

Older Persons in Hong Kong: Past, Present and Future

A paper prepared for
the 21st Population Census Conference
19-21 November 2003
Kyoto, Japan

by

H W FUNG

Deputy Commissioner for Census and Statistics

Hong Kong, China

INTRODUCTION

1. It is established practice from 1961 for Hong Kong to conduct a population census once every ten years and a by-census in the middle of the intercensal period. Following this practice, a population census was conducted in Hong Kong in the thirteen-day period from 15 to 27 March 2001.

2. The 2001 Population Census comprised a simple enumeration on six-sevenths of households to provide basic information like age and sex of household members and a detailed enquiry to the remaining one-seventh on a broad range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics of household members. Through the use of appropriate computation methods, statistics on the size and characteristics of the population can be compiled by combining the data from the simple enumeration and the detailed enquiry.

3. Population census/by-census is the primary source of data for small geographical areas and population sub-groups. It provides a wealth of data on the socio-economic characteristics of the population in Hong Kong, thus allowing studies to be undertaken on various facets of the community and specific sub-groups of the population.

4. Results from the 2001 Population Census have been made available in a series of publications and products released during October 2001 to December 2002. Among the reports published for the 2001 Population Census are a new series of thematic reports on population sub-groups like youths, older persons and ethnic minorities. The detailed analysis presented in the thematic reports not only gives a general picture of these sub-groups, but also facilitates the Government in formulating specific policies for these sub-groups in the community.

5. Based on the findings from the 2001 Population Census as well as the past censuses/by-censuses, this paper provides an overview on the past and present situation of the older persons in Hong Kong. It also looks into the future size and growth of the older population using the results from the latest set of population projections. This paper is separated into two parts: Part I describes the size and growth of the older population during the past 30 years (i.e. from 1973 to 2003) and the coming 25 years (i.e. from 2003

to 2028), whilst Part II focuses on the current socio-economic characteristics of the older persons.

DEFINITION OF OLDER PERSONS

6. Categorical definitions of older persons are neither straightforward nor universally applicable. Nowadays, chronological definition of older persons is more commonly used. In older person studies, different age groupings for older persons may be adopted, depending on the subject matter concerned. For instance, persons aged 60 or 65 and over may be respectively defined as older persons for different objectives.

7. In Hong Kong, persons aged 65 and over have generally been taken as the target population in planning services for older persons despite the fact that selected services for older persons are also provided for persons aged 60-64. In the context of this paper, older persons refer to population aged 65 and over for both sexes.

