



Tables and chairs taped up at the Chinatown Complex Food Centre in May last year during Singapore's circuit breaker. The researchers found that those from lower-income households reported higher levels of retrenchment, on top of the challenges in paying their debts. ST PHOTO: BENJAMIN SEETOR

# Lower-income folk worst hit by circuit breaker: Study

But social consequences of lockdown felt widely, with lasting impact on all segments

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The circuit breaker imposed last year to interrupt the transmission of Covid-19 had an uneven effect on families, with those earning less than \$3,000 a month hit hardest by the economic shutdown.

A number of them had difficulty paying for daily expenses.

On the other hand, the social consequences of the lockdown were widely felt and had potentially lasting impact on the well-being of all segments of society here, said researchers, in papers published by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

The circuit breaker highlighted concerns over how such vulnerabilities might play out over the longer term, said the papers' authors.

More than four in 10 households earning less than \$1,000 and more than three in 10 of those earning between \$1,000 and \$2,900 reported having trouble paying for living expenses. On average, fewer than three in 10 of households of all higher income levels reported similar issues.

Respondents from lower-income households were also more likely to have their salaries disrupted by the circuit breaker, during which social gatherings and most activities were banned, movement was restricted and most businesses except essential ones were closed. On average, more than half of households earning less than \$1,000 and nearly half of those earning between \$1,000 and \$2,900 reported disruptions to their incomes.

This occurred less frequently with those at higher income levels. For instance, four in 10 households earning between \$8,000 and \$9,900 and fewer than three in 10 households of those earning between \$10,000 and \$14,900 reported disruptions to incomes.

The six authors of the papers, which were published from Aug 10 to 13, polled more than 1,000 citizens and permanent residents every two weeks between May 7 and July 16 last year, for a total of over 6,000 respondents. It is the first time an extensive study specific to the circuit breaker has been conducted.

The authors include Dr Patrick Daly, a senior research fellow at the Earth Observatory of Singapore at Nanyang Technological University (NTU); Professor Benjamin Horton, the director of the observatory; and Dr Laavanya

Kathiravelu, an assistant professor at NTU's Division of Sociology. The observatory conducts research on climate-related topics in and around South-east Asia, with a focus on sustainable societies.

The other authors are Dr Reuben Ng, an assistant professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) at the National University of Singapore (NUS); Dr Caroline Brassard, an adjunct assistant professor at the LKYSPP; and Dr Jamie McCaughey, an AXA post-doctoral research fellow in the Weather and Climate Risks group at ETH Zurich in Switzerland.

The circuit breaker lasted from April 7 to June 1 last year and was lifted with a three-phase reopening plan. The researchers found that those from lower-income households reported higher levels of retrenchment, on top of the challenges in paying their debts.

As household income levels increased, respondents tended to be less concerned about their household finances deteriorating.

"People from the lowest household income brackets were more likely to expect that their situation will be worse in a year," said the researchers.

But the survey also found that households earning between \$1,000 and \$4,000 per month reported receiving slightly higher levels of support from the Government. About half of households earning less than \$1,000, and more than half of those earning between \$1,000 and \$3,900 said they received support.

Last year, the Government committed nearly \$100 billion through five Budgets to support individuals and businesses through the circuit breaker, and other disruptions caused by Covid-19.

While the researchers found that families were impacted unevenly by the economic fallout, the social consequences of the nearly eight-week shutdown were widely felt and had real and potentially lasting impacts on the well-being of all segments of society. The most commonly cited disruptions during the lockdown were to socialising and interactions with family members or relatives.

More than half the respondents reported that the circuit breaker limited their participation in social activities and visiting family, while 44 per cent reported disruptions to exercise/sporting activities. An average of 16 per cent of those polled over the course of the study reported that their

household or family harmony had been disrupted.

"Further research is needed to evaluate the extent to which the extended period of social disruption might have caused psycho-social harm, emotional distress and domestic tension, and whether the stress of Covid-19 and the circuit breaker might register as trauma that might need treatment," said the researchers.

They also found that the lockdown caused more anxiety to Malay respondents than Chinese

WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T

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DR PATRICK DALY, who says that more research is needed across a wide range of subjects to better understand how future policymaking can be more effective and inclusive.

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT

**As the pandemic wears on, ongoing and necessary public health measures expose many people to experiencing situations linked to poor mental health outcomes, such as isolation and job loss.**



PROFESSOR BENJAMIN HORTON, director of the Earth Observatory of Singapore at Nanyang Technological University.

and Indian respondents. Malay respondents were, on average, more likely to report disruptions to income. More than a third of them said their ability to pay for living expenses was affected by the circuit breaker, compared with fewer than three in 10 for all other ethnicities.

Half of the Malays polled felt "very worried" about their household financial situation. In contrast, only slightly more than a third of Indian and Chinese respondents felt so.

The researchers said there is clear evidence that Covid-19 mitigation measures caused greater hardship for Malay respondents than for respondents of Chinese and Indian ethnicities. "It is important to ensure that Covid-19 and the circuit breaker do not further exacerbate socio-economic vulnerabilities or produce racial fissures," they said.

In response to the study, the secretariat for the Government's M3 programme – a tie-up between Mendaki, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore and the People's Association Malay Activity Executive Committees Council – said the past year and a half has been challenging for every Singaporean as a result of the disruptions caused by the coronavirus.

"Many sectors were affected and this, in turn, affected livelihoods. Some were affected more than others," said the secretariat, adding that the Government laid out many initiatives to help Singaporeans.

Dr Daly said the circuit breaker and its restrictions, despite hitting the Malay community harder, also brought to light positive aspects of how the Malay population coped with the pandemic. This included higher levels of reported support from community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, and even neighbours.

"This suggests that there are important sources of resilience – possible social capital – within the social fabric of the Malay community that (are) not as widespread within other racial groups," he said.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said in June that Singapore will "put circuit breaker as a response behind us", given how the country is working to live with Covid-19 as an endemic disease.

On how the lessons from the study can be applied, Dr Daly said the research shows that certain kinds of needs were not fully met – especially in terms of helping people maintain social activities, visiting family, and, importantly, their psychological well-being.

"Going forward, it is essential to conduct a detailed and nuanced assessment of what worked and what didn't during the past 18 months," he said, and more research is needed across wide-ranging subjects to better understand how future policymaking can be more effective and inclusive.

Prof Horton added that the pandemic and the resulting economic issues had negatively affected the mental health of many people.

"As the pandemic wears on, ongoing and necessary public health measures expose many people to experiencing situations linked to poor mental health outcomes, such as isolation and job loss," he said.

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