

# Health inequality in Hong Kong:

A special focus on the equity impact of COVID-19



CUHK INSTITUTE OF HEALTH EQUITY  
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Collaborative Partner:



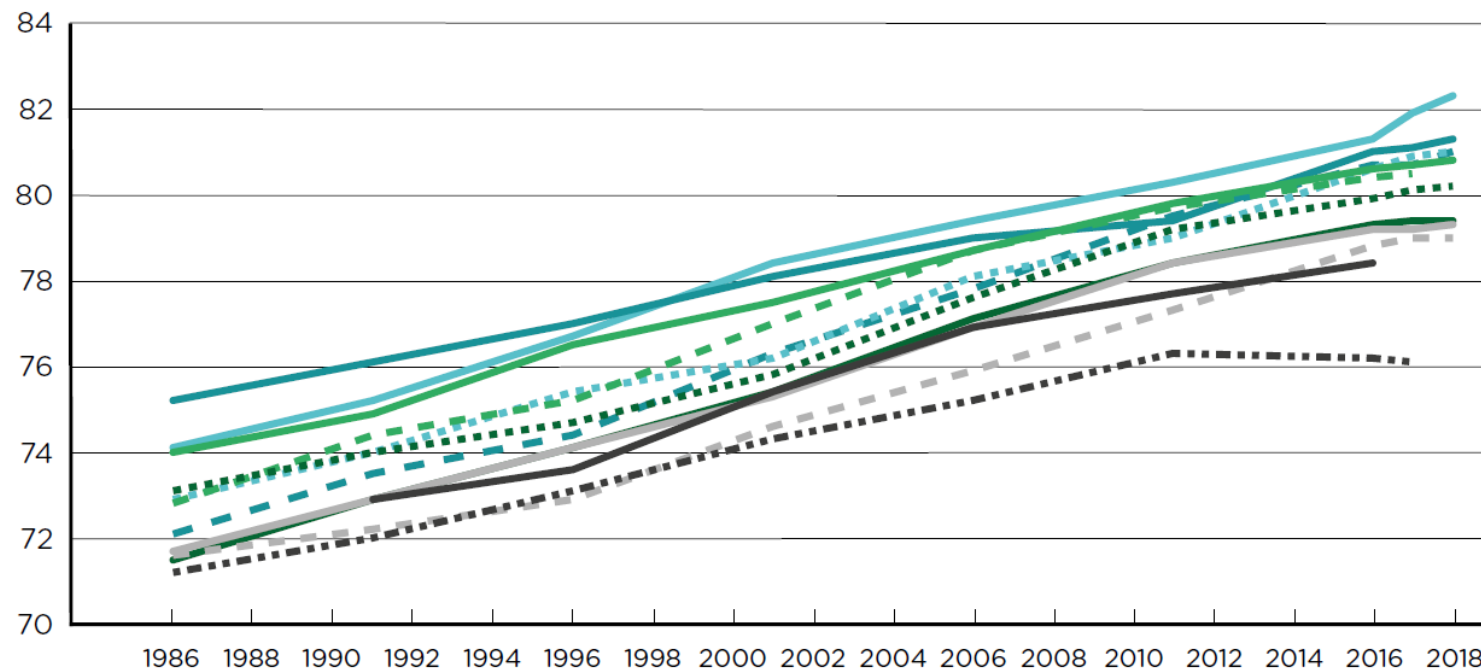
**BUILD BACK FAIRER:**  
REDUCING SOCIOECONOMIC  
INEQUALITIES IN HEALTH  
IN HONG KONG



