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New Study Identifies 40 Items Deemed Essential for Singaporeans’ Household Needs

Study by SMU uncovers insights into what Singaporeans think are essential items, the extent to which different groups can access such items, and gives recommendations to bolster social support for the vulnerable

Singapore, 12 July 2024 – Forty out of fifty-one items polled are regarded by a majority of Singaporeans to be essential for their daily household needs. These items comprise household appliances like refrigerators and washing machines, items related to digital connectivity, as well as social activities like going out with family and friends.

These findings are from a new study titled “Household Needs Study (HNS)”, which surveyed 4,014 respondents. The study was conducted from May 2022 to February 2023, and was spearheaded by [Prof Paulin Straughan, Director of SMU Centre for Research on Successful Ageing \(ROSA\)](#) and Dr Mathew Mathews, Head of Social Lab, and Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The study aimed to identify what Singaporeans deem to be essential for a normal life in Singapore and examined Singaporeans’ ability to afford such items and activities (across different household income, housing type, and age groups), and their general attitudes and beliefs towards reasons for poverty.

The study found that Singaporeans were divided on whether other items, such as air conditioning and dining out at a restaurant at least once a month, were considered essential. Other items, such as an annual staycation, were not deemed essential by most respondents.

It was also revealed that income or housing type affected whether respondents thought certain items were perceived as essential. For instance, 34% of respondents living in 1- and 2-room HDB flats thought air conditioning was essential, compared to 78% in private housing.

Two-thirds of respondents reported that they had access and/or could afford all 40 items deemed essential items identified in the study. The remaining one-third lacked access to an average of four essential items.

As a nationally representative population-based survey, the study can help academics, government agencies, social service practitioners, philanthropists and more to understand and develop social policy and practice. In particular, to ensure that essential items are provided for those in need. It also highlights the importance of considering activities pertaining to social inclusion as essential to one’s quality of life. Refer to Annex A for the study’s key findings.



SMU-DBS Foundation Symposium on Essential Household Needs in Singapore

The HNS was presented at the ‘SMU-DBS Foundation Symposium on Essential Household Needs in Singapore’ on 12 July. Speakers from the academic, social service and corporate sectors gathered to discuss findings from the HNS, and share views on how to enhance vulnerable segments’ access to essential needs.

“[SMU ROSA](#) is delighted to continue its partnerships with the government and industry to foster a more inclusive society through research. It is crucial for us to understand and address these needs to advance healthspan and holistic well-being for Singaporeans,” said **Prof Paulin Straughan, Director of SMU [Centre for Research on Successful Ageing \(ROSA\)](#)**.

“We’re privileged to be part of today’s symposium, and of an essential conversation with like-minded parties who share our commitment to taking a whole-of-society approach to drive change. In today’s fast-evolving world, there is an urgent need for us to lend support to those who need it most, and empower them with the skills, tools, and opportunities to build towards better circumstances. At DBS Foundation, we hope to join forces with those who share our goal of uplifting the vulnerable and creating a more inclusive Singapore for all,” said **Ms Monica Datta, Lead, Fostering Inclusion, at DBS Foundation**.

At the Symposium, Dr Mathew Mathews also presented findings of an IPS poll on Singaporeans’ perception on who should provide for essential items for those in need. The poll found that respondents were inclined to view the self as the main provider of essential items, followed by the government, community, relatives/friends, and then businesses (in order).

Breaking down the list of essential items, 67% of respondents believed the government should help Singaporeans who cannot afford basic necessities (e.g., three meals a day, shelter, access to healthcare), while 62% believed that individuals are responsible for providing themselves items associated with a decent standard of living (e.g., dining out at restaurants once a month).

Both the IPS poll and the HNS were conducted as part of the Ministry of Social and Family Development’s (MSF) regular partnerships with academics to enable informed and evidence-based policy making, and funded by MSF.

Enclosures

Annex A: Key findings of the Household Needs Study

Annex B: Key Findings from IPS’ poll on ‘Public Perceptions of Provision of Essential Needs’

Annex C: Symposium on Singapore’s Household Needs Survey



About Singapore Management University

Established in 2000, Singapore Management University (SMU) is recognised for its disciplinary and multi-disciplinary research that addresses issues of global relevance, impacting business, government, and society. Its distinctive education, incorporating innovative experiential learning, aims to nurture global citizens, entrepreneurs and change agents. With more than 13,000 students, SMU offers a wide range of bachelors, masters and PhD degree programmes in the disciplinary areas associated with six of its eight schools - Accountancy, Business, Computing, Economics, Law and Social Sciences. Its seventh school, the SMU College of Integrative Studies, offers degree programmes in deep, integrative interdisciplinary education. The College of Graduate Research Studies, SMU's eighth school, enhances integration and interdisciplinarity across the various SMU postgraduate research programmes that will enable students to gain a holistic learning experience and well-grounded approach to their research. SMU also offers a growing number of executive development and continuing education programmes. Through its city campus, SMU focuses on making meaningful impact on Singapore and beyond through its partnerships with industry, policy makers and academic institutions. <https://www.smu.edu.sg/>

