

Study examines issue of food insecurity in S'pore

Some go hungry because they lack money or are too frail to leave home to buy food

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Despite being ranked the fourth most-secure food nation in the world by the Economist Intelligence Unit last year, researchers have found that there are people here who struggle to get access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food.

In speaking to 236 people and 35 food support organisations last year, researchers from the Lien Centre for Social Innovation found that these people may go hungry due to various constraints.

Some said they were too frail to get out of their homes to buy food or could not get someone else to do it for them. Others missed out on a nutritious meal because of financial difficulties.

Dr Tania Nagpaul, one of the re-

searchers involved in the study – the first of its kind to explore the issue here – said while the numbers are not nationally representative, given its sample size, there is still cause for concern.

These concerns, such as the elderly being left malnourished, are echoed by other large-scale studies.

In reaching out to residents of rental and non-rental Housing Board flats all over Singapore, the researchers found that one in five low-income households here faced severe food insecurity.

This means that there was a time in a 12-month period that they were hungry but did not eat, or went without eating for a whole day because of a lack of money and resources.

However, the research also showed that the lack of financial resources is not the only contributor to food insecurity.

For those who claimed to have some level of food insecurity, about one quarter earned an income of \$2,000 and above.

For respondents who have

chronic health conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure, 57 per cent of them were found to have moderate to severe food insecurity, suggesting that they were too frail or ill to get out of their homes to get food.

Dr Wee Shiou Liang, research programme director at the national Geriatric Education and Research Institute, said that while the research sample is not nationally representative, the study does provide some "insight to the nature and factors related to food insecurity in certain socio-economic groups in Singapore".

"The study brings out a topic that is rarely in Singapore's public discourse," added Dr Wee, who has done malnutrition-related research among the elderly.

The findings in the Lien Centre's Hunger In A Food Lover's Paradise report also dovetail with the Singapore Longitudinal Ageing Study (SLAS) – a study spanning 15 years and is ongoing – on older Singaporeans.

As many as one third of the 6,045 SLAS participants, aged 55 years old and above, are at risk of malnutrition or malnourishment, the study found.

"It cannot be denied that food insecurity is present in a significant proportion of Singaporeans, especially in the lower-income and elderly groups," said Associate Professor Ng Tze Pin from the National University of Singapore who was the principal investigator of the SLAS.

Similar issues were also explored in a 2015 study commissioned by the charity Food from the Heart, which last year distributed \$5.52 million worth of food and supported 35,500 beneficiaries.

The Lien Centre researchers

found that while there is a range of food support initiatives in Singapore, with 125 such groups having an online presence, there was little coordination among them.

These outfits range from food-centric groups such as The Food Bank, Willing Hearts and Food From The Heart to community groups, and governmental, social service and religious organisations.

The study laid out some recommendations to have greater coordination and targeting of food support, which include matching the type of food support with the target group.

"For example, dry rations for those who have the means to cook and cooked meals for those who do not," said the researchers.

The study also called for nutritious and quality food to be made a priority and recommended that to tackle the problem of social isolation, people can be brought together in community kitchens, cooking classes and community dining options.

Assistant Professor of Sociology at Nanyang Technological University Zhan Shaohua suggested having a national food security policy and agency to coordinate food provision, funding and food quality.

He said that in the United States, for instance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program served 42.1 million people, or one in seven Americans.

Said Prof Ng: "They saw the need to provide essential financial assistance to alleviate hunger and food insecurity in low-income families, as well as improving diet quality and healthy living for all citizens. We should take food security in Singapore no less seriously."

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