# Our first Health Equity Report in HK

# Life expectancy for men in HK

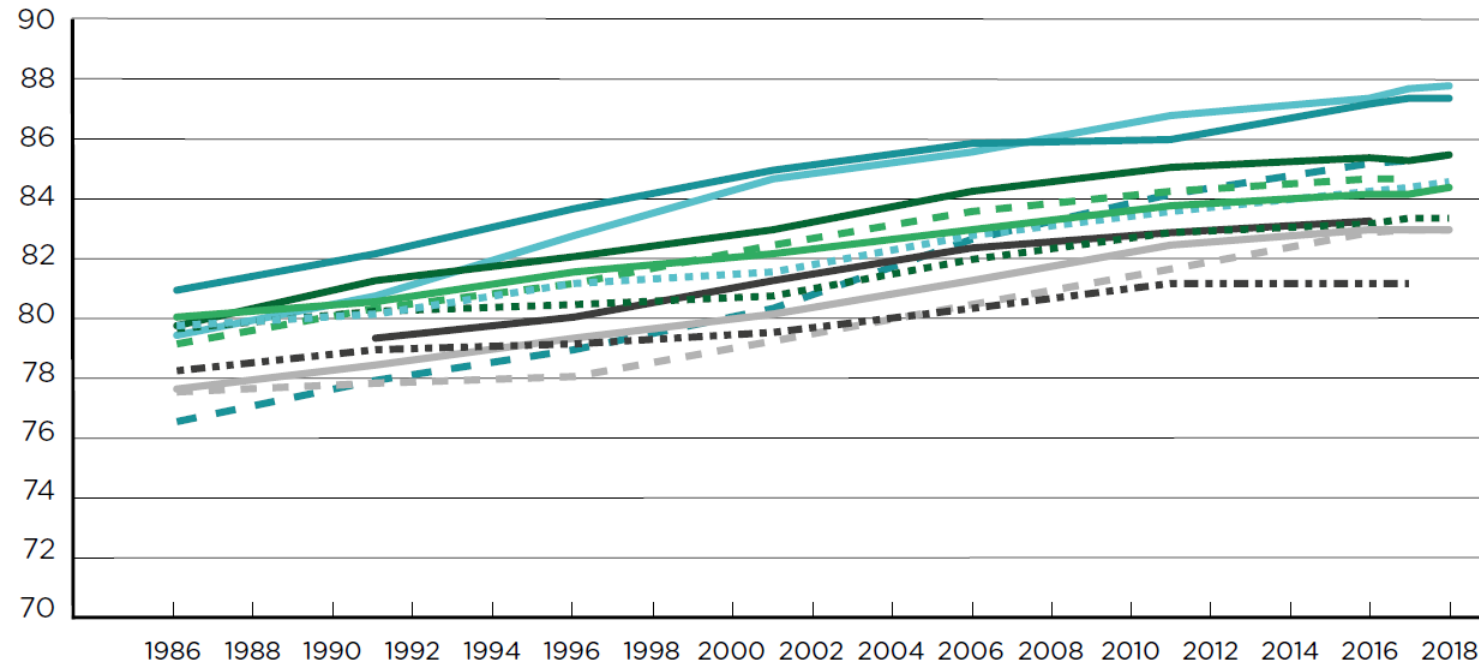
Life expectancy (years)



