

Coronavirus crisis exposes harsh existence of Hong Kong's poorest households

- Quarantine centre offers respite for man living in a 'stacked-up cage', families cramped in tiny subdivided flats unable to afford masks, sanitiser
- Experts warn of ticking time bomb for children's mental health as parents keep children indoors fearing contagion



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Mrs Lai says she shares a 800 sq ft flat with nine other households and does not want her children to leave the flat during the Covid-19 threat. Photo: Xiaomei Chen

Twice a week Mrs Lu leaves her seven-year-old twins home alone to buy food at the market in Tsuen Wan. She knows this is a criminal offence.

But the 34-year-old, who asks to remain anonymous, says she has no choice as the only carer for her sons during the coronavirus pandemic, which since February has forced the closure of schools that is set to last until after the Easter holidays next month.

Speaking to the *Post* inside her 120 sq ft flat, with her boys playing with Lego on a bunk bed, she says: “It is crowded in the market. I don’t want to risk them getting infected. This is the only way I can buy food.”

Mrs Lu – who lives on the fourth floor of a walk-up in Tsuen Wan, a town in Hong Kong’s New Territories – realises she is putting her children at risk.

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Only last month a 4-year-old girl fell to her death from a public housing block in Tuen Mun. Her father was suspected of leaving her and his younger daughter at home for the same reason.

Ill-treatment or neglect of a child is an offence carrying a maximum penalty of 10 years in jail.

Mrs Lu, who is from Fujian province in mainland China and has lived in Hong Kong for six years, is one of around 210,000 people living in one of the city’s thousands of subdivided flats. She pays HK\$6,500 (US\$836) a month in rent.

Doctors say the crowded and poor living conditions mean they are at high risk of contracting the coronavirus, which causes the Covid-19 disease and has plagued more than 130,000 people, killing nearly 5,000 globally.

In Hong Kong, 131 people have been infected, four of those fatally, as of Friday.

The health crisis, which has intensified into a pandemic since its emergence in the central Chinese city of Wuhan at the end of last year, has hit daily life in Hong Kong hard.



A mattress on the floor is where these children in Tsuen Wan are forced to do their homework. Photo: K. Y. Cheng

Wreaking havoc on the economy, it has brought much of the city to a standstill, triggered panic buying and isolated many through social distancing.

The public has struggled with shortages of surgical masks and sanitising products, with low-income households especially vulnerable.

Some of those say the lack of these basic supplies has led them to keep their children inside for long periods of time.

“It’s pretty common [to stop children going outside], especially for the subdivided units, because primarily they do not have masks and they do not want the kids to go out and get infected,” says Josephine Leung, executive director of The Hub, a community centre supporting low-income families in Sham Shui Po, the city’s poorest district.

Leung says she knows of around 80 families living in subdivided units, adding: “They have nothing. They do not have hand sanitiser and there are no classes, so they do not let the kids out, which is very sad.”

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In 2018, researchers from the University of Hong Kong found some buildings housed up to six times the number of people they were designed for, and that such premises were at higher risk of outbreaks of fire and infectious diseases.

People who live in subdivided units need proper ventilation and for surfaces to be cleaned regularly, according to medical professionals.

“In the presence of poor ventilation the concentration of the virus will be a lot higher, so more people can be infected,” says Chinese University respiratory medicine expert Professor David Hui Shu-cheong.

However, he points out that there have been no infections in the city related to subdivided units, so far.



Ng Wai-tung, from the Society for Community Organisation, believes the number of homeless in Hong Kong could be around 2,000. Photo: Winson Wong

The Education Bureau last month ordered an extension to the closure of kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools until at least April 20 to minimise the chances of contagion.

But experts warn that staying in confined conditions for a long period of time creates mental health risks.

Brent Horner, a clinical psychologist at the London Medical Clinic in Hong Kong, cites a study on children from February 26, published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, which found children who go outdoors and are “connected to nature” are happier.

“In layman’s terms it would be cabin fever,” says Dr Horner. “Something kids really crave is having a sense of stability and security, a routine. So that has been totally disrupted and that is not good for their mental health.”

Mrs Lai, who also wants to remain anonymous, shares an 800 sq ft subdivided flat with nine other households in Sham Shui Po. She says her two children have gone outside only twice since the end of January.

Lai is concerned that living in proximity to other people will increase her family’s risk of infection so she does not want her children, a seven-year-old son and nine-year-old daughter, to walk past the other units when leaving the flat.

“I know they feel bored and angry,” the 52-year-old says. “We do not have a TV, so they spend a long time reading. My son keeps asking when he can go back to school and see his classmates.”

Mrs Lin, not her real name, shares the same concern. Her seven-year-old and five-year-old daughters rarely leave their 110 sq ft flat in Tsuen Wan.

The space does not have a bed. Instead, the family of four sleep on mats on the floor, and share a fold-up table where the children do their homework.

“I feel like my older daughter has changed a lot,” the 40-year-old says. “For example, when my daughters are playing together, she would yell and scream ... she is very agitated.”