

Study into how Families Change over Time Launched

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TODAY, 3 November 2014

To gather data that could help policymakers tackle challenges faced by families, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has launched a long-term study into how families change over time and how family environments influence one's success in life.

The study will track about 5,000 households possibly over decades on various fronts, such as how they cope with issues like fluctuating income, marriage, divorce, birth and "external shocks", such as epidemics and security threats.

Called the Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics, the study will cover Singaporean citizens and permanent residents, and include non-traditional families such as those with stepchildren, single parents, no parents or no children.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser, who is leading the project with IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, said the data collected will paint a more accurate picture of Singapore's social landscape for policymakers. Additionally, the study seeks to capture the values and aspirations of households and track whether they practise what they believe in, he added.

Singapore's families are doing reasonably well, but there are challenges relating to raising children, childcare, eldercare, work-life balance and social and financial health, said the National University of Singapore don.

The Government is also concerned over any entrenchment of poverty — whether low-income families succeed in rising up the social ladder or stay poor, he added.

Unlike the past practice of studying different families in different samples, the new study is longitudinal and will track the same family constantly over several years. This is necessary as family conditions change, such as when individuals leave or enter households through marriage or divorce, or when there are births and deaths.

"Being able to capture this complexity, all these processes going on, enables us to have richer data," said Associate Professor Tan. Similar surveys have been conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom, leading to policy changes.

Data collected from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, conducted by the University of Michigan since 1968, covers more than 70,000 individuals and have been used to determine welfare reform and healthcare expenditure. In the UK, the British Household Survey has informed policy debates on income, poverty and healthcare.

The IPS study will involve 50 field interviewers holding hour-long surveys annually with a random sample of about 5,000 households generated by the Department of Statistics. Surveys started last Saturday.

There will be a concerted effort to retain the same survey participants over the years by encouraging interviewers to stay in touch with survey participants, said the IPS. Should

households drop out of the sample, new households will be added in a manner that matches Singapore's demographic profile as closely as possible.