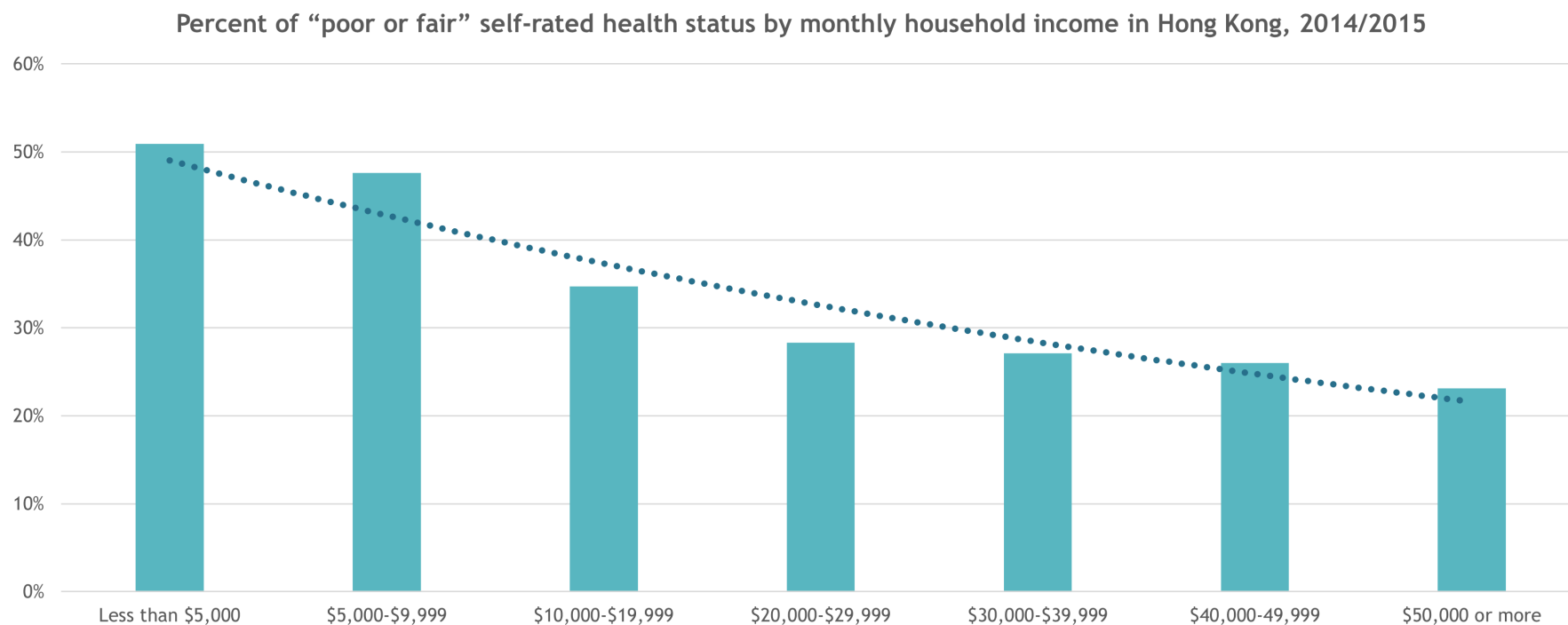
- Hong Kong
- Japan
- Singapore
- Norway
- Sweden
- Australia
- Netherlands
- France
- United Kingdom
- Denmark
- Germany
- United States of America

# Life expectancy for women in HK

Life expectancy (years)



# A social gradient between income and self-rated health



Source: Centre for Health Protection, Department of Health – Report of Population Health Survey 2014/15



# A wide array of social determinants are closely related to health





# Government responses to COVID-19

- ▶ COVID-19 containment measures:
  - ▶ Social distancing measures, immigration control for inbound travellers, surveillance, case detection, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine, community virus testing centres, vaccination programme etc.
  - ▶ Support measures for the Hospital Authority and residential care homes
  - ▶ Some of the containment measures have had **unintended consequences on the social determinants of health**, especially to the less advantaged groups
- ▶ A comprehensive **fiscal stimulus package** to mitigate the impact of COVID-19:
  - ▶ 12.2% of GDP as a means of **supporting individuals and business**
  - ▶ Despite a wide range of COVID-19 initiatives, **unmet health and social needs** remain in the community given the service gaps that the Government avoids
- ▶ **Reactive community engagements**:
  - ▶ **Community support** indispensable both for control and mitigation of measures implemented

# Inequalities exposed by COVID-19 in HK

- ▶ The impact of COVID-19 and related containment measures in HK
  - ▶ COVID-19 infection diagnostic delay and outcomes, and poorer mental health in disadvantaged population
  - ▶ Disadvantaged groups were disproportionately affected in financial security, employment, education, access to health and social care





