

S'pore residents say smartphones, short holidays, air-con are essential: Study

It comes amid public interest in resources needed to achieve basic living standards

Shermaine Ang

More than nine in 10 Singapore residents polled in a new study said a smartphone with a data plan is essential, while 64 per cent think air-conditioning is a must.

A trip each year to a South-east Asian destination is also essential, said 56 per cent of those polled. And social connections are important too, with 90 per cent saying family bonding is essential.

These were among 40 items and activities that respondents deemed essential in the study on household needs conducted by Singapore Management University (SMU) and funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

It polled a nationally representative sample of around 4,000 Singapore residents and comes amid growing public interest in the resources needed to achieve basic living standards.

Respondents were asked how essential they considered a total of 51 items and activities across categories such as household appliances, digital connectivity and social participation.

Essential items were those perceived to be so by at least half the respondents.

The study – which also included respondents taking part in focus group discussions between May 2022 and February 2023 – focused on affordability of essential items and attitudes on poverty.

For example, two-thirds of respondents said they were able to afford all the items deemed essential.

For the remaining one-third,

the top essential items they cited being unable to access or afford included emergency savings of at least three months of expenses and an annual overseas vacation in a South-east Asian country.

A separate study done by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) that garnered 2,000 responses collected in June 2024 looked at public perceptions of who should provide for essential needs, be it the Government, the community, the individuals themselves or other parties.

Key findings from both studies were presented on July 12 at the SMU-DBS Foundation Symposium on Essential Household Needs in Singapore.

Director of SMU Centre for Research on Successful Ageing Paulin Straughan, who led the first study, said the hope is to reveal the gaps that may aid efforts to help disadvantaged Singaporeans break out of deprivation, which is defined in the study as being unable to afford items considered essential.

Sharing other insights, she noted that perceptions towards higher expenditure activities and items like holidays and the need for adequate savings differed across income groups.

Households in the lowest income group earned up to \$2,499 a month while the top band earned over \$17,000 a month.

One in two among the lowest income band see dining at restaurants once a month as essential, compared with over 60 per cent in higher income bands.

And only 49 per cent in the lowest income band see air-con as essential, compared with 70 per cent in the highest income band.

Items deemed unnecessary by respondents included private tuition – considered essential by 49 per cent of respondents – private enrichment classes (30 per cent) and annual staycations (27 per cent).

Respondents thought students

can get help from free tuition classes offered by self-help groups rather than more costly private options – such tuition classes were seen by nearly 60 per cent of respondents as essential.

On poverty, the study showed that most believed it is attributable to personal actions and circumstances. Some 80 per cent think people are poor because they face major problems in their lives, while less than a quarter agreed that poverty is due to external factors like bad luck or divine will.

Prof Straughan said: “There’s a lot more consensus on what we can do to help ourselves... it tells us that from an approach perspective, Singaporeans can be helped and they are willing to be helped.”

She said the next run of the study may be done in five years’ time, to see if new interventions introduced can plug the gaps found, such as the lack of emergency savings.

Speaking at the symposium on July 12, Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli said the studies by SMU and IPS will inform MSF’s ongoing review of its ComCare scheme for low-income families. He cited how ComCare assistance now covers mobile data plans as digital connectivity has become an essential need.

“We will continue to adjust our policies and programmes, recognising that needs evolve over time,” he said.

Mr Masagos said the research shows there are differing views on what needs are deemed essential, particularly for items that go beyond subsistence needs.

Implicit in these views is the public’s understanding that social assistance provided by taxpayers must be reasonable and sustainable, he added.

“The studies also show that there is much room for others besides the Government to provide support for low-income and vulnerable families.”

