

WHILE attending university in the United States, Singaporean Kevin Seah remembers being struck by the snaking lines outside soup kitchens and homeless shelters.

"That was my impression of poverty. Begging, homelessness. But in Singapore you don't see all that," said Mr Seah, 27, a former Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) boy who admitted his life until then had been quite sheltered.

So he was surprised to find some startling statistics about the poor here, when he first started working on a marketing campaign to raise awareness of poverty in Singapore when he returned after graduating from Buffalo University in upstate New York.

"There are 105,000 households earning below \$1,500 a month. I knew there are some issues which we are facing. But it's quite hidden," he said.

Hidden they may be, but they are certainly there. According to latest official data, 10 per cent of Singapore's resident households, comprising an average of 3.5 members and with at least one working person, earn an average of \$1,644.

This figure is all the more surprising given that Singapore has one of the world's highest annual incomes per head, of \$65,000.

Singapore has no official measurement of what constitutes poverty here, but the Department of Statistics found the average household expenditure on basic needs to be \$1,250 a month for a four-person household two years ago.

This is average spending on food, clothing and shelter for those living in a one- to two-room flat, according to a paper to be released by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation.

Mr Seah, whose father is a businessman and mother an optometrist, discovered this when he began working with Caritas, the charity arm of the Catholic Church, eight months ago on its "Singaporeans against poverty" campaign, which was launched on Monday.

Given Singapore's rapid economic progress over the decades, poverty is a phenomenon that many do not encounter personally, or tend to wave aside because it is not part of their daily consciousness.

Indeed, in 2001, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, declared that Singapore had eradicated poverty. "There are no homeless, destitute or starving people in Singapore," he said, in remarks that some considered too sweeping.

Even someone like Ms Candice Neo, who grew up in a relatively low-income family, has never encountered first-hand those who struggle to get by daily. This is why she decided to do a project on poverty in Singapore last year, together with her classmates at Nanyang Technological University.

They went to rental flats in poorer estates in Circuit Road and Jalan Kukoh and put together videos about the lives of the poor, meeting not just elderly folk abandoned by their families, but also families with young children.

One elderly person they met had to sleep on the floor because his mattress was infested with bed bugs, and another did not turn on the lights at night in order to save on the electricity bill.

They learnt that while most Singaporeans have enjoyed the benefits of economic growth that has lifted incomes for the majority, pockets of less well-off families remain, often out of sight in this gleaming metropolis.

Disappearance of the poor

WHAT has led to poverty becoming seemingly invisible in Singapore?

Chiefly, it is because Singapore's progress has been so fast.

Said Associate Professor Irene Ng of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) department of social work: "Poverty has become hidden because Singapore has progressed so quickly and also become more socially segregated. So many people do not see poverty or know people in financial hardship."

With an income gap made wider by globalisation and technology advances, and a liberal inflow of foreign workers in the last decade,

wages at the bottom have been depressed, while those at the top have rocketed.

And it is not just the material wealth gap, but the education system that has also played a part - more children of well-off families go to the top schools, meaning greater social stratification.

A second reason is the nature of the poverty.

Mr Yeoh Lam Keong, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), who helped to draft the upcoming paper on measuring poverty by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation, said that the invisibility could be due to the fact that poverty is largely made up of the working poor - people who work but earn very low wages, and the elderly poor - people who have earned little wages throughout their career and are now either retired or unemployed.

"It is relatively hard to see, and the extent of the problem has yet to be properly measured and studied," he added.

The third reason: Singapore's public housing policy may have played a part, as even the poorest typically have a roof over their heads.

It means that "the man in the street would rather help a person devoid of shelter in another country, than pump in money to help a family in Singapore living in a flat but where the per capita income could be very low", said social worker Charis Kuang, a manager at Care Corner Woodlands Family Service Centre.

Yet a fourth reason could be a simple reluctance to talk about poverty in developed countries because "poverty implies backwardness, underdevelopment and failure", said Professor Jonathan Rigg of NUS, who has been covering poverty issues in Asia since the 1980s. "In a place like Singapore,

which has had extraordinary success and growth in material well-being, to admit there are poor people would seem to be admitting failure."

But it certainly seems that discussing poverty is becoming more mainstream.

Hong Kong last month set an official poverty line of half the median monthly household income for the first time, immediately declaring 1.3 million people, or a fifth of its population, as living under this line.

This has given rise to calls for Singapore to also set an official poverty line.

However, Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing on Monday told Parliament that Singapore is not considering having such a line, as it would not fully reflect the severity and complexity of issues faced by the poor, and may also lead to those above the line missing out on assistance.

