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The cleanliness of Singapore's public toilets still has a long way to go, a study by the Singapore Management University (SMU) has found.

The survey of more than 1,000 toilets located in coffee shops and hawker centres showed that most of these facilities were as dirty as they were three years ago.

The Waterloo study, which follows up on previous surveys done in 2016 and 2020, found that the cleanest public toilets are at Marina South, while the dirtiest ones are located at Pioneer, Ubi and along the Singapore River.

POORLY VENTILATED, STAINED FLOORS, CLOGGED SINKS

“We studied the hawker centre and coffee shop toilets, and we found them to be largely in a woeful state, particularly the coffee shop toilets,” said SMU principal lecturer of statistics Rosie Ching, who is behind the study.

The nationwide public toilet study found toilets that have been relegated to small, dark and poorly ventilated spaces with stained, wet and oily floors, she told CNA's Singapore Tonight on Thursday (Nov 9).

Inadequate toilet paper, clogged sinks, dirty taps, stained mirrors, and “gruesome” seats with footprints on them were also observed.

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“You also have stuff inside the toilet bowl that one might expect to have been flushed away long ago,” added Ms Ching, whose research interests include statistical experiments and applications.

“Altogether, it makes for a very challenging toilet-going experience for any customer in a food eating place like a hawker centre or a coffee shop.”

The survey was conducted between August and September this year by Ms Ching and 170 undergraduates.

A total of 9,411 people, comprising 460 employees and 8,951 customers, were interviewed.



TIME TO FOCUS ON ENFORCEMENT?

The study found that public toilets in coffee shops are as dirty as in 2020, with some improvements observed in hawker centres.

Singaporean toilet activist Jack Sim, who was also interviewed on the programme, believes coffee shop toilets can be as clean and well-maintained as those in shopping centres.

He said it is time to focus on enforcement, so that coffee shop owners are more motivated to maintain and repair their toilets.

“The users are the same at the shopping centres and the coffee shops. The difference is the owners,” said Mr Sim, founder of the World Toilet Organization.

“If (toilets in) shopping centres are clean, it is because the owners saw it as revenue generation and they are responsible.”

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Many coffee shop owners, on the other hand, think that they can save money and water if nobody uses them, he said, adding that a fine should be imposed on owners of premises with dirty toilets.

“So I think this attitude can only be solved by government enforcement,” he noted.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY TO KEEP PUBLIC TOILETS CLEAN

Similar to the previous public toilet surveys, the latest edition comprised comprehensive on-site surveys of toilet attributes.

It confirmed earlier findings that toilets near cooking facilities are significantly dirtier.

One in four people interviewed said they will not answer nature's calls at these toilets.

“I think the coffee shops don't have much space. Therefore, the hygiene level has to be kept very high,” said Mr Sim.

“What happens is that food hygiene becomes very dangerous when pathogens from the toilet travel into food, and when the cooks don't even have the soap to wash their hands. In the coffee shops, the soap is diluted with so much water, and the cooks cannot wash their hands properly.”

Most survey respondents said that toilets in coffee shops and hawkers centres need a major overhaul.

“We believe that it is time we recognise that keeping public toilets clean is the collective responsibility of both the premise operators and the users. It does not only fall on the shoulder of one,” said Mr Andrew Khng, chairman of the Public Hygiene Council.

“Clean public toilets can only be possible when everyone plays their part. Partnership between operators and users could also create a multiplier effect that encourages good toilet etiquette across the wider community.”

Ms Michelle Tay, director of the Singapore Kindness Movement, agreed, saying: “This fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility that reflects a collective commitment to maintain hygiene and the overall quality of life for everyone in our society.”

Source: CNA/ca(fk)