

Helpless in Hong Kong: low-income new arrivals from mainland China struggle with job losses, lack of support during Covid-19

- Many poor families from mainland do not qualify for one-off HK\$10,000 government allowance
- Pandemic adds to burdens of new arrivals coping with illness, reduced income, discrimination

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Many poor families are struggling in Hong Kong, especially as not all are eligible for the government's HK\$10,000 handout. Photo: Reuters

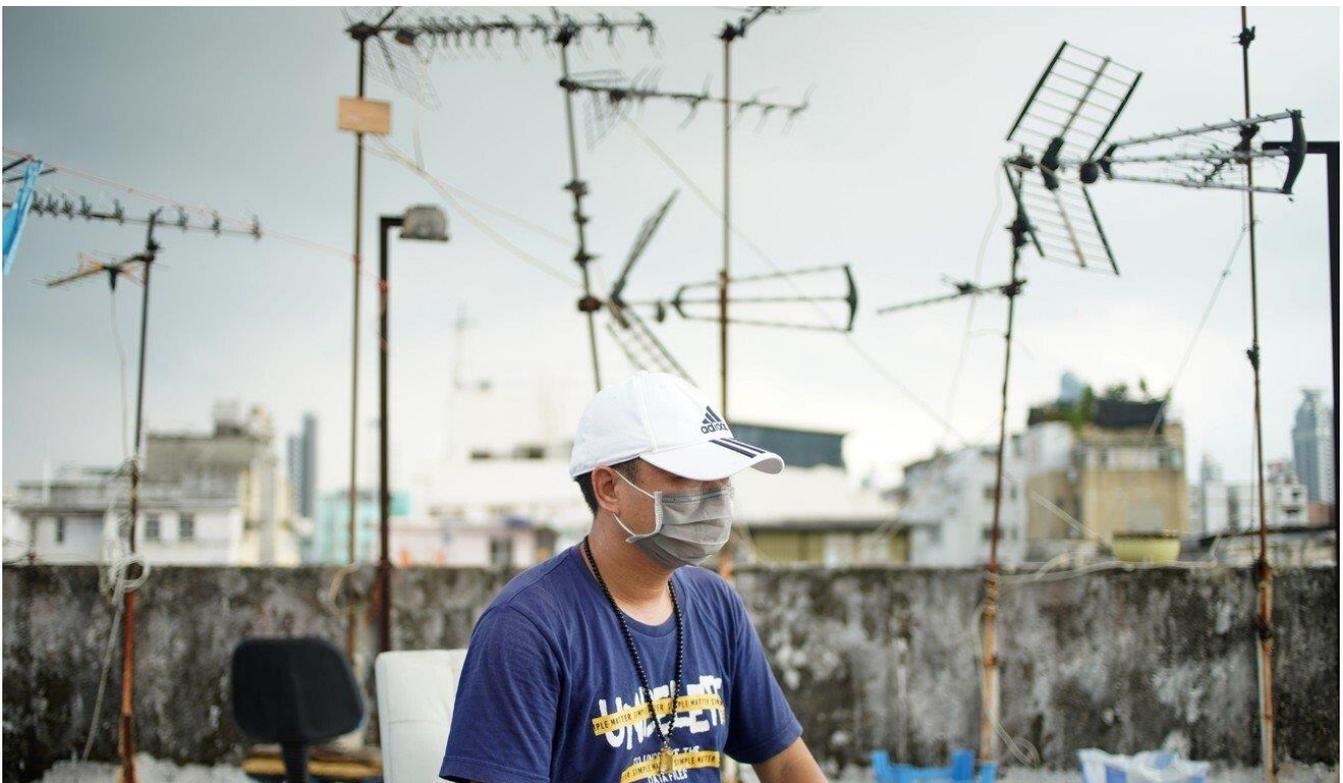
Housewife Guo dreams of better days for her family as she comes to terms with all the struggles that make up her life in Hong Kong.

The 40-year-old mother of two from China's eastern Jiangxi province arrived in 2017 to reunite with her husband, a Hongkonger she married in 2011.

But he was felled by a devastating stroke soon after and, now 52 and paralysed, is in a care home. For the past three years, Guo has been in Hong Kong caring for him as well as their seven-year-old son, while their younger boy, aged three, remained with her family on the mainland.

Then came the coronavirus pandemic. The care home did not allow visitors, and she has not been able to travel to visit her younger son or bring him to Hong Kong.

"I feel helpless and restless, being confined to home with no work, unable to see my husband and son," says Guo, who asked to be identified by only her surname.



Ben Gam, a new arrival from mainland China, on top of a building in Sham Shui Po. Photo: Winson Wong

Like her, many new arrivals from the mainland face difficulties with money, adjusting to life in Hong Kong, and discrimination. They have to be in the city for at least seven years to qualify for permanent residence.

Before her husband's stroke, Guo's family survived on his monthly income of HK\$10,000 (US\$1,290) to HK\$20,000 working on construction sites. After his illness, she borrowed from friends before social workers helped her apply for food assistance and the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance monthly allowance which she began receiving last November.