"Different countries tailor their methods to identify and assist their needy according to their circumstances... In Singapore, we use broad definitions for the groups we seek to help, have clear criteria to identify and assess those in need, and tailored schemes to assist them," he said.

"A poverty line does not fully reflect the severity and complexity of the issues faced by poor families, which could include ill health, lack of housing or weak family relationships."

But the issue continues to simmer, with writers to the Forum page of The Straits Times subsequently arguing the pros and cons. Amid this, Caritas Singapore launched its poverty awareness campaign this week, raising the issue for discussion.

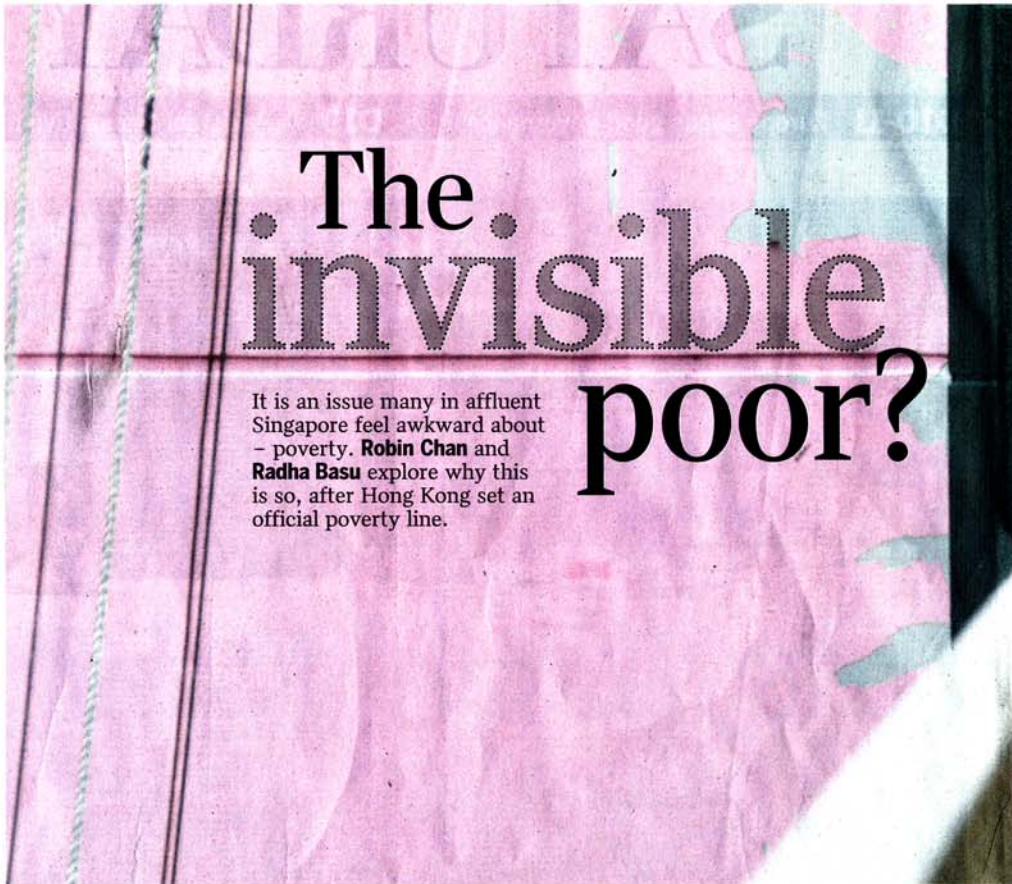
"There is now more interest in poverty among the public, because with rising affluence, education and social awareness, people are concerned that sections of the community are still living in hardship," said Mr Yeoh.

What is poverty?

YET, while there have been renewed calls to measure and define poverty, the issue is not entirely new and has featured in various government reports and discussions in the past. Still, the way forward remains unclear.

Member of Parliament Seah Kian Peng, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Family and Social Development, said there is no need to define someone as poor or not poor.

"How does this help them? It



The invisible poor?

It is an issue many in affluent Singapore feel awkward about - poverty. **Robin Chan and Radha Basu** explore why this is so, after Hong Kong set an official poverty line.



Mr Kevin Seah at a compound area of one-room cluster flats in Beach Road. He is working with Caritas, the charity arm of the Catholic Church, on its "Singaporeans against poverty" campaign. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

FEW OUTWARD SIGNS

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NTU students Benny Lim and Candice Neo met residents in Jalan Kukoh rental flats, like Mr Mathieu Gordon Anthony, 68, for a university project on poverty in Singapore. Mr Anthony is an ex-convict with no living family members, and shares his one-room flat with two other elderly men. He is receiving \$400 in monthly public assistance. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

doesn't. In my opinion, this doesn't add one iota of depth, of nuance, of understanding," he said.

