

Not-so-golden years for the elderly in Singapore

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OLDER folk in Singapore have some way to go to achieving a gold standard in active ageing.

According to a new Active Ageing Index, the elderly in Singapore fall short in three areas: health, financial security and community engagement.

Just 5 per cent of those aged 65 to 69 who were polled scored high for active ageing. That figure declined to 3.4 per cent for those aged 70 to 74, before falling to 1 per cent for those aged 75 and above.

Overall, however, the majority - about 80 per cent - achieved a 'medium' level of active ageing.

The index, constructed by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), measures three dimensions of active ageing as defined by the World Health Organisation: health, community participation and security.

Singaporeans fall particularly short on community participation. Just 5.5 per cent take part in clubs or group activities, and just 23.8 per cent participate in the workforce, whether for paid or unpaid work.

Relating to the poor score in active ageing is another sobering figure: One in five feels that he or she does not have sufficient income for living.

But there are also some bright spots.

For instance, 93 per cent are fairly independent, with no limitations on their daily activities, defined as eating, dressing and bathing. A similar proportion also report interaction with family members.

The index was put together by IPS academics Yap Mui Teng and Kang Soon Hock in a State of the Elderly report commissioned by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS).

The researchers, who based their work on a Thai study, looked at 13 indicators from a 2005 National Survey of Senior Citizens, which polled 4,591 people.

The indicators range from psychological well-being to income sufficiency. The scores are tallied and the respondents are then ranked high, medium or low on the overall index, according to the methodology used by the United Nations for its Human Development Index.

Singapore's old do not age as well as Thailand's. Among the latter, 15.6 per cent of the 60-somethings fall into the 'high' category, before dipping to 5.7 per cent for those in their 70s.

Mr Gerard Ee, who chairs the Council for Third Age, an independent body that promotes active ageing, posited that one reason is that unlike Thailand, which has rural areas for its elderly to retire to, Singapore is a city-state.

Thus, its elderly 'face a discontinuation from their work life', he said. 'They are faced with rising cost of living in the city and there is no countryside to escape to for a simpler life - short of migrating to Malaysia or Australia.'

He is particularly worried about the 70-somethings, who 'arrived relatively unprepared'. Many have lower education levels and fewer options post-retirement.

Those in their 60s have had more time to prepare, he said. 'Still, many would not have adequately provided for the 20- plus years post-retirement. Sooner or later they will also face major challenges of inadequate savings and poor health.'

Noting that the data for the findings was collected five years ago, Mr Ee believes today's state of affairs 'would have improved but marginally'.

In the last few years, there has been a slew of efforts to help Singapore's elderly.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Boon Heng was put in charge of ageing policies. Initiatives range from getting companies to rehire the old, to a \$20 million fund to cultivate interest groups.

Mr Lim told The Straits Times: 'We have preliminary indications that the state of active ageing has improved with all these efforts.'

However, there is 'room for improvement', he acknowledged, particularly in getting the old to be involved in the community.

He cited several reasons why Singaporeans do not do as well. For instance, Singapore does not yet 'have a strong volunteer culture or a culture where older people self-organise activities', he observed.

So the aim is to build on a Wellness Programme set up in 2008 that promotes exercises with a strong social component, like brisk-walking.

'We are tracking if these strategies will help the Wellness Programme get more 'new' aunties and uncles in the heartland to be active,' he said.

On what other efforts can be put in place to improve the process of ageing, Dr Yap said: 'In particular, I think we should get more women to be more active in organisations.' She cited, for example, alumni or voluntary groups.

Based on her observations, she said, 'it has been difficult to get them to be involved outside their family sphere'.

The picture will get better though, believes Mr Ee. 'It is the future seniors whom we have to work on, so they realise from an early age that they have to take personal responsibility for their future,' he said.

Mr James Law, 63, a retired military officer, said the Government has organised many activities for senior citizens.

'But no matter how many activities they organise, if people are not interested, they will not participate,' he said.

'The problem with most elderly people in Singapore is that they don't take care of their health and they don't have enough savings. It's hard to age well when you don't have health and money.'