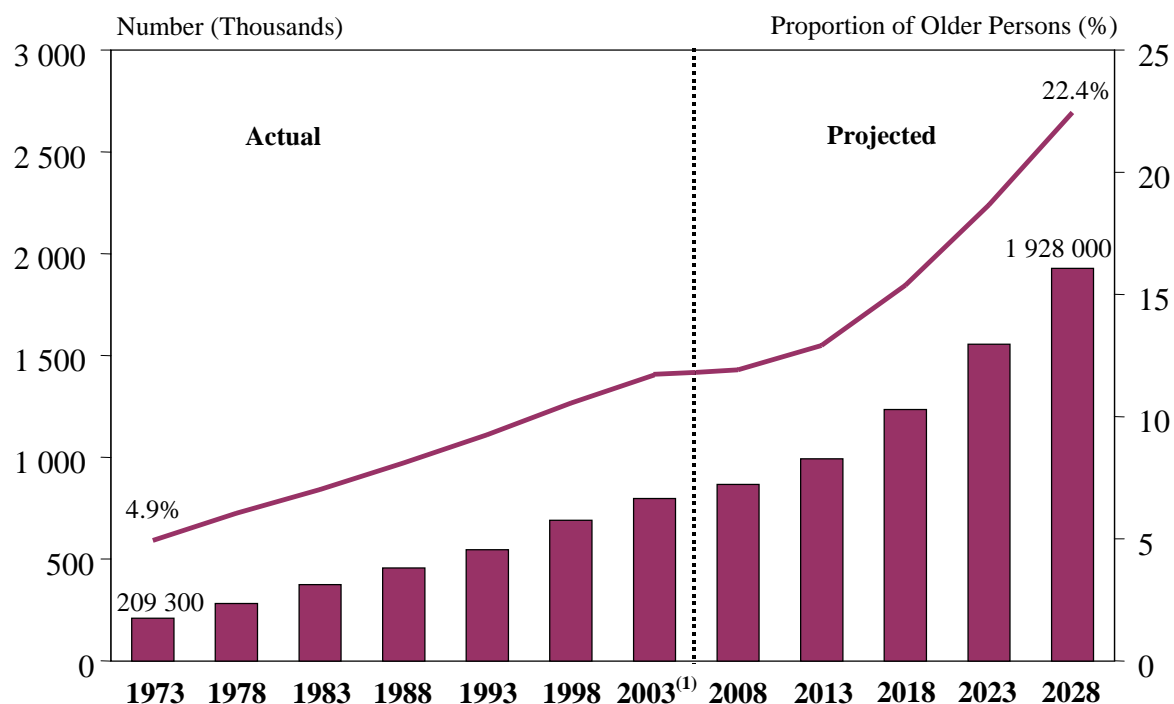
PART I: SIZE AND GROWTH OF THE OLDER POPULATION

8. The number of older persons in Hong Kong increased by almost 3 times over the past 30 years from 209 300 in 1973 to 798 200 in 2003. The average annual growth rate of older persons in this period was 4.6%, much faster than the 1.6% for the total population. A continuous aging trend of the population is projected in the next 25 years, with the number of older persons reaching 1 928 000 in 2028. This represents an average annual growth rate of 3.6% during the period 2003-2028. (Chart 1 and Table 1)

9. In terms of proportion in the total population, the percentage of older persons rose from 4.9% in 1973 to 11.7% in 2003, and is projected to increase to 12.9% in 2013 and then markedly to 22.4% in 2028. (Chart 1)

10. Following the increase in the proportion of older persons, the elderly dependency ratio, defined as the number of persons aged 65 and over per 1 000 persons aged between 15 and 64, increased from 80 in 1973 to 161 in 2003 and will increase further to 342 in 2028. (Table 1)

Chart 1 : Number and Proportion of Older Persons, 1973-2028



Note: (1) Figures for 2003 are provisional.

Table 1 : Size and Growth of Older Population, 1973-2028

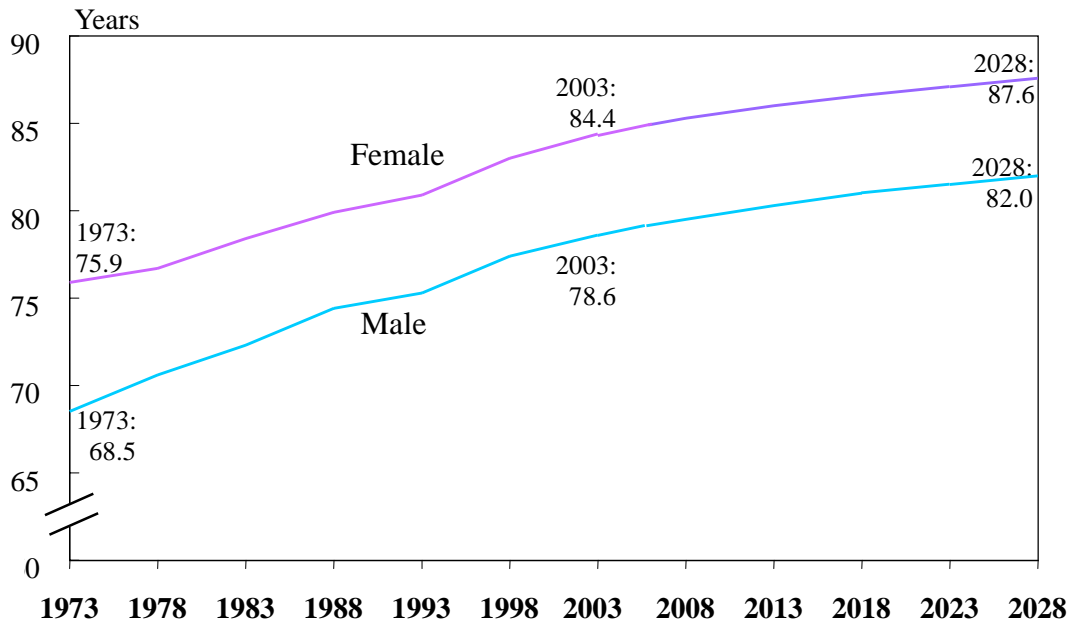
| | Population | | Average Annual Growth Rate over the Preceding 5 Years (%) | | Elderly Dependency Ratio ⁽¹⁾ |
|-------------------------|---------------|------------------|---|------------------|---|
| | Older Persons | Total Population | Older Persons | Total Population | |
| Actual | | | | | |
| mid-1973 | 209 300 | 4 241 600 | .. | .. | 80 |
| mid-1978 | 281 600 | 4 667 500 | 6.1% | 1.9% | 91 |
| mid-1983 | 374 600 | 5 345 100 | 5.9% | 2.7% | 102 |
| mid-1988 | 455 800 | 5 627 600 | 4.0% | 1.0% | 116 |
| mid-1993 | 546 000 | 5 901 000 | 3.7% | 1.0% | 132 |
| mid-1998 | 690 600 | 6 543 700 | 4.8% | 2.1% | 147 |
| mid-2003 ⁽²⁾ | 798 200 | 6 816 000 | 2.9% | 0.8% | 161 |
| 1973-2003 | .. | .. | 4.6% | 1.6% | .. |
| Projected | | | | | |
| mid-2008 | 867 600 | 7 285 500 | 1.7% | 1.3% | 161 |
| mid-2013 | 991 800 | 7 681 200 | 2.7% | 1.1% | 174 |
| mid-2018 | 1 233 900 | 8 031 700 | 4.5% | 0.9% | 214 |
| mid-2023 | 1 556 000 | 8 337 800 | 4.7% | 0.8% | 271 |
| mid-2028 | 1 928 000 | 8 589 000 | 4.4% | 0.6% | 342 |
| 2003-2028 | .. | .. | 3.6% | 0.9% | .. |

Notes : (1) The number of persons aged 65 and over per 1 000 persons aged 15 and 64.