"Is a mother who has been trained as a nurse but stuck at home dealing with elderly parents, and coping with psychological harm from domestic violence poor because she doesn't make \$1,500 a month? And then we view her through that lens?"

"Or do we continue to use the approach we do now - not to label anyone under a certain income level poor, but to see them as a complete, complex and precious human being, to be cared for on many levels?"

Dr Lily Neo, MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC, believes such attempts to define poverty, while well-meaning, might result in stigmatisation and social stratification.

"It is more important to ensure that various groups of those in need are helped out holistically at their time of need. The important issue is more on preventive measures to ensure people do not fall into poverty in the first place."

The Wall Street Journal also raised concern over Hong Kong's adoption of a poverty line and its impact on work ethic and a government budget in surplus.

"An arbitrary measure of poverty... encourages policies that will undermine the social mobility and economic growth needed to reduce poverty," it said.

"Many politicians in both the pro-Beijing and pro-democracy camps are eager to expand Hong Kong's small welfare state, and they will no doubt use this new tool to lobby for more benefits."

It is fair warning for a country like Singapore whose work ethic and fiscal prudence have arguably been key to its economic sustainability.

Mr Yong Teck Meng of Habitat for Humanity Singapore said: "An income number alone would make it difficult to tell the whole picture. I have been in HDB flats of the 'supposedly-poor' equipped with an LED TV larger than the one I have at home."

Added Mr Seah: "We should continue to target those who need help the most and reinforce individual effort and responsibility."

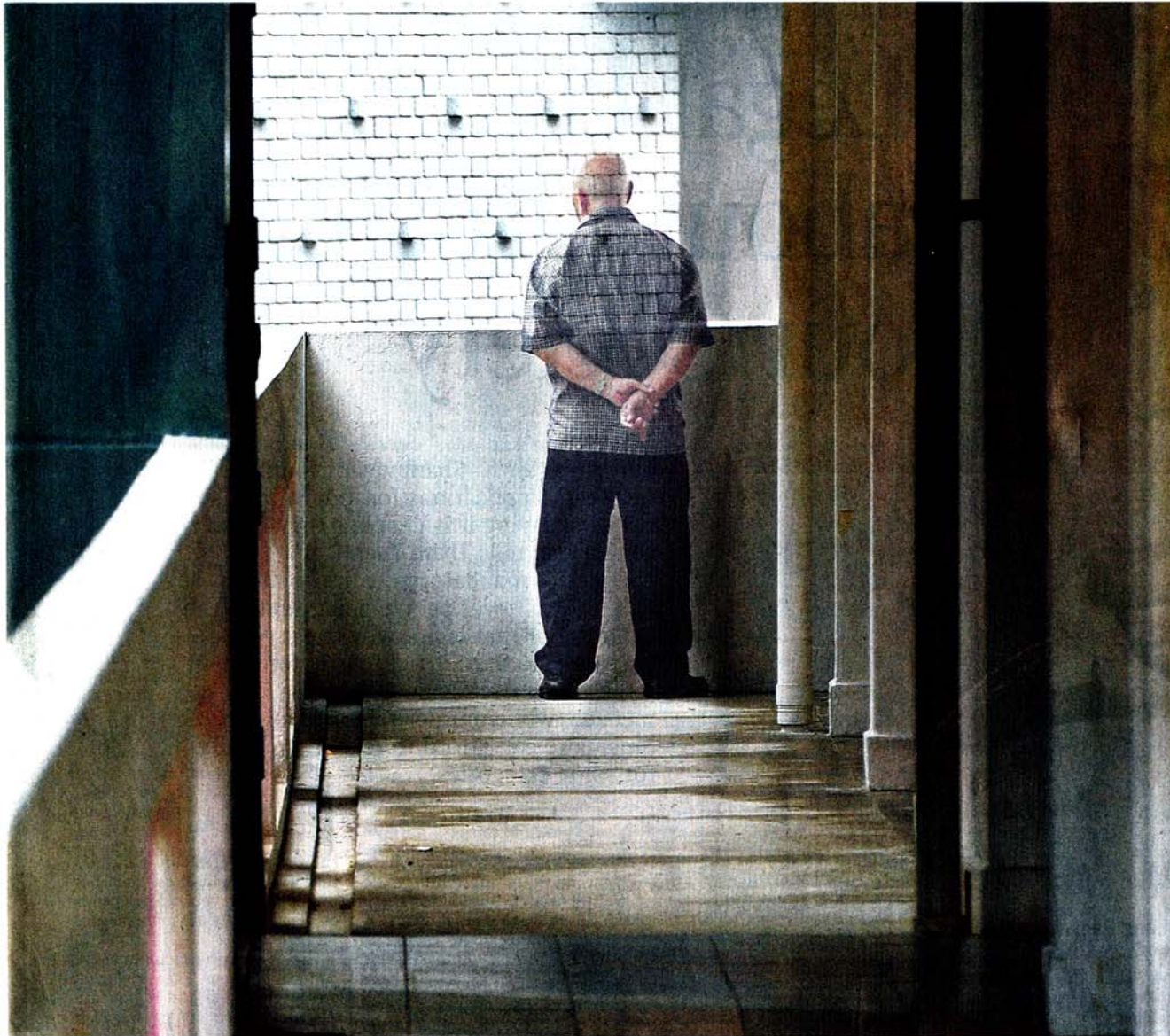
Even without having an official poverty line, Singapore appears to have several yardsticks of those in need. One is public assistance. A single adult receives \$450, while a household of two adults and two children can receive \$1,480.