“Life was particularly tough during the first year or two, when I had little knowledge of the place and had no connections,” she says. “Things gradually improved, but then came the pandemic.”

The disruptions brought about by Covid-19 have made life more challenging for mainlanders living in Hong Kong, as there is little support available to them.

The government announced a one-off HK\$10,000 allowance for new arrivals from low-income families this week, but many mainlanders are not eligible.

More than a million mainlanders have come to Hong Kong since 1997 under the one-way permit scheme, which allows up to 150 mainland residents into the city daily to reunite with their families.

Immigration Department statistics show that 39,060 one-way permit holders entered Hong Kong last year, or an average of 107 a day, and most were women. A total of 42,331 arrived in 2018.

With the Covid-19 outbreak this year, the entry of one-way permit holders was suspended from early February to early June.

According to 2019 data, more than a half the new arrivals said they had difficulties adapting to life in Hong Kong, mainly because of the living environment, work and language. Their median monthly household income was HK\$12,700.

‘I don’t have time to feel bad for myself’

Ben Gam, 42, arrived from neighbouring Guangdong province in 2017 to reunite with his Hongkonger wife, 41, bringing their two daughters, aged 18 and 16, and 10-year-old son with him.

The family survived on Gam’s monthly income of about HK\$18,000 working as a security guard, and his wife’s income of a few thousand dollars a month from part-time domestic work. Since the pandemic, however, she has hardly had any work.

Gam works 12 hours a day, six days a week as a security guard. When his wife’s income dried up, he bought a motorcycle in March and began delivering food at night and on his days off. He returns home at midnight on the days he works both jobs.

“I sleep for only four hours a day, and I barely have time for my children,” he says.

Gam says life had improved for the family before the pandemic. When he first arrived, he could get only low-paid part-time work and the family squeezed into a 100 sq ft subdivided space.

Now he has a stable job and a 300 sq ft flat in Tai Po to live in.

“I have to work hard to support my family through this difficult time. I don’t even have time to feel bad for myself,” he says.

About 203,000 people will qualify for the government's HK\$10,000 allowance for mainlanders from low-income families, with around HK\$2.1 billion set aside under the Community Care Fund.

But mainlanders such as Ng and her husband, both 40 and from Zhuhai, in Guangdong, do not qualify.

The couple's sons, aged 13 and eight, were born in Hong Kong and have permanent residence, but the parents do not, and need trimonthly visas to be in the city.



Sze Lai-shan, community organiser at the Society for Community Organisation (SoCO). Photo: Dickson Lee

Ng stayed with her sons who attend Hong Kong schools, while her husband worked as a clerk in Zhuhai and visited once a week. But he was put on unpaid leave last December and lost his monthly income of about HK\$10,000. Pandemic-related travel restrictions have kept him on the mainland for more than six months.

Ng, who also asked to be identified by her surname only, says it has been a struggle taking care of her sons through the pandemic, as they get restless and lose their temper from being confined indoors for too long, and do not have access to the internet for online learning.

Without Hong Kong identification, Ng and her husband are not entitled to the new HK\$10,000 cash handout or other government welfare assistance.

"Life was hard before the pandemic, but it has become even harder now," she says.

‘These families need help too’

Some new arrivals, as well as social workers, have complained of the delayed support for them during the pandemic, compared to permanent residents who were offered a one-off handout of HK\$10,000 in June.

There are some, however, who say the new arrivals should not receive such help as they have not made long-term contributions to Hong Kong’s economy.

Others like Sze Lai-shan, community organiser of the Society for Community Organisation (SoCO), believe this group needs support, pointing out many low-income new arrival families have struggled through the pandemic with job losses, slashed working hours and loss of income, just like Hongkongers.



A man hangs his clothes to dry on the rooftop of a building in Sham Shui Po. Photo: Felix Wong

They have faced increased discrimination during the pandemic too, as some people blame the mainland for the spread of Covid-19.

Urging equal treatment for them, she says: “New arrivals come to Hong Kong for family reunions. They help take care of their families and work. They are also contributing to Hong Kong society.”

SoCO has distributed protective items to low-income families, including new arrivals, provided job training for the unemployed, helped take care of their children, and assisted with online learning.

The charitable organisation, ChickenSoup Foundation, has also offered 7,000 packages of masks, hand sanitisers, food, children's books and toys to 2,500 underprivileged families during the pandemic, including new arrival households, according to its chief incubator, Cindy Chow On-ting.

The organisation also raised funds from businesses and individuals to provide 260 families with a HK\$1,650 coupon each for food and other necessities.

As the pandemic drags on, Guo is doing her best to keep her family together.

With the help of nurses in the care home, she communicates with her husband via video calls occasionally, although he has a nasogastric feeding tube and cannot speak. She says she does all the talking, and tries to cheer him up.

Stretching her monthly allowance of about HK\$5,000, she manages to set aside some money to support her younger son on the mainland.

"I dream a lot at night," she says. "In my dreams, my husband can stand up and walk again."

Source:

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3103034/helpless-hong-kong-low-income-new-arrivals-mainland-china>