

Poor in Hong Kong: life is hardest for the elderly, jobless and single-parent families living on a pittance

- Experts say current help measures aren't enough as 2018 figures show 1.4 million living below poverty line
- Elderly poor population swells to 516,600 as retirees with no income struggle

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Wong Suet-ying, 70, should be enjoying retirement but finds herself in a daily struggle to make ends meet, like hundreds of thousands of her fellow Hongkongers. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

Staying at home to take care of her autistic son, Liu says her family of four survives on her husband's unstable income of HK\$10,000 a month from part-time work.

That is less than half of the HK\$21,000 (US\$2,700) Hong Kong sets as the poverty line for a four-person household.

Liu, 39, her husband, 47, and their two children – a 19-year-old daughter and six-year-old son – live in a 300 sq ft public rental housing flat in Kowloon Bay with a monthly rent of HK\$2,000.

Asking to be identified only by her surname, Liu, who is originally from mainland China, married her Hongkonger husband in 2001 and moved to the city in 2008. Their daughter was born the year they married, and their son was born in 2013.

Life changed for Liu after her son was born. Aside from being autistic, he was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and is deaf in his left ear, but can hear with his right ear after cochlear implant surgery.



Liu wipes away the tears as she talks of her struggle to support her autistic son. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

The former waitress quit her job four years ago to take care of the boy. His medical expenses have further strained the family's meagre income.

Her husband used to earn about HK\$20,000 a month working at construction sites. But the anti-government protests, which have engulfed Hong Kong for more than seven months, affected the construction sector and left him jobless. For about three months, the family had no income.

Now he takes odd jobs at restaurants from early morning until midnight, spending little time with the family. Some nights, he sleeps in parks if he misses the last train home, Liu says.

“It is so hard for him, and I wish I could go out to work to help relieve some of his burden,” she says.

Their daughter dropped out of school after Form Three and earns only about HK\$1,000 from part-time jobs, so she still depends on her parents.

Liu says the burden is not only economic. The bitterness of being poor in a glamorous city makes her cry almost every day.

“I’m so desperate,” she says, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I’m happy to do whatever I can for my family and take care of my boy, but I haven’t seen much improvement. I don’t know how to go on.”



Liu, pictured at home in Kowloon Bay, had to quit her job as a waitress to take care of her son. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

The number of poor people in Hong Kong reached a 10-year high, at about 1.41 million in 2018, accounting for 20.4 per cent of the total population, according to the latest poverty situation report released by the government in December.

That means more than one in five people lived below the city’s poverty line – with a monthly income of HK\$4,000 for one person, HK\$10,000 for a two-person household, and HK\$16,500 for a three-person household.

The unemployed, the elderly, single-parent households and new-arrival families – which refer to households with at least one member who is a one-way permit holder from the mainland and has lived in Hong Kong for less than seven years – are at higher risk of poverty, the report shows.

An increase in poverty among young people aged 18 to 29 has also raised a red flag. The youth poverty rate reached 12.6 per cent in 2018, up from 11.9 per cent in 2015.

The report says government help in the form of recurrent cash benefits reduced the number of poor people to about 1.02 million. Secretary for Labour and Welfare Law Chi-kwong has argued that in fact, the poor population was even lower, at 910,000, although he conceded the figure was still high.

Experts say the statistics do not truly reflect the poverty situation.

Chinese University economist Terence Chong Tai-leung says the government's definition of poverty – having an income that is less than half the city's median monthly household income – is a relative figure. "They are poor, compared to others," he says.

Professor Paul Yip Siu-fai, associate dean of the faculty of social sciences of the University of Hong Kong (HKU), adds that the city's economic development – which grew 3 per cent in 2018 – does not benefit most Hongkongers, especially low-income households.

Yip, who is chair professor of population health at HKU, points to the general population increase, ageing society, and growing number of small-sized households and says: "We have more people, more elderly and more single people. All these contribute to the increasing number of poor people."

Not having a job has a big impact on poverty levels. The poverty rate of economically inactive households stood at 76.2 per cent in 2018, compared with 12.7 per cent of economically active households, statistics show.

Overall, Hong Kong has 125,400 unemployed people, with an unemployment rate of 3.2 per cent, according to the Census and Statistics Department.

'We are living from pay cheque to pay cheque'

Ageing Hong Kong had about 1.2 million people aged 65 and above in 2018, or 16.9 per cent of the total population.

Elderly people who are retired with no income are at a greater risk of poverty. About 516,600 people, or 44.4 per cent of the total elderly population, are poor. Their poverty rate was more than double that of the overall population.

Wong Suet-ying, 70, and her husband Law Kin-fat, 64, both retired, share a 200 sq ft public rental housing flat in Kwun Tong with their three grandchildren – a 14-year-old boy and his sisters, aged 13 and nine.

