"People Give, Just Take And Eat":

Food Insecurity and Food Aid in a Public Rental Neighbourhood in Singapore

BEYOND
social services

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Beyond Social Services started out as the Bukit Ho Swee Community Service Project more than 50 years ago. It has grown and morphed significantly since, and is currently known as a community development agency dedicated to helping children and youths from less privileged backgrounds break away from the poverty cycle. Beyond Social Services adopts an asset-based community development approach to its work with low-income communities, and seeks to provide support and resources that enable families and communities to care for themselves and each other. The organisation's current reach extends to 64 rental housing blocks spread out over 20 neighbourhoods, involving 2,563 families and a total of 8,911 persons.

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Executive Summary

The issue of food insecurity in affluent countries has gained prominence as an area of research and policy interest. In Singapore, a recent landmark study estimated that around 10% of Singaporean households are food insecure;[1] among respondents, reasons cited for food insecurity predominantly centred on financial constraints.[2] The proliferation of food aid organisations and initiatives has also gained attention, particularly in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic led to increases in demand for food and financial assistance. Food insecurity, which occurs when persons have limited or unstable access to safe and nutritious foods in socially acceptable ways,[3] is inextricably linked to economic inequality. In current contexts, the socially acceptable way of obtaining food is through commercial transactions: people shop for food in supermarkets, or purchase meals at food and beverage outlets. Depending on food aid provided by charities is a system relegated to persons marked financially disadvantaged—in Singapore, many organisations apply a means-test or use housing as a proxy to determine eligibility for food aid.

Motivated by a mounting concern with food insecurity—as evidenced by increased demands for food aid—Beyond Social Services (Beyond) embarked on this project to better understand the nature of food insecurity and food aid in a public rental neighbourhood. A qualitative study, it involved semi-structured interviews with 54 public rental flat residents, four stakeholders involved in providing food aid, and a focus group involving eight members. These activities were conducted between July and December 2020. Data analysis was done by a research team—involving staff, interns and volunteers—and involved the use of online data analysis platform, Dedoose.

This study privileges the experiential accounts of residents who live in rental flats. Interviewees shared their decision-making processes when it came to the acquiring, preparation and consuming of food on a daily basis—they talked about what they ate, and why they didn't; they spoke of sharing, of sustenance and, often, of deprivation. As parents, they were resolute that their children's food needs took precedence over their own, and their accounts amplified the trade-offs many grappled with in trying to balance tight budgets and feeding their families adequately. When it came to food aid, residents expressed a discernible ambivalence: overwhelmingly, there was gratitude for the thoughtfulness of others in providing food, yet sometimes also shame, and a mixture of resignation and frustration (in milder forms, puzzlement) at inappropriate provisions that led to wastage, and the poor quality of some provisions. Despite a distinct familiarity with food charity, many residents could not confirm where some of the food they received came from, and how long they would continue to receive it. In recounting experiences with food aid, the general pattern, from the perspective of recipients, was one of randomness and unpredictability, in which they accepted that "sometimes have, sometimes don't have".

Despite the overall prevalence and volume of food aid being distributed, efforts appeared patchy and ad hoc, with some interviewees receiving food aid (sometimes in excess), while others were left unclear about how to receive food assistance, despite clearly needing it. The unevenness in distribution led to perceptions among residents of preferential treatment, with speculation of bias reinforced by a general lack of understanding of where aid was coming from and how the food aid system was being run. Despite relatively candid sharing during their interviews about the standard of food aid (complaints mainly centred around cooked meals), residents were mostly reluctant to share such feedback with food aid organisations, and seemed to accept as well as reinforce the notion of aid recipients as needing to be grateful and unfussy. While interviewees' food narratives often invoked notions of 'survival', many also expressed a deep appreciation

of how food (and eating) is imbued with social and cultural meanings.

While not examined in detail, the implications of prolonged and endemic food insecurity on residents remain a grave concern: food insecurity is a serious public health issue and is linked to increased mental stress and the development of chronic health conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated food insecurity. Quality of life, across all domains, decreases as food insecurity increases: there is also a mutually reinforcing dynamic between these deteriorating conditions and food insecurity. Food insecurity in communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage can also extend beyond the individual and households to affect social networks and erode capacities for self and community organising.

Despite clear links between food insecurity and income poverty, discourse around food aid continues to be centred around improving food aid and the diets of poor people: how to make food aid distribution more targeted, efficient and healthy; how best to divert surplus food to food insecure households (the food waste-food poverty nexus); and how to promote healthy eating through public health campaigns. As charitable food responses become normalised as a key way to deal with food insecurity, it is important to examine structural drivers of this system, in which economic constraints have a clear bearing on the food choices persons make (or are unable to make). Examining the narratives of food insecurity shared by respondents challenges public health discourse around food, health and nutrition, which reflects and privileges largely middle-class lifestyles and aspirations. Exhortations to 'eat healthy' or 'eat mindfully' are glaringly misaligned in the context of households struggling to purchase enough food for their families, and health literacy campaigns need to pay greater attention to the causal relations between income insecurity, food insecurity and health inequalities.

The persistence (and growth) in food insecurity demands attention to fundamental questions about inequalities in our food ecosystems and the political commitment required to deal with the social determinants of food insecurity. Such efforts will certainly include food aid, but must extend beyond charitable food responses to allow for multi-scalar, collaborative action that shifts us, collectively, towards more socially just and environmentally sustainable food systems.

Food insecurity in affluent societies poses important ethical and political questions that demand our attention and scrutiny: if we recognise the human right to food, access to adequate food should no longer be treated as a gift or act of benevolence, but a fundamental right and statutory obligation.

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Chapter 1

Food Insecurity and Food Aid in Singapore

> *"Food is just a method to survive ... day by day. ... If you are talking to me about nutrition ... I don't think we people [in this neighbourhood] get all that. ... [it] is going to cost us a lot. For us, in ... this small community, we are not rich people. We are just blessed to have food, that is all."* (Interview, Rental flat resident)

The juxtaposition of hunger amid excess can be jarring. It is especially confronting in a country celebrated for being a food paradise, in which a wide variety of food—is generally considered "cheap and highly accessible".[4] Food is imbued with deep social and cultural meanings for most people, especially in Singapore, where food (and eating) is deemed a national obsession.

Yet, even as wealth accumulates and Singapore's culinary reputation grows, so too has the number of charitable food aid organisations on this small island. As of February 2020, there were around 125 food aid groups in Singapore set up to assist persons in financial hardship.[5] One prominent food charity, Willing Hearts, which provides cooked meals to the poor, has increased its output steadily over the years: it now distributes 9,500 meals daily to over 40 locations, 365 days a year.[6] Food from the Heart, another major food charity, distributed S$6.35 million worth of food to 53,700 people in 2020.[7]

Food insecurity, broadly understood as the lack of nutritionally adequate and safe foods for all persons at all times,[8] is inextricably linked to economic inequality. It is an issue of growing concern in many affluent countries, including Singapore, where a recent study estimated that around 10% of Singaporean households are food insecure.[9] Meanwhile, charitable food aid has also risen significantly: a 'downstream' solution to people's increasing inability to secure food for themselves and their households.[10] This proliferation of charitable food aid organisations as a response to food insecurity has garnered significant research and policy interest.[11] This study, which examines the nature of food insecurity and food aid in a public rental neighbourhood, aims to contribute to this burgeoning discourse.

About This Study: Background and Methodology

Beyond Social Services (Beyond) is a community development agency, not a dedicated food charity. However, having worked with residents in public rental neighbourhoods for over five decades, Beyond has organised and been involved in multiple food aid initiatives over the years. In 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly during the circuit breaker, food distributions rose significantly, due to concerns over income loss for many rental flat residents, as well as increased donor interest in funding food aid initiatives. Between February and December 2020, Beyond distributed 96,117 cooked meals, 5,301 food ration packs, and S$818,740 worth of supermarket vouchers to 1,555 families.

This unprecedented increase in food aid activity generated questions from Beyond's staff as well as donors about the efficacy of such efforts. Beyond was also involved in ongoing research on income insecurity (related to COVID-19),[12] as well as health and wellbeing in rental flat communities, and it became increasingly evident that there were key overlaps between these issues and food insecurity, in which food—or the lack of adequate, nutritious food—was deeply intertwined with financial constraints and health concerns. This growing concern with food insecurity and food aid efforts at Beyond led to this research project. A qualitative study, it involved the following:

- Semi-structured interviews with 54 residents in a public rental flat neighbourhood Beyond works in, conducted between July and August 2020;
- Interviews with four stakeholders involved in providing food aid in the neighbourhood, conducted between July and October 2020;
- A focus group involving eight rental flat residents, conducted in December 2020.

Interviews were conducted with an adult household member; most had families with young children (see Appendix A for further demographic information). Interviews were mostly conducted in English, though several were conducted in the interviewees' preferred language (Malay, Tamil or Mandarin), then translated. All the interviews as well as the focus group proceedings were transcribed.

Data (i.e. the transcripts) was coded and analysed via thematic analysis. A codebook was drafted in collaboration with a team of university student volunteers, then modified as new themes emerged. Using Dedoose, a data analysis platform, the student team coded the 54 interviews with members in early 2021, and presented their findings to Beyond in April 2021. Subsequently, a second round of coding was done by the author of this report, in which the interviews with members as well as stakeholders, and the focus group transcript, were further coded and analysed.

Defining Food Insecurity

At the United Nations' (UN) World Food Summit of 1996, food security was defined as existing "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life".[13] In ensuring food security, not only is the type of food important—i.e. food adequately nutritious to meet health needs—the manner of acquiring such food also matters: there should be "the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways", that is, "without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, and other coping strategies".[14] According to the UN Food and Agricultural Association (FAO), there are four key dimensions to food security:

- **Food availability:** the availability of sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality;
- **Food access:** this refers to access by individuals to adequate resources for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet;
- **Utilisation:** this emphasizes the non-food aspects of food security, in which physiological needs should be met through ensuring food can be utilised through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care in order to reach a state of nutritional wellbeing;
- **Stability:** food security requires access to adequate food at all times, and encompasses both the availability and access aspects of food security.[15]

In many wealthy countries, the phenomenon of 'First World Hunger' is closely linked to shifts in welfare reforms and impacts on income security and social protection.[16] Manifestations of food insecurity are understood as explicitly linked to income poverty, in which the concept of relative deprivation is integral. Prominent British sociologist Peter Townsend highlights the dynamism of poverty and emphasizes that, "Poverty is not an absolute state. It is relative deprivation".[17] In Townsend's view, "individuals and families whose resources, over time, fall seriously short of the resources commanded by the average individual or family in the community in which they live … are in poverty".[18]

Hunger Free but Food Insecure: The Singapore Context

Singapore was ranked the world's most food secure nation by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Food Security Index (GFSI) in 2019 (though this ranking dropped to 19th in 2020, interestingly, when the GFSI introduced inequality-adjusted income levels for the first time).[19] The GFSI considers "food affordability, availability, quality and safety, and natural resources and resilience across a set of 113 countries".[20] In a *Straits Times* report on the 2019 GFSI ranking, Singapore Food Agency's (SFA) chairperson attributed Singapore's high ranking to strong economic growth and "Singaporeans' increased purchasing power, allowing them to afford quality food".[21]

This top ranking reinforces the general perception of Singapore as a country where food is plentiful and affordable, and the population well-fed.[22] Through examining the narratives of those living in poverty, however, researchers like Tan et al. have pointed out how such narratives "debunk perceptions among relatively privileged Singaporeans" that food in Singapore—particularly hawker food—is cheap and affordable "for everyone".

