

Dealing with "Covid social risks" requires social innovation as part of Hong Kong's crisis mitigation response

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For centuries, governments worldwide have been preoccupied with helping citizens absorb various risks and contingencies that threaten their livelihoods and well-being. In response to these social risks, governments have taken on more responsibility to provide for basic needs and promote more cohesive, productive, and sustainable progress of societies.

Most recently, the global Covid-19 pandemic presented a critical public health crisis. But, at the same time, societies across East Asia have also been witnessing a related wave of complex socio-economic changes that produced a new set of social risks. In a recent research project with colleagues from Taiwan and South Korea, I have labelled them as "Covid social risks", broadly falling in five critical areas: physical health, employment and income, skills and knowledge, care, and social relationships.

First and foremost, the risk of sudden job loss has risen amidst Covid-19 due to strict lockdown and social distancing measures. Many workers and salaried employees had no choice but to take unpaid leave due to closing businesses or heightened care responsibilities in the home. Even if they managed to retain a job, many individuals experienced a substantial loss of income, for instance, due to reduced working hours.

Related to these employment and income risks, some workers experienced a sudden shock as markets no longer required specialised skills, e.g., aeroplane pilot or a travel guide. The pandemic also exacerbated this knowledge crisis since it hindered children's educational progress due to school closures and the adoption of online learning. In Hong Kong, more than three out of four parents of kindergarten and primary school students raised concerns about their children's online learning progress.ⁱ

Social distancing and lockdown measures created uncertain care burdens as parents, particularly women, faced the need to care for their children or family members at home as schools and social service facilities closed due to infection concerns. The increased care burden has been particularly striking for single parents or households with family members with long term care needs.

Finally, the general public also faced psychological stressors, such as the disruption of regular routines and separation from family and friends, which triggered different negative psychosocial responses, including anxiety, stress, and even depression. Researchers discovered similar patterns in previous crises, but the current decline in mental health in Hong Kong is particularly alarming. For example, a recent paper for the academic journal *Psychiatry Research* suggests that 65 per cent of Hong Kongers reported poor mental health due to increased loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic.ⁱⁱ

The above "Covid social risks" are potential threats to all. Yet, the intensity of experiencing them varies across different societal groups. Take me as an example: once Lingnan University switched to online, and later hybrid, instruction due to the health concerns for our students, I found it relatively easy to complete my daily tasks in the home environment. I found myself as part of a privileged group of salaried employees that could convert face-to-face jobs with the help of the latest digital networking and teleconferencing software. Consequently, my working hours and income were hardly affected.

Naturally, not everyone was in the same lucky position. Essential workers were unlikely to lose their jobs in the pandemic since they provided vital goods or services needed in daily life. Yet, their occupations were not suitable for being transformed into non-face-to-face work, meaning there was a higher possibility for them to suffer from infection with Covid-19. Indeed, service and sales workers were among the 'frontline' occupation groups with the most Covid-19 incidences in Hong Kong and elsewhere in East Asia. Other groups of 'essential' workers that suffered a similar fate were healthcare workers, drivers and transport workers, cleaning and domestic workers, and public safety workers.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is now well-known that the pandemic most severely hit the Hong Kong accommodation, food, and entertainment sectors. However, even within these industries, service and sales workers faced the highest risk of unemployment without any fault of their own. Despite the Hong Kong government's provision of economic stimulus and wage subsidies through the newly introduced Employment Support Scheme (ESS), Hong Kong experienced an increase in the number of low-income households. According to official Government statistics, the total number of Hong Kongers receiving financial support through the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) increased by merely 5,000. This suggests that the Hong Kong social safety net was ill-prepared to cater for many individuals affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

How, then, should the Hong Kong government respond to newly emerging "Covid social risks"? How should it alleviate the rising inequality between the different groups of society that were affected so differently throughout the local Covid-19 outbreak?

We still have much to learn. Yet, besides the need to strengthen the existing social safety net and active labour market policies, Covid-19 taught us that more bottom-up social policy initiatives are required. Notably, such approaches will focus on families, schools, and communities as they are crucial in solving the social care, social relationships, and skills retention crises. In addition, the Covid-19 mitigation phase in Hong Kong requires diversity and creativity that is most commonly associated with the notion of "social innovation." Consequently, the Hong Kong government should facilitate co-production and collaborative governance that engages citizens directly. A successful and forward-looking Covid-19 response in Hong Kong and East Asia cannot rely solely on the lessons from the past.

ⁱ Lau, E. Y. H., & Lee, K. (2020). Parents' views on young children's distance learning and screen time during COVID-19 class suspension in Hong Kong. *Early Education and Development*, 1-18.

ⁱⁱ Tso, I. F., & Park, S. (2020). Alarming levels of psychiatric symptoms and the role of loneliness during the COVID-19 epidemic: A case study of Hong Kong. *Psychiatry Research*, 293, 113423.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lan, F. Y., Wei, C. F., Hsu, Y. T., Christiani, D. C., & Kales, S. N. (2020). Work-related Covid-19 transmission in six Asian countries/areas: a follow-up study. *PLoS one*, 15(5), e0233588.