

Transiting to the New Normal – Evidence and Insights to Address COVID-19 and Post-COVID-19 Challenges

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Breakout Session 5: Challenges Faced by Families, Children, and Vulnerable Populations During COVID-19 and in the New Normal

By Ms Gráinne Dirwan, Mr Lim Zhong Hao, Mrs Lydia Chua, Mr Andre Wai and Mr Eugene Liow (Moderator)

Ms Gráinne Dirwan is a policy analyst in the Child Well-being Unit of The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Her work at the OECD includes vulnerable children and family support services.

Mr Lim Zhong Hao is a senior manager at the Centre for Applied Research and Evaluation, National Council of Social Service (NCSS). He is a primary contributor to the Quality of Life studies at NCSS, looking at the well-being of different vulnerable groups in Singapore.

Mrs Lydia Chua is a principal social worker with Care Corner Singapore, with over 20 years of experience. She works with and supervises vulnerable families in the areas of risk management, family functioning and well-being.

Mr Andre Wai is the deputy director of Operations Strategy, and the deputy director of Child Protective Service Rehabilitation and Protection Group (RPG-CPS), Ministry of Social and Family Development. He leads a team on process innovation, data and technology, organisation development and capability building initiatives in CPS.

Mr Eugene Liow is a lead researcher in Civil Service College. His research interests are on social inequality, class and capitalism.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN AND SECURING THEIR WELL-BEING IN THE RECOVERY by MS GRÁINNE DIRWAN

Ms Dirwan outlined the five challenges to children's well-being for the recovery from the impact of COVID-19 and further elaborated on three of them:

1. Higher levels of child poverty and inequalities;
2. Greater need for support among already-vulnerable groups of children;
3. Greater need for mental health supports;
4. Higher levels of family stress; and
5. Learning loss and school disengagement.

- **Higher Level of Child Poverty and Inequalities**

- Child poverty has been on the rise in OECD countries since the 2008 Global Recession. In the recovery from crisis, it can be difficult for policies to effectively target all children with poor living standards using the relative poverty indicator¹. Policymakers should also be aware of the changing socio-demographics of poverty which can affect how policies

¹ OECD's poverty indicator is defined as having income less than half the median household income of the total population. For more information, please visit <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>

targeting poverty are designed and delivered. For example, children are unlikely to benefit from economic stimulus packages if their parents are not in the workforce.

- **Greater Need for Mental Health Supports**

- It is important to address and prevent poor child mental health now, as half of lifetime cases start by the age of 14 and 75% before 25 years. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact for some children's mental health, such as affecting their ability to socialise and access supports.

- **Learning Loss and School Disengagement**

- The pandemic has also resulted in significant learning losses when schools were closed during lockdowns. Children from lower socio-economic background are more disadvantaged when schools are closed as they have less learning support at home. The loss of learning also greatly affects countries' GDPs and the individuals' earning capacities when they enter the workforce in the future.

Ms Dirwan concluded her presentation with possible next steps to secure children's well-being in the recovery. She highlighted that OECD has identified five pillars to support countries to rapidly and sustainably achieve their aims for children and effectively implement their policy programmes. They are:

1. Developing a data framework for monitoring child well-being outcomes and policies;
2. Mobilising (consistently) the appropriate financial resources;
3. Establishing a clear distribution of policy responsibilities among stakeholders and public administrations;
4. Ensuring high quality provision of services to the most vulnerable children and families; and
5. Ensuring political leadership and commitment for child well-being.