Food security requires stable access to a healthy and balanced diet. While hunger may be experienced by those struggling with food insecurity, this is a potential, rather than essential consequence of food insecurity.[23] In other words, "households may … be food insecure even if they are hunger free".[24] This is an important consideration in Singapore, where the poor tend to experience "intermittent food insecurity and hunger, rather than abject poverty and starvation".[25] In Tan et al.'s study on food insecurity, in which the researchers interviewed 30 recipients of food aid from a local soup kitchen, food insecurity for the poor is defined as situations in which an individual:

> (a) meets only the basic requirements of daily intake of food in order to curb hunger; (b) needs to compromise on quality of food in favor of eating cheaper options that may be unhealthy or inappropriate to sustain their health; and/or (c) needs to make difficult decisions between food and other daily needs, at times forgoing meals.[26]

The UN's *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021* report stated that about 4.5% of the population in Singapore was estimated to face moderate to severe food insecurity.[27] It is unclear what official data was specifically relied upon by the UN to determine this percentage, as Singapore does not officially measure or track food insecurity among its residents.[28] Local studies that have focused on food insecurity, however, have turned up notably higher estimates. In 2020, the Lien Centre published a nationally representative study of food insecurity, *The Hunger Report: An In-Depth Look at Food Insecurity in Singapore.*[29] Key findings in that report include:

- 10% of the 1,200 surveyed Singaporean households experienced food insecurity at least once in the last 12 months; two out of five of these households experienced food insecurity at least once a month;
- Almost 3.5% of individuals participating in the study experienced severe levels of food insecurity;
- Food-insecure households were more likely to reside in one- or two-room HDB flats;

- Household heads of food-insecure families tended to have lower educational attainment.[30]

Crucially, the study reported a positive and persistent correlation between low income and experiences of food insecurity; in fact, 79% of the reasons cited for food insecurity centred on financial constraints.[31]

In the 'Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study' conducted by the National University of Singapore (NUS),[32] the study found that among those who lived in public rental flats:

- Approximately 38% reported they did not have enough food and did not have money to get more;
- Around 33% worried that they would run out of food before they got money to buy more;
- About 23% reported they couldn't afford to eat balanced meals;
- Almost 15% reported their children were not eating enough because they "just couldn't afford enough food".[33]

These results correspond with the study's own findings on financial strain among the respondents, in which:

- Almost 33% of those living in public rental flats said they had "not enough to cover expenses";
- Around 36% had "just enough to cover all expenses";
- Around 38% had fallen behind in paying their bills.[34]

It is clear that poverty and food insecurity share a "contingent relationship", in which hardship is not just created but exacerbated.[35] These studies have implications for Beyond's research, in which interview respondents share similar profiles and are, in the Singapore context—where housing is often used as a proxy for economic status—already marked as financially disenfranchised.

Food Charities and the Growth of Food Aid

The food aid landscape has broadened over time to include multiple means of providing different types of food. In countries around Europe, for example, there are food banks (where excess or leftover food is donated, for e.g. by the food service retail industry), soup kitchens (where meals are prepared and given out), community cafés (which turn surplus food into affordable meals),[36] community fridges (food-sharing initiatives in which residents donate as well as access surplus food),[37] and 'social supermarkets' which offer items at significantly lower prices to 'members', with membership restricted to the poor.[38] There has also been interest in initiatives like community gardens—admittedly a limited strategy, but seen as providing other benefits such as improving social health and wellbeing.[39] There are also other ways food is subsidised, for example through the provision of meals at school for children from low-income families.[40]

In Singapore, common forms of food aid include the distribution of food rations, which may include 'dry food' staples (like rice and oil; tinned food like sardines), as well as 'wet food' like fresh produce, including vegetables and meat. There are also delivered cooked meals, more commonly associated with lone elderly recipients (though during the pandemic last year, more families received cooked food, particularly during Ramadan). Sometimes, households may receive

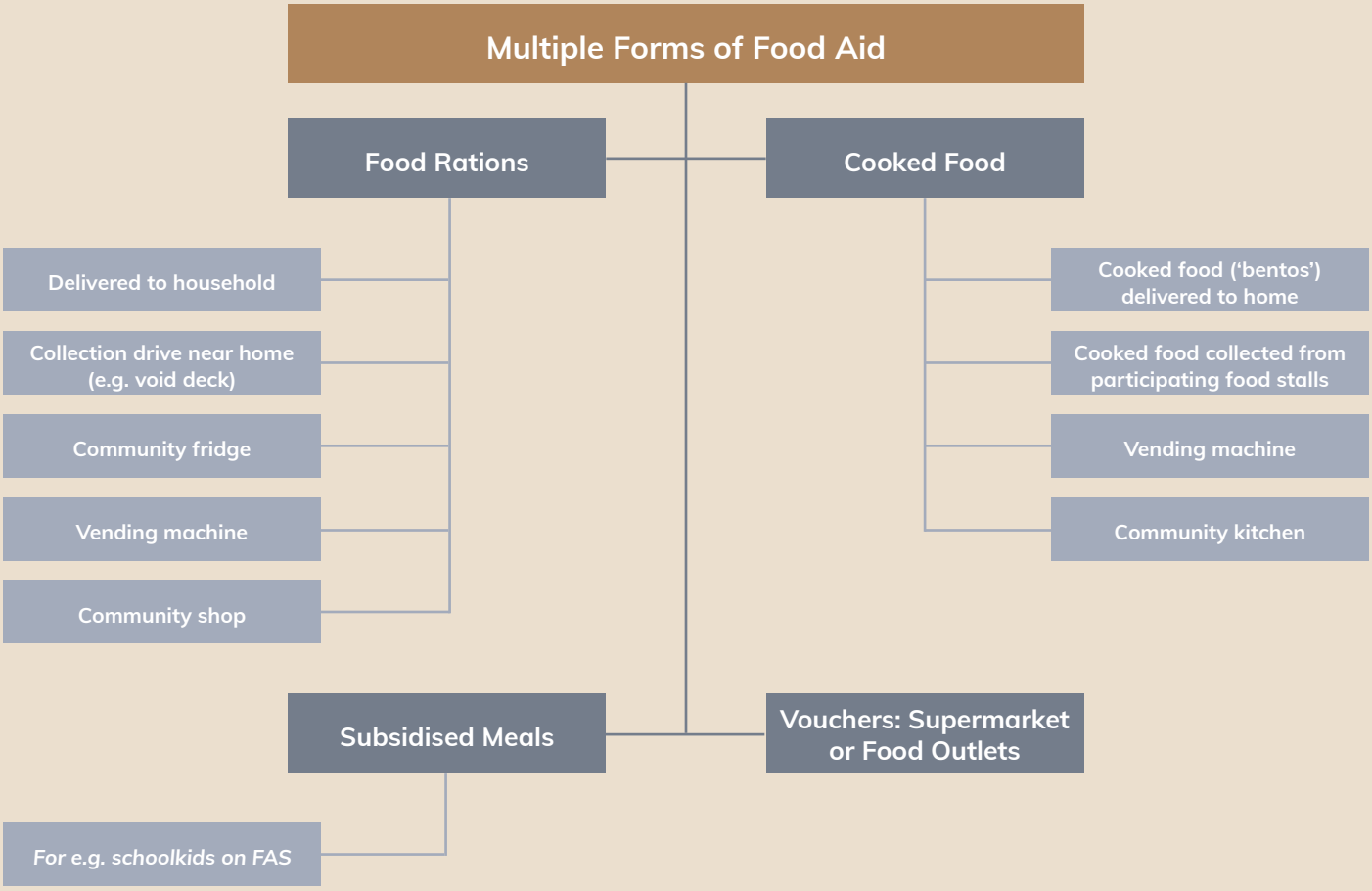

Figure 1: Forms of food aid in Singapore

supermarket vouchers, which they can use to purchase food items and daily necessities (see Figure 1).

Locally, innovations in food aid include community fridges,[41] as well as a vending machine located at a public housing estate where residents are given credit to redeem dry food items or packed meals.[42] There are currently two 'community shops' run by non-profit organisation, Food from the Heart: run on a 'shop-for-free' concept, select low-income beneficiaries can visit the store several times a month to choose up to 12 items, which includes staples as well as canned food.[43] Several food charities also run food banks.[44]

Partnerships have also emerged, in which food charities tie up with food providers, e.g. hawker stall owners, to allow for a "hot food redemption programme"; beneficiaries who qualify are able to claim meals from participating hawker stalls within the zones they live.[45] During the pandemic, The Food Bank Singapore tied up with food and beverage (F&B) outlets to deliver food, in which hawkers as well as Michelin-starred restaurants participated.[46] The Community Development Council (CDC) also launched its Voucher Scheme last year, in which vouchers, given out to households in financial hardship, could be used to redeem food or other essential goods at hawker stalls or heartland shops.[47]

Besides the more well-known food charities—e.g. Food from the Heart, Food Bank Singapore, Free Food for All, and Willing Hearts—there are also voluntary welfare organisations, religious organisations, grassroots organisations, even schools, as well as government-linked social service agencies that may not be registered food charities, but also engage in food distributions (whether on a regular or ad hoc basis). The Food Bank Singapore acquires donated food from a range of sources—farms, stores, manufacturers, etc.—and distributes them via their member network, which includes around 360 organisations (including Willing Hearts, as well as the Salvation Army and

family-service centres).[48]

In assessments of Singapore's food aid landscape, commentators have noted the government's 'Many Helping Hands' approach,[49] which emphasises a shared responsibility between "the individual, the family, the community and the State [in] coming together to address the needs of the vulnerable".[50] A local media report highlighted some of the complexities of this approach, including consequences such as food wastage and inefficiencies in food aid, such that some people receive more food than they can reasonably consume, while others who are in need do not receive any, or not enough.[51] This was also emphasised in the Lien Centre's 2020 report, which revealed a "stark misalignment in the provision of food assistance", in which severely food-insecure households were not receiving food assistance.[52]

As charitable food responses continue to expand globally, a growing body of literature is challenging this rise in food charities, asking if this is a "practical, effective and ethical response to hunger and poverty".[53] Some of the issues raised with food charity as a solution to food insecurity include problems with adequacy (that provisions are "too small" or "too piecemeal" to meet systemic need), as well as quality (often "variable" and "poor").[54] It has also been noted how food aid often "stigmatise[s] recipients", and studies have been conducted on not just how food banks affect recipients' diets, but also their emotional responses, which may include "shame, gratitude, and anger".[55] There is also the observation that charitable food aid is a "distinctly 'other' system of food acquisition", set clearly apart from mainstream modes of accessing food (through commercial shopping).[56] In the public rental flat neighbourhood where we conducted this study, and where charitable food aid is common and normalised, many of these issues surfaced in our interviews.

This chapter sought to introduce key definitions and provide a general overview of food insecurity and the food aid landscape in Singapore. The following two chapters delve into the findings of the study, with an emphasis on the experiential accounts of rental flat residents. Chapter 2 examines the nature of food insecurity in the neighbourhood, including the multiple strategies adopted by residents to manage food insecurity under financial duress. It also discusses some of the impacts of COVID-19 on interviewees, and their general anxieties about and around food provision. Chapter 3 focuses on the food aid landscape, and how rental flat residents interact with as well as rationalise food aid decisions. This chapter also includes interviews with stakeholders involved in providing food aid in the neighbourhood, and excerpts from a focus group conducted with several residents. The final chapter discusses the implications of these findings, situating them within broader global discourse around food insecurity and growing awareness around sustainability and right-to-food approaches.

Chapter 2

Food Insecurity in a Public Rental Neighbourhood: Key Findings

> *"If I ate lunch, I would be worried that when my kids want to eat at night, I will not have enough money. If I'm left with only $10, I wonder what my kids can eat if I had eaten. ... So I'll just wait for them to return from school and see what they want to eat. I will then see how much is left after that, and decide for myself accordingly."*
> *(Rental flat resident)*

If this quote is stark, it is also unexceptional. Over and over again, interviewees' narratives demonstrated a troubling intimacy with food insecurity. Despite variations in the severity and frequency of food insecurity, interviews with rental flat residents revealed that reduced and restricted food intake was extremely common. Parents, in particular, struggled and sacrificed to ensure their children would not experience hunger, and grappled constantly with the pressures of meeting their children's food needs (even if not their preferences). Collectively, interviewees' experiences demonstrate conditioned responses to normalised deprivation. Food-related decisions were primarily dictated by financial considerations, reinforcing the causal relationship between food insecurity and income poverty.

The following sections detail the many ways in which respondents experienced, struggled and coped with food insecurity. This is followed by an examination of COVID-19 and its impacts on food insecurity, a consideration of interviewees' anxieties about food, and the gendered dimension of food provision.

