

Many poor Malays 'do not seek social aid'

Study reveals lack of awareness of available help schemes and a fear of being stigmatised

Walter Sim

About two-thirds of low-income Malay/Muslim households do not seek help from social services despite hopes that their children can escape the poverty trap, according to a new study commissioned by community self-help group Mendaki.

This is not due to an ability to cope on their own, said researcher Caroline Brassard of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy yesterday.

Rather, the 18-month study of 25 households revealed a lack of awareness of available schemes and, more worryingly, she said, an undercurrent of fear at stigmatisation.

To those who argue that this reluctance to tap social assistance is a positive sign of resilience, Dr Brassard told an audience of a hundred yesterday at a Mendaki seminar that "tolerance of a situation should not be confused with resilience".

Social assistance could be the difference between escaping a poverty trap and staying in it, she noted.

But members of the low-income families she studied were held back by a sense of shame. One participant compared asking for money to being "beggars knocking on people's doors in the middle of the night", while another lamented that "I can't always be asking for support from others, right?"

Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim told reporters that the findings reinforced the need to adopt a "last mile approach" by going door to door to speak to low-income families and urge them to tap resources that can help them achieve their aspirations.

The study also pointed to a need for agencies to revise a social assistance system reliant on the submission of a large volume of forms,

which low-income families are often unable to cope with.

"Maybe we should look at how best to capture the information once so that it is in the database. So next time when they come in, we know who they are, what's their background, and we can give them the assistance they need," Dr Yaacob said.

At yesterday's seminar, another paper on "family excellence circles" – social support networks made up of parents in similar circumstances – was presented by Dr Mathew Mathews of the Institute of Policy Studies.

Founded in 2005 and currently numbering 45, the groups of 12 to 15 families each help foster resilience and reduce social isolation among low-income Malay/Muslim families, he said.

The circles enabled the pooling of resources such as after-school care, allowing parents to be more involved in their children's development and education.

This is crucial, said Dr Yaacob, because education is key in achieving social mobility.

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Reduce red tape

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MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS YAACOB IBRAHIM, on the study's point that low-income families are often unable to cope with submitting the many forms for social assistance