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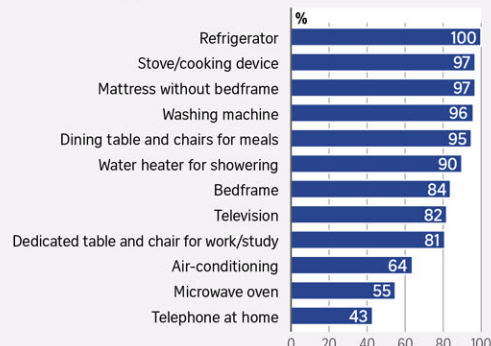
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Household needs in Singapore

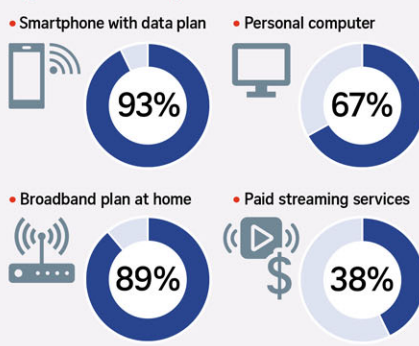
ITEMS SINGAPORE RESIDENTS CONSIDER ESSENTIAL IN LIFE

Respondents were asked whether they considered 51 items across various categories, such as household appliances, digital connectivity and social participation, to be essential.

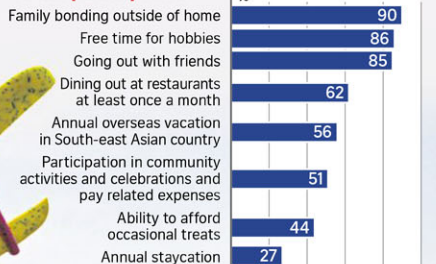
Household appliances and furniture



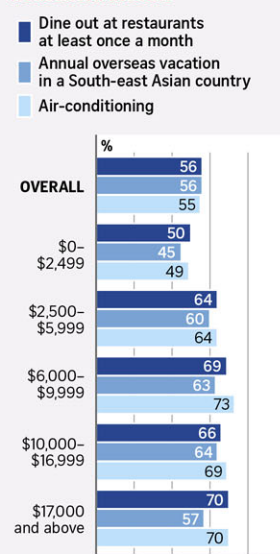
Digital connectivity and devices



Social participation



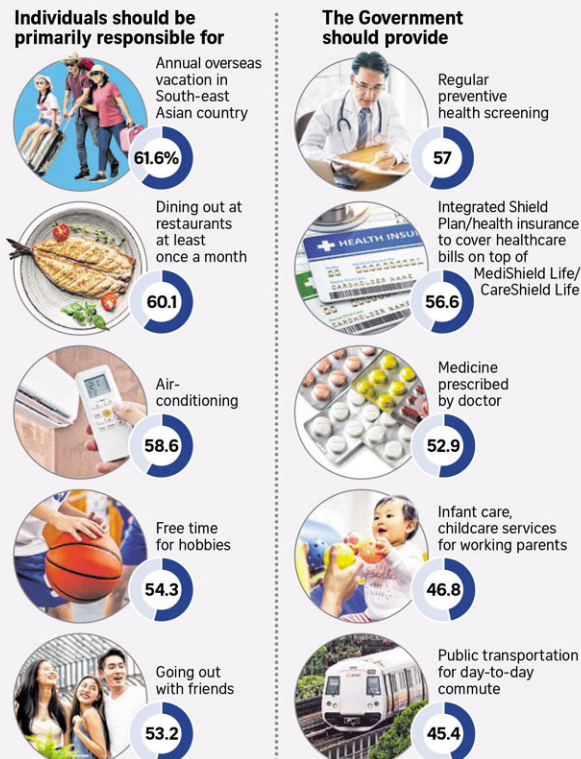
Proportion of respondents who found the item essential, according to monthly household income



WHO SHOULD PROVIDE FOR BASIC NEEDS IN SINGAPORE?

Singapore residents were polled on whether they thought basic needs should be provided by individuals, the Government, the community or other parties.

Top 5 items respondents think...



Proportion of respondents who say which party should provide basic necessities and items for a decent standard of living (%)

	Basic necessities	Decent standard of living
Government	67.3	34.1
Community	59.3	31.6
Self	41.3	61.7
Relatives/friends	34.6	28.2
Businesses	32.3	23.2

Sources: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY, SOCIAL LAB, INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES, NUS
PHOTOS: ST FILE, ADOBE STOCK, STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Most S'pore residents prioritise self-reliance for essential needs

But support for low-wage earners should be more generous, says poll

Chin Soo Fang
Senior Correspondent

Singapore residents generally believe they should be responsible for providing their own essential needs such as air-conditioning and emergency savings, but that the Government should help those who cannot afford basic necessities like three square meals.

