



Better Understanding of Food Security Yields Food Stability for Citizens

Since February 2009, the Social Welfare Department has commissioned NGOs to operate short-term food assistance service programmes to provide individuals and families with immediate financial difficulties with basic short-term food assistance for no more than eight weeks. Such programmes have been in place for more than ten years, and have been regularised in August this year. The government has set aside 415 million dollars as recurrent expenditure. What is puzzling is that Hong Kong is known as an international financial centre, it is one of the ten wealthiest cities in the world. So why is there such a demand for food assistance service?

Poor Population in Hong Kong Reaching 150 Million

The soaring demand for food assistance is directly related to the issue of poverty. According to the poverty line established by the government in 2013, which is based 50% of the monthly household income median in Hong Kong, taking a four-person family as an example, if their monthly household income is less than \$21,400, they are living below the poverty line. The “Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2019” published by the government at the end of 2020 shows that before policy intervention, Hong Kong’s poor population was close to 1.49 million, with a poverty rate of 21.4%. In other words, one in five people in Hong Kong lives below the poverty line. Even after the intervention of government policies (including cash and non-cash welfare programmes), the

poor population still exceeds 642,000, with a poverty rate of 9.2%.

Data also shows that the poverty rate has risen among most of the 18 districts in Hong Kong. In particular, the poor population in Kwun Tong exceeds 120,000, making it the district with the highest poor population. Comparing the poverty rates of various districts, Kwun Tong, Tuen Mun, North District, Wong Tai Sin, Kwai Tsing, Sham Shui Po, Yuen Long, Tai Po, Sha Tin, and Yau Tsim Mong are all above the Hong Kong average. Among them, the rate of child poverty, single-parent families, and non-CSSA receiving working poor are all more than the Hong Kong average.

HONG KONG POVERTY LINE	1 PERSON	2 PERSONS	3 PERSONS	4 PERSONS	5 PERSONS	6 PERSONS OR MORE
	\$4,500	\$10,000	\$16,600	\$21,400	\$22,100	\$23,000

Source: General Household Survey, Census and Statistics Department

Food Insecurity Causes Changes in Eating Habits

Families living below the poverty line are stretched very thin, it is difficult for them to have three full meals every day. The “food insecurity” mentioned in “An interview with Professor Wong Yu Cheung”, is exactly the problem faced by a lot of grassroots families, as the lower the income, the greater the lack of food security. What is “food security”? What is the impact of the “food insecurity” on individuals and families?

Eating is a basic need for human survival. Quintessentially, whether this basic need is met should not be merely decided by whether there is food or not. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines “food

security” as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” It is further divided into four categories: “high food security”, “marginal food security”, “low food security” and “very low food security”.

The last two levels: “low food security” and “very low food security” both belong to “food insecurity”, meaning that it is difficult or uncertain whether one is able to obtain enough food. As a result, they have to change their eating habits, and lower their expectation for the quality, variety, or flavour of food.

THE FOUR LEVELS OF FOOD SECURITY		
FOOD SECURITY	HIGH FOOD SECURITY	NO FOOD-ACCESS PROBLEMS OR LIMITATIONS
	MARGINAL FOOD SECURITY	ANXIETY OVER FOOD SUFFICIENCY OR SHORTAGE OF FOOD IN THE HOUSE. LITTLE OR NO INDICATION OF CHANGES IN DIETS OR FOOD INTAKEVV
FOOD INSECURITY	LOW FOOD SECURITY	REDUCED QUALITY, VARIETY, OR DESIRABILITY OF DIET. LITTLE OR NO INDICATION OF REDUCED FOOD INTAKE
	VERY LOW FOOD SECURITY	DISRUPTED EATING PATTERNS AND REDUCED FOOD INT

Source: United States Department of Agriculture

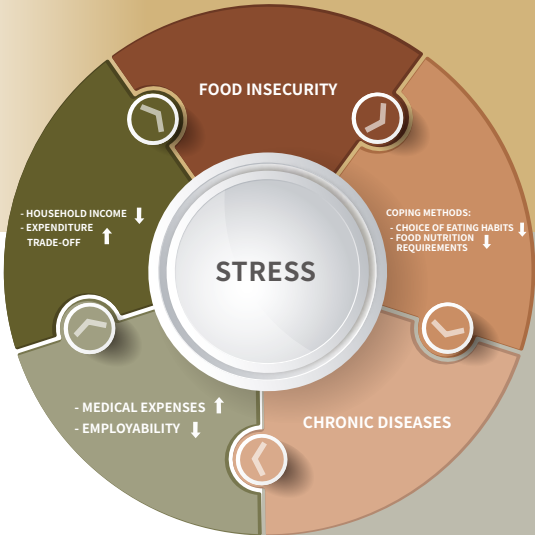
Vicious Circle: Food Insecurity and Chronic Diseases