Cooking and Eating One Meal A Day

Many interviewees mentioned cooking just once a day, and having one or at most two meals a day. In terms of the former, this helped to ensure groceries were stretched; it also reduced the time involved in food preparation (thus reducing costs in terms of cooking, for e.g. the use of gas). Interviewees also spoke of keeping things "simple", often cooking one-dish meals:

> *"We just make do with a simple meal. Like, instead of like having two, three dish a day, we just have like one dish food. Something like that, simple one."*

> *"I only cook one time only—it's like, if I cook chicken curry once, rice, or noodles, only morning I cook, we eat until midnight."*

For many, one meal a day was not uncommon. While on occasion, the skipping of meals may be due to tiredness—one woman shared how she worked 12-hour shifts and, when she returned from work, was too exhausted to prepare or eat anything—overwhelmingly, the cutting down on meals was related to economic constraints:

> *"Erm, we always skip breakfast. Then we always skip lunch. Then we always eat dinner. Our meal is one day one meal only. That's what I can afford."*

> *Interviewer: Have you ever skipped meals?*
> *Interviewee: Ever lah. Because we more focused on the bills—we have to pay those. We let go of all the bills first. Then, if we have enough money, we will go to the market ... to get food. Even so, there are people in this house that eat a lot so I will have to see. I will cook bit by bit.... Then I save-save some.... that's why we cook one meal only.*

> *Interviewer: On an average day, what is a typical breakfast, lunch and dinner for your family?*
> *Interviewee: Oh normally, like, let's say the cash flow is very tight, normally we eat lunch, that's it.*
> *Interviewer: You'll only eat lunch, one meal?*
> *Interviewee: Yeah.*
> *Interviewer: What about your kids?*
> *Interviewee: Er, milk powder lah.*
> *Interviewer: The teenage kids?*
> *Interviewee: Same. ... Let's say we eat lunch, that means lunch only.*

The Prevalence of Parental Buffering

A common response to inadequate food was parental buffering, in which parents reduced their food intake to protect their children from hunger. The term parental buffering is adapted from the notion of "maternal buffering", which takes place when mothers "protect their children from low food supplies by reducing their own food intake"; in other words, children's food needs are prioritised over that of their mother.[57] In this study, however, it was noted that it was not only mothers/women who did this, but also fathers, particularly those in single-headed households. Hence the term 'parental' rather than 'maternal' is used. The following are responses when interviewees were asked if they ate less or chose not to eat to ensure their children had enough:

> *"Sometimes ... when very tight, then we let them [children] eat first, then we just drink plain water lor. It's ok."*

> *"Sometimes lah ... you will do that for your children. Like let's say, for that day, we only left two to three eggs, then I make an omelette. They eat, they ask for more, so I will not have my portion, I will give it to them."*

> *"Sometimes I cook and there is a little bit, then I give my kids first, then my eldest, then if got biscuit or what, we just eat lah. We make sure our kids are full first, everything our kids come first. We give them eat properly ... when they are not hungry, then we think about us."*

This willingness to sacrifice for their children was treated as a 'given', as expressed by this interviewee, who said, "Yes, of course, a mother must have that kind of thinking". Parents, as well as grandparents, expressed a resoluteness in ensuring children, especially the youngest ones, are shielded from hunger:

> *"I make sure like end month ... that they have enough groceries for them to cope. The reason is because—you know why—I have granddaughter. So, I will feel bad if my granddaughter also lack of food ... is too sad, you see."*

> *"You asked earlier, in my life do I worry about food. Yes, I have, I do. Because I'm feeding not only my mouth—my mum, my children, my grandkids. If it's just me, I don't have to worry so much. ... I do not want my children to feel like, oh, because I'm a single parent, that's why they have to struggle over food. ... I told them, no matter what, I will never let you all go through a day without food. ... That's my promise to them."*

Sometimes, buffering may be done by older children:

> *Interviewer: Have your children skipped meals?*
> *Interviewee: Always the third one ... she carry the responsibility of, like, the eldest one. ... she will manage the money, she will manage the groceries, and she will manage the toiletries, everything is under her. And when come to evening, she will monitor the dishes. She will be like, 'Have you sent [food] to grandma?' I say, 'Yeah'. [She will ask] 'How about older brother?' I say, 'Yeah'. [She will ask] 'So the chicken left like that?' I say, 'Yeah. Why? If you want to eat, eat.' [She will say] 'No, it's okay. I'm not hungry.' She can just go to sleep without eating, yeah.*

Filling Up with Liquids, Snacks and Starches

In order to manage restricted food intake, interviewees sometimes coped by filling up with liquids or starches, and purchasing items that are "cheap and filling" for the family. This interviewee, for example, shared how her husband dealt with eating one meal a day:

> *Interviewer: What does your husband usually eat at work?*
> *Interviewee: (Chuckles) No, he don't eat.*
> *Interviewer: So he waits until he comes back home to eat with you all?*
> *Interviewee: Yup. But I did inform him, because he need energy right, to work? So he say he sometimes drink coffee. If not, the thing that can make him fill his tummy is Milo ... either iced Milo or hot coffee.*

Another interviewee also tried to save money by not eating while at work, or brought snacks from home:

> *"Then when I work, also need to eat right? Can't be for 15 hours I don't need to eat right? Then every day, we have to buy outside food cost about $5 to $6 you know. ... Sometimes I bring food from home like keropok [deep fried crackers] or biscuits, I bring to work and eat only that, hold out, starve until night, go back home eat Maggi."*[58]

Others spoke of how they will buy food for the family that is "cheap and filling", like "hot dog with buns". One interviewee, when asked about health considerations, said the main concern was how he would be able to keep himself and his family full:

> *"As for us, we don't earn that much. Healthy is always very expensive, you know? There's no way of us eating healthy meal. Like, let's say we don't eat rice, we don't eat starch, how we gonna keep ourselves full ... for the long period. The main thing for us is to actually get starch so that we can actually keep ourselves full and then we eat lesser meals."*

Meanwhile, another interviewee, who has to think of how to adequately feed her family of seven, including five children, spoke about the importance of ensuring full meals, rather than snacks:

> *"My priority will be rice. If they eat instant noodles or titbits, they will be hungry quickly, in one or two hours. So my priority will be meat, chicken and rice."*

Stringent Budgeting: Compromises and Trade-Offs

Interview respondents—primarily women—demonstrated a keen frugality, a distinct aversion to wastage, and a hyperawareness of fluctuations in the prices of food items (which created much anxiety during the early stages of the circuit breaker in 2020). One interviewee, who cooked not just for her own household, but also for her mother and sibling's households, talked about how she stretched her food budget, down to the last chicken wing:

> *"Because I'm no longer working, right, so.... we need to stretch whatever I have. ... I have to really budget in a way that one person can only take one chicken wing, so that you all can eat one. I mean, it's better to have one chicken wing than no chicken wing to eat. So, like, at least one day one person can take two chicken wings, one for dinner and [one for] lunch, and I make sure that it's enough for three households."*

Another interviewee also shared that wings are cheaper than drumlets:

> *"We try not to buy food like nuggets and hotdogs since they are getting more and more expensive. If I buy … it will cost $20 for seven people to eat. If I spend $20 a day, how much then will I have to spend every month right? So the main thing I will be buying is wings-type food, because, if I buy the drumlets set, there are fewer pieces … One wings packet for 2 kg will last us for three days … If I buy fish, it costs more and will last my family only one day, so it is not worth it."*

Others talked about buying cheaper-priced products:

> *"Yeah, like rice right? I buy the … budget rice, $5. … I don't buy the expensive $8 you know, I buy the cheaper one. Ah, then chicken, I will see if the chicken wings, 2 kg, I divide by two [persons] for one week, sometimes for three."*

Shopping strategies included purchasing items when they are 'not so fresh' and are on sale (so not when the items first arrive at the supermarket, but days later when the supermarket wants to sell these items off quickly; or shortly before the store is about to close), and traveling to shops further away where certain products are cheaper—not possible or as convenient last year during the pandemic. Some saved by buying bigger packs of items (like a sack of onions), while others, who only had small amounts of cash to spare, would purchase food items in small amounts but more frequently. Interviewees, particularly those who cooked at home regularly, demonstrated careful planning about their food purchases as well as their menus (what they were going to cook, when and how, including how long the food will last):

> *Interviewee: Because if you're talking about my house, like groceries, toiletries and poultry, right, if really is a very basic kind, nothing that is expensive, nothing that is branded, [a budget] that can last me throughout one whole month, honestly, I must say $500. … Including chicken, eggs, bread, oil, rice, it's solid $500, considered I've taken the most cheapest things. If chicken … if have $10.90, $8.75, or $7.95, I will take the $7.95 one. I don't care what brand of chicken it is, as long as it's halal. … for some people, if today they are going to cook, today they will peel the onions. So you understand that onions are not cheap and then*

> *they use a lot of onions. For me, no. What I will do is, I will buy like, two sacks of onions, keep one sack in the fridge. I will peel all in the other sack, then one packet of chilli, like 3kg, I blend everything and cook stir-fried sambal and put in freezer. ... So, in a way, you save onions, you save oil.*
> **Interviewer: And save time also, right?**
> *Interviewee: Yes, correct. If on a daily basis, every day if you add oil, the oil will also finish. Onions are expensive, [also] garlic, right? So if you cook like that, you already have the basic mixture, you just add in. If [making] curry, [use] that sambal and curry powder, add chicken, add coconut milk and you're done.*

There was also a keen sense of wanting to ensure there is no wastage:

> **Interviewer: When you're cooking or thinking of what to prepare, what do you take into consideration?**
> *Interviewee: The amount of food I need to cook, is it enough. Or is it more than enough? I don't want to have any excess. ... let's say today I cook, got excess until tomorrow, then I make sure the thing will finish tomorrow. If not, I have to throw it away, and it's wasting. To me it's really, really, wasting. Because, you know, you purchase all these things, you purchase with your own money, and money is not easy to earn.*

As already alluded to, interviewees' food budgets and choices are predominantly dictated by financial considerations, which often means a trade-off in terms of variety, taste, food preferences and considerations about nutritional value. The following quotes illustrate how a household could be 'hunger free but food insecure':

> *"Er, skip meal don't have, we still got something to eat but less lah ... we sometimes eat instant noodles or egg every day, but for me main thing at home must have rice. Rice, egg, instant noodle, that must have at home."*

This reliance on "simple" food like rice, eggs and noodles was common:

> *"[B]ecause it is the end of the month right, there's usually not much of the salary left. We will just eat Maggi mee lor!"*

> *"There is sometimes when we really got no money. But we still have rice, or maybe 10 eggs for about $2.50 right? Then the whole egg, each of us one egg. Or maybe I cook the meal with two eggs, then three of us eat together. That's all lah. It all depends. If we really got no money, then that is what we eat—fried rice. Fried rice is the cheapest."*

Residents responded to interviewers' questions about health considerations when managing food budgets with a mix of responses: bemusement, guilt, resignation and, on occasion, visible exasperation:

> *"I don't think about all that [nutrition]. I just open my fridge, see what I have, and then cook. I don't have time to think about nutrition all that because I am not from a rich family."*

The point about compromising on health and nutrition bears additional emphasis, as public health campaigns continue to focus heavily on increasing awareness about nutrition in an attempt to encourage 'healthy choices'. This framing obscures the economic realities faced by many low-income families, in which competing financial priorities and a limited budget often shrink available food choices to what is affordable and available, despite an awareness of what is healthy and 'good'.