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ANNEX A: Key findings of the Household Needs Study

- 1. 40 out of 51 items and activities were deemed essential by at least half of the respondents, including social participation activities.**
 - a. The items which most respondents saw as essential included household appliances such as refrigerators (100%) and washing machines (96%), as well as items related to digital connectivity like smartphones with data plans (93%) and home broadband plans (89%).
 - b. Essential social participation activities included family bonding outside of home (90%) and free time for hobbies (86%).
 - c. Higher expenditure activities, such as dining out at restaurants at least once a month (62%) and annual vacation to a Southeast Asian country (56%), were perceived as less essential.
 - d. Items deemed non-essential included private tuition (49%) and private enrichment classes (30%), as well as activities like annual staycations (27%).

- 2. Two-thirds of the respondents did not experience any relative deprivation, defined as the inability to access and afford items that were considered essential by at least half of the respondents.**
 - a. The remaining one-third who experienced relative deprivation lacked access to an average of four items deemed essential.
 - b. The top three items with the highest relative deprivation rates were emergency savings of six months of expenses (24%), emergency savings of three months of expenses (16%), and an annual vacation to a Southeast Asian country (11%).
 - c. Housing type and monthly household income were found to be correlated with relative deprivation rates – those in smaller housing types and those with lower income tended to experience higher rates of deprivation.

- 3. The majority of respondents believed that poverty is attributable to personal actions and circumstances, such as facing major issues in their lives (80%) or spending money on inappropriate items (72%).**
 - a. Conversely, fewer respondents agreed that poverty is due to external factors like bad luck (22%) or divine will (17%).

Recommendations:

- 1. Targeted interventions are needed to support more vulnerable groups in accessing essential items, such as those who are lower-income or living in 1-2 room public flats.**

- 2. There can be greater awareness and initiatives to help encourage savings, particularly for lower-income groups.**
 - 16% of the Singapore population lack savings for 3 months' worth of expenses, and 24% lack savings for 6 months' worth of expenses. It is important to increase awareness of the importance of savings, which can help mitigate the impact of sudden financial shocks such as job loss.



ANNEX B : Key Findings from IPS' poll on 'Public Perceptions of Provision of Essential Needs'

- 1. With reference to the list of essential items identified by the HNS, most respondents felt that individuals should primarily be responsible for providing a larger number of items than other parties.**
 - Respondents had a higher tendency to indicate the Government as the party to provide for healthcare- and childcare-related items.
 - Items that respondents most commonly indicated that the individual should primarily be responsible for were items related to social participation and leisure (e.g. annual overseas vacation in a Southeast Asian country, dining out at a restaurant once a month).
 - For a number of household, daily living, and social participation items, more respondents agreed that community, businesses, and relatives/family should play a larger role than the Government.

- 2. Respondents agreed that the Government should be the main party in the providing 'Basic Necessities' to those who cannot afford it, while the individual should be the main party responsible for 'Items which Provide a Decent Standard of Living'.**
 - When asked about who should support individuals who could not afford items that were 'Basic Necessities', the Government (67.3%) was selected by most respondents, followed by the community (59.3%), and the self (41.3%), i.e., self-reliance.
 - For 'Items which Provide a Decent Standard of Living', most respondents felt that responsibility should lie with the self (61.7%), followed by the Government (34.1%), and the community (31.6%).
 - Two-thirds of respondents felt that two or more parties should be responsible for helping Singaporeans to afford basic necessities, with the individual and the Government more commonly ranked as the primary party to ensure this. The community was most commonly ranked as the second party to provide for basic necessities to those who cannot afford them (after either the individual or the Government).

- 3. Amongst respondents who chose 'Government' as an option to provide for basic essential items, most respondents (58.1%) preferred to re-allocate Government spending from other areas to fund such provisions rather than to pay higher taxes (17.9%).**
 - Of the items that respondents felt should be funded by a reallocation of Government spending, the top three categories were items related to healthcare, child-related expenses, and public transport.
 - There was no clear consensus among these respondents on which areas this funding should be reallocated from. The top two areas from which resources could be drawn were Arts (36.8%) and Sports (32.7%).
 - Of the items that respondents felt should be funded by higher taxation, the top three categories were items related to emergency savings, digital connectivity, and social participation and leisure.



ANNEX C: Symposium on Singapore’s Household Needs Survey

Hosted on the SMU campus, the SMU-DBS Foundation Symposium on Essential Household Needs on 12 July 2024 was attended by close to 200 members from academia, the social service, philanthropy and corporate sectors, and government agencies. The discussions at the Symposium addressed the insights unveiled by the HNS, shared research from other countries on studies on essential needs, and represented views from academics, social service practitioners and the corporate sector on how society can help the most vulnerable gain access to essential needs. The study underscores SMU ROSA’s continued efforts to translate applied research into evidence-based policy interventions.

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