A majority also prefer to rely on themselves for social participation and leisure needs, but feel that the Government should provide healthcare and childcare-related items, a recent poll by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found.

Findings of the IPS poll on Singapore residents' perceptions of who should provide for essential needs were presented at a symposium at the Singapore Management University (SMU) on July 12, alongside those of an SMU study on what most people here feel are essential items for their daily household needs.

The IPS survey of 2,000 Singapore citizens and permanent residents, conducted in June, saw 39 essential needs put into categories such as childcare, daily living, transport and household items.

An additional 424 respondents from lower-income households were polled, and the data from the resident population was weighted to be nationally representative.

On average, respondents felt that individuals should be responsible for about 16 of the 39 items, the Government for 10 items, and the community for 9 items.

More than three in five said indi-



The IPS survey conducted in June showed that the top items people felt the Government should provide were regular preventive health screening, an Integrated Shield Plan and infant care and childcare services. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

viduals should be responsible for things that ensure a decent standard of living, such as an annual vacation in a South-east Asian country and dining out in restaurants at least once a month.

Conversely, the top items that people felt the Government should provide were regular preventive health screening (57 per cent of respondents), an Integrated Shield Plan to cover healthcare bills (56.6 per cent) and infant care and childcare services for working parents (46.8 per cent).

Over two-thirds of those surveyed also indicated that the Government should be the main party to support individuals who do not have basic necessities such as shelter and access to healthcare.

Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli said both the IPS and SMU studies were funded by his ministry, and will inform the Government's ongoing review of its ComCare financial assistance scheme.

In his closing remarks at the symposium, Mr Masagos said the IPS poll showed that many Singaporeans believe in individuals taking responsibility for meeting their own needs, especially if they strive for a higher standard of living.

"This is not surprising at all. Singaporeans hold self-reliance in high regard. This includes the lower-income themselves, who find dignity in providing for themselves and their families," he said.

The poll found that while more

than four in five surveyed felt that public schemes to help low-income individuals should be more generous, more than two-thirds also agreed that the support available today is eroding recipients' self-reliance.

"Taken together, this may suggest that while there is a desire for more generous government support for low-income individuals, there are lingering concerns that such support should not reduce recipients' self-reliance," said the survey report.

There were generational differences in perspectives, with younger respondents leaning more towards the Government providing for both basic needs and items for a decent standard of living. Older re-



PRIDE IN SELF-SUFFICIENCY

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MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT MASAGOS ZULKIFLI, on how the poll showed that many Singaporeans believe in individuals taking responsibility for meeting their own needs, especially if they strive for a higher standard of living.

you can contribute, then you may begin to say the Government (should provide)," said the director of SMU's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing.

Close to 60 per cent of respondents who felt that the Government should provide some of the 39 items said that funding for these essential needs should come from reallocated public funds, as opposed to higher taxes.

There was no clear consensus on where this funding should be reallocated from, though the areas that drew the highest responses were the arts and culture (36.8 per cent), sports (32.7 per cent), and heritage conservation (27.3 per cent).

Implicit in the findings was the public's understanding that social assistance must be reasonable and sustainable, bearing in mind that it is funded by taxpayers, said Mr Masagos.

Mr Masagos said that while there is a preference for reallocating government spending from other areas, this involves hard choices.

"This is a delicate balance we will need to strike – between which items to provide for through government funding, and the trade-offs we need to make as a society," he said.

He added that the studies show there is much room for others besides the state – such as individuals, organisations, and businesses – to support vulnerable families in achieving stability, self-reliance and social mobility.

Agreeing, Prof Straughan said a whole-of-society approach is needed as the Government can only do so much, beyond which taxes may have to be raised.

For instance, the desire for travel to South-east Asian countries once a year can be met by community clubs, which may currently be more focused on organising several local outings annually.

They can also open up air-conditioned rooms on their premises for community use on hot days, she suggested.

She also called for more philanthropy, now that the studies have made visible the gaps where people feel help is essential.

"Businesses that are doing well and top income earners here can do their part to bring the community together and make Singapore a stronger and more stable nation," she said.

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