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Headline: Impact of COVID on Singapore's older adults

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Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has jolted the daily lives of many. Particularly during the circuit breaker period which took effect from April 7, Singaporeans have had to adapt quickly to a new normal, with some doing better than others, most notably the older adults.

The Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA), a research centre based in Singapore Management University (SMU), has undertaken a study to understand possible impacts on elderly Singaporeans so that further assistance may be provided to them in the future. Using collected data from the Singapore Life Panel (SLP), the study explored a wide array of topics to uncover the effects of COVID-19 and Government responses on the attitudes, behaviour, and well-being of older adults in Singapore within the social, economic and mental health domains. Additionally, findings were contrasted between respondents of different socio-economic and education levels, leading to a more robust discussion of policy implications for different vulnerable groups. Data was collected from a population representative monthly survey with a monthly response rate of about 7,500 respondents, tracking the lives of Singaporeans aged 55 to 75.

Here are some of the key findings:

Sources of information

- Respondents relied more on official sources for information regarding COVID-19. Hence, results show that older Singaporeans are sourcing information reliably during the pandemic.
- Those with a higher level of education tend to source for information from newspapers, Government sources, social media and Internet research more than those with a lower level of education.

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Attitudes toward the Government's response to the pandemic

- Respondents showed confidence in the Government's response to COVID-19, with 73 percent stating that they somewhat or completely trust the Government's management of the pandemic.
- Most older Singaporeans have heeded the Government's advice regarding COVID-19 restrictions – more than 70 percent of respondents avoided outside activity such as grocery shopping and physical activities. The use of face mask also increased significantly within the month of April, from one in 10 to nine in 10 wearing a face mask most or every time they leave home.

Economic indicators

- COVID-19 reduced household spending by 9 percent in March and by a further 23 percent in April compared to January 2020.
- Employment income was also reduced by 6 percent in the month of April, with respondents from low- and middle-social-economic status (SES) households experiencing a larger loss of income compared to high-SES households.
- Regardless of income loss, however, consumption spending for all households was reduced by about 18 percent.
- Expectations for the future economy were also lower, with 32 percent and 24 percent of respondents expressing being either very or extremely worried about the economy in general and their own financial situations respectively.

Well-being of older Singaporeans

- Following the implementation of circuit-breaker measures in April 2020, respondents reported a significant decrease in overall life satisfaction by 3.8 percent in April 2020 and 4.0 percent in May 2020, compared to January 2020. The drop in life satisfaction was concurrent with a stark increase in feelings of isolation as the circuit-breaker began in April 2020.
- During the circuit-breaker, respondents who lived alone reported experiencing significantly greater increases of feelings of social isolation and decreases in feelings of social satisfaction compared to respondents who do not live alone.
- There was also a non-homogenous effect on interactions with household members during the circuit-breaker, where 53 percent of respondents reported an increase in family bonding as a result of the circuit-breaker, while 10 percent of respondents experienced increased friction with household members.

Use of technology in response to COVID-19

- Less than half of respondents (40 percent) expressed comfort with scanning QR codes for use in SafeEntry registration, and only 44 percent felt comfortable holding video conversations with friends or family, highlighting the difficulties that older adults face when adopting new technology into their daily lives, as well as coping with the challenges that COVID-19 measures have imposed.

Anticipation of the future

- Respondents expressed uncertainty about the future of the pandemic, rating the risks of infection and fatality at an average of 41 percent and 39 percent respectively.
- In terms of respondents' worries for the future, 33 percent stated that they were very or extremely worried about the health of their loved ones and 29 percent were very or extremely worried about the availability of medical treatment if they contracted COVID-19.
- Additionally, respondents reported increasing expectations for job loss by 5 percent from January 2020 to May 2020, with older Singaporeans indicating higher expectations of job loss.

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These findings suggest that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the financial burdens and well-being of older adults in Singapore. However, the findings reveal that certain vulnerable groups experienced greater impacts than others, particularly lower-SES households and individuals who live alone. Findings also indicated how social distancing measures have made it difficult for respondents to connect with close social contacts. This was difficult despite the availability of virtual alternatives, as only half of the respondents felt comfortable holding video calls with family or friends.

Hence, the study recommends the following:

- Financial help should be targeted at older adults from low-SES households.
- Measures to help older adults cope with mental health challenges during the circuit-breaker should, in the future, be strengthened and targeted at older adults that live alone.
- Measures to increase digital literacy among older adults should include not only the usage of safe distancing measures, but also how to keep in contact with loved ones virtually.

At present, several Government initiatives are in place to ease concerns about the needs of elderly Singaporeans, such as the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF)'s National Care Hotline, where individuals can seek guidance on mental health challenges they may be facing, and the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA)'s Seniors Go Digital Movement which promotes digital literacy.

In view of ROSA's study findings, representatives from the Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Social and Family Development, Ministry of Manpower, Central Singapore CDC, and the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) have been invited to convene in August to assess COVID-19 policies implemented, look into the strengthening of current initiatives, and the development of possible new approaches to tackling issues experienced by the elderly population.