(2) Figures for 2003 are provisional.

11. Aging of the Hong Kong population in the coming years is brought about by two factors: first, the number of persons entering the “old-age” group. While the increase in the number of persons aged 65 and over is still quite gradual from 2003 to 2013, there will be a marked growth after 2013. This is because in Hong Kong, a baby boom occurred in the 1950-1960s. These people will join the “old-age” group starting from that time. Hence, the number of older persons will increase at a fast pace after 2013. Second, the expectation of life increased as a result of improved medical and health services, enabling more persons to live beyond age 65. In 1993, a new born baby boy was expected to live 75.3 years and a new born baby girl to live 80.9 years; these figures increased to 78.6 and 84.4 respectively in 2003 and will increase further to 82.0 and 87.6 respectively in 2028. (Chart 2)

Chart 2 : Expectation of Life at Birth, 1973-2028



12. Apart from the aging trend, there is also an aging effect observed among the older population. Older persons aged 85 and over increased from 9 600 in 1973 to 71 300 in 2003 and is projected to increase further to 197 700 in 2028, accounting for 10.3% of the projected population aged 65 and over as compared to the 8.9% in 2003. (Table 2)

13. Correspondingly, the median age of the older persons increased by 1.9 years from 71.3 in 1973 to 73.2 in 2003. This increase is projected to

continue until 2012 with a peak median age of 74.9 before gradually declining to 72.9 in 2028. The drop after 2012 is related to the large number of post-war baby boomers (those born in the 1950-60s) entering the old age group, which offsets the aging effect of the older population. (Table 2)

Table 2 : Older Persons by Age Group, 1973-2028

| | 65 – 74 | | Age Group 75 – 84 | | 85+ | | Median Age |
|-------------------------|-----------|------|----------------------|------|---------|------|---------------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | |
| Actual | | | | | | | |
| mid-1973 | 147 400 | 70.4 | 52 300 | 25.0 | 9 600 | 4.6 | 71.3 |
| mid-1978 | 196 400 | 69.7 | 71 800 | 25.5 | 13 400 | 4.8 | 71.2 |
| mid-1983 | 261 100 | 69.7 | 94 800 | 25.3 | 18 700 | 5.0 | 71.3 |
| mid-1988 | 307 100 | 67.4 | 120 500 | 26.4 | 28 200 | 6.2 | 71.8 |
| mid-1993 | 357 700 | 65.5 | 153 600 | 28.1 | 34 700 | 6.4 | 72.0 |
| mid-1998 | 439 500 | 63.6 | 202 900 | 29.4 | 48 200 | 7.0 | 72.3 |
| mid-2003 ⁽¹⁾ | 472 300 | 59.2 | 254 600 | 31.9 | 71 300 | 8.9 | 73.2 |
| Projected | | | | | | | |
| mid-2008 | 457 300 | 52.7 | 313 200 | 36.1 | 97 100 | 11.2 | 74.5 |
| mid-2013 | 508 400 | 51.3 | 352 800 | 35.6 | 130 700 | 13.2 | 74.7 |
| mid-2018 | 720 400 | 58.4 | 345 100 | 28.0 | 168 400 | 13.6 | 72.8 |
| mid-2023 | 965 300 | 62.0 | 395 400 | 25.4 | 195 300 | 12.6 | 72.6 |
| mid-2028 | 1 159 100 | 60.1 | 571 300 | 29.6 | 197 700 | 10.3 | 72.9 |

Note : (1) Figures for 2003 are provisional.

14. As females usually live longer and have lower mortality, males are far outnumbered by females among older persons. The sex ratio for older persons in 2003 was only 862, while the corresponding figure for the whole population was 938. It is projected that the mortality rates for both sexes will decline with a slower pace and the difference in expectation of life at birth between males and females will be relatively constant at around 5.5 years. As such, the sex ratio of the older persons will remain below parity in the next 25 years but will decrease slightly to 794 in 2028. (Table 3)

Table 3 : Sex Ratio, 1973-2028

| | Sex Ratio ⁽¹⁾ | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| | Older Persons | Total Population |
| Actual | | |
| mid-1973 | 521 | 1 041 |
| mid-1978 | 608 | 1 051 |
| mid-1983 | 703 | 1 077 |
| mid-1988 | 758 | 1 057 |
| mid-1993 | 795 | 1 022 |
| mid-1998 | 843 | 987 |
| mid-2003 ⁽²⁾ | 862 | 938 |
| Projected | | |
| mid-2008 | 868 | 887 |
| mid-2013 | 857 | 854 |
| mid-2018 | 842 | 828 |
| mid-2023 | 823 | 805 |
| mid-2028 | 794 | 783 |

Notes : (1) The number of males per 1 000 females.
(2) Figures for 2003 are provisional.

