



Residential care services for the elderly in Hong Kong

Figure 1 – Elderly population trend in Hong Kong

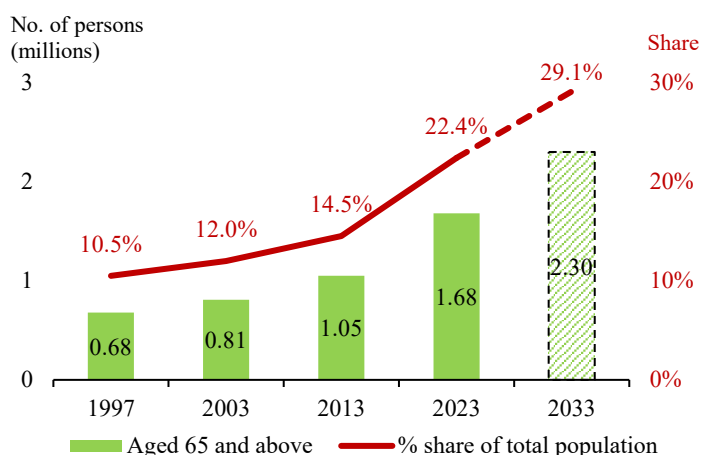
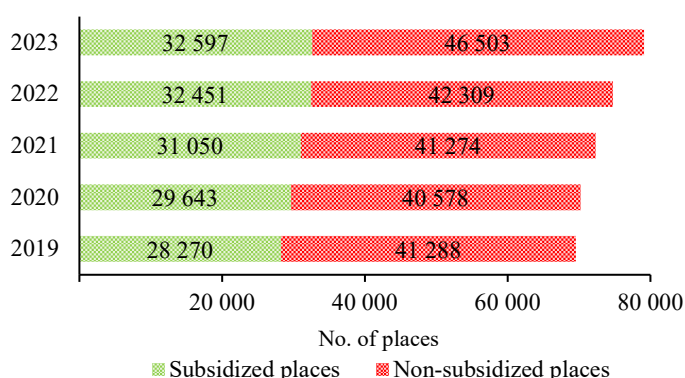
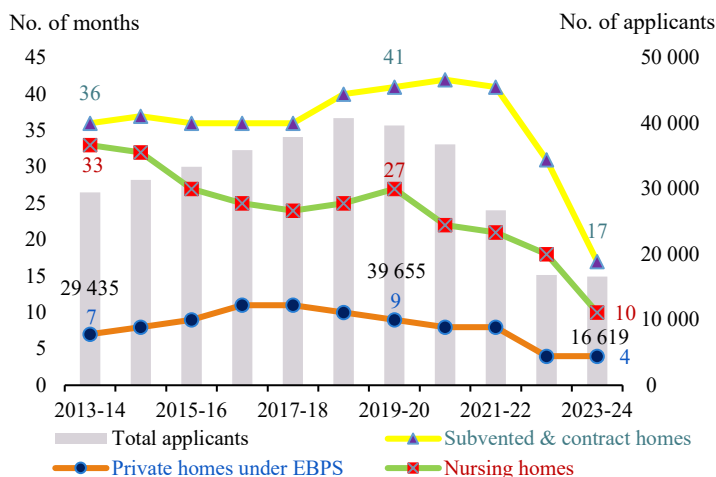


Figure 2 – RCS places for the elderly



Note: End of financial year figures.

Figure 3 – Average waiting time and number of applicants for subsidized RCS



Note: End of financial year figures.

Highlights

- Hong Kong’s population is ageing rapidly. Between 1997 and 2023, the number of people aged 65 and above (i.e. elderly population) more than doubled to 1.68 million, representing 22.4% of the total population (Figure 1). This demographic trend is expected to accelerate in the years ahead, with the number of the elderly projected to increase to 2.3 million, or 29.1% of the total population, by 2033. According to the Population Census 2021, some 306 000 or 28% of the elderly population indicated needs for long-term care (“LTC”) due to chronic diseases and various levels of disabilities.
- The Government has been promoting the policy of “ageing in place” since 1977. However, due to a shortage of community care services, residential care services (“RCS”) have been an important channel for meeting the LTC needs of the elderly. Between 2019 and 2023, RCS places increased by 14% to 79 100 (Figure 2), of which 41% were subsidized places operated either by subvented social organizations or certain private care homes subsidized via Enhanced Bought Place Scheme (“EBPS”) and RCS Voucher Scheme. While most elderly people prefer subsidized RCS for its better living environment and lower cost, additional subsidized RCS places expected in the next five years amounted to a mere 3 400 places.
- Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant demand for subsidized RCS as evidenced in the lengthy average waiting time for subvented/contract care homes (41 months in 2019-2020), nursing homes for the elderly with mild to severe physical and mental impairment (27 months), and private homes under EBPS (9 months) in 2019-2020 (Figure 3). The average waiting time decreased visibly after the outbreak of the fifth wave of COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, which saw a 58% reduction in the number of waitlisted elderly applicants. The decline is reportedly linked partly to over 9 000 fatalities among the elderly, most of whom were either living in or waiting for care homes.