Absolute or relative?

OVER time, the way poverty has been defined globally has evolved and there are now three broad methods - absolute, relative and subjective.

Absolute poverty is the most simplistic. It fixes a level of income, below which it is deemed that the person or family is poor.

In developing countries, the World Bank defines the absolute poverty line at US\$1.25 (S\$1.55) a day, and has set it at US\$2 a day for middle-class developing coun-



How some countries measure poverty

UNLIKE many developed countries, Singapore – along with Canada, New Zealand and South Korea – does not have an official poverty line.

Singapore does have some estimates on numbers of the working poor, but there is no publicly available government data on how many non-working households there are who can be considered poor.

Still, data on how many people fall below a certain level of income is useful as it is a simple yet effective gauge to track numbers of people who might need financial help – and whether their ranks are growing. This is why even countries that do not have official poverty lines, have unofficial ones.

Take Canada. Rather than a single line – which has obvious flaws – it has a more complex and comprehensive method of tracking numbers of the poor. A spokesman for the Canadian government's statistics agency told The Straits Times that it has three different benchmarks to measure how many

“low-income” people there are at any given time.

The first is the Low-income Cut-offs. These are income thresholds below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on basic necessities, such as food and clothes. The country keeps meticulous data on how many working and non-working poor fall below these thresholds.

It is not a single income level, but is fine-tuned depending on a host of factors such as whether the person lives in an urban or rural area.

The second, the Low-Income Measure, is 50 per cent of the country's median family income, adjusted for family size.

The third, known as the Market Basket of Measures, measures disposable income.

These are treated as “de facto poverty lines”, the spokesman said.

At last count, in 2011, there were between three million and 4.2 million Canadians – or between 10 and 12 per cent of the population – who were considered “low-income”.

ADMISSION OF FAILURE

“In a place like Singapore, which has had extraordinary success and growth in material well-being, to admit there are poor people would seem to be admitting failure.”

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tries. But it gets trickier in developed countries.

The US has an absolute poverty threshold set at three times the cost of a minimum food diet in 1963 updated annually for inflation. But these absolute measures tended to have fluctuating numbers of poor depending on recessions and economic booms, according to economist Michael Forster from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Relative poverty is a measure more often used in developed countries, as it is set in the context of the overall distribution of income in a country.

The OECD sets the mark at half the median household income, while Britain and Taiwan have thresholds at 60 per cent of median household income.

But relative definitions of poverty, by definition, mean that some people will always be less well-off, regardless of how afflu-

ent a society becomes.

So policymakers have to look at other yardsticks to ensure that the less well-off are not falling further and further behind those surging ahead, with some landing in a condition of being in dire need.

Subjective poverty, a newer concept, asks what it feels like to be poor, taking in cultural and societal attitudes to being “poor”.

This has led to new and more nuanced ways of measuring poverty, said Ms Sanushka Mudaliar,

senior manager at the Lien Centre for Social Innovation.

These include multi-dimensional poverty measures with indicators for poor health, lack of education and disempowerment; and an index used by the United Nations which tracks exclusion from social services, and civil and social life.

Yet another is Participatory Poverty Assessments, which involve engaging the community in creating a definition and measure

of poverty that aligns with their experience, she added.

Some might argue that since relative poverty will always be a concern, the poor will always be with us. While that might be axiomatic, it should not distract society from seeking to understand the underlying causes which keep some members from breaking out of poverty and trying to give them a leg-up.

As Singapore strives to become a more fair and just society, one

which is plugged into a fast-changing globalised economy, the key to maintaining its social cohesion will be efforts that are made – by Government as well as individuals – to help its weaker members stay with the pack that is racing ahead, rather than have them fall further behind.

Having a frank conversation on the issue of poverty, and how to tackle it, is a start.

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