PART II: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OLDER PERSONS

Marital distribution

15. Among older persons in 2001, 59.9% were now married, and 33.9% were widowed; the remaining proportions of never married (4.1%) and divorced/separated (2.1%) were very low. Compared with the whole population aged 15 and over, there were marked differences in the distribution in respect of marital status.

16. When analyzed by sex, it is noted that older men are more likely to be now married and older women are more likely to be widowed. The share of widows among older women at 51.0% in 2001 was higher than the share of widowers among older men at 14.1%. This phenomenon is attributed to two factors. First, the female mortality rate has always been lower than the male mortality rate at older ages. Second, according to Chinese marriage tradition, husbands are usually older than their wives, thereby further hastening the widowhood of women. From the marriage

registration records in Hong Kong in the past 30 years, it can be seen that brides were younger than the bridegrooms on average by 3-4 years. (Table 4)

Table 4 : Older Persons by Marital Status, 2001

| Marital Status | Older Persons | | | Population aged 15 and over | | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Male | Female | Both Sexes | Male | Female | Both Sexes |
| | Number (% ⁽¹⁾) | | | Number (% ⁽¹⁾) | | |
| Never Married | 17 603 (5.1) | 12 856 (3.2) | 30 459 (4.1) | 918 722 (33.9) | 868 797 (30.1) | 1 787 519 (31.9) |
| Now Married | 270 782 (78.4) | 176 478 (43.9) | 447 260 (59.9) | 1 673 786 (61.7) | 1 651 696 (57.2) | 3 325 482 (59.4) |
| Widowed | 48 667 (14.1) | 204 804 (51.0) | 253 471 (33.9) | 60 996 (2.2) | 272 626 (9.4) | 333 622 (6.0) |
| Divorced/ Separated | 8 132 (2.4) | 7 730 (1.9) | 15 862 (2.1) | 57 483 (2.1) | 94 866 (3.3) | 152 349 (2.7) |
| Total | 345 184 (100.0) | 401 868 (100.0) | 747 052 (100.0) | 2 710 987 (100.0) | 2 887 985 (100.0) | 5 598 972 (100.0) |

Note : (1) Figures in brackets represent the percentages in respect of the total.