Residential care services for the elderly in Hong Kong (cont'd)

Figure 4 – Elderly applicants who passed away while on subsidized RCS waiting list

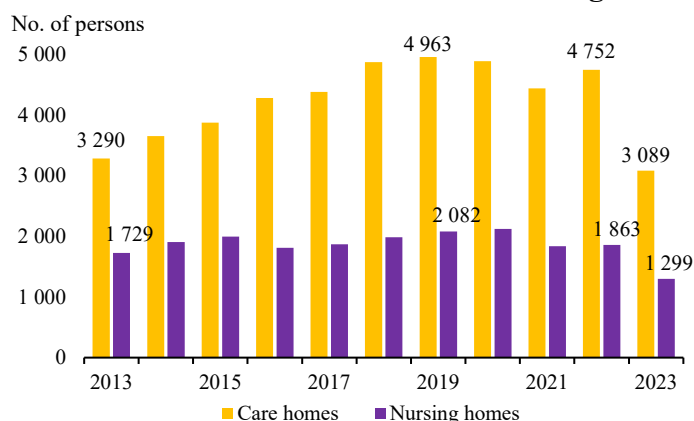
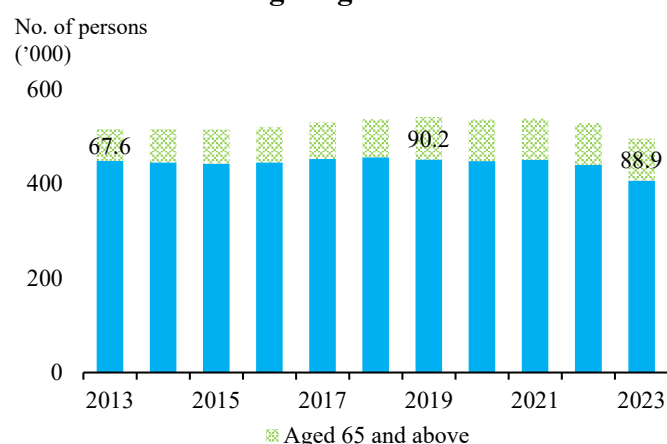
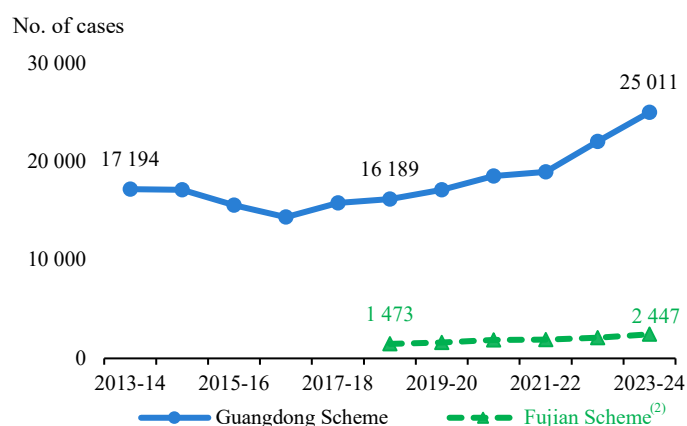


Figure 5 – Number of Hong Kong people staying in Guangdong Province



Note: Mid-year figures for Hong Kong Permanent Residents who have stayed at the Guangdong Province for 6 months and above within a year.

Figure 6 – Elderly recipients of social security allowance living on the Mainland⁽¹⁾



Notes: (1) End of financial year figures.
(2) Fujian Scheme was launched in April 2018.

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Highlights

- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, critics pointed out that prolonged waiting time for subsidized RCS resulted in many elderly passing away while on the waiting list. The number of such fatalities increased by 51% between 2013 and 2019 (**Figure 4**). While there was some improvement in the following three years, it was not until 2023 that this figure fell markedly to a low of 3 089 after the pandemic ended. Regarding fatalities among elderly applicants waiting for subsidized nursing homes, the numbers fluctuated between 1 700 and 2 100 during 2013 to 2022 before easing to some 1 300 in 2023.
- An emerging trend of moving to the Mainland for retirement in pursuit of more spacious accommodation and lower living costs has helped contain the number of applicants for subsidized RCS in Hong Kong. This trend is reflected by the increase in the number of Permanent Residents aged 65 and above living in Guangdong Province, which rose by 33% to 90 200 between 2013 and 2019 (**Figure 5**). Despite stringent anti-epidemic measures implemented during the pandemic, the number of such elder persons only decreased by 1% to 88 900, representing 18% of total Hong Kong Permanent Residents staying in Guangdong Province in 2023.
- In response to the increasing trend of retiring in the Mainland, the Government extended social security allowance to needy elderly residing in Guangdong Province and Fujian Province in the 2010s. The number of recipients under Guangdong Scheme surged by 45% to 25 011 in March 2024 since its inception in 2013, while that of Fujian Scheme also leaped by 66% to 2 447 between April 2018 and March 2024 (**Figure 6**). In 2020, the Government also regularized a RCS Scheme in Guangdong to provide 400 subsidized places in two care homes in Shenzhen and Zhaoqing, which are operated by social organizations in Hong Kong, and included two more care homes (located in Foshan and Shenzhen respectively) in May 2024. To encourage the use of elderly care services available across the boundary, there have been calls for extending more welfare and medical benefits to cover more provinces on the Mainland.

Data sources: Latest figures from Labour and Welfare Bureau, Social Welfare Department and Census and Statistics Department.