

Where are our families heading?



In this ongoing series from *The Social Mission Conference*, Dr John Hui, former master of the Catholic Medical Guild, lists the reasons why we should be concerned for the institution of the family in Singapore.

Charity & Justice

The Social Mission Conference

ACCORDING to the State of the Family Report 2009 published jointly by the National Family Council and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), the majority of Singaporeans “hold pro-family values and attitudes and enjoy close ties with their family members”, with 96 per cent viewing their family as close-knit and able to help them financially and emotionally. An even larger proportion said they desired to marry and have at least two children.

In reality, the statistics show otherwise. (See box: “Some Key Trends of the Family”, for key statistics related to the family in Singapore.)

Many statistics point in the wrong direction: Marriages and reproduction are on the decline, divorces and singlehood are on the rise. There are fewer one-family nuclei and even fewer multi-family nuclei. Singapore has one of the fastest greying populations in the Asia Pacific.

Clearly, the institution of the Family is under severe pressure, and the main victims might well be our children.

There are more children growing up in families without a family nucleus, they are largely from single-parent families or children of divorced parents.

Additional issues like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are also on the rise, with a larger proportion of young people infected. For those below 20, the rate is especially alarming, having more than doubled from 61 per 100,000 population in 2000 to 133 in 2008. In terms of absolute numbers, youths with STIs increased from 238 cases in 2002 to 787 in 2008.

Research by the Health Promotion Board and Ministry of Education in 2006 showed that 8 per cent of students aged 14 to 19 surveyed were sexually active. Another survey found that young girls were more likely to have sex if they had been sexually abused. Statutory rape cases in Singapore have doubled over four years, from 38 cases in 2006 to 83 in 2009.

Drug abuse among youths has also risen.



Majority of people “hold pro-family values and attitudes and enjoy close ties with their family members”.

Figures from the Central Narcotics Bureau show more young people under the age of 25 caught for drug abuse. The number rose from 266 such arrests in 2007 to 309 last year.

Counsellors at halfway houses say youths now abuse more party and prescription drugs than some decades ago, when they smoked marijuana and abused inhalants.

Related to this, alcohol abuse is also up. The Health Promotion Board estimates that about 10 per cent of youths indulge in binge drinking. Teenage alcohol misuse or abuse may affect the development of mental and social abilities, increase the chances of

engaging in risky sexual behaviours and unplanned pregnancies, increase juvenile delinquency, and result in unintentional injury as well as death.

There are also more suicides occurring now – 401 cases last year, 37 more than in 2008. The biggest rise was among those aged 20 to 29, with 72 deaths, an increase from 52 in 2008. Those aged 10 to 19 hit a six-year high with 19 resorting to suicide, up from 12 in 2008.

One reason for suicide among young people is relationship problems with peers or family members, a situation that must surely concern us all.

Signs of trouble in the family

- Marriage rates are down. From 1990 to 2008, the rate of marriage per 1,000 unmarried residents has been steadily decreasing from a peak of 62.7 to a low of 39.3. The median age of the first marriage rose from 28.3 to 29.7 years for men, and 25.7 to 27.1 years for women.
- Divorces are up. The number of divorces rose from 4,888 in 1997 to 7,226 in 2007. Most of the divorces in 2008 involved couples aged 20 to 24. Over half the divorces occurred in marriages that lasted less than 10 years.
- Singlehood is rising. From 1998 to 2008, the percentage of single male Singaporeans between 30 and 34 years old rose from 33.3 per cent to 40 per cent. The number of single women of the same age range

increased by 7.8 percentage points to 29.4 per cent in the same period, with many citing reasons such as their careers and the inability to find suitable partners.

- The fertility rate has been dropping. In a short span of 30 years, our total fertility rate has fallen from six to the present 1.22.
- The population is greying rapidly. Demographic projections from now till 2030 show that 1.4 million – or more than a quarter of Singapore’s population – will be people aged 65 and above by 2030.
- The multi-family nuclei is declining. The number of households with one family nucleus and multi-family nuclei is decreasing while the households with no family nucleus are on the increase.

What other panellists of “The Family” say:

“The family is the school of humanity; if that school disappears, society disappears. There is still hope. As a church, we have a unique contribution to offer: giving charity is giving care for persons as unique individuals worth loving for themselves. And most importantly, charity begins at home.”

– Fr David Garcia, OP

“Feed the hungry, quench the thirsty and welcome the stranger. That is what we hope to do in our programmes for the poor and needy in our community.”

– Samuel Ng, Chief Executive

Officer
Marine Parade Family Service
Centre

“Grave threats such as pornography, gambling, substance abuse, adultery, prostitution, child and spousal abuse, work pressure and materialism are working in tandem with commuter families and outsourced parenting to undermine the family unit. The clear trend in Singapore is a growing number of failed marriages and dysfunctional families. The multi-faceted challenges faced by families have little correlation to income. It affects the wealthy, middle income and the poor, and regrettably, both Christians as well as pre-believers.”