

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.



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."