The children's parents are unable to care for them, and Wong declines to elaborate on the reasons.



Wong Suet-ying, 70, and her husband Law Kin-fat, 64, share a 200 sq ft public rental housing flat. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

With no income, the household of five gets by on a monthly allowance of about HK\$17,000 under the government's Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) welfare scheme.

Before moving into the subsidised flat in 2017, they moved every year for four years between private rented flats.

"We lived a constantly unstable life," Wong says.

Although they now have a flat, with two bunk beds, life is a struggle. Wong has rheumatoid arthritis, and her husband has cirrhosis.

"We are living from pay cheque to pay cheque," she says. "Usually we have more at the beginning of the month, but less at the end of the month."



Li has to make do with a 100 sq ft subdivided flat for her and her young son. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

With a rising number of Hongkongers remaining single, getting divorced or having fewer children, household size has shrunk from 2.85 people in 2009, to 2.68 people in 2018. The number of one and two people households has risen, accounting for 48.3 per cent of all households in 2018.

With a poverty rate of 48.1 per cent in 2018, the report says single-parent households have a higher risk of poverty, as these parents have to take care of children and lack family members available for work.

Li, 27, who asked to be identified by only her surname, left her 30-year-old husband last September, and now lives with their three-year-old son in a 100 sq ft space in a subdivided flat in Mong Kok.

Their third-floor space is one of five units in a subdivided flat that has a total of 13 occupants. Lhas no bed or refrigerator, only a mattress she shares with her son.

She says she pays a reduced rent of HK\$6,000 a month because the area is a regular protest site. The poorly ventilated flat becomes stuffier when she closes the windows to prevent tear gas fired by the police from getting in.

The former receptionist stopped working after her son was diagnosed with autism in 2018, and now relies on a monthly CSSA allowance of about HK\$11,000. She says her ex-husband does not help, and she is not close to her parents or younger brother.

Li says the hardship has taken a toll on her. She has lost weight and copes with depression.

“Life is hard for single-parent families, let alone those with children who have special needs,” she says. “I feel depressed with no way to vent my emotions, but it is my love for my son that has kept pushing me forward.”

Sze Lai-shan, community organiser of the Society for Community Organisation, says poor families with children are among those who suffer the most.

“Bad living environments can cause them to have emotional problems and lose self-esteem, and a lack of money for the children’s education can affect their school performance,” she says. “It can lead to a vicious intergenerational cycle of poverty.”

‘Current measures have limited impact’

Warning that a worsening poverty situation can cause social instability, experts and lawmakers say the government should do more.

Labour Party lawmaker Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung says the city’s poverty situation is dire and can worsen the ongoing political turmoil.

“The social movement has arisen from a deep sense of injustice, and this injustice will spread over from political concerns such as personal security, liberty and democracy to social issues such as poverty,” he says.

The government and non-governmental organisations have been helping the poor with cash allowances and services over the years, and the administration’s interventions lifted 382,200 people out of poverty in 2018, reducing the overall poverty rate by 5.5 percentage points, according to statistics.

Among them, CSSA remained the most effective measure, helping in more than 221,000 cases involving about 312,000 recipients by the end of September 2019.



Single mum Li has depression but refuses to give up for the sake of her child. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

Two initiatives – the Higher Old Age Living Allowance (OALA) for the elderly, and the Working Family Allowance (WFA) for working families – were implemented in 2018.

But Cheung says the current measures have limited impact compared with a universal retirement pension system which will be more effective in tackling the growing number of elderly poor. He also suggests more support for the disabled.

Peace Wong Wo-ping, chief officer of social security and employment of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, says the government should raise the minimum wage – currently HK\$37.5 per hour – to support low-income households prone to poverty.

“Hong Kong has a wide income gap. The government should tackle the poverty problem from the first distribution of the market to reduce the number of people who need support,” he says.



Edward Man Ho-wai, the founder of ChickenSoup Foundation, says some poor people need support with how to best allocate their limited means. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

Edward Man Ho-wai, founder of the charitable organisation ChickenSoup Foundation, established in 2013 to serve poor families, says NGOs can provide services and care to the poor, complementing cash support from the government.

“Money is no doubt necessary to help them, but it alone can’t solve the problem,” he says. “Most poor people don’t know how to use resources efficiently.”

Mok Hing-luen, 61, a retired senior lecturer in social work at City University, visits poor households regularly. He says many of the poor have low self-esteem and feel isolated, and their mental well-being needs to be cared for too.

Cheung expects the poverty situation to worsen, given the ongoing political unrest and gloomy economic outlook. He also thinks the city’s embattled government is unlikely to introduce major changes or reforms.

Given the economic downturn that looks likely to continue this year, he is not hopeful about the prospects of new measures to help the poor any time soon. “We could be looking at an even worse situation,” he says.

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