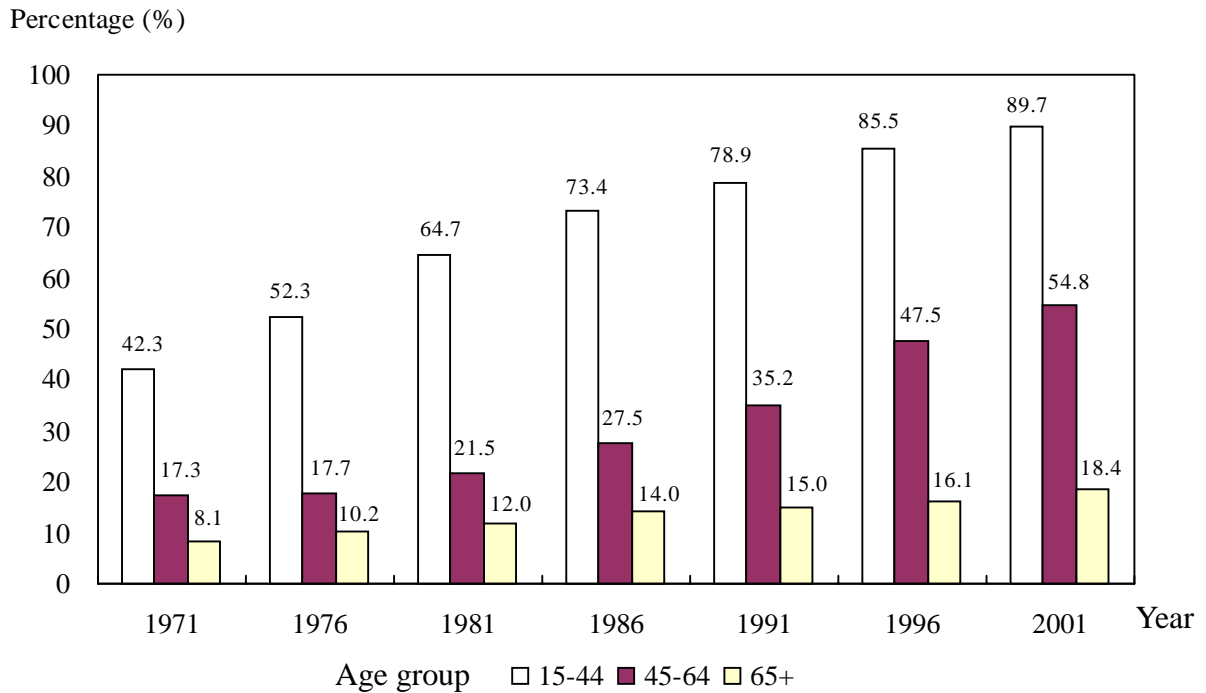
Education

17. Educational attainment is linked to many aspects of a person's well-being. Research has shown that higher levels of education usually translate into better health status, higher incomes and consequently higher standards of living. People with higher educational levels may be less dependent on their family for financial assistance. In Hong Kong, as the opportunities for education were not well-developed during the 1930's to 1950's, the current cohort of older persons on average had relatively low level of educational attainment. In addition, many of the current cohort of older persons came from the Mainland during their youths. The opportunity of attending school was slim especially for the females from villages.

18. Analyzing the educational attainment of the population by age group, it is noted that the proportion of persons aged 15-44 having attended secondary and higher education increased significantly from 42.3% in 1971 to 89.7% in 2001 and that of persons aged 45-64 from 17.3% to 54.8% over the same period. On the other hand, the proportion for older persons only

grew mildly from 8.1% in 1971 to 18.4% in 2001. The marked improvement in educational attainment for the young and middle aged population was mainly associated with the operation of the nine years compulsory education in Hong Kong starting from 1978. (Chart 3)

Chart 3 : Proportion of Population with Secondary and Above Education by Age Group, 1971-2001



19. Though the educational attainment of the older persons only slightly improved over the past years, it is worth noting that the younger cohort of older persons tended to be better educated. For older persons in the younger cohort aged 65-74, the proportion with no schooling/kindergarten at 36.5% in 2001 was much lower than 62.7% for older persons aged 85 and over. On the other hand, the proportion with primary educational attainment or above was higher for the younger cohort. (Table 5)

20. Owing to past education tradition in Chinese society of placing less importance for females to receive education, the proportion of older women in Hong Kong who received no schooling or had only kindergarten education was high at 58.9% in 2001 compared to 23.3% for older men. Such gender differential among older persons was also observed in many countries/territories. (Table 5)

Table 5 : Older Persons by Sex, Age Group and Educational Attainment (Highest Level Attended), 2001

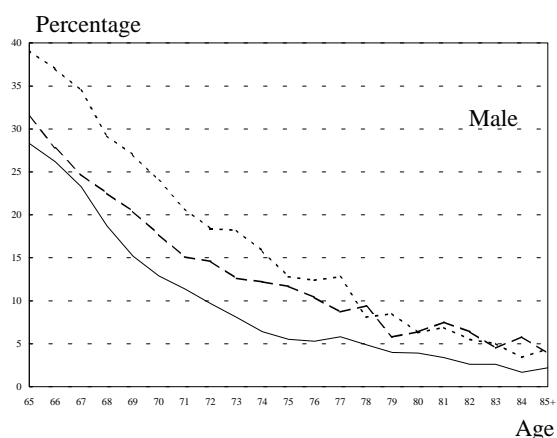
| Sex and Age Group | No Schooling/ Kindergarten | | Educational Attainment (Highest Level Attended) | | | | | | Total | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|------|---|------|---------|------|--------|-----|---------|-------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| Male | | | | | | | | | | |
| 65 – 74 | 46 404 | 20.2 | 115 982 | 50.5 | 52 485 | 22.9 | 14 733 | 6.4 | 229 604 | 100.0 |
| 75 – 84 | 26 773 | 27.8 | 47 267 | 49.0 | 17 856 | 18.5 | 4 474 | 4.6 | 96 370 | 100.0 |
| 85+ | 7 092 | 36.9 | 7 629 | 39.7 | 3 468 | 18.1 | 1 021 | 5.3 | 19 210 | 100.0 |
| Sub-total | 80 269 | 23.3 | 170 878 | 49.5 | 73 809 | 21.4 | 20 228 | 5.9 | 345 184 | 100.0 |
| Female | | | | | | | | | | |
| 65 – 74 | 120 840 | 52.8 | 79 363 | 34.7 | 22 778 | 10.0 | 5 684 | 2.5 | 228 665 | 100.0 |
| 75 – 84 | 84 335 | 64.5 | 34 222 | 26.2 | 10 247 | 7.8 | 1 885 | 1.4 | 130 689 | 100.0 |
| 85+ | 31 583 | 74.3 | 8 129 | 19.1 | 2 276 | 5.4 | 526 | 1.2 | 42 514 | 100.0 |
| Sub-total | 236 758 | 58.9 | 121 714 | 30.3 | 35 301 | 8.8 | 8 095 | 2.0 | 401 868 | 100.0 |
| Both sexes | | | | | | | | | | |
| 65 – 74 | 167 244 | 36.5 | 195 345 | 42.6 | 75 263 | 16.4 | 20 417 | 4.5 | 458 269 | 100.0 |
| 75 – 84 | 111 108 | 48.9 | 81 489 | 35.9 | 28 103 | 12.4 | 6 359 | 2.8 | 227 059 | 100.0 |
| 85+ | 38 675 | 62.7 | 15 758 | 25.5 | 5 744 | 9.3 | 1 547 | 2.5 | 61 724 | 100.0 |
| Total | 317 027 | 42.4 | 292 592 | 39.2 | 109 110 | 14.6 | 28 323 | 3.8 | 747 052 | 100.0 |

