

Poverty in wealthy S'pore

A Singapore Management University report says it's time for Singapore to join comparable developed nations in officially defining and measuring poverty.

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SINGAPORE: The growing presence of poor people in wealthy Singapore is becoming more and more obvious despite the fact that begging carries heavy fines or even imprisonment.

There are calls for Singapore to acknowledge rapidly rising income inequality by setting an official poverty line.

Hong Kong's recent decision to set a poverty line as a way to better identify and assist its poor has prompted a similar debate in Singapore's parliament.

A report released on November 11 said Singaporeans are not aware of the scale and depth of poverty.

Meanwhile, a new public awareness campaign challenges citizens to try living on US\$5 (RM15) for a day in a nation with one of the highest costs of living in the world.

But even as government spending on anti-poverty efforts rises – assistance payments to the poor exceeded S\$100million dollars for the first time last year, a nearly 45% jump from the previous year – business-minded Singaporeans are balking at the idea.

Some 105,000 households in Singapore – that's one in 10 family homes, or 387,000 people – earn an average monthly income of S\$1,323 (RM3,308) and some 114,000 individual residents earn less than \$805 (RM2,012) a month, according to government data.

This is despite the country's average per capita income of S\$52,305 (RM130,762) a year, one of the highest in the world.

Yet Singapore's poor are largely hidden, in part because affordable public housing typically means a roof over the heads of the working poor and elderly poor.

That helps to create an overall impression that poverty and homelessness may exist only negligibly, if at all.

Widening income disparity

While Singapore has no official measure of poverty, the average household spends S\$1,250 (RM3,225) a month for a four-person household on basic needs – food, clothing and shelter, says a two-year-old survey held by the Department of Statistics.

“In light of rising concerns about increasing inequality, and debate about the existence, extent and nature of poverty in Singapore, it is time for Singapore to join comparable developed nations in officially defining and measuring poverty,” reads the report by Singapore Management University’s Lien Centre for Social Innovation.

In the report, a team of researchers and policy experts say officially defining and measuring poverty will help to identify at-risk households and to measure the performance of efforts to lift people out of poverty.

The report cites two measures of inequality in Singapore.

First, the period from 1998 to 2010 saw the real median income of employed residents in the bottom 20% fall by approximately eight percent, while the income of those in the highest-earning quintile increased by 27%.

Second, Singapore’s Gini coefficient – which measures the degree of inequality within the country – increased between 2002 and 2012 at a rate that far outpaced the rest of the developed world.

“Rising inequality does not necessarily denote the existence of poverty.

“However, rising inequality combined with evidence of poverty indicates that the poor are being left further behind, and this appears to be what is happening in Singapore,” noted the report.