# Inequalities exposed by COVID-19 in HK

## ▶ Financial security

- ▶ The socially deprived and the unemployed feel more worried about the financial situation since the outbreak (unpublished data from IHE telephone survey)
  - ▶ 65.7% in the deprived, compared to 30.6% in the non-deprived
  - ▶ 60.2% in the unemployed, compared to less than one-third in other occupation groups

## ▶ Education

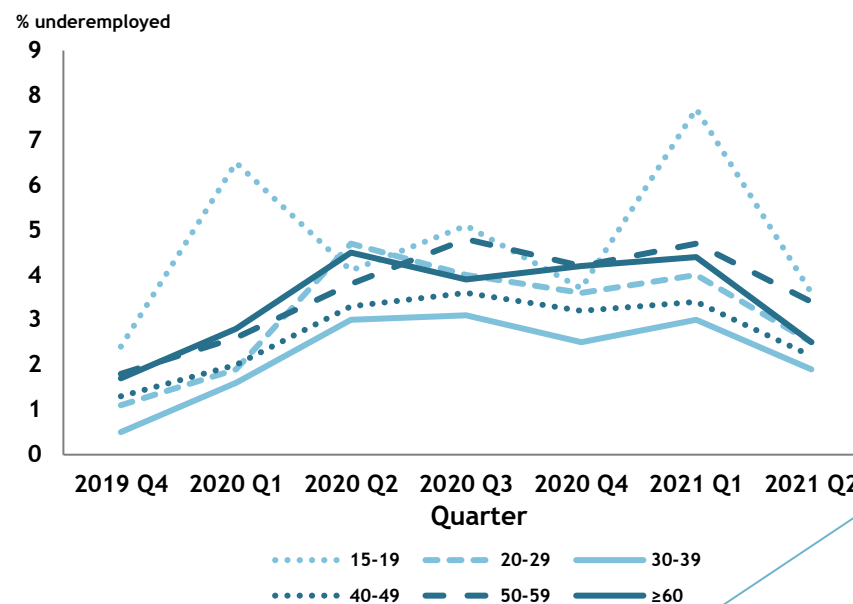
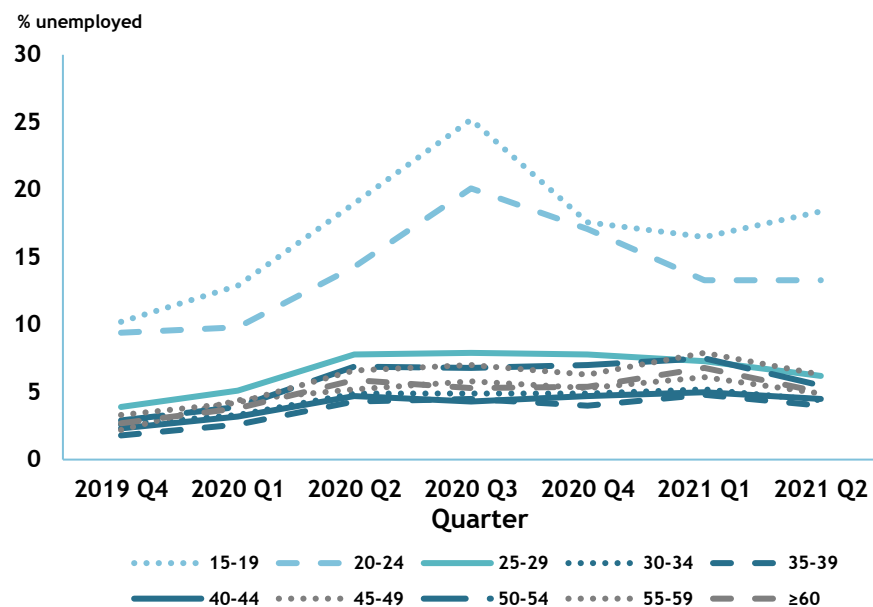
- ▶ Strong impact of prolonged school closure on child development and learning
  - ▶ Higher psychosocial risks in children from low-income families and with special needs (Tso et al., 2020)
  - ▶ The challenge of digital divide for school children
    - ▶ 70% of low-income families did not have computers and 28% had no broadband access (SoCO, 2020)