Labour force participation

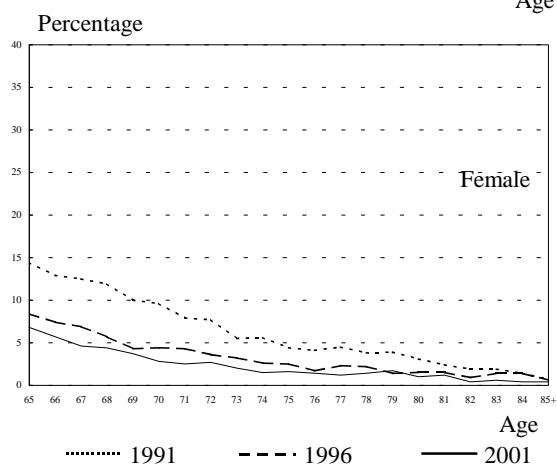
21. The labour force participation rate for older persons in Hong Kong (the proportion of economically active older persons among the whole population of older persons) was 7.2% in 2001, much lower than the 61.4% for the whole population. There was a continuous decreasing trend of the labour force participation rate observed for older persons over the past ten years, from 14.1% in 1991 to 7.2% in 2001. This, to some extent, is attributed to the improvement in general economic condition which entices more older persons to choose retired life and leave the labour market. (Chart 4)

22. Further analysis of the labour force participation rates of older persons reveals that the rates decreased gradually from age 65 onwards. Female older persons had much lower labour force participation rate than male older persons for almost all ages, though with a narrowing gap as the age increases. (Chart 4)

Chart 4 : Labour Force Participation Rates of Older Persons by Sex and Age, 1991, 1996 and 2001



| Sex | Labour Force Participation Rate | | |
|------------|---------------------------------|-------|-------|
| | 1991 | 1996 | 2001 |
| Male | 22.6% | 17.0% | 12.6% |
| Female | 7.5% | 3.8% | 2.6% |
| Both sexes | 14.1% | 9.8% | 7.2% |



23. Distribution of the working older persons by occupation was distinctly different from that of the whole population. On the one hand, nearly 40% of the working older persons were engaged in the elementary occupations, much higher than the 19.5% for the whole working population, which may be due to their lower educational attainment. On the other hand, nearly 16% of the working older persons were managers and administrators, compared to 10.7% for the whole working population. (Table 6)

24. The median monthly income from main employment of the working older persons in 2001 was \$6,000, which was only about 60% of the median (\$10,000) of the whole working population. It is also noted that the median income of working older persons was lower than that of the whole working population for all occupations. This may be due to the relatively low educational attainment of the working older persons. (Table 6)

