

Lien Centre for Social Innovation Report

Earlier this year, the Lien Centre for Social Innovation published *A Handbook On Poverty, Inequality And Unmet Social Needs In Singapore* that compiled research and policy ideas on issues affecting the vulnerable. The centre has built on that and launched three more reports last week that delve into the specific needs of the elderly, the disabled and single parents here. The Straits Times looks at some of the findings.



A study by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation showed that once people have a certain level of social interaction, more interaction does not do them much good or harm. Once a person has an adequate social life, his well-being is more dependent on a myriad of other factors, such as mobility and financial constraints. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Where more support is needed

The elderly Activities and friends keep seniors happy – up to a point

Janice Tai

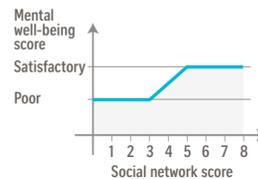
Get Grandpa out of the house to mingle with others and he will be less likely to have dementia or be depressed, past research has found. Yet a new study has discovered that the relationship between social isolation and one's mental well-being is not so clear-cut. Findings from a study by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation show that while it is generally true that a

socially active person tends to be less depressed and have higher life satisfaction, that relationship applies only up to a certain amount of social interaction. Beyond that point, further strengthening one's social network will make no significant difference on his mental well-being. "This suggests that once people have a certain level of social interaction, more interaction does not do them much good or harm," said Associate Professor John Donaldson,

who teaches political science at the Singapore Management University. Prof Donaldson led the study that focused on the needs of the elderly in Singapore. Interviews were done with 102 senior citizens from a low-income neighbourhood. Once a person has an adequate social life, his well-being is then more dependent on a myriad of other factors, such as mobility and financial constraints, said the researchers. "This does not mean that a person should stop going out or that there's

no point in organising social activities, but rather we need to address other factors and examine the type of social networks one is in," said Ms Cate Smith, who is one of the study's researchers. Only certain types of social networks have a big impact on mental wellness, the study found. These are relationships with one's children or grandchildren or people that one can depend on in times of need. Conversely, one's relationship with relatives, friends and neighbours or whether one is living alone or not does not matter as much in determining a person's degree of mental wellness. "So the implication then is not only to look at the number of activities or relationships, but also to enhance the depth of those relationships, especially with family, and one way to do so is to have spaces

Well-being of seniors



NOTE: Social network score takes into account the number of one's social activities and the quality of relationships, among others
Source: LIEN CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION ST GRAPHICS

and services where grandparents and their grandchildren can interact more," said Ms Smith. Mr Keith Lee, director of AWWA Health and Senior Care, said these findings are useful because community groups often see the same few faces on the ground. According to the findings, these activities are unlikely to benefit the regulars much, compared with their potential impact on new people. "Grassroots or community groups often report that they see a certain number of participants, but actually they are drawing from a common pool of seniors and the beneficiaries can be from the same group of elderly," said Mr Lee. "What will be useful is either tracking the number of new participants or getting the regulars to bring in new friends."

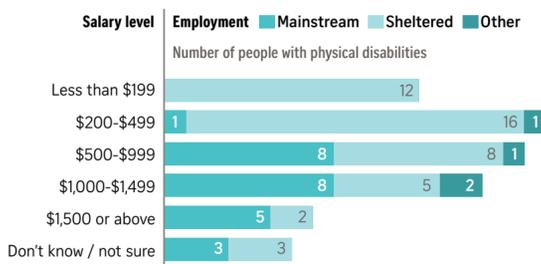
jantai@sph.com.sg

People with disabilities 'Those in sheltered work underpaid'

Priscilla Goy

People with disabilities who are working in sheltered employment are largely underpaid, according to a recent poll by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation. Full-time employment in sheltered workshops drew a median monthly pay of \$200 to \$499. "It does not even match the industry standard for, say, a cleaner or packer. This is much lower than that," lead researcher Ranjana Raghunathan said. "Some respondents liken what they earn at a sheltered workshop to an allowance, rather than a salary, highlighting the meagre pay," she added. Sheltered employment programmes are run by charities and offer jobs that tend to be low-skilled, such as data entry and telemarketing. The survey polled 100 physically disabled people aged 20 to 59, of whom 46 were in sheltered employment. The rest were in mainstream employment, unemployed or students. More than half of the 46 said their salaries were low and insufficient to meet their needs, such as living expenses and healthcare costs. Besides proposing higher wages, some respondents also suggested that there be more opportunities to acquire marketable skills while in sheltered employment. The model of sheltered employment is increasingly unpopular in developed countries. Critics argue that it further isolates people with disabilities, and does not teach skills that prepare them for integration into open employment.

