

# Singapore's public toilets dirtier since 2016: Study

Key factors likely lack of good hygiene habits, poor facilities; 3 in 5 polled want overhaul

Cheryl Teh

Despite endless exhortations to keep Singapore's public toilets clean, they have become dirtier since 2016, according to a new island-wide study of more than 1,000 toilets in hawker centres and coffee shops.

This might boil down to two key factors: a continued lack of good public hygiene habits, and creaky toilet facilities such as taps that do not work and clogged toilets, said those behind the project conducted by the Singapore Management University (SMU).

"Public awareness needs to be raised in abundance, and the operators of coffee shops and hawker centres need to step up their game if they care about public hygiene," said project coordina-

tor and SMU senior lecturer of statistics Rosie Ching.

The study, titled "Waterloo", was conducted by Ms Ching and 157 SMU graduates from Jan 10 to Feb 7.

They polled some 6,000 patrons of 104 out of 114 hawker centres in Singapore, and 1,181 of the 1,330 coffee shops across Singapore, asking them 100 questions on toilet cleanliness, including aspects such as mirrors, taps, sinks, soap dispensers, toilet paper, toilet bowls, flushes, floors, rubbish bins, sanitation bins, urinals and ventilation.

This follows a similar survey done in 2016 by Ms Ching and her then students.

The 2020 version found that the dirtiest public toilets are in Tuas, Telok Blangah and Bukit Batok. Marina South topped the list for having the cleanest public toilets, followed

by Tanglin and Changi.

Coffee shop toilets are deemed significantly dirtier than hawker centre toilets.

But the latter also saw its cleanliness standards drop significantly compared with four years ago, based on respondents' feedback.

Coffee shop toilets remained as filthy as they were in 2016.

Said Ms Ching: "It's disheartening to see statistical analyses reveal a marked regression in toilet hygiene from 2016, and furthermore, in almost every single attribute of toilet cleanliness on average."

The students interviewed 8,217 customers and hawkers about the state of toilets in coffee shops and food centres across all postal codes in Singapore.

More than a quarter of 5,948 customers polled said that they would not use the toilets at hawkers and coffee shops, with three in five saying there was a need for an overhaul of the state of Singapore's toilets.

Accountant Jennifer Ng, 27, said she often patronised the hawker

outlet at Block 308, Clementi Avenue 4, but was turned off by the "revolting" sight of the toilets.

"I refrain from using the toilets at any hawker centre or foodcourt, because I'm really disgusted by what I see and smell in the bathrooms," Ms Ng said. "It can be very gross and it spoils my appetite completely."

Hawker Evan Tan, 46, who works at a stall at a coffee shop in Bishan, said that the toilets he uses have always been dirty, but not much has been done in the past five years to improve their condition.

"I don't have high expectations of cleanliness since there are so many people working at and patronising hawker centres with high footfall. But it's hard to think of our food being prepared with 100 per cent cleanliness, with the communal toilet being so dirty," Mr Tan said.

The Straits Times also spoke to several cleaners, including Madam Low Loke Heng, 67, who said that she cleans the toilets four to five times during her 12-hour shifts at a

Eunos coffee shop but it "just isn't enough".

"Just an hour after I finish cleaning, I come back to find unflushed toilets, water pooling around the basins, and sometimes puddles of urine on the floor," she said. "I wish people would be courteous enough to clean up after themselves, as it would make our jobs easier."

Beyond habits, public toilet infrastructure needs to be upgraded, said Ms Ching.

"Dry floors, odourless areas and adequate ventilation will help. But maintaining the basic necessities alone – like unchoked, flushable toilets, or taps that work – this is the bare minimum," she said.

Meanwhile, Mr Edward D'Silva, chairman of the Public Hygiene Council, proposed a "carrot and stick" approach.

This would involve giving coffee shop and hawker centre operators a one-year grace period to upgrade their toilets with modern, working facilities such as by putting in hand dryers or paper towel dispensers, clean mirrors, and new and unstained urinals and toilet bowls.

He suggests making mandatory a system that rates public toilets in terms of their cleanliness.

If hygiene standards fall consistently below a certain ranking, fines could be imposed, he added.

"This will help improve personal and public hygiene, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond," said Mr D'Silva.

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BASIC MAINTENANCE NEEDED

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**MS ROSIE CHING** Singapore Management University senior lecturer of statistics, on the need to upgrade infrastructure.

IMPACT ON FOOD HYGIENE

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**MR EVAN TAN**, a hawker at a coffee shop in Bishan, on the condition of hawker centre toilets.