Table 6 : Working Older Persons by Occupation, 2001

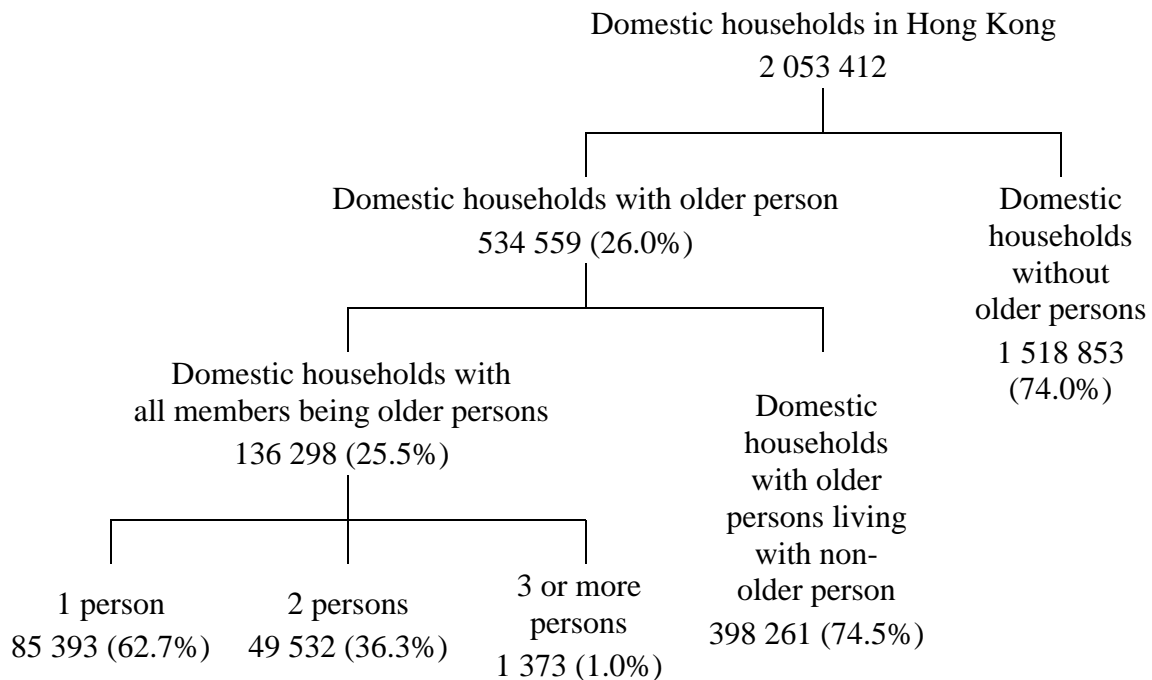
| Occupation | Working Older Persons | | | Whole Working Population | | |
|--|-----------------------|-------|--|--------------------------|-------|--|
| | Number | % | Median income from main employment ⁽¹⁾ (HK\$) | Number | % | Median income from main employment ⁽¹⁾ (HK\$) |
| Managers and administrators | 8 417 | 15.9 | 17,600 | 349 637 | 10.7 | 26,000 |
| Professionals | 1 477 | 2.8 | 25,000 | 179 825 | 5.5 | 30,000 |
| Associate professionals | 2 698 | 5.1 | 10,500 | 498 671 | 15.3 | 16,000 |
| Clerks | 3 492 | 6.6 | 8,000 | 529 992 | 16.3 | 10,000 |
| Service workers and shop sales workers | 7 210 | 13.6 | 6,000 | 488 961 | 15.0 | 9,110 |
| Craft and related workers | 4 326 | 8.2 | 7,500 | 321 000 | 9.9 | 10,000 |
| Plant and machine operators and assemblers | 3 680 | 7.0 | 6,500 | 238 666 | 7.3 | 10,000 |
| Elementary occupations | 20 906 | 39.5 | 5,000 | 635 393 | 19.5 | 5,300 |
| Skilled agricultural and fishery workers; and occupations not classifiable | 705 | 1.3 | 3,000 | 10 561 | 0.3 | 7,000 |
| Total | 52 911 | 100.0 | 6,000 | 3 252 706 | 100.0 | 10,000 |

(1) The figures exclude unpaid family workers.

Living arrangement

25. In 2001, there were 534 559 domestic households in Hong Kong with members being older persons. Slightly more than one quarter of these households (136 298 in number) were households comprising solely older persons, whilst the other three quarters were with both older persons and non-older persons living together. Among the households with older persons only, majority (62.7%) of them were single older person households, while households with two older persons constituted 36.3% of the older persons households. (Chart 5)

Chart 5 : Domestic Households in Hong Kong, 2001



26. The living arrangement of older persons was quite different from that for the whole population. The commonest arrangement (32.1%) was for older persons to live with spouse and child(ren). There were another 18.4% of older persons living with spouse only, 24.7% living with child(ren) only and 11.3% living alone in domestic households. (Table 7)

27. Sex differentials in the living arrangement of older persons were observed. More older women were living alone (12.1%) or just living with child(ren) only (36.4%) than their male counterparts (10.4% and 11.1% respectively). On the other hand, the proportion of older females living with spouse at 35.0% was significantly lower than that at 68.6% for older men. It can be attributed to the fact that there was a higher proportion of widowed older persons among older women than older men. (Table 7)