There are areas that need to be addressed to effectively implement the necessary programmes, namely:

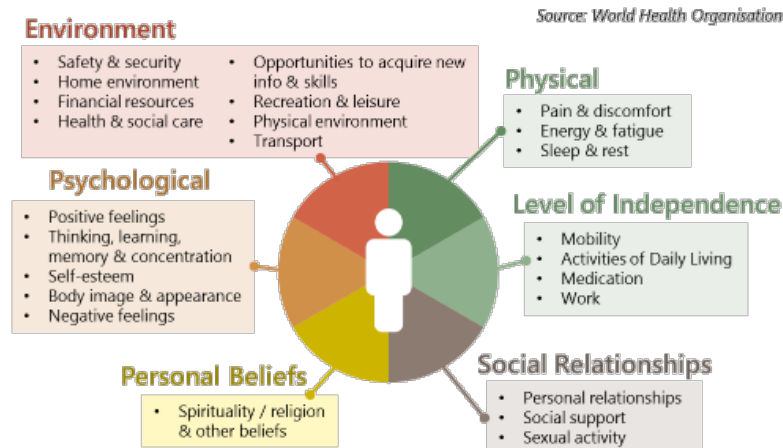
- Data on children are often limited, missing or incomplete. This makes it difficult for policymakers to design good policies and measure the outcomes of the policies. Countries also need good data infrastructure to better monitor child well-being and the effects of child well-being policies. This means collecting data on well-being indicators such as health, school performance at various points and factors contributing to inequality.
- Countries also need to improve the coordination and cooperation of all stakeholders and public agencies to implement comprehensive child well-being policies. Child well-being depend on many different policy domains and requires synergies between these domains when designing and delivering the policies.

[Link to slides](#)

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS by MR LIM ZHONG HAO

- Mr Lim shared that the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) had done three waves of telephone polls to understand the quality of life of the Singapore population during the pandemic. **Wave I** was done between May to June 2020 (Circuit Breaker), **Wave II** was from September to

October 2020 (Phase 2 of Reopening) and **Wave III** from March to May 2021 (Phase 3). The quality of life was measured via the World Health Organisation framework, with a holistic look across six domains and 24 facets of well-being:



- The surveyees had included persons from population groups which may need additional support such as: seniors above the age of 65, persons in lower income housing (i.e. living in HDB 1-2 room flats), and persons with disabilities, as well as those from the general population.

Insights on quality of life

- From Circuit Breaker to Phase 2, the polls showed that the general population's quality of life improved after the reopening of the economy, but the groups needing additional support did not have similar improvements and was in fact on a downtrend across most facets of well-being. This was primarily seen in terms of increasing symptoms of psychological/psychosomatic stress and falling level of independence.
- With the further reopening of the economy from Phase 2 to Phase 3, the groups needing additional support showed more improvement in their quality of life, with seniors and persons with disabilities showing stronger recovery. However, those from lower-income housing continued to not see any improvements physically or psychologically.
- Persons in lower-income housing were more likely to report difficulties in meeting their living expenses during the pandemic, with around one in two reporting so, due mainly to loss of income or perceived increase in cost of living. However, the polls suggested some improvements as the economy continued to reopen.
- The polls also highlighted possible lingering effects of the pandemic on the general population: recovery was slow for their physical well-being, material needs such as financial resources and home environment, and work capacity. Across all groups surveyed, top of mind challenges reported were job security, finances and mental health.

Transiting to the new normal

- Survey respondents felt that more government support was needed for the vulnerable and needy. They also wanted more financial help for families, employment support and efforts to improve the mental well-being of Singaporeans.
- When surveyed on the sentiments towards COVID-19 vaccinations, those who were likely or had been vaccinated tended to be the ones who were better informed about the vaccines. Hence, dissemination of updated information on the vaccines' safety and effectiveness may help in

nudging vaccination rates, particularly among persons with disabilities in the community who may have misconceptions about the vaccines with respect to their existing health conditions. As vaccination-differentiated safe management measures have been implemented, ensuring vaccine inclusion for such groups in need may be additionally important to safeguard their opportunities to partake in recreational activities and maintain a sense of social inclusion, which will contribute to their well-being.