# Inequalities exposed by COVID-19 in HK

## ▶ Employment

- ▶ Unemployment and underemployment rates have increased sharply during the pandemic
- ▶ The younger age groups are harder hit



# Inequalities exposed by COVID-19 in HK

## ▶ Access to healthcare

- ▶ Equitable in-patient COVID-19 care but worsened pro-rich outpatient care
  - ▶ Public non-emergency and non-essential outpatient services were greatly reduced
  - ▶ Hard to manage chronic conditions and mental health for the disadvantaged (Chan et al., 2020, Wong et al., 2020)
- ▶ More severe COVID-19 outcomes in multimorbid patients living in disadvantage areas than their wealthier counterparts (Chung et al., 2021)
- ▶ Persons living in public rental housing, and living in an area with low education were associated with longer time to diagnosis in the first wave of infections (Wu YS et al., 2020)
- ▶ Risk of delayed diagnosis for public rental housing residents mitigated by the higher density of public clinics/ hospitals and slightly increased by the higher density of private medical practitioners

## ▶ Access to social care

- ▶ Provision of centre-based services were severely affected during COVID-19 (Chan et al., 2021)
- ▶ Launched online services but faced various constraints from staff and users



# Inequalities exposed by COVID-19 in HK

- ▶ Exclusion and discrimination towards marginalized groups
  - ▶ E.g., ethnic minorities, migrants, foreign domestic workers
  - ▶ Barriers to accessing health information and healthcare, discriminatory behaviours, worse employment conditions, less protection under government policy responses (Lui et al., 2021)
- ▶ Mental health and psychosocial well-being
  - ▶ Higher risk of depression and anxiety in the socially deprived
    - ▶ 24.7% vs. 9.1% in the non-deprived
  - ▶ Worse subjective well-being in the socially deprived
    - ▶ Lower scores in terms of happiness, worthiness of life, and life satisfaction
  - ▶ Greater increase in stress level since the outbreak in the less educated (Zhao et al., 2020)



# The crucial role of the civil society

- ▶ Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and the charitable sector provided great social assistance and support to the less advantaged during the pandemic
  - ▶ Examples:
    - ▶ PPE support programme by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service along with over 350 social welfare organizations
    - ▶ Community health education and psychological support services by the Hong Kong Red Cross
    - ▶ Nutritious food packs for the disadvantaged groups by the St. James' Settlement
    - ▶ The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charity Trust allocated over \$987 million on a wide range of COVID-19 community support initiatives, in collocation with different stakeholders including academia, NGOs, and social and healthcare sectors

# Summary and Recommendations

- ▶ Hong Kong has the longest life expectancy worldwide; however, there are also marked health inequalities.
- ▶ The COVID-19 outbreak has exposed and exacerbated the pre-existing social inequalities in Hong Kong, not only due to disproportionate risk of COVID-19 infection but also the differential health and social impacts of the COVID-19 containment measures across the social ladder
- ▶ Reducing inequalities in health requires holistic strategies across the whole of the society and across the governmental sectors rather than mitigation in silos
- ▶ To review the impact of COVID-19 and the containment measures on physical and mental health of different social groups, including school children, working adults and foreign domestic workers, and incorporate analysis of the impact of policies on health equity in future policies and measures to tackle the pandemic



# The CUHK Institute of Health Equity



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- ▶ To examine and understand issues of health equity in Hong Kong
- ▶ To build capacity of relevant stakeholders and serve as a platform for experience sharing and networking
- ▶ To inform government policies and intervention programmes to improve health equity of Hong Kong
- ▶ To establish a network for the Asian region to foster knowledge exchange and capacity development across the region