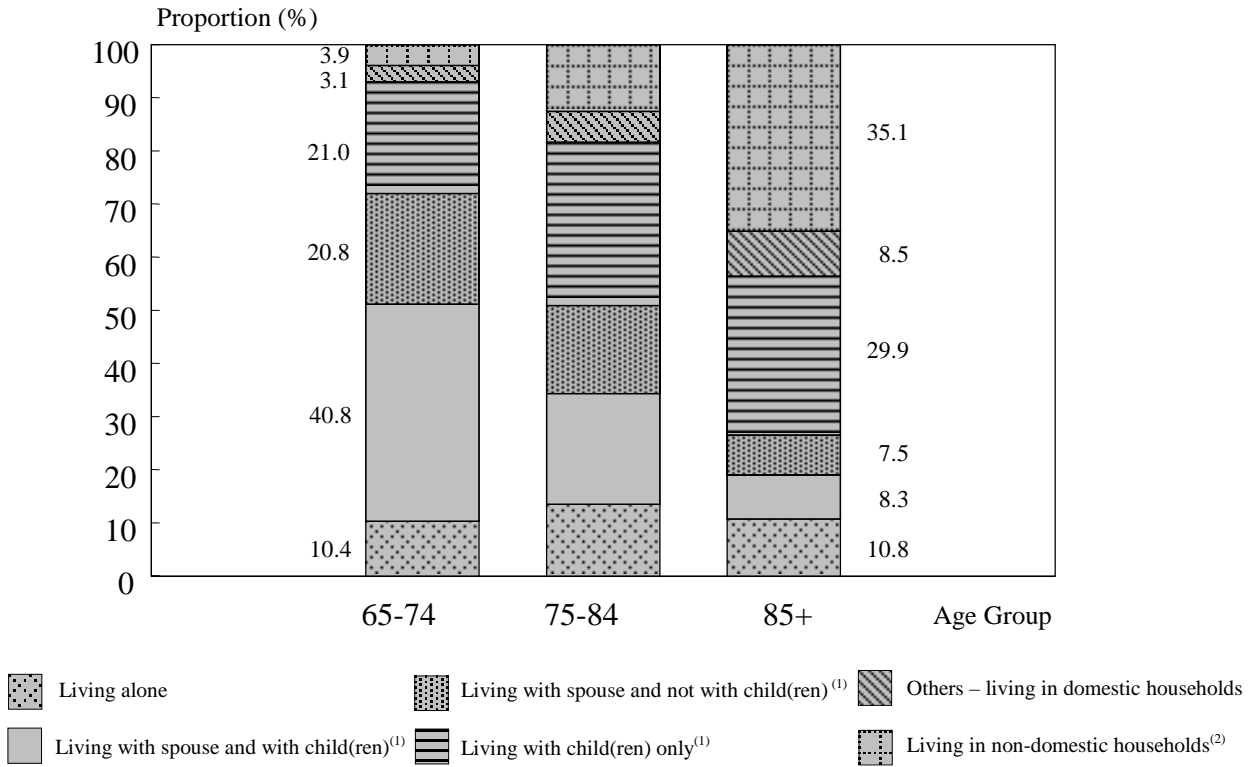
Table 7 : Older Persons by Sex and Living Arrangement, 2001

| Living Arrangement | Older Persons | | | Total Population | | |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total |
| | Number (% ⁽¹⁾) | | | Number (% ⁽¹⁾) | | |
| Living in domestic household | | | | | | |
| Living alone | 36 018 (10.4) | 48 749 (12.1) | 84 767 (11.3) | 162 031 (4.9) | 127 001 (3.7) | 289 032 (4.3) |
| Living with spouse ⁽²⁾ and child(ren) | 156 309 (45.3) | 83 371 (20.7) | 239 680 (32.1) | 1 161 113 (35.3) | 1 146 750 (33.5) | 2 307 863 (34.4) |
| without children | 80 363 (23.3) | 57 227 (14.2) | 137 590 (18.4) | 313 370 (9.5) | 310 101 (9.1) | 623 471 (9.3) |
| Sub-total | 236 672 (68.6) | 140 598 (35.0) | 377 270 (50.5) | 1 474 483 (44.9) | 1 456 851 (42.6) | 2 931 334 (43.7) |
| Living with child(ren) only ⁽²⁾ | 38 189 (11.1) | 146 135 (36.4) | 184 324 (24.7) | 99 567 (3.0) | 294 444 (8.6) | 394 011 (5.9) |
| Others | 10 005 (2.9) | 22 731 (5.7) | 32 736 (4.4) | 1 464 028 (44.6) | 1 460 792 (42.7) | 2 924 820 (43.6) |
| Sub-total | 320 884 (93.0) | 358 213 (89.1) | 679 097 (90.9) | 3 200 109 (97.4) | 3 339 088 (97.5) | 6 539 197 (97.5) |
| Living in non-domestic household | 24 300 (7.0) | 43 655 (10.9) | 67 955 (9.1) | 85 235 (2.6) | 83 957 (2.5) | 169 192 (2.5) |
| Total | 345 184 (100.0) | 401 868 (100.0) | 747 052 (100.0) | 3 285 344 (100.0) | 3 423 045 (100.0) | 6 708 389 (100.0) |

Notes : (1) Figures in brackets represent the percentages in respect of the total.
(2) Figures include persons living with person(s) other than spouse and child(ren).

28. Living arrangement for older persons changed with growing age. Among older persons aged 65–74, those living with spouse (with/without child(ren)) constituted the highest proportion (61.6%). The proportion dropped to 37.4% for those aged 75-84 and further to 15.8% for those aged 85 and over. The changes reflected not only deaths of the spouse of older persons with growing age but also increasing demand for care owing to illness and disability. The proportion of older persons living in non-domestic households increased with ages, from 3.9% for persons aged 65-74 to 35.1% for persons aged 85 and over. (Chart 6)

Chart 6 : Proportion of Older Persons by Living Arrangement and Age Group, 2001



Notes : (1) The figures include persons living with person(s) other than spouse and child(ren).
 (2) The figures include persons living in homes for the aged, hospitals and penal institutions, etc.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

29. The population of Hong Kong, similar to many other places in the world, is experiencing an aging trend over the past years. It is projected that this trend will continue into the future; and in 2028, nearly one in four of our population will be aged 65 and over. The results from the population census/by-census and the population projections provide us with valuable information on the older persons. With such information in hand, we should be able to better prepare for the challenges posed by the growing older population.