> *"Yes, of course I would want to put in more nutritious foods. Unfortunately, they are all expensive products. So I just trust in God's plan. Hopefully, it's healthy for my family."*

> *"Healthy meal for me quite expensive … if I don't have any money, we always eat egg … I know that is not healthy. But we have no choice … I cannot afford, so I just ignore … whatever we can eat, for survival, we just eat lah."*

> *Interviewer: Do you ever worry about whether the food you or your children eat is unhealthy?*
> *Interviewee: Oh, this. I don't even think about this! I am more worried about the few months of housing debts I owe. Where got the capacity to think of this? I am already occupied and stressed up about the rent ... will I still want to worry about [this]?*

In the excerpt below, a mother shared her struggles with feeding her young children with Milo when she was no longer able to afford milk (formula), which is a lot more expensive:

> *Interviewer: Do you consider what is healthy?*
> *Interviewee: Sometimes I do, but we just eat what we need to survive. Sometimes people say this one not good, [why] you eat this always ... like my friends say, you give your kids Milo, also not good, later they stomach pain. I say, what to do? ... Of course they will ask for milk, then don't have, then he will cry all the way until he get the milk. Ok, Milo lah. No choice what, we must survive.*

It was extremely painful for the interviewee, who had to explain to her children that she could not afford to buy them milk:

> *"Last time my husband work full time, the children always drink milk. Then now very difficult, so now I give them Milo, I tell them temporary, now we cannot afford ... I need to tell them I got no money to buy milk [starts to cry]. This is the first time I give my kids Milo and I cannot buy [milk]. ... You know, sometimes they got the milk for people who drink the coffee? I just put that one in the hot water then I just give them. ... as long as they see inside the bottle milk colour then they drink."*

Parents generally acknowledged the importance of including fruits and vegetables in their children's diet, though this desire to ensure their children ate vegetables regularly had to be balanced with the desire to cut down on wastage; one mother didn't purchase many vegetables "because children don't like to eat, then will be wasted". In general,

fruit was considered a healthy and preferable food choice—particularly if the children didn't eat vegetables—but also expensive:

> *"We seldom eat fruits at home. [Fruits are] expensive. That is why we don't dare to buy. ... But all those are healthy lah."*

> *Interviewer: In your opinion, what is considered healthy?*
> *Interviewee: Healthy equals fruits, vegetables, organic, less sugary drinks.*
> *Interviewer: Are these part of your diet?*
> *Interviewee: No, they are not [laughs]. It is all too expensive.*

This next interviewee made practical food decisions—purchasing what was cheaper (not fruits), what was easier to prepare, and what her children liked to eat (not vegetables):

> *"I usually buy more frozen food and fried foods like nuggets, fish fillet, frozen chicken. My children like to eat and it is easier to prepare, I can just fry it for them. I don't buy fruits and vegetables because they are too expensive and my children don't like vegetables. Frozen meat is three times cheaper than fresh meat."*

Managing Children's Food Needs and Preferences

When it came to catering to children's preferences, parents expressed a mix of guilt (at not being able to give their children what they'd prefer, especially treats like fast food), relief (that their children were "not fussy"), and frustration (that their kids sometimes refused certain foods). This interviewee, like several others, instructed her children not to be "choosy", and to see food as a "blessing":

> *"[My children], whatever food on the table they eat. ... I said, this is a blessing ... you need to eat, don't choosy-choosy."*

This 'teaching' of children to be grateful extended towards the receiving of food aid:

> *"I said whatever [food aid] we get, we just eat, don't too fussy, too picky, because I told them [my children] that some other country also they don't get any food to eat. I teach them, whatever we get, just eat lah. We have to be grateful."*

Others adopt a stricter 'take-it-or-leave-it' stance with their children:

> *"I'm actually very lucky that our kids understand our situation. ... That's how we taught the kids lah: 'You want to eat, eat, you don't eat, you go hungry. I don't care.'"*

> *"I say I cannot give, I cannot give what they [the kids] want. ... whatever we have on the table, you need to eat. If you don't want to eat, your problem lah, I don't want to scold."*

This last interviewee also expressed concern that if she didn't inculcate this in her children, they would ask for meals she cannot afford: "Then, in the end ... we don't have money to buy this thing. I really scared of that."

A number expressed visible relief, even pride, at the lack of fussiness in their children:

> *"But my son, he's not a picky eater. He will just go after the food—rice or anything that is given. He said, 'It's okay mummy, halal sustenance. As long as it's halal, we will eat.'"*

Of course, there are also parents who have to deal with the stress of children either refusing to eat certain foods or showing their displeasure, sometimes leading to tensions in the home:

> *Interviewer: You mentioned just now your children like certain kinds of foods. What happens if you can't cook what they like?*
> *Interviewee: They will throw tantrums. [My] second son is ok ... but my elder one, he is quite a picky eater ... he will throw tantrums, he will say, 'I don't want to eat, I don't want to eat'. Then it will actually make me angry, and I myself will shout. Yeah, quite drama.*

There are also parents who need to consider their children's health conditions in managing household food needs:

> *"[My daughter] having eczema and together with hives. And she have maintenance medicine as well. ... so I have to be careful of the food I'm giving her. [She cannot eat] soya, wheat food. ... it will become rashes. ... Because she have allergy as well. Like if I wrongly give her food, straight go hospital."*

> *"Because my youngest is also ... anaemic. ... I have to really put into consideration her diet. Especially like meat, eggs, vegetables ... meat sometimes, once in a while, on my pay day only, I will treat her to some meat. Otherwise I will focus on milk. Milk is a must ... because doctor said if you can't afford to give her meat then please push her to drink milk and green veggies. So sometimes I'm more worried that I don't have the money to buy milk for her."*

Parents' abilities to accede to children's requests for their favourite foods were circumscribed by budget constraints. Those in relatively better off positions may be able to afford occasional treats, such as this parent:

> *"Depends, the kids' want McDonalds, then I buy the food. They want prata, then I buy the ready-made prata ... like once a week, they want something ... I will go by their preference and ... I will just give it to them."*

Others have to consider more deeply if it's something the family can afford at the time of the request:

> *"I will think about our budget. Sometimes they want to eat fried chicken or McDonalds. But we don't even have enough money, how to buy? So I'll just tell them, 'Another day, another day'."*

> *"You know, when you have kids, they love to eat. So the pressure is there when you can only eat once a day. The kids will be asking, 'Mummy, why I cannot have nuggets, fishballs', and so on. Then I will say, 'Please understand my situation, I don't have enough money'. Then two, three months later, I will buy, but it is only enough for that day. So it is quite pressuring but I try to assure them that they will eat their preferred food one day."*

It can be difficult and stressful for parents unable to provide occasional 'treats' for their children, particularly as providing these treats—such as an occasional fast food meal, or a special drink—is a recognisable and common social norm in Singapore. Giving in, however, could exact other costs:

> *"So, sometimes my children crave for McDonalds right, like I sympathise right, so I said, okay lah, since it's not frequent. So, I ask my friend, then borrow from them lah [long pause]. Then when I get the money, I return."*

Another thing a few parents mentioned were the appetites of 'growing children', which can aggravate concerns about adequacy:

> *Interviewee: [I scared] not enough [food]. Because kids are growing right, so their appetite is also growing. So they tend to eat more.... They will have more than one serving. ... Like they will eat, then later they will get hungry again. So that's my worry, because sometimes we don't have enough.*
> *Interviewer: Do they ask for snacks?*
> *Interviewee: Yeah. [But] I cannot always cater to them. Because that one is also additional expenses.*

Social Networks: Friends, Family and Neighbours

Residents also reached out for help via their social networks when things got tough. Some shared that they borrowed money—mostly from family, sometimes friends or colleagues, even neighbours. For one interviewee, 'managing' was equated with providing food for her family, which was sometimes achieved through borrowing: "I always manage. Food I will cook but I will borrow money [from friends]". Others shared that borrowing money is not just to pay for food, that there are multiple needs:

> *"Yes I have [borrowed money]. But I didn't tell them [it's for food] lah. Actually, I want to buy for whatever needs... A lot of times, definitely."*

Several expressed embarrassment at having to borrow from others:

> *"[Last time] I did say to her, 'Mummy, can borrow $50 first, wait my husband [gets] pay then I just give you back $50'. Because need to buy food on that day, don't have money. But she will ask yeah, because she also worried. Because $50 dollars for now cannot last ... one day also can finish ... so she will ask. ... But now lesser—I won't ask a lot because now ... staying alone with my own family, not with my mother already right, so have to, you know, learn how to be independent. So whatever we have, whatever we don't have, only the four walls understand what we going through."*

Notably, a few interviewees had to borrow money last year because their financial situation deteriorated significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see later section for more impacts from COVID-19):

> *Interviewer: Have you ever borrowed money so that you can buy food?*
> *Interviewee: Yes ... I can say for this year it's frequent. ... Because suddenly, they just take away our job. Suddenly, we are like, stunned! We don't prepare anything! No savings, nothing. ... That period, that period really. Until my son drink condensed milk. ... that was the bitterest day of our lives.*

> *"Because at the end of the month … we had staples, that means rice, sugar … but when it came to buying vegetables and fresh meat, we were short of money. So I had to borrow money from my mom, I had no other choice. That was one of the first times. … I really normally don't disturb them. … even during the first time when it was quarantine, my mom kept asking, 'Do you need money' … But I said no, it was okay, because I could manage. But it was only when, you know, it was really biting my hand, that I really couldn't take it, then I said, 'You know, can I just [borrow] some, then I give it back to you'."*

A few spoke about having meals at other family members' homes—for some, this was a regular arrangement, for others, something they resorted to when the need arose. Sometimes, it was only the children who would eat at their grandparents' homes:

> *"Okay, sometimes … if we really, we ever run out of food right, I need to call my Dad to actually ask them to fetch the kids. Then I'll just, myself, I'll just go hungry with my husband … we all just eat Maggi, yeah, just to survive."*

Another interviewee spoke of how his sister would sometimes give his children $10-$15 every time she saw them (maybe once or twice a week), and they would use this money to get food. The interviewee said his son would also go over to his mother's house for dinner as they lived close to each other.

Neighbours Helping Neighbours

Helping behaviours were evident in the community, with interviewees talking about giving as well as receiving food from neighbours. An interviewee shared that one of her neighbours, "Whatever they cook, they will give a bit for me … whatever they buy they will buy for me". This interviewee had lived in the neighbourhood for 15 years and said she was close to her neighbour. Another interviewee, who has lived in the neighbourhood for more than 10 years, meets up with friends who live nearby. When they bump into each other in the coffeeshop, these friends will ask if he had eaten and, if he had not, they would buy him a meal. The interviewee shared, however, that sometimes he would pretend he had already eaten and would walk away. During festive occasions, these same friends would celebrate at the coffeeshop, and invite him along for a meal.

Some interviewees specially looked out for families who were struggling financially:

> *"Sometimes the food we have are in excess, in the morning I will give any neighbour that really needs the food. ... It's okay lah, if we share the food with others, our blessings will increase, you will never know right?"*

> *"I ask my children to come here sometimes to eat because I got a lot of food and they can bring the neighbours, because my neighbours are also the less fortunate right, so I bring the neighbours here so that they can eat, but if they don't want to eat then I just pack for them, so that they can bring (it home). You know, we share food with others because we can feel how others feel, you get what I mean ... because we've gone through [it] you see."*

These relationships were nurturing and reciprocal and, as another interviewee shared, not just for when there is a crisis:

> *"When they [my neighbours] cook something, they cook more, then they will send over to my place. Of course I will feel happy lah, I tell them, 'Thank you so much. ... You cook more, you think about my family.' ... Sometimes if I purchase items ... or I receive cooked food from organisations, if I got more, I'll pass to them. To me and my neighbours, it's not like, 'Oh, you have difficulties then I will come and help, but when you are fine I will never come and help.' No, to us it's not like that. To us, who got more, just share to each other. It doesn't mean that, 'Oh, you are well enough, you got a lot of money, both of you are working so we don't have to give you food.' To us it's that whatever I have enough, I will share with you. You have enough, you will share with others."*

One interviewee also mentioned that, while she "cannot afford" to give cash assistance, she was glad to be able to share food with her neighbours ("to make them happy, at least can feed their kids right?"). These forms of mutual support are an indicator of the strength of social networks within the community; they also function as a means of reinforcing them. They also illustrate the ways food functions as a means to demonstrate care and solidarity (see Chapter 3, on meanings of food).

Access to nurturing neighbourly relations, however, differed for residents, and some interviewees had a different perspective on whether neighbours helped each other. These interviewees tended to keep more to themselves, with one explaining, "I never mix with other people before. Only say 'hi, bye', like that." Similarly, these interviewees said:

> *"I don't really mix around. For me, basically, work, home and then I come back from work, I prepare for them [the children] to go school, send them to school, then come back home. Then if I need to go market then I go market. I don't really mix around."*

> *"[In this neighbourhood] everybody just minding their own business! I don't really mingle with the neighbours."*

COVID-19: Impacts from the Pandemic

It has been noted that impacts from the pandemic have been unevenly borne.[59] Media commentaries have spoken frequently of a 'K-shaped recovery',[60] or 'trajectory', in which some sectors have "bounced back swiftly" or are even doing better than before (hence the 'upward' stroke of the K), while others continue to flounder and deteriorate (signifying the 'downward' K stroke).[61] For many of the rental flat residents Beyond works with, the pandemic has had a devastating financial impact.[62]

While fine dining restaurants reported months-long waiting lists,[63] interviewees we spoke with continued to struggle with the financial fallout, which exacerbated food insecurity. A number had lost their jobs or had their incomes reduced, some temporarily, others indefinitely. School closures and the circuit breaker forced household members to stay indoors and for longer periods of time, increasing food as well as utilities consumption. Families who had to be quarantined or were issued stay-home-notices were under immense stress. Food supplies—and prices—fluctuated, and food shopping became additionally challenging with several young children in tow.

