

## How do Singapore's poor families get by?

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Nurhaida, 29, who is unemployed with six children in Singapore, says it is difficult to make ends meet

**Nurhaida Binte Jantan is making dinner. She is roasting otah-otah, a Malay dish of fish paste wrapped in banana leaves, over a portable stove.**

She is a 29-year-old unemployed single mother with six children from five to 13 years old. She lives in a tiny flat, just 30 square metres, with little furnishing.

There is no dining table, so the children eat their otah-otah with rice and chillies crouched on the floor.

The children share the single bedroom - their only bedding is mattresses and thick blankets. Nurhaida sleeps on the sofa in the living room.

She receives weekly groceries from charities, as well as about S\$600 (\$474, £262) a month in government aid and money from a boyfriend. But she admits that it is difficult to make ends meet. She has not been able to afford asthma medicine for her second daughter for months.

"No one can afford to get sick in this house because our finances are too tight. It's quite tough and a struggle for me to be raising them up," she said.

"I have to look after this house 24/7... so for me if I were to find a job, it would have to be a night job, so that once they are in bed, I can go out and the older kids can watch the young ones."

What is surprising about Nurhaida's story is that she lives in Singapore, one of the wealthiest countries in the world. But it is also one of the most costly.

Singapore recently ranked as the world's sixth most expensive city according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, and its property market is among the top 10, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The city-state's efficient infrastructure, relative safety and low taxes have attracted many of the world's wealthy. It now boasts more millionaires per capita than any other country.



Watch: Singapore has a hidden poverty problem, as Sharanjit Leyl reports.

Its gross domestic output per individual is among the highest too, at over \$51,000 (£30,600), outranking that of developed economies like Germany and even the US in some measures. But the wealth gap is the second-widest among advanced economies in Asia, next to Hong Kong.

So it comes as no surprise that the less well-off would struggle to pay for daily necessities. There is no minimum wage or poverty line set and no welfare provision along the lines of many developed Western economies.

It has become such a problem that anti-poverty campaigners are now posing a challenge - can you make ends meet on S\$5 dollars a day?

### **'Change the narrative'**

According to the campaigners, S\$5 a day is what nearly 400,000 Singaporeans are left with after paying for utilities, school, rent, loan instalments and healthcare.

The people behind the challenge are Caritas Singapore, the social and community arm of the Catholic Church. They wanted to change the opinions of Singaporeans about the poor, said Tang Lay Lee, an advocate and social worker from the group.



Singapore's People's Action Party has been in power for more than half a century

"Mindsets will not change just with facts and figures about poverty. We want people to feel what it is like to be in the shoes of a person getting by on S\$5 a day for food and transport," she said.

The issue has been raised in parliament by Nominated MP Laurence Lien.

"Social researchers have estimated that 10 to 15% of households are low income. We do not see poverty in your face; it's not abject poverty around here," he said.

"And that's why it's hard to understand, if you look at the infrastructure, it's beautiful but what happens behind closed doors is a different matter for most families."

Mr Lien said that despite government efforts, the problem had got worse in the past decade because of globalisation and the influx of lower-cost foreign workers who have suppressed the wages of many blue-collar Singaporeans. It is meant that the income of the poorest 20% of Singaporeans had stagnated, he said.

But Mr Lien said that national identity was also a contributory factor.



Mr

Lien said the influx of foreign workers on lower wages have affected wages of blue-collar workers

"This society has been founded on the basis of meritocracy... if you have been successful, it's because of your own efforts, if you're not, it's your fault," he said.

"But we need to change that narrative because people have got different opportunities and different conditions that could impede their ability to move out of that poverty trap."

### **Welfare 'crutch'**

The budget announced by Singapore's Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam last week aims to address some of these problems.

The stated aim of the budget, which will push the government into deficit this year and next, is to achieve a "fair and equitable society".

To do this, the government is offering kindergarten fee assistance to more households to help families like Nurhaida's, as well as transport subsidies to those with disabilities. But the lion's share of spending will go to the older generation.

Singapore is spending the equivalent of \$7bn on lifelong healthcare subsidies for elderly citizens. Some 450,000 aged 65 and above will get medical benefits ranging from specialist care to medical insurance.





Nurhaida's children eat their meals crouched on the floor of their tiny flat

The city-state has one of the fastest ageing populations due to the low birth rate, and many of the elderly, dubbed the "pioneer generation", are credited with the work that built today's modern, wealthy Singapore.

But despite the wealth, there is increasing discontent. The ruling People's Action Party, which has held power for more than half a century, suffered its worst election result in 2011. It has since lost two more by-elections, and some analysts say that they are now seeking to placate a more demanding electorate.

Financially, Singapore can afford a welfare state for those in need, said Eugene Tan, an associate professor of law at Singapore Management University who comments widely about local politics. But politically, welfare is unpopular, he said.

"It is seen as a path to economic irrelevance because it undermines the dignity of work in a society that abhors and just doesn't do welfare," he said.

"It's an abiding fear of becoming enervated by a poor work ethos where welfare becomes a crutch."

But he admits that Singapore has become more welfare-oriented than ever before, even if that welfare is strictly controlled.

"It's a social welfare state in-the-making, where the tight-fisted approach is now recognised to take away from nation building."

But whether Singapore ever goes the way of many other developed economies by providing more welfare for families like Nurhaida's would be "a tightrope walk", he said.