

Lower-income families with young kids worst hit by pandemic: Study

Theresa Tan
Senior Social Affairs
Correspondent

Lower-income families with young children have been hit the hardest by the Covid-19 pandemic, with home-based learning putting kids from needy households at a greater disadvantage, a new large-scale study has found.

The study involved 4,355 children, aged between two and nine years, from 3,018 families and key findings include:

- 10 per cent of families had someone who lost a job during the pandemic. Breaking this down by housing type, 20 per cent of households living in HDB rental flats fell into this category. This is compared with 8 per cent of families who own five-room or executive flats and 5 per cent of those living in private property they own or rent.
- Almost three in 10 families said they do not have savings of at least one month of their family's income. Slightly over half of those in rental flats face this

situation, compared with about one in four of those in five-room or executive flats and 8 per cent of households in private property.

- When schools closed to stem the spread of the virus and students took to home-based learning, this placed children from poor families at a greater disadvantage. For example, 88 per cent of children living in HDB rental flats have a computer or tablet for home-based learning, compared with 98 per cent of children in private property.

Professor Jean Yeung, the study's principal investigator, told *The Sunday Times* that Covid-19 inflicted "multiple shocks" on families.

TARGETED HELP continued on A2

Targeted assistance rolled out for affected families

FROM A1

“The economic impact, work from home, closure of schools and social distancing upset families’ daily routines and functions in an unprecedented manner.”

Explaining why more families in HDB rental flats or smaller flats experienced job loss, she said more of them work in lower-wage jobs in industries that were badly hit by the crisis, like in the service industry and cleaning.

Prof Yeung, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at the National University of Singapore, pointed out that when schools switched to home-based learning, more of the financially better-off parents were better equipped to help their children with such learning or get extra tutoring for them.

“Sustained assistance is needed for disadvantaged families to avoid a greater level of a vicious circle of inter-generational transmission of disadvantages due to the pandemic.”

The Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG Leads) has been following the children since 2018 and interviews on the pandemic’s impact took place between February and this month.

The study is the first one that is nationally representative of families with young children here that examined the impact of the pandemic, said Prof Yeung.

It is supported by the Social Science Research Council, which was set up by the Government in 2016 to develop talent and provide concerted direction for social science and humanities research.

A Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) spokesman said in response to the study’s findings that the ministry recognises that the pandemic has affected the lives of many Singaporeans, and groups that have less means are more impacted.

To help families cope with the financial impact of the pandemic, the ministry said the Government has introduced a host of broad-based support schemes. It has also rolled out targeted financial aid, such as for Singaporeans who lost their jobs or had their incomes cut, through schemes like the Covid-19 Recovery Grant and Temporary Relief Fund.

It has given more financial aid through the ComCare scheme, and the increased aid is a reflection of the pandemic’s impact.

For example, the number of families helped by ComCare Short-To-Medium-Term Assistance rose by about 24 per cent, to about 35,700 households in its last financial year, which ended in March.

theresat@sph.com.sg