The Strain from Financial Impacts

Several members who lost their jobs due to the pandemic had to resort to borrowing money (see previous section on borrowing). Anxieties about providing enough food for the family heightened during this period, leading to high levels of stress and negative impacts on mental health:

> *Interviewer: Have you ever worried about not having enough food to eat?*
> *Interviewee: Yes, ever. Because I was not working. My husband also earning one day $50 right, after deducting money for rent, electricity, I was worried lah, no food.*
> *Interviewer: When was that?*
> *Interviewee: When was COVID-19? March?*
> *Interviewer: Were you worried every day?*
> *Interviewee: Yes, every day.*

> *"Yes, really, the whole thing, really feel like collapsing. ... The stress is very big. .... Before COVID-19 ... the economy was already very bad, plus this COVID-19 happening, a lot of people broke, broke completely. Very worrying, a lot of stress, just a little bit more I would have gone to see a mental health doctor. ... In this COVID-19 situation, my appetite is worse. I've not been able to sit down properly to have a good meal."*

> *"COVID-19, actually my husband had to pay [a loan] monthly. His monthly [pay] was not enough. The eldest, the kids, asked a lot [for food]. For me it was very stressful. I was also doing some work [but] kids are now at home instead of school, so I had to stop my work. My husband also struggled a lot with the money. I had to take loans from people, my friends. For these three months, I felt very stuck."*

For those that continued to work, but had their hours (and thereby income) reduced, food intake was also reduced:

> *"Because of this [circuit breaker] right, I am working … as a part time security. There is work then there is pay. Food-wise is 30% to 40% lesser. Bills, I have to pay the bills. So food is less for me. … I just eat whatever there is."*

> *"At work he [my husband] don't eat or, sometimes, I cook the nasi goreng, he bring to work. He don't have money and don't want to spend money—he have money also use it to top up his EZ-Link for work. Then when he come back then he eat. Before COVID-19 he … buy the outside [food]. Now, because of COVID-19, before he go work he eat, or come back then eat, never buy outside food. Only some coins to buy drink only—as long he got coin to buy drink, that's all."*

One interviewee spoke of her family's experience, in which her husband worked for a store that was identified as a COVID-19 cluster in 2020. The entire household had to be on stay-home notice (SHN), which meant she had to stock up on enough food to last them the duration of the SHN. Her husband's pay was also reduced, and she worried about how to provide meals for the family. In the end, despite palpable fears about her husband being infected—and then infecting them—he went back to work because "we got no choice":

> *"[W]e started to realise that he can't run the family with just the $500. … We cut down a lot … we were thinking, how are we going to put food on the table in the coming months. … When Phase II started, one part of us was happy that my husband was going back to work, but one part of us was also scared he might get infected. His supervisor was asking whether he was willing to come back to work. So, we had no choice but to say yes. … even though … we were still scared, even on the day he was going to work, because we got two kids at home [and] my immune system is quite low. … [But] I can't go to work right now. … so we got no choice."*

Food Prices, Food Consumption and Food Shopping

Interviewees complained about the 'triple whammy' of food consumption increasing at a time when food prices went up, and their incomes shrunk. Additionally, in the early weeks when there were bouts of panic shopping, there were days when certain (cheaper) items would be out of stock. Meanwhile, interviewees preferred not to travel outside of the home unnecessarily to purchase food, particularly when they cared for young children, due to fears of catching the virus.

> *Interviewer: During the circuit breaker, did the prices at the supermarket affect you?*
> *Interviewee: Yes, changed like crazy! I couldn't afford to buy. … Like the onion, was nearing $3 or $4, four pieces only! That one packet [of onion] cost $4 plus right, you imagine, I divide by two everyday if cook. … During COVID-19, I have to buy less [food]. Then my children breakfast, they don't eat—they only eat lunch and dinner. … Also need to cut.*

Families, already watchful and frugal, had to be even more circumspect about their food and toiletries expenditure and consumption rates:

> *"[B]elieve it or not, we did not have deodorant for a month [laughs]. Because NTUC sold [the deodorant] at one dollar and ten cents more than usual. … And then for shampoo, we have to really use small-small amount. We really have to save … even the toothpaste … On groceries, I tell you, that day, in April, I got $600 dollars for my, what do you call that, [government] support care? I bought $600 of groceries alone. And that is how pricey the items were!"*

When schools were closed, children who were previously able to obtain meal subsidies in school were now eating their meals at home; spending more hours at home also meant more requests for snacks. As this interviewee shared,

> *"Yeah, … we need more groceries during … the circuit breaker, because all of us were at home. … During COVID-19, I had to buy a lot, like a lot. … During that time, two, three months, they only have online classes. And they'll be bored at home, watching TV, and they'll want to munch on something."*

Some interviewees, who were home bakers, also saw their businesses affected by price increases and the unavailability of items:

> *"During COVID-19, the price all increase. And the things you want to find also no stock. ... during fasting month when Raya is nearing and I want to make kuih, everything all don't have. So we want to make but it was interrupted, everything has to be cancelled ... because of COVID-19, no items. So we have to stop our orders."*

> *Interviewee: Last time, we do eat outside, like they [the kids] want pizza or McDonald's, you know, once in a while they like to, so called, 'freak out'. ... For now, they know it's very bad and I got no job. Last time, before COVID-19, they eat chicken rice all ... now they like never see chicken rice for quite some time already...*
> ***Interviewer: So COVID-19 has changed the food situation?***
> *Interviewee: Upside down!*

The circuit breaker, in particular, created additional anxieties about food shopping, particularly for those with young children, who couldn't be left alone at home and would have had to 'tag along' when the parent shopped for groceries. As some interviewees shared, reducing food intake was not only due to financial constraints, it was also to reduce the frequency in which they had to leave the home to purchase food:

> *Interviewee: But now we must budget our money. So we cook one dish then, if want, you eat, if not we wait till dinner, eat already then that's it. Then wait until tomorrow.*
> ***Interviewer: Is this before or after COVID-19?***
> *Interviewee: After COVID-19. Now I cook very budget-budget only ... as long as kids eat, we ok already. Because before COVID, if the dish finish then I can just go get ... I can buy and cook for them. But now I rather sit at home. I won't want to go out, if not my kids want to follow me. That time there was a confirmed COVID case at our downstairs so I'm scared to bring my children there. So afternoon I cook right, we must keep until dinner.*

For interviewees who visited extended family regularly, in particular when food supplies were running low, the pandemic complicated these routines:

> *"If we no food then we need to go our mother-in-law house. For me to travel from [mother-in-law's place] to [our neighbourhood] not near, then I need to bring my kids go by MRT, then a lot of people. I very scared to bring my kids to go out. My kids very young, don't want to use mask or face shield. Sometimes, when we no money, my mother-in-law will say, come and eat here. But then we need to travel there from here."*

While many families experienced additional hardship due to COVID-19, there were reminders that things were already difficult, even before the pandemic:

> *Interviewer: Do you worry about food?*
> *Interviewee: Yes, all the time. How not to worry? If you were me you would be worried too.*
> *Interviewer: Is this recent? COVID-19-related?*
> *Interviewee: COVID-19 has definitely made food a bigger worry as income is affected, but honestly, things were tough even before this pandemic.*

This next interviewee, for example, spoke about how things were "very tough" because of COVID-19:

> *"You see, I am only earning $1300! After CPF deductions, my take home pay is only $900 plus. After paying for all the housing and electricity bills, the leftover where got enough? Sometimes when I want to eat I also have to think about the budget for the day. It is really a very tough period right now."*

When asked about how things were prior to the pandemic, he indicated he was also worried about food.

> *Interviewer: What about before COVID-19? Did you worry about food?*
> *Interviewee: Will worry lah.*
> *Interviewer: Could you elaborate on that?*
> *Interviewee: I would worry about the potential of getting retrenched or worry about not having enough money on hand. … Food wise, I will just look at the situation. If I have more money, I'll eat better food. If I have no money, I'll just buy Maggi mee to cook at home.*

Another interviewee spoke of how food (i.e. thinking about how to provide enough food), "is always a source of stress". As this interviewee shared:

> *"Yes. … That one [not enough food] is my worry. Sometimes I haven't gotten my pay—my pay is one month one time. Then, sometimes I think, alamak, there's no food on the table for my kids. That is what I think about. To me, my children don't eat, that matters, I don't eat, that doesn't matter. My priority is my children."*

Another interviewee, when asked when she didn't worry about food, laughed and said, "When I have money lah!"

The inability to adequately meet food needs, not only for oneself but for one's family, can cause immense stress. Interviewees' acceptance of—perhaps resignation at—their circumstances belie the mental toll food insecurity exerts. This stress, moreover, is not always evenly borne, as the following section illustrates.

Food is Labour, Gendered Labour

> *"For my kids, food is just food, for me it's my hard work. For them, the food comes to them easily, you know, it's served on a plate … somebody's there to feed them or serve them. Whereas, when I see the food being thrown away, or when someone says, 'I don't want food', it actually hurts me a lot. … I have to think what to cook tomorrow, today. … So, when somebody says that they don't want to eat. … that's what really makes me very angry. … For me, food means hard work."* (Rental flat resident)

Access to and availability of food are important dimensions of food security. However, food not only needs to be acquired, it frequently has to be turned into meals: something edible, palatable and, in certain cases, preferred. This requires time, effort and skill; it also imposes a mental load. As this interviewee shared,

> *"Just that sometimes like stress. Because every day I cook right, so it's like the same thing ... like every day before sleep I need to find what's the menu for tomorrow, like what to cook. Then have some [in the household] that eat this, some that don't eat this."*

As the opening quote asserted, "food means hard work". This burden appeared to be a gendered one, with women, particularly mothers, shouldering the practical as well as cognitive strain of managing food insecurity. Interviewees' accounts shed light on the agonising arithmetic involved in food shopping and menu planning, down to the number of chicken wings (versus drumlets) per person. Academic Megan Blake terms this 'thrift acrobatics', and her research respondents spoke about how "every purchase is a mental calculation, and it is exhausting".[64] The logistics and strategy of food shopping on tight (and sometimes shrinking budgets) included planning when and where, including what to purchase and in what quantities; travel costs, as well as how much can be physically carried in one shopping trip, were also things that needed to be considered. Mothers with care responsibilities had to consider how to time grocery shopping (so that it fit around children's schedules), or else manage grocery shopping with several young children in tow (something they tried their best to avoid last year because of fears of catching COVID-19).

Mothers frequently fretted over their kids' consumption (or not) of fruit and vegetables—one tried to blend vegetables and 'hide' them in the food—and expressed guilt over not being able to provide healthier options, as well as the inability to 'treat' their children to the less healthy meals (such as fast food) they craved. They trained their children to be less 'fussy', managed children's tantrums when they refused certain foods, and had to conjure up more meals on smaller budgets during the circuit breaker when everyone, including the children, were stuck at home. Cooking, even when they worked long hours outside the home, seemed primarily to fall on women:

> *Interviewer: So when you were working, you had the time to cook?*
> *Interviewee: I will wake up at 5am. I will take my shower ... then I will straight away cook. Yeah, sometimes it's disturbing because the baby is sleeping, but what can I do, I need to cook, so I will just cook. Unless I have a full shift, 10am to 10pm, then that day I will be doing very simple meals, like fried rice or something. Otherwise, there is a dish and rice. I can't not cook, then there will be no food. Because I need to bring it to work also.*

> *Interviewee: So is quite tiring. ... I sometimes come back [from work] already tired, I like don't feel appetite. ... Because one day I sleep like three hours. ... Some more I need to take care of at home the two kids, one special, one two years old. So I only sleep ... at 1 or 2 o'clock then I wake up at 4.30am.*
> *Interviewer: And you still have time to cook?*
> *Interviewer: Yeah. Simple food lah, simple food.*

Care responsibilities sometimes included elderly parents, on top of caring for children. This interviewee, for example, shared her frustration with being asked to 'find work' (i.e. paid employment outside the home), when she was already juggling immense care responsibilities:

> *"I can't just leave my kids alone and go to work. I need to cook too. I don't know how to explain. My mother was sick and now she has diabetes. She couldn't care for the kids. So I have to take care of my kids. ... And I'm the eldest, so I have to take care of my mom."*

Notably, in this male, single-headed household, the father juggled long work hours with food provision, and sacrificed sleep to cook:

> *"Mostly for me I will eat outside. When I'm outside working, I can't really come back and eat because I need to sleep. Because my job is like that—wake up early morning, then have to go work in the afternoon, so come back I have to sleep. [If] I'm too tired I can't do anything then I'll buy them [my two kids] food. Sometimes I have to sacrifice the time that I sleep [to cook for them]. Let's say I got 3 to 4 hours to sleep, so I just give up 2 hours [to cook]."*

It is important to note mutually reinforcing relationships between food insecurity, health and employment: the interviewee above spoke of how constant sleep deprivation led to high blood pressure, a condition likely to be exacerbated by food insecurity (in which eating irregularly and subsisting on cheaper, processed foods are common). Prolonged food insecurity results in poorer health outcomes and the possible development of chronic health conditions;[65] this in turn further impacts employment prospects and choices, and financial circumstances.

