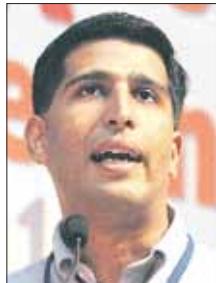


The poor – in Singapore?



In this ongoing series on Charity and Justice, Dr Mathew Mathews, lead researcher of Caritas Singapore's Study of the Poor, examines who are the poor in Singapore and how their needs are being addressed.

A QUESTION not often asked in affluent Singapore: Are there poor people here?

After all, we hardly encounter beggars or the destitute sleeping on the streets.

But the statistics tell us there are 240,000 fulltime workers struggling to survive on less than \$1,000 a month and more than 2,000 live in acute poverty. The income disparity between the top 20 per cent of our population is 30 times higher than the bottom 20 per cent.

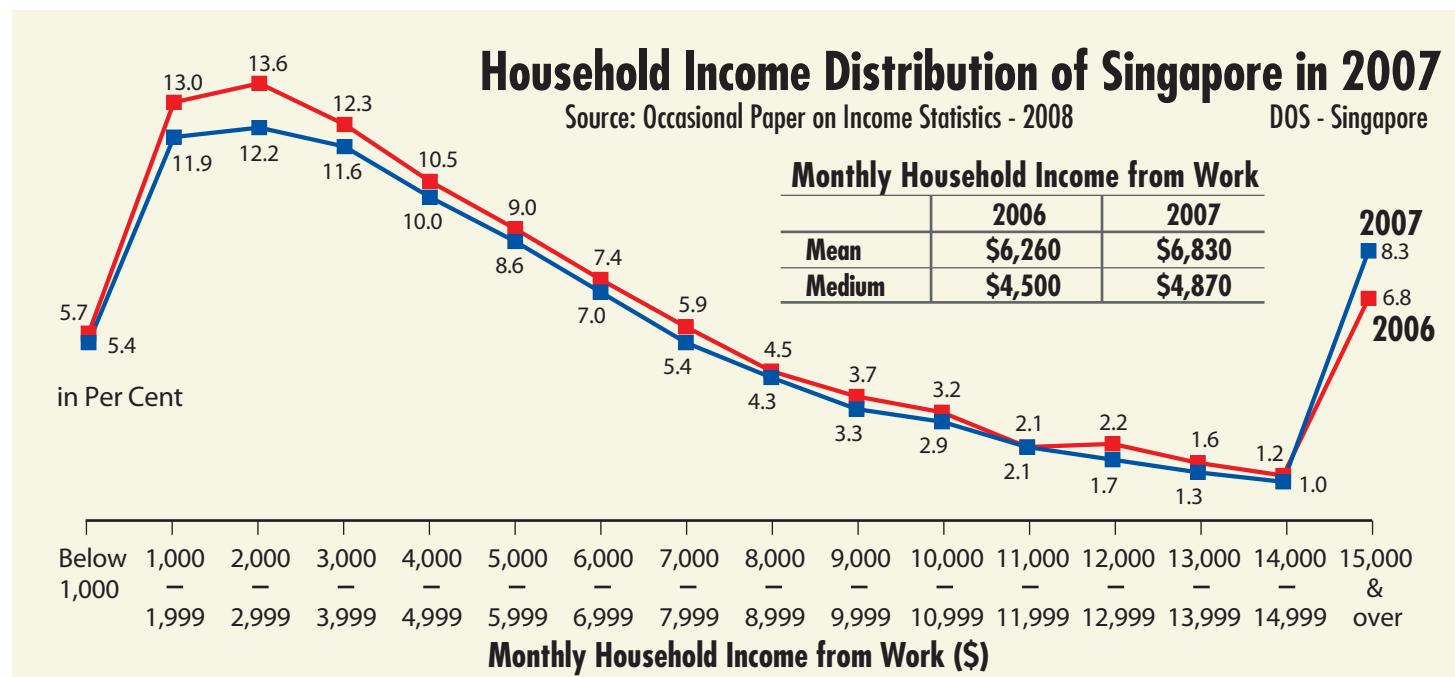
The chart on Household Income Distribution in Singapore shows a bulging proportion of people at the lower income levels. Indeed, the gap between the rich and the poor based on the GINI coefficient (a measure of income disparity) has been widening over the years, although in the last year it narrowed with welfare income supplements and other measures.

Based on a sample of around 2,800 people being helped by the Society of St Vincent de Paul, 21 per cent are 18 years old and below. This is the group most vulnerable to inter-generational transfer of poverty, the effects that put them at a severe disadvantage when competing for social, economic or educational resources.

Research shows that upward mobility is most likely with higher educational attainment. Yet children who come from poor families may receive less educational opportunities compared to their richer counterparts.

More affluent parents are able to provide an environment at home which is conducive to studying and have the means to help their children with their schoolwork. Poor children do not have these benefits and many lose heart, finding it pointless to aim high and perform well in school. Ultimately, they leave school with fewer skills and will not be able to secure well-paying jobs.

While there are existing strategies to help the poor, including financial aid, food rations, supplementing their



It might be hard to spot the poor in Singapore because it's rare to spot beggars or homeless people. But the statistics tell us there are 240,000 fulltime workers struggling to survive on less than \$1,000 a month and more than 2,000 live in acute poverty.

healthcare needs, educational grants, and free professional services such as medical or legal consultation, what might be needed more is a change in the mindset when it comes to helping the poor.

Our most common notions of the poor are that they are poor because:

- They are lazy, not willing to do hard work;
- They have an attitude problem;
- They don't have the drive;
- They have got themselves into a mess;
- They have little capability; or
- They are depending on rich people to help them.

Such condescension reinforces existing hierarchies in an already

stratified society. Most importantly, it goes against our Catholic teaching of charity and justice.

We need to respect the human dignity of those who are poor, and their ways of doing things. We should seek to understand them and the environment they are in, rather than judge and deplore their current state.

Our Christian obligations require us to be passionate about the opportunity to work with them to get them and their children out of the poverty trap.

And not just by providing charity. We need to focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. We must be hopeful of change, not resigned to leaving them in their cycle of vicious poverty.



VOICES

“We at the Catholic Welfare Services (CWS) and the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SSVP) should have a better system for the poor knocking at the doors of churches, of religious congregations and of individuals who often are unable to do much for them. We could refer these poor people to the CWS/SSVP.”

I believe that we should have a team of dedicated and experienced or specialised people who will look into each individual person needing help and study in-depth the ways and means to improve their standard of living. The CWS/SSVP will not be just a one-stop help for them, but people able to follow-up and assist them until they readjust themselves back to society.”

Brother Emmanuel, SG
Chairman, Catholic Welfare Services

“Apart from just feeding the poor, we can bring about a change in their life for the long term through areas such as education, employment, self-help projects and micro-credit financing.”

Michael Thio, President General, International Council General, Society of St Vincent de Paul

“Our call to action to serve the poor should start with each of us. Whether we are teachers, doctors, lawyers, employers ... we can commit to creating a level playing field through our daily actions and values of empowerment, respect and dignity, through services and policies that promote equal opportunity – if not, a preferential option for the poor.”

We have ample role models among us: the principal who took in a bunch of low-income kids and turned them into football 'champions'; the teacher who went the extra mile to get a runaway kid back to school; the lawyer who provides pro-bono legal services to low-income delinquent youths so that they can make right what they have done without becoming hardened through imprisonment; the policy-makers who advocated for policies that create a level playing field and an inclusive society.”

Tan Bee Leng
Social Worker