- In response to each wave of the survey findings, NCSS has worked with stakeholders to address concerns such as mental health and employment. For example, in light of the results seen in Phase 2, NCSS had increased funding for counselling centres, and affirmed initiatives such as the Government's continued provision of the National CARE Hotline, and tripartite focus on mental wellness. To sustain employment, NCSS also funded employment support programmes for seniors, and supported Government efforts to ensure inclusivity in economic recovery and job security, by encouraging additional measures implemented by the National Jobs Council to provide persons with disabilities with employment and skills opportunities.
- As the pandemic continues, the government should be prepared to step up and provide more targeted support for these groups needing additional support.

Interested parties may contact NCSS (research@ncss.gov.sg) to find out more about the study, or view the Beyond COVID-19 Taskforce report at <https://www.ncss.gov.sg/our-initiatives/beyond-covid-19-taskforce>, which includes an extract of the research findings in Phase 2.

CHALLENGES FACED BY SINGAPORE'S FAMILIES AND CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 by MRS LYDIA CHUA

- From the onset of the pandemic, Mrs Chua shared that there was an increase in cases seeking help at Care Corner Family Service Centres as follows:
 - 33% increase in cases related to family issues such as family violence;
 - 32% increase in cases on mental and emotional issues; and
 - 30% increase in cases related to financial issues such as employment and finances.
- She highlighted that care needs are complex and tend to be interrelated. Care Corner uses a seven care needs framework to understand the needs of individuals and families. Care Corner has observed that many families are struggling with care needs such as physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive and social, which have been exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic. For example, isolation due to safe distancing measures, family violence from spending too much time together in small spaces, unstable employment due to economic disruptions could all add to the struggles.
- To build resilience in multi-stressed families, Care Corner adopted a Resilience Practice Framework to guide their service responses in helping individuals and families build resilience capacity. This capacity helps to apply resilience characteristics when faced with an immediate, problematic and challenging event.
- Care Corner had also modified its service delivery to better serve families and individuals during the pandemic. Technologies are used to deliver many services, such as disbursement of financial assistance via PayNow², video calls to engage clients and online talks to build resilience in children.

² PayNow is an electronic fund transfer service that allows transferring of Singapore Dollar funds instantly to a payee, using the payee's designated mobile number or national identification number (NRIC/FIN) or if a payee is an entity then its standard identification number (UEN) instead of their bank account number.

In transitioning to the new normal, Care Corner will explore hybrid methods to deliver their services and continue to build resilience in families.

[Link to slides](#)

KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE IN A COVID-19 WORLD by MR ANDRE WAI

- The pandemic has brought new challenges to families whom the Child Protective Service (CPS) at the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), Singapore, works with. These include economic hardship and working from home, which have created greater tensions and conflicts at home. Mr Wai shared that CPS saw an increase in the number of family violence and child abuse cases, with a ten year high of 1,313 child abuse cases in 2020.
- With the surge in child abuse enquiries and investigations, CPS officers also experienced additional challenges such as periodic closures of school and social service agencies during the pandemic, which reduced their ability to monitor the children under their care.
- Mr Wai went to elaborate on how CPS leveraged on technology and partners to overcome these challenges, to continue keeping children safe during the pandemic.

Reporting and monitoring

- CPS worked with for-profit and non-profit organisations to launch a 24-hour national anti-violence helpline, making it easier for members of the public to get help and for CPS to assess and triage reports quickly.
- To continue monitoring children when schools and social service agencies were closed, CPS tapped on MSF staff volunteers and ex-interns to help monitor the children through a hybrid model of virtual and physical checks. In the new normal, CPS will continue to evolve their monitoring strategy.

Digital by default

- CPS transitioned to digital by default operations since 2019 and relied on automation to reduce errors and improve efficiency. Digitising case files allowed CPS officers to be operationally ready and responsive in the new normal of hybrid working. CPS is also considering using technology to complement and enhance their training, such as virtual reality (VR) simulations with realistic scenarios.

Data analytics

- Data analytics and predictive risk modelling are also some tools that CPS is exploring to complement their existing work processes to better prepare for future scenarios and improve efficiencies.

[Link to slides](#)