) (N = 110)
	Median	Median	Median
Area (Sq Ft)	130	153	153
Rent (HKD)	4200	2850	2850
Rent/Sq Ft (HKD)	38	18.6	18.6
Rent/Income Ratio	43.1%	34.3%	28.5%

Table 3
Satisfaction with housing conditions and accessibility

	Residence in former housing (N = 110)		Transitional Housing (T1) (N = 110)		Transitional Housing (T2) (N = 110)		<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Satisfaction with housing conditions (1 = very dissatisfied; 5 = very satisfied)							
Kitchen	2.81	1.20	3.68*	0.88	3.75*	0.80	< 0.001
Bathroom	2.77	1.17	4.06*	0.76	4.02*	0.86	< 0.001
Natural light	3.03	1.23	3.85*	0.96	3.96*	0.78	< 0.001
Ventilation	2.88	1.25	3.64*	1.04	3.80*	0.96	< 0.001
Sound proofing	2.52	1.22	3.55*	1.04	3.44*	1.01	< 0.001
Indoor activity space	2.42	1.21	3.49*	1.02	3.33*	1.11	< 0.001
Outdoor environment / recreational space	2.56	1.20	4.12*	0.83	4.07*	0.86	< 0.001
Social services / community support	2.81	1.26	3.98*	0.91	4.13*	0.80	< 0.001
Neighborhood relationships	3.23	1.10	3.72*	0.86	3.93*	0.81	< 0.001
Cleanliness	2.79	1.22	3.87*	0.90	3.75*	1.02	< 0.001
Overall satisfaction with housing quality and environment	2.68	1.19	3.93*	0.69	3.99*	0.71	< 0.001
Improvement in living environment	N/A	N/A	3.99	1.16	4.03	1.05	0.744
Accessibility (1 = very accessible; 5 = very inaccessible)							
Public spaces (e.g., neighborhood park)	N/A	N/A	3.41	1.05	3.79#	0.80	0.006
MTR Station (Yuen Long/Long Ping)	N/A	N/A	3.33	1.01	3.65#	0.96	0.010
Bus/Mini-Bus Station	N/A	N/A	3.21	1.01	3.60#	0.97	0.001
Hospital/Clinic	N/A	N/A	2.98	0.99	3.21	1.11	0.095
Supermarket/Market/Shopping Center	N/A	N/A	2.92	0.98	3.35#	0.96	< 0.001
Children's School	N/A	N/A	2.90	1.12	3.33#	1.16	0.027
Own Workplace	N/A	N/A	3.00	1.23	3.29	0.96	0.474
Overall accessibility	N/A	N/A	3.25	0.90	3.50#	0.89	0.004
* Significantly different from former residence <i>p</i> < 0.05; # Significantly different from T1 <i>p</i> < 0.05							

Table 4
Housing Security

	Residence in former housing (N = 110)		Transitional Housing (T1) (N = 110)		Transitional Housing (T2) (N = 110)		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Housing Stability							
Even though I would like to lengthen my lease, I know that this housing is not a place I can live long term.	3.87	1.13	3.72	1.02	3.94	0.82	0.193
I have government stipends that help me pay my rent.	2.58	1.49	3.44*	1.42	3.81*	1.12	< 0.001
In the six months before I moved into Transitional Housing, I had the ability to maintain my accommodation and was not evicted.	3.68	1.10	NA	NA	NA	NA	
In the months since I have moved into Transitional Housing, I have been able to maintain my accommodation and have not been evicted.	NA	NA	4.10	0.73	4.22	0.64	0.246
I am very well adapted to my residence and have hope for the future.	3.24	1.19	4.05*	0.79	4.06*	0.72	< 0.001
I strictly adhere to the rules set by my landlord.	4.22	0.82	4.42*	0.64	4.40	0.58	0.048
I am confident I can pay my rent on time.	4.09	0.90	4.38*	0.68	4.43*	0.58	0.003
I face rent-related legal problems, preventing me from having stable accommodation.	2.03	1.25	1.93	1.31	2.50#	1.32	0.007
I am satisfied with this accommodation.	2.76	1.25	4.15*	0.77	3.96*	0.91	< 0.001
Physical Security							
Overall, I feel safe living in this type of accommodation.	3.12	1.41	4.07*	0.90	4.06*	0.73	< 0.001
Living in this type of accommodation, I don't worry that things in my house will be stolen.	3.25	1.42	3.83*	1.14	3.76*	1.08	< 0.001
Financial Security							
The rental costs put me under economic pressure.	3.59	1.26	2.77*	1.23	2.83*	1.08	< 0.001
The rental arrangements allow me to thoroughly develop my future housing plan.	3.23	1.18	3.47	1.12	3.67*#	0.99	0.017
On the whole, rental problems make me worried.	3.05	1.35	2.59*	1.25	2.26*	0.87	< 0.001
* Significantly different from former residence p < 0.05; # Significantly different from T1 p < 0.05							

Table 5
Health

		Transitional Housing (T1) (N = 110)		Transitional Housing (T2) (N = 110)		p
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
VR-12	PCS	39.08	8.03	40.62	7.03	0.044
	MCS	37.75	5.69	37.91	4.96	0.803
PHQ-2		1.32	1.78	1.22	1.46	0.454
GAD-2		1.40	1.80	1.15	1.47	0.080
		N	%	N	%	p
PHQ-2	< 3	92	83.6	94	85.5	0.617
	>=3	18	16.4	16	14.5	
GAD-2	< 3	93	84.5	97	88.2	0.317
	>=3	17	15.5	13	11.8	

Table 6
Social relationships

	Residence in former housing (N = 110)		Transitional Housing (T1) (N = 110)		Transitional Housing (T2) (N = 110)		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Social relationships (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)							
Know quite a few neighbors	2.92	1.34	3.27*	1.10	3.43*	1.01	0.009
When I encounter difficulties, I can ask a neighbor to help	2.82	1.40	3.10*	1.22	3.33*	1.15	< 0.001
Relationship with neighbors is harmonious	3.35	1.23	3.60*	0.99	3.68*	0.99	0.006
Frequency of communication (1 = never; 4 = frequently)							
Communicate with neighbors	2.59	1.08	2.84*	1.02	3.47*#	1.35	< 0.001
Social activities (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)							
Willing to participate in community activities	2.83	1.29	3.69*	0.99	3.61*	0.88	< 0.001
Believe that frequently participating in community activities is very meaningful	3.32	1.24	3.95*	0.82	3.85*	0.77	< 0.001
Willing to contribute to improving the community	3.47	1.15	3.90*	0.92	3.79	0.78	< 0.001
Have skills and knowledge to impact community	2.76	1.13	3.05*	1.04	3.01*	1.01	< 0.001
Impact of TH social services on self (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)							
Made me more willing to participate in community activities	NA	NA	3.92	0.92	3.67#	0.98	0.046
Gave me more courage to face challenges in social interaction	NA	NA	3.84	0.90	3.75	0.83	0.354
Helped me improve my children's learning ability	NA	NA	3.51	1.23	3.61	1.04	0.254
More job opportunities	NA	NA	3.49	1.24	3.39	1.11	0.707
Improved my work abilities/ability to face challenges at work	NA	NA	3.50	1.24	3.39	0.95	0.887
* Significantly different from former residence p < 0.05; # Significantly different from T1 p < 0.05							