

Your English teacher has recently asked you to write a letter to the editor expressing your view on news about the recent death of a street sleeper in Choi Hung McDonald's Restaurant on SCMP. In your article, you may include THREE reasons of the poverty problem in Hong Kong and some possible solutions employed by the government may also be suggested.

Dear Editor,

Poverty in an affluent city

Being an international financial centre, Hong Kong is known to be an affluent city. Owing to this, most people may think that every citizen living in Hong Kong enjoys a high level of living standard. The wealthier the city is, the higher living quality the citizens have! However, Hong Kong is an exception.

According to an annual government report in poverty problem released last month, more than 1.3 million HK people of a total population of 7.2 million still live in poverty. You may doubt why poverty still exists in Hong Kong while we earn more than those compared to lots of countries especially the less developed countries. The poverty problem we are facing is the concept of relative poverty which refers to individuals or groups lacking resources when compared with that of other members of the society.

Relative poverty is much in evidence in our city. Not only does the accurate data prove that, but it is also shown in our daily life. With reference to the research conducted by Hong Kong Free Press this year, the number of citizens living in inadequate housing, colloquially known as 'cage homes' has risen to 200,000 due to poverty.

Recently, the death of a street sleeper in Choi Hung McDonald's Restaurant has raised awareness of the poverty problem. It is such a tragedy that this incident occurred in Hong Kong, which is said to be a prosperous city. Therefore, poverty problem has become a heated issue in the society. In view to this, I would like to explore the problem and how to alleviate the situation.

Lacking comprehensive old age protection has pushed the elderly of the city into a situation of poverty. With reference to a survey conducted by the University of Hong Kong last month, approximately one in three elderly live below the poverty line. The reason why the elderly often falls into the poor category is that they lack sustained, stable and sufficient income. Most of the poor elderly can only rely on the little support from the government or their family.

However, insufficient support from the government is, the elderly has no choice apart from the government's allowances. As most of the elderly are retirees, they no longer have a monthly income from work. Furthermore, the government has not launched any comprehensive policies to encourage the families to support the living of their elderly. The elderly only receives Old Age Allowances or Comprehensive Social Security Assistance to pay for their monthly expenses. Also the large expenditure on medical services has created a great financial burden and pressure on them.

Apart from elderly poverty, 'working poor' is another common phenomenon in our city. There are two main causes leading to current situation.

Economic restructuring forced a great number of workers to be unskillful in the 1980s and the workers have become 'working poor' in their middle age now. In the 1980s, when Hong Kong manufacturers moved their production lines to the mainland, out-of-work local garment workers were mostly with little formal education and unskilled. As a result, they could only take those low-paid and unskilled jobs or they might remain unemployed.

In recent years, service and financial industries have become the most important industry. Working in financial industry requires a high level of education. Those workers are not competitive compared to the university graduates. They can only keep working for the low-paid job. Despite the rapid economic growth in Hong Kong, they cannot benefit from it.

In a capitalist city with big wealth gap, income disparity is inevitable. It is hard for the government to meddle in the free market. Minimum wage system cannot help eradicate the problem. The oversupply of employees leads to competition and the employers can employ workers with lower wage. Paid little from the work, the citizens are facing the poverty.

In spite of the government's great effort on poverty alleviation, the situation is still harsh and serious. In a view to this, I would like to suggest some methods to relieve the situation.

Firstly, education and provision of skills and training empower citizens with knowledge and skills. With different knowledge-based industries, the government should provide more allowances to encourage students to build up a comprehensive foundation for their future development.

Secondly, income redistribution could improve living standard of the poor. The government should collect more from the rich on taxation so as to put more resources on poverty alleviation. With the problem of 'working poor', not only should minimum wage be raised, but they should also reduce citizens' burden by providing different allowances and subsidies like travel allowance.

Poverty alleviation is a long-term work. The citizens should cooperate with the government in order to maximize the effects. Rome was not built in a day. On condition that everyone is determined to deal with the problem, the situation will be eased in the coming future. Every little helps. Let's improve our society together!

Best regards,

Chris Wong

A student