

Households smaller but more affluent

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The Straits Times, 16 February 2011

Changes reflect social transformation in Singapore, says minister.

Households here have grown smaller over the last decade, while the proportion of families and individuals who now live in condominiums and private flats has nearly doubled in the same period.

These trends were revealed in the latest Census 2010 data on households and housing released yesterday.

And the picture it presented showed that the family unit here has shrunk and grown older - but is generally more affluent compared to 11 years ago.

According to the Census, there were 1.15 million resident households - Singaporeans and permanent residents - last year, a 25 per cent increase from 2000.

The average household size last year was 3.5 people, a drop from 3.7 in 2000.

Data showed that households comprising three or fewer family members made up more than half the total resident households here last year - an increase from 44.5 per cent in 2000.

Commenting yesterday, Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said the changes reflected the 'long-term social transformation occurring in Singapore, lower fertility, an ageing population and more job opportunities in the region'.

'The result of all this is the household size will shrink,' he said. But efforts will continue to be made to ensure 'the family remains the centrepiece of our lives'.

Agreeing, analysts said matters have not been helped by married couples not having children or having fewer children. Singapore's total fertility rate hit a historic low of 1.16 last year.

Explaining the smaller household size, National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser said it could be due to a growing number of couples and singles across all age groups preferring and having the means to live alone: 'Sometimes, couples may prefer to live with their parents. But it may be more practical to live on their own near their workplace or school of choice.'

The drop in household size was most apparent among the Chinese, where the average size fell to 3.4 from 3.6 in 2000.

The average Indian household size fell to 3.6 from 3.7 in 2000, while it held steady for Malay households at 4.2.

Still, the experts say the smaller size is not cause for concern, unless it leads to social isolation and less support from other family members and caregivers.

'There should not be a problem if they are socially engaged or if they remain integral parts of their families,' said Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) demographer Yap Mui Teng.

The Census also showed a larger proportion of families and individuals lived in condominiums, private flats and landed property compared to 2000.

Last year, 16.9 per cent of households did so, compared to 11.4 per cent in 2000.

The sharpest rise was for those living in condominiums and private flats: 11.2 per cent were in such housing compared to 6.3 per cent in 2000.

While the proportion living in HDB flats declined by 5.3 percentage points to 82.4 per cent last year, five-room and executive flats comprised the only public housing category to see an increase.

The rise in the number living in private housing is possibly a sign of growing affluence, said Dr Yap. It could also be due to a larger supply of such housing types.

It is also part of 'the Singapore dream' to cross over from public to private housing, added Professor Tan.

Other signs of affluence were in the rise in household income among ethnic groups. The median monthly household income from work increased from \$3,640 in 2000 to \$5,000 last year.

Indians overtook the Chinese as the ethnic group earning the highest household income. Last year, Indian households earned a median monthly income of \$5,370. This compares to \$5,100 for Chinese and \$3,844 for Malay households.

In 2000, Chinese households were the top earners with a median monthly income of \$3,880. The shift is probably tied to the growth in the number of better-educated Indian immigrants, said Dr Yap.

Nearly half of married couples last year were also drawing a dual income, compared to 41 per cent in 2000.

The data also pointed to the rise of the professional, well-off single living alone.

One-person households saw the largest growth in percentage points among different household sizes: 12.2 per cent of households had one member last year, compared to 8.2 per cent in 2000.

More than half of them were single, and almost half lived in private housing or HDB flats with at least four rooms, compared to 30.3 per cent in 2000.

This group is likely to grow, said NUS sociologist Paulin Straughan.

Assessing the trends, she said they gave an indication of the future: 'In 20 to 30 years' time, there will be a big chunk of the elderly population living alone, and they will be quite happy to do so. But at some point, they will need support.'

This has implications on government support structures for the elderly, which are 'hinged very much on family'.

Both she and IPS research fellow Kang Soon Hock called for a change in the support strategies. These include more community support facilities for the elderly and more step-down care options such as retirement villages.