In Hong Kong, the income of grassroots families is extremely limited. It is inevitable that they have to make compromises in their daily expenses. To cope with essential expenses such as rent, medical care, and education, “food expenses” is often the first to be sacrificed, in ways such as changes in eating habits, deliberate change in mealtime, for example delaying breakfast in order to save expenses for lunch, eating dinner at teatime, or even reducing food intake. When lowering the expectation for food quality, people usually choose food that is cheap and convenient, for

example replacing fresh food with frozen food, or to buy sub-par ingredients near closing time of markets. These are some common ways that grassroots families reduce food expenses.

Undoubtedly, changing eating habits can reduce family expenses. However, it causes irreversible damage to one’s health. Feeding America, a non-profit organization consisting of more than 200 food banks in the United States, pointed out that people with “food insecurity” are prone to the vicious cycle of chronic diseases: the reduction of food variety and intake leads to lower nutrition intake. Long-term malnutrition could affect physical and mental health, and even cause chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and heart diseases, which in turn increases medical expenses.

Insufficient food intake also affects physical strength, which in turn affects work capacity and income. As a result, a compromise between food expenses and other expenses has to be made, creating a vicious cycle.



Source: : Food Insecurity in America: Putting Dignity and Respect at the Forefront of Food Aid

Regular Research Data from Countries

According to data quoted in the Legislative Council from the Social Welfare Department, each year, there are about 30,000 low-income persons receiving food through “Short-term Food Assistance Service Projects”. In the first three months of 2021 alone, more than 5,000 applications have been approved for the project, with more than 10,000 beneficiaries, an increase of 45% over the same period last year. The number of cases requiring extended food assistance has increased by nearly 54% year-on-year.

However, this only reflects people who are not eligible for CSSA and are willing to take the initiative to seek food assistance, but not the exact number of people who suffer “food insecurity” in Hong Kong. It is presumed that there are still many people in need who have not sought help. A survey conducted by the Singapore Management University in 2021 found that up to 60% of the people who suffer from “food insecurity” do not seek help because they are worried about being labelled, feel embarrassed, or do not know food assistance. They would rather face difficulties on their own, or feel like there are people who are more in need than them.

Such as the United Kingdom and the United States

Apart from the “Study on the Deprivation of the Disadvantaged in Society” conducted by the Hong Kong Council of Social Services, there is no other accurate data on the “food insecurity” in Hong Kong.

On the contrary, in other countries, local governments would regularly conduct systematic studies, use standardised scales to collect data on food security nation-wide, in order to better understand the problem and trend of “food insecurity”, and adjust policies and measures accordingly. For example, in the US, when investigating the situation of “food security”, the Department of Agriculture will ask thorough and in-depth questions regarding each family's situation, for sample: Are you worried that you will have no money for food after the food you have now is consumed? Are you worried about your ability to afford and maintain a balanced diet? Do you eat less because you don't have enough money to buy food? Do you rely on cheap food to feed the children due to the lack of money? Have you ever asked your child to eat one less meal for the day because you don't have the money to buy food?

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The Insufficient Amount of CSSA Payment Should be Reviewed

Without sufficient and comprehensive data on the specific figures of the population with “food insecurity”, it is difficult to analyse regional distribution and causes of “food insecurity”, thus in turn, it is difficult to formulate relevant policies and social services.

The current food assistance services have a service limit of eight weeks, meaning that the government assumes recipients only need short-term assistance. However, the reality is that a lot of families turn to other food assistance programmes to seek further help after the government's food assistance service period ends. The government states that if service users have long-term welfare needs, they should be referred to the CSSA scheme through organisations providing food assistance. But with the surge in the cost of living, CSSA payment is barely enough to cover daily expenses. A lot of families receiving CSSA have to tighten their belts, with many of them needing to seek help from non-government-funded food assistance programmes.

The government announced in August this year that the “Short-Term Food Assistance Service Projects” is to be regularised. Undoubtedly, they are realising that more and more people from grassroots need related aid. However, this project is unable to nip the problem at its bud—poverty. It merely treats the symptoms, and not their causes.

COUNTRY/REGION	POPULATION WITH INSUFFICIENT FOOD SECURITY
SINGAPORE	10%
JAPAN	1.8%
SOUTH KOREA	2.5%
TAIWAN	7.8%
UNITED KINGDOM	10%
UNITED STATES	12.5%
HONG KONG	8.5% *

*Estimated based on 640,000 poor people

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