Salaries across different types of employment



Source: LIEN CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION ST GRAPHICS

LOWLY PAID
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MS RANJANA RAGHUNATHAN, lead researcher, on the wages of people with disabilities in sheltered employment.

But until mainstream employment is more inclusive, it may be important to still have sheltered workshops, said Ms Raghunathan. At SPD, which represents people with disabilities, some clients who have limited functional abilities earn up to \$690 a month, including transport subsidies. But craftsmen, who are more skilled and make products such as photo frames by hand, can earn an average of \$1,300 a month, including transport subsidies. SPD executive director Abhimanayau Pal said: "The challenge is in securing enough contract work, and work that pays us better. We hope organisations will be more forthcoming in engaging services offered by our sheltered workshop. "Only with more contract jobs or work that brings in higher revenue, are we then able to offer more allowance for the clients."

goyshiyi@sph.com.sg

Single parents Torn between work and childcare

Priscilla Goy and Janice Tai

The lack of childcare support makes it challenging for single parents to find time to look for or hold down a job. However, without a job, it is hard to afford childcare services as unemployed single parents benefit from fewer subsidies than working single parents. This catch-22 situation has led researchers behind a Lien Centre for Social Innovation study of single-parent families to call for the provision of childcare and student-care subsidies to unemployed single parents. The study polled 88 single parents, of whom 28 were unemployed. Almost half said their unemployment was due mainly to the inability to find childcare help. Currently, all parents with Singapore citizen children enrolled in childcare centres qualify for a basic subsidy of \$300 a month. There is also an additional subsidy of up to \$440 if the monthly household income does not exceed \$7,500, but this is applicable only to mothers and single fathers who work at least 56 hours a month. Single parents also cannot qualify for subsidies to defray the costs of after-school student care if they are not working. "This is a problematic policy requirement as, without childcare, a single parent may struggle to seek and attend work, yet without employment she cannot secure the subsidies," said Dr Emma Glendinning, who led the study. Even when single parents can balance work with caregiving activities, their finances are still strained.



Currently, all parents with Singapore citizen children enrolled in childcare centres qualify for a basic subsidy of \$300 a month. ST FILE PHOTO

Almost 40 per cent of the 88 respondents said their average monthly expenditure was greater than their monthly income. Excluding those whose spouses died, about two-thirds of the remaining 78 respondents did not receive any kind of financial help from their children's other parent. Dr Glendinning said the criteria for childcare subsidies could be tweaked to allay concerns that they end up as free handouts for unemployed single parents. "Subsidies could be made available to them for a limited period of time – when they go for a course to upgrade their skills, or if they show an action plan on how they are searching for jobs," she said. Inaccessibility to childcare services not only affects their employment and financial situation, but may also lead to housing problems. About half of the single parents in the study lived with their parents or relatives mostly because they needed childcare help or were unable to buy their own properties.

Such arrangements are unstable when the family home gets overcrowded or when relationships become strained due to the lack of personal space and privacy. As a result, the study found, more than half of the respondents had moved house at least twice. "All this moving around is not good for the child's emotional development or the single parent who needs to re-establish her own support network in a new community," said Dr Glendinning. The director of AWWA Family Service Centre, Mr Edwin Yim, said: "Employment, financial issues and housing are all interlinked, and we need to address them, to provide longer-term solutions for single parents. "Childcare subsidies for single parents will help the children level up with their peers, by giving them access to supervised and structured programmes."

goyshiyi@sph.com.sg
jantai@sph.com.sg