The prevalence of food insecurity among interviewees, and the nonchalance with which these accounts were shared, indicate the normalised deprivation that characterised residents' daily lives. Residents adapted to financial hardship by compromising on food: how much/little they ate, what they ate, when they ate, and who in the household got to eat. As highlighted by Sievwright et al., who studied food insecurity among those experiencing entrenched disadvantage in Australia, food, being the "most elastic" aspect of household budgets, is most frequently sacrificed when there are competing expenses, including debts and household bills like rent or utilities.[66] As the researchers note, "low income is the strongest and most consistent predictor of food insecurity".[67] The following chapter, which focuses on the distributing and receiving of food aid in the neighbourhood, further elaborates on how food insecurity is perceived and managed through charitable food assistance.

Chapter 3

The Food Aid Landscape: Variability and Unpredictability

This chapter shares key findings related to food assistance and food aid distribution, based on interviews with rental flat residents, several stakeholders engaged in food assistance, as well as a focus group conducted with residents. While there was discernible gratitude at being provided food aid, interviewees' accounts highlighted key gaps in food aid distribution that resulted in wastage, including the provision of poor quality meals and inappropriate rations. Despite the overall prevalence and volume of food aid being distributed, efforts appeared patchy and ad hoc, with some interviewees receiving food aid (sometimes in excess), while others were left unclear about how to receive food assistance, despite clearly needing it. The unevenness in distribution led to perceptions among interviewees of preferential treatment, with speculation of bias reinforced by a general lack of understanding of where aid was coming from and how the food aid system was being run. Despite relatively candid sharing during their interviews about the standard of food aid (complaints mostly centred around cooked meals), interviewees were mostly reluctant to share such feedback with food aid organisations, and seemed to accept as well as reinforce the notion of aid recipients needing to be grateful and unfussy. The chapter concludes with an examination of interviewees' food narratives which, while invoking notions of 'survival', also demonstrated a deep appreciation of how food (and eating) is imbued with social and cultural meanings.

Food Aid: Adequacy and Dependency

When asked about the necessity of food aid, interviewees generally expressed a desire to continue receiving food aid, and believed that, in their neighbourhood, many families would suffer greatly without it. At the same time, interviewees' accounts often pointed to food aid serving a supplementary—though significant—function, in which expenditure and menu planning was adjusted according to what was provided, and when. Food aid was generally seen as "not enough, but is okay just to supplement". This interviewee spoke of how it lessened her financial burden:

> *Interviewer: Was it enough for your household, the rations?*
> *Interviewee: Actually no, but … help little bit for us. Because my boys [are] heavy eaters so for us at least I got some help … also less my burden because I not depend all on my husband's salary [for] all the groceries.*

Another interviewee spoke of how being given free cooked meals allowed her to channel money originally earmarked for food for other items:

> *"That time fasting right, so [food charity] give us food so I can budget. Like that money I can keep for something else, because I already have food to eat. … In that way good … we save money also."*

This indirect form of financial assistance can play a significant role when household budgets are already extremely stretched. This interviewee, when asked about the potential impact of reductions in food assistance, said, "there will be a lot of money out of our pockets … [we will be] affected a lot". Another interviewee described how they would "add on" to food rations received, for example, cooking eggs with soya sauce to go with the rice. Basically, families adjusted to the unpredictability of food aid, with food budgets and consumption patterns shifting constantly in relation to what was received (and when). During the focus group discussion, participants spoke of food rations as an important "back up" source:

> *FGD* Participant: Usually depends on our budget. Whatever we have, we will spend according to what we have. So like [another participant] has spoken just now, we have dry food ration right, canned food whatever, we just put one side. So when we plan our menu, we buy those fresh ingredients from the supermarket and just use whatever we have [at home]. So in a way we at least save some money …*
> ***Facilitator: So meaning, your food menu for the week, you see what you receive, then you adjust accordingly?***
> *FGD Participant: Back up, back up. Must have a back up, like that.*
> ***Facilitator: So this [food rations] is the back up?***
> *FGD Participant: Yes.*
> *FGD Participant: So we don't waste lah, whatever dry food ration we have. We make full use of it.*
> *FGD Participant: Let's say you no money still can cook. No money you got back up, can cook sardine, beehoon.*
>
> **FGD refers to a Focus Group Discussion.*

Having food rations stocked up at home lessened anxieties about completely running out of food. As this interviewee shared, "At least have food ration I don't worry right, like my house don't have any [food] … [with] food ration at least got something to cook for them, porridge okay already".

In terms of assessing the community's dependency on food aid, one stakeholder felt that many interviewees would suffer if food aid was reduced or ceased. When asked what would happen if there was no food aid for her family, one interviewee went, "I will be going crazy!" Others spoke about the community at large, stressing that in this neighbourhood, many are "in dire need". As this interviewee expressed:

> *"Too many people, like I know the people in this area nearby, some of them, they live meal to meal [有一餐，过一餐]. Their days are just like this. … And they can't even find a job, it's very difficult to find."*

"Sometimes Have, Sometimes Don't Have": Not Knowing When and What

Despite a clear need for food aid, accounts from interviewees cast food assistance as something that is ad hoc and unpredictable. One interviewee even described food distributions as something that happens "out of a sudden", while another said, "I don't know where they come from. I was shocked, suddenly they will send me this fried beehoon without [me] register[ing]". The following exchange details the variability involved in receiving food aid:

> *Interviewer: So, you have been receiving from [Food Charity A]?*
> *Interviewee: Yes.*
> *Interviewer: How long have you been receiving from them?*
> *Interviewee: I think I received it last Monday. … Sometimes once in a week, sometimes don't have, sometimes twice a week. Depends on donor. Let's say today have free food, they will message our phones and ask us to bring down the plastic bag to collect the food. … They will indicate in the message, at [which] block [to collect]. … usually they want us to come down. However, before we get our food, we have to register. Maybe there is more than 100 rental flat residents. In our phone right, they will tell us there is free food and come down at maybe 3 or 4pm. Then sometimes, there is only a few packages. If you receive the message and wait for a while, then you go down, they say, 'Sorry, the food has finished. All has been taken.' Once you got the message, you need to go down. Like we got 3 [persons in the house] right, maybe we only get 2 [portions]. Then sometimes the donors bring a lot then we get a lot. Then we will keep them in the fridge for tomorrow.*

There is variability not just in the frequency and quantity of food aid—it can also be unclear what will be part of the food rations (whether vegetables, or canned food, for e.g.). The lack of predictability in food aid distribution affects families' abilities to plan their menus and their budgets; it also results, once again, in wastage. As this focus group participant explained,

> *"Because we are not sure what time, when exactly we will get it [food aid]. … as the single breadwinner of the family … we have to put aside an amount to buy stuff. But then we receive the same thing. … Even sometimes from [another charity] I get the same thing again and again, like Maggi noodles, canned food, sardines. So when we have too much of this … what we will do is to give to our neighbours, our parents and all that. … Like sardines, I can end up with 10 to 12 tins of sardines."*

This is compounded by the fact that, in many cases, it is not evident to interviewees who is providing the food aid. Relationships between 'givers' and 'receivers' of food assistance were unclear, with interviewees often confused about which organisation has provided them aid. A common response from interviewees when asked who they received food aid from was, "I don't know from who … they just knock on the door". Interviewees spoke of opening their doors to find that food had been hung outside, or receiving slips telling them to collect food. At times, it seemed akin to food aid lottery, as this resident recounted: "One volunteer knocked on my door and told me that I was included in this food ration. I have been picked by them, but I don't know why. I was lucky that day".

Interviewees seem accustomed to this lack of clarity and accepted that food rations are unpredictable and donor-dependent. One resident, for example, spoke about a scheme that she was on the previous year, but then "after that no more … because they usually based on donations". According to the interviewee, this was not a regular arrangement: as and when there was a donation, these items would be delivered.

What's the 'Catch': Conditions to Receiving Food Aid

Another interviewee was visibly upset, and avoided asking for food aid after an encounter in which the offer of food aid came with a 'catch', a condition she felt endangered the safety of her children and her family:

> *"I never ask for it [cooked food] because ... there is a catch. ... If you want that cooked food every day to be served to your house, you need to bring your child down, to explore this play area. ... During this COVID-19 [period], you ask people to go down, gather around, sure or not? Then the next time, the lady came and then talk-talk-talk, force some more go down, then I say, 'To be honest with you, you know what is COVID-19 or not?' You cannot socialise with other people, then you expect me and my kids go down. If anything happen then how? ... Then they say, 'No, no, no, you just come down only and then we will give you a packed meal'. Then I say no ... not gonna happen. ... If you wanna help then you must help sincerely lah. ... You cannot get people to go down ... then after that you will offer a free meal every day. ... I say, 'How confident are you that this COVID-19 is really gone?' [They said] 'Ah no lah, you can just come down and, you know, let your kids interact and just play'. I straight away turn to my husband [and told him], you go entertain, I cannot. My heart boiling already."*

Issues of Quality and Food Safety

The key advantage of receiving cooked meals, as this interviewee shared, was that it resulted in savings: time and money.

> *"But for the cooked meal, easy for us. ... save my time. And then some more if we haven't payday yet, we don't have any money, but we still have cooked meal to serve in my family, I feel very helpful, it help me save a lot."*

For the interviewee above, who appreciated the money saved from consuming cooked meals, the food was "okay lah, acceptable". Many other interviewees, however, had less positive feedback: "like hospital food", "tasteless", "bland", were very common responses. Some also surfaced concerns over food safety. Notably, interviewees were reluctant and unwilling to share these complaints with food charities:

> *Interviewee: Sometimes the auntie 'knock knock knock' ... I don't know from who, people give already I take lah. Sometimes I eat, sometimes I never. ... I never taste that kind of food before, eat already want to vomit.*
> **Interview: If not nice, can you tell them?**
> *Interviewee: No, don't want. ... I never say anything.*

> *"First time it [the cooked food] came, it was not nice. ... My children don't want to eat, because no taste, like bland. The second is ok, but not every day. Must see the day—sometimes nice, sometimes not nice, it depends. ... But we cannot be fussy right, we have to eat what."*

These observations about cooked food were similarly shared by a stakeholder engaged in food aid efforts, who commented, "it is just beyond words ... to see the kind of food that is being served":

> *"Previously we had some other donors coming in to provide some food.... The food that is being served, it is just terrible, sometimes it looks like swill. And you don't know what time they come ... sometimes they can come as early as 9 or 10 o'clock, sometimes as late as 1 o'clock. And it's just ... sad to see beneficiaries eating that, it's like, 'bo pian, bo pian, ai jia, ai tun' [in English, 'no choice, no choice, must eat, must swallow'].*"

Some interviewees also cited food safety concerns with the cooked food:

> *"I tell my children, 'Okay never mind, we don't waste food, if you all can eat, you eat'. But sometimes, even before [it is time to eat], the food already spoil. ... There is one time, my stepson, he doesn't know how to taste the food, spoiled or not, he will just eat the entire portion. Then suddenly my daughter say, 'Mummy, this one spoil already'. Then my stepson said, 'Alamak, Mummy! I already ate the food, I also don't know spoiled or not, I just eat!'"*

> *"Some [of the meals] are alright. I do eat some of them. But for some that I ever eat, the chicken is not cooked. … I got an upset stomach. … I think the best is like, when the food comes, you have to eat. Because you actually cannot keep."*

While interviewees sometimes tolerated the cooked meals, despite misgivings about the taste, it was a different case when it came to their children:

> *"When my kids tasted [the cooked food] they said, 'Ma, this one is like hospital food, the taste', and sometimes when they look at the veggies, they say, 'Yucks, what's that?' So I told them as long we have food, it's healthy, there is no poison, we can try to eat. I will explain to them, like this is a hard time for us, we just have to, you know, tahan a bit and eat."*

While the interviewee above tried to convince her children to eat the food, for some others, this proved too challenging, even impossible.

> *"My daughter's school, the food they send … not nice, cooked until it's very dry, very difficult to swallow, but I will still eat. But for the children, they would eat at the start, but after a while, they won't eat it every day—it becomes a waste of food. … How do you force them if they don't want to eat?"*

> *"Because [other] families' children will just eat whatever meals are delivered to them. … Unlike my kids, I really have no choice. … even if you deliver five packets of cooked food, it's still useless, because they still won't eat them."*

Managing Excess and Unsuitable Food Aid

Interviewees devised strategies for managing surplus, unwanted food—primarily, this involved redistributing (food rations and cooked food), modifying or 're-seasoning' (cooked food) and, when inevitable, throwing it away. Interviewees, however, strove to avoid wastage, and there appeared to be active, ongoing redistribution among neighbours. One interviewee suggested that food rations be more inclusive, and for charities to take note of the provisions different races use/do not use. In the meantime, neighbours engage in their own forms of sorting and redistribution:

> *"During Chinese New Year all the time they will do the door-to-door [giving of food rations]. … the moment that I unpack it, it will be all the food that I don't want. I think mainly, I will only [keep] sugar, milk. … And then I will knock on my Chinese auntie door and say, 'You can have it'. … I will 100% make sure I don't throw them away. … There's times when they are not at home, I will go over to my mom's house and tell my mom to give to her Chinese colleague. [Sometimes] my Malay neighbour will come and pass to me and I will say, 'No, I don't cook [this]. You can't pass to me'. … Then all of us will have to pass to our Chinese neighbour."*

Other interviewees empathised with the difficulties of trying to ensure diverse needs and preferences are met, and generally accepted the necessity of redistribution:

> *"I don't like baked beans, I really don't like baked beans so you are giving me more baked beans. [But] you have to see the majority what. I cannot, for myself, you all have to change the whole thing right? It's very difficult also. … So, worse come to worse if I don't like baked beans, I give it to someone who like. You don't throw."*

With cooked food, some interviewees tried to make the food palatable by recooking 'tasteless' meals, or adding condiments:

> *"[Cooked] food rations, we don't need to cook, can save on gas. ... But you know sometimes the food rations come but it is not nice. .... Then what I did was to cook back ... maybe add in seasoning like chicken stock ... maybe I cut some onion and egg, mix with oyster sauce, maybe ketchup, then nicer right? If throw away, it is very wasted."*

However, creative 're-cooking' was not always possible. Also, there remained food safety concerns:

> *"For the rice, [it] is like, how we going to make fried rice or what because the food and the rice they mixed up together. ... The gravy move to the rice already. ... also it is quite dangerous if the food already quite long they keep. There is a tendency to have food poisoning."*

Despite interviewees' concerted efforts to avoid food wastage, it was sometimes inevitable, particularly when it came to cooked food. There are times when, even if members wanted to give food away, neighbours would not want it, or the amount would simply be too much for them to consume:

> *Interviewer: So you will mostly just give to your neighbours?*
> *Interviewee: Yeah, if they want, because some of my neighbours also complain, 'Alamak, they give a lot of food then how we going to [eat] ... we also cook already.'*
> *Interviewer: Then the food will be wasted?*
> *Interviewee: Wasted. And they give really too much. You see in my household only three people then they give six packets, seven packets. ... how we going to finish?*

This interviewee attributed the discarding of food aid in the neighbourhood to charities giving more than families were able to consume; additionally, she was unable to alert the charities to this problem because it was not clear who was giving the food:

> *Interviewer: Do you get to meet the person who gives the food?*
> *Interviewee: No we don't.... When we open the door, sometimes the food is already hang [there]. Sometimes they give like ... five to six packets of food. .... It's really many, that's why you can see most people around the area they throw food.... Some of my neighbours they put on the gate, don't give me food, don't send food, they put note.*

A food aid stakeholder believed a lack of coordination among agencies led to wastage; this was exacerbated by increased food aid distributions during culturally significant periods:

> *"It was very prevalent during COVID-19 because we could see so much wastage. The other big wastage was during the Ramadan period. I think it is not coordinated, so there are sometimes three, four, maybe five agencies giving food."*

Gratitude, Resignation and Giving Feedback

> *Interviewee: I am not trying to complain but ... when you see [the cooked food] ... you just don't want to eat. ... When I talk about it, I feel sad because the food was really very bad ... I know my children didn't like it, but no choice. People give, we just eat, we cannot complain.*
> *Interviewer: Have you ever given any feedback?*
> *Interviewee: No, we cannot. It's not nice for us to complain . . . this is free food.*

Despite quite candidly sharing about the food assistance received, most interviewees shied away from the suggestion that they should share such feedback with food charities. For one, many did not know who to give feedback to ("give feedback, alamak, I don't know how"), and were not sure what feedback mechanisms existed. A significant majority expressed uneasiness—even alarm—at the idea of sharing these views with food aid charities. While some expressed concern that sharing negative feedback may result in being cut off from future donations—"If I say it's not tasty, later won't get again!"—in general there was a sense that recipients of aid should be grateful. A dominant narrative existed that people who receive food aid should not be "choosy":

> *"How can we complain about the food people give? Whatever food that people give, we just eat lor. We should not be choosy, right? ... It's already a good thing that people are providing us with food. I shouldn't be giving feedback, right."*

Interviewees expressed a strong "better to receive the food than to receive none" mentality. Some deemed it bad manners, even unkind, to respond in a negative way to people's charity, because people "have the heart to do this".

> *Interviewee: Most of the organisations that I know, they will ... give me two bags. And ... [t]hat one bag already ... got so many things that I don't want. [But] I don't have the heart to say that no, I don't want. Then when I take it, it's actually piling up in my house.*
> ***Interviewer: Why do you think you can't say no?***
> *Interviewee: I'm not sure, I'm afraid I may sound rude, like, you know, like 'I'm doing you a favour and you're saying no to me'. Everyone gets one and I'm giving you two, and you're saying no to me, you understand?*

As another interviewee shared, "at the end of the day, it's still people's kindness, so I'm not gonna complain about it". Even if the food aid is unsuitable, she said it can always be passed to someone else. There is also a prevailing sense of 'low expectations', in that food given free isn't expected to be delicious, merely edible. As this interviewee said, "As long as [the cooked food] is edible, we can eat. We don't die, we will still eat".

When Feedback is Given

Despite this, some interviewees mentioned providing feedback. In these instances, however, the perception was given that the feedback had minimal impact. One interviewee tried to give feedback to the person who hung the cooked food on her door, but said "it is useless because the person would say he is just doing his job as the delivery man, he is not the one cooking, so he can't do anything about it". Another interviewee said that when she shared feedback with the organisation giving out assistance, she was told that "these are the things that they [donor] give, so we just take and give". The interviewee interpreted this to mean that "they are giving us free things, so we should not expect to get perfect things, meaning that the food will not be perfectly nice, but still edible".

In the focus group, some residents, who were volunteers involved in food aid distribution in their neighbourhood, shared the difficulties of trying to solicit feedback. One of them said they do go door-to-door to ask residents for feedback, but they "don't want to voice out. They just take whatever we give". While one focus group participant attributed this to laziness, another believed residents may be concerned that giving negative feedback would result in their names being cancelled, that they wouldn't get rations in future.

Another focus group participant, who initially voiced frustration at receiving complaints from residents when she was involved in food aid distribution, conceded that "if the people are able to receive what they really need, then I feel that even if the food is not perfect, people can appreciate it more". This participant felt that most feedback was motivated by a desire to reduce wastage: "No one wants to waste food, so they voice out their concerns so as to not waste food". At the same time, she did that feel that "People seldom understand that it is hard to give them what they want exactly".

Dignity, Autonomy and Fairness: Improving Food Aid

Several interviewees raised concerns about distribution mechanisms and held perceptions of preferential treatment regarding food aid distribution, something possibly reinforced by the ad hoc nature of food aid, and a general lack of clarity over who was giving food aid, to whom and for how long.

Perceptions of Preferential Treatment

Some interviewees held perceptions of bias in food aid distribution. One interviewee, when asked for suggestions on how food assistance could be improved, said that food distributions "must be fair". This interviewee felt that certain persons involved in food distributions were "biased", and that certain families received more food based on their relationship with those doing the distributing. He added, "This is not fair because everyone needs food in [our community] and everyone should be given fairly".

Another interviewee suggested that donors and food charities do personal house visits to understand families' food needs and the household situation. This interviewee felt that when volunteers were assigned to do this, the process was not undertaken with adequate transparency, and that checks or visits were only done within certain social networks ("they don't spread the word around"), and this is "not fair for others". The implication was that opportunities to receive food assistance tended to be reserved for particular families already entrenched within the food distribution network.

Some felt that certain blocks in the neighbourhood seemed to get more food aid than others, with one interviewee asking, "How come my block … nobody give anything. … we also the same right, come from low-income family". At the same time, the interviewee felt awkward making such insinuations, prefacing her observations with, "I don't know lah, this is my opinion

only right?" Still, it was clearly a sore point, for she continued to emphasise, "But I feel like it is unfair. Like everything [my block] don't have anybody knock … Like last time … they go house by house, [got] food ration … Now, no [more]". The interviewee speculated that maybe the organisation no longer "have our names", or that "maybe this volunteer, they never come and find us". The general confusion over food aid mechanisms fuelled such speculation, with the interviewee even wondering if it's because she is "not on good terms" with specific persons involved in food aid distributions.

One of the food aid stakeholders interviewed suggested that while food aid distributions are often segmented to cater to different populations within the community—e.g. the elderly, or families with children—it should be arranged such that everyone within that category can receive food aid: "It cannot be like certain groups get, certain groups don't get, it creates a lot of animosity". Additionally, it may lead people to think, "if I be nicer to him I can get, or I be nicer to her I can get". The stakeholder believed "that's the general feeling, because it's not distributed equally".

Another food aid stakeholder acknowledged that some residents will ask, "Why didn't I get? Why is it you give them and not give me?" The stakeholder explained that assessments have to made, such as how many children are in the family and how old the children are. The stakeholder added, "I tell them that I have [many] blocks of families to take care of and it is very difficult for me to be fair. But I try my best to distribute. Of course, my first priority is families with children". The stakeholder also acknowledged that, despite efforts to be as fair as possible, "there will always be someone who will question you":

> *"I have been doing the work so long that I will try not to disappoint or be rude or harsh. I will try to explain the rationale behind why you don't get it all the time. … We need to help the others who need it more than you. … I don't get angry about it, but it is a healthy conversation that I have with anybody who ask me why it is like that."*

During the focus group discussion, participants also agreed that a perception existed among the community that the system of food distribution was not entirely fair. They also noted that groups that were 'left out' of distributions would demonstrate their unhappiness, but little could be done at the point of distribution: for example, elderly residents may wonder why they are excluded, or residents from purchased flats may say they also need food rations, but will be turned away.

While there was a general understanding that most organisations relied on a donor-dependent model—i.e. what is given out is "based on donations", "what the sponsor provides", and who they want to give to—the imposed scarcity creates another problem: volunteers involved in distribution have to manage and deal with the displeasure of those who are turned away. During the focus group, participants who volunteered shared the difficulties of managing food distributions when there were limited rations: "if one block get, [another] block never get, it's really unfair. The elderly will ask. And [if] some elderly gets, the younger one will ask". Interviewees shared how they would get scolded and blamed by those who were turned away.

To deal with limited food rations and a community in need, suggestions were given to adopt a 'rotation' system of sorts. For example, one stakeholder said "there are many instances where it can be spread ... so this month you get, next month [could be others]". Focus group participants similarly suggested a roster or schedule be set up, so that different blocks and residents will have a turn: "Maybe [make] a schedule, for this time ... this block, [next] month this block. ... So the resident won't say never get, not fair". Focus group participants also said there should be briefings for residents, so that they understand there is a schedule; that if they have not received this time, they would be able to receive in the future.

Supermarket Vouchers and the Autonomy to Choose

> *"Because to be very frank, we can buy what we want, what we really want. ... for me, because there have been times they give [items] we are not able to use it, [and] their money is also wasted."*
> *(Rental flat resident)*

While supermarket vouchers were the least frequent form of food aid, they were clearly preferred. Supermarket vouchers allow families to choose *what* they wish to buy from the supermarket—this enables them to cater to different needs and preferences within the household. This also reduces wastage, one of the problems interviewees have pointed out is a negative and frustrating outcome of inappropriate food aid. Giving vouchers also allows families to shop for food *when* they need it, for e.g. when they have used up most of their household income (often towards the end of the month). Supermarket vouchers enhance autonomy, because being able to choose is "better than what they want to give"; it allows residents to select what they need and want, "not unnecessary things".

One interviewee mentioned that supermarket vouchers gave her the choice to select healthier foods than what was usually found in ration packs (i.e. instant noodles). Another interviewee mentioned that supermarket vouchers would allow her to buy milk and diapers for the baby. With vouchers, this interviewee mentioned being able to "save more" because she could purchase items that stretched the food budget and provide 'cheap but nice' meals:

> *"I prefer to have voucher ... to buy whatever you want to cook. Can save more because ... mostly what we eat is rice and egg. Egg is the most important ... let's say there is no food, there is only rice and egg then can make fried rice! If you want more then can buy ikan bilis to fry rice. It is very nice!"*

These views were affirmed during the focus group discussion, in which participants favoured supermarket vouchers because they are "most powerful" and the "most practical": they can "lighten cash burdens", because residents will "use it for things that your home really needs", versus items charities give, which people sometimes "never cook or never eat … very sayang [wasted]".

Dignity: Give "What You Want to Eat Yourself"

The issue of dignity was raised by a food aid stakeholder, who was upset by the wastage witnessed, a problem the stakeholder felt was precipitated by organisations not putting adequate consideration into the food aid provided:

> *"There is a lot of food that is being thrown away, why? Because when you serve, you repeat the same menu … and the quality of food, it is just terrible … And a lot of them [residents] feel undignified and it's sad to see them, you know, you want to give me food, but why give me food like that? The landscape is like, oh, ok, it's the beneficiary, so can be chin-chai [easygoing], you take it or leave it, because it's not paid by you. If that's the kind of attitude, then wow, but the amount of food being thrown away … we see so much food being thrown away, and we talk to some of them and they say to us: how to eat this every day?"*

The problem of varying quality in the provision of cooked food was acknowledged by all stakeholders, with one stakeholder determining that when it came to cooked food, "about 50 percent think the food is good, about 30 percent would say it's okay, and then 20 percent would think that it's, yeah, not really good". Of course, food quality also varied according to vendors and caterers. The same stakeholder spoke of how different funders would switch vendors regularly, and some would be "really good food", while others were "not that great". Another stakeholder expressed dismay that the organisation, in providing food aid, was contributing to food wastage. However, it was difficult to determine the level of need, and this stakeholder depended on social service agencies working within the community to provide this information. There was, however, a process of finetuning: the stakeholder would collect feedback on the quality of cooked food provided (some recipients had indicated that food from certain vendors is "quite bad"), and, in the case of negative feedback, the stakeholder would "approach my caterers and see how they can work out the meals [to be better]". If the problem was, say, the budget allocated, the stakeholder would "'up' my budget to see if can afford better food for better quality". The stakeholder added, "I am a foodie so I cannot stand bad food. So whenever I speak to my caterers, I will tell them it is important to serve the beneficiaries with food that we want to eat also." Another stakeholder insisted it was possible to achieve "a good decent margin" (for the caterers) but still ensure minimum standards of 'decent' food. The problem, felt this stakeholder, lay more in the mentality of food aid providers:

> *"I just don't understand why organisations and companies and caterers would provide food that they won't even eat themselves! ... we must take time, and serve food that, at least, suits the community that we are serving. You need to be careful and also take pride ... no doubt you are giving food where they don't have to pay anything, but the quality of food must be at least decent—we are not asking for five-star hotel food but the food must be at least decent."*

Liaising with donors/donor relations

As earlier mentioned, the issue of variability was often attributed to supply chains that relied on the vagaries of donors—what donors provided, when, and who they wished to give to. At the same time, charities are making efforts to liaise with donors and share feedback to influence [the food aid process]. Here is one stakeholder's experience:

> *"I will talk to the members [residents] and see what they would like to see in their packs, rather than just giving. Previously, sponsors will come in and say they want to give and we will just accept it. However, now we work with the sponsors and discuss with them. Items that are not so practical ... we will change. ... It's more important to give them [things] they want and they use. So, it is a win-win situation for both sides."*

While sponsors seem generally receptive to feedback, the ultimate decision still relies on them. If, after feedback is given, donors still insist that "this is the pack we want to give", the stakeholder said, "we will respect their decision and still do the distribution". In such situations, residents "know what they need to do", that is, they will simply collect the packs, and give the items they don't need or use to "those who need it more".

Meanings, Memories and the Narrative of Survival

As Tan et al. noted in their study of food insecurity in Singapore, poverty and scarcity formed the broad context in which their research participants negotiated their food needs and their health. Their empirical reality consisted of "constant, daily negotiations" in managing everyday expenses with limited finances. Under such a context, "the narrative surrounding food becomes that of survival".[68] This was prevalent in our interviews with residents, many of whom used the word 'survive' or 'survival' in discussing food and its meanings. One interviewee, when asked to recount his favourite food memories, said, "Food does not bring up any positive memories or experiences. It is merely a means of survival".[69] Again, the issue of not being fussy surfaced frequently: one interviewee said that "to not starve ... that's good enough for me". He continued, "I am not picky ... got food we can eat, we happy". These quotes, however, must be assessed against the backdrop of cumulative hardship. One interviewee spoke of how

she appreciates food, any food, because "there was once, many years back, we have no food at all. We had to dig up rubbish to eat food". Children, of course, may have differing views and demands around food:

> *"My daughter will always say, 'Food is bae' [bae stands for 'before anything else', something the person really loves]. For me, I need food to survive. Yeah, I don't live to eat, but I eat to live. So it means a lot because I can't afford to let the people around me, my loved ones, to go hungry. My daughter's statement is very simple, 'Food is bae'. Yeah, I say, 'Bae your head, bae'."*

This narrative of survival, however, did not eradicate residents' memories and appreciation of food's social and cultural meanings. Residents, when prodded, spoke about the capacity of food (and social eating) to invoke happiness, to relieve stress, to enable bonding and to demonstrate reciprocity:

> *"Like [when] you feel very stressed, like me, when I eat the food, I really enjoy ... we never think about other things, we just enjoy food, like relax."*

> *"With food you can show care and love also, like when other people got less, you can give, and when you got more, you can give. It is not just party only then you cook. You know, in Malay culture, when you invite people over for the funeral prayer, you prepare food, it is like charity also, you treat them with food. ... When we do a party or barbeque, we set up the tent and we bring the portable cooking grill [and] put outside the tent—then we cook. It is a lot of fun when you have food around you. ... [my neighbours] and me sit at [block number] ... we eat and drink together. Food is not just for survival. ... there is a lot of bonding over food."*

As one resident shared, "Food bonds people, brings family together". There were frequent mentions of family and friends sharing food, and the importance of 'eating together', particularly on special occasions like birthdays, or Christmas. Food memories were intimately associated with familial relationships, as well as celebrations:

> *"Yes, yes, I remember eating dumplings ... Like Mid-Autumn Festival, eating mooncakes. ... Like some festivals, if we can go out to eat a meal, that's the best. ... Most importantly, we can bring our mother out to eat. That is the most happiness. Because my mother is very old. ... No matter what I'm eating, eating with my mother is the happiest for me."*

> *"[Pizza is] me and my family's favourite ... because there's one time when we have a bit of money right, we order pizza and then everybody was, like, 'Wah!', you know, like you get what you want to eat after this long time ... because pizza is quite expensive ... [so] my son's birthday, we did order pizza ... very happy already."*

That food is a means of showing love and care was manifested in how parents frequently invoked children's needs and preferences when speaking about food, such as for this mother: "[When I think about food] I think about my children, nothing else. ... Whenever I have food, my children will be my priority". Another interviewee talked about how happy she felt when her cooking—her method of showing love—was appreciated: "When my kids say, 'Oh, the food is nice and delicious', I feel like, oh, very happy". For this next resident, food is happiness precisely because a lack of food is equated with tensions within the household:

> *"To be honest with you. ... because sometimes ... when I open my fridge right, there's no food right, you know it will make someone angry. 'I'm hungry coming back from work and there's no food served on the table,' you know, and you only eat biscuit, you get what I mean? Yeah, so to me food is happiness. I just need that food on the table."*

Meanwhile, this parent reminded her children that such happiness is transient:

> *"[Food] is not just for survival, it's about how food can keep your family together throughout the bad times. I always explain to the kids that today we eat more than we have. Meaning that if we have extra money, this makes my kids happy. But I tell my kids that it is only for today, and that tomorrow, we will return to normal."*

This next quote is stark because it was one of the few that so strongly conveyed the pleasure of food and eating:

> *"Because long time right never go out … long time never eat the kuih, you know, the Malay kuih … that time got one [donation], they give me one only you know. … My heart, oh my God … long time never got the taste of this. I got the taste of the putri salat, the durian. … It is like, at last. … Because I envy the taste of kuih for a long time. I lucky I get one … one time only … Then my son ask, 'Mummy, why you so happy you get this kuih? Then I say I long time never eat this kuih."*

This last quote is evocative, but it is also an aberration: rarely did interviewees' descriptions of food invoke the joy and delight of eating. It is also poignant, because it was inspired by a single, rare event, a food memory already tainted with melancholy and longing.

When it came to food aid, residents' accounts demonstrate a discernible ambivalence: overwhelmingly, there was gratitude for the thoughtfulness of others in providing food, yet sometimes also shame, and a mixture of resignation and frustration (in milder forms, puzzlement) at inappropriate provisions that led to wastage, and the poor quality of some provisions. In recounting experiences with food aid, the general pattern, from the perspective of recipients, was one of randomness and unpredictability, in which they accepted that "sometimes have, sometimes don't have" (and when it came to taste, "sometimes nice, sometimes not nice"). As charitable food responses become normalised as a key way to deal with food insecurity, it is important to examine the structural drivers of this system, in which economic constraints have a clear bearing on the food choices persons make (or are unable to make).

Chapter 4

The Right to Food: Towards a Food Justice Framework

If food security exists when there is stable access to safe and nutritious food, interviewees' accounts in the previous two chapters reveal a disparately different picture. It is one that sits incongruously against the backdrop of an affluent country like Singapore, where mainstream portrayals of food and eating patterns largely reflect middle-class habits and lifestyles—regular meals, an aspiration towards healthy eating, and food as central to celebrations and a means of indulging oneself and loved ones.

In February 2020, likely spurred by the Lien Centre's *The Hunger Report*,[70] *Channel NewsAsia* did a two-part written and video series on food insecurity in Singapore.[70] The articles surfaced similar issues raised by this study: persons living in poverty invariably grappled with food insecurity—they ate irregularly, filled up on cheap and unhealthy foods (like instant noodles), and struggled with both income and time poverty, as well as poorer physical and mental health outcomes. Despite the existence of around 125 food support organisations, the articles noted that inefficiencies in food aid distribution led to food wastage on the one hand, and persons requiring food aid not receiving any, on the other. Associate Professor Walter Theseira (Singapore University of Social Sciences), meanwhile, pointed out that in a country like Singapore, food insecurity is a "problem of people not having enough income to get the food they want". Theseira was "skeptical" food assistance could serve as a long-term solution to food insecurity, and believed more fundamental considerations—related to ensuring adequate incomes—were needed.

The negative impacts of food insecurity are recognised internationally, and irrefutable.[71] Food insecurity is a serious public health concern in many countries[72] and is linked to "increased depression, stress and anxiety, poorer wellbeing and quality of life, and increased incidence of chronic health conditions".[73] Knight et al.'s research on food insecurity among UK families clearly demonstrate the multi-dimensional nature of food insecurity and how it is experienced, in which there are "physiological (quantity of food), nutritional (quality), social (alimentary participation) and emotional/psychological dimensions".[74] As a respondent in Megan Blake's research on food insecurity and poverty put it, "The chronic stress of poverty affects everything—your relationships, your ability to make decisions, your ability to focus, your ability to regulate your emotions. … It is a constant, bone-deep, live-with-it-so-long-you-don't-know-it's-there stress".[75]

It is important to consider the social participation dimension of food insecurity—also known as "alimentary participation"—as food often functions as a marker of "social exclusion and inclusion": in current social contexts, "eating the same food as others is a basic mark of belonging".[76] This was especially acute for the teenage respondents in Knight et al.'s study, who often watched their peers buy snacks and other treats after school, but were unable to themselves.[77] Relying on charitable food aid also differentiates recipients: in current urban city contexts, the socially acceptable way of obtaining food is through commercial transactions—people shop for food in supermarkets, or purchase meals at food and beverage outlets. Receiving food aid provided by charities is relegated to persons marked financially disadvantaged, where many organisations apply a means-test or, as in Singapore, use housing as a proxy to determine eligibility for food aid. As Assistant Professor Theseira highlighted, "Singapore is a very rich and abundant society. And if you feel that you constantly have to make very constrained decisions, there's going to be a long-term effect on your ability to feel like a regular member of society".[78]

Food insecurity is closely tied to economic inequality: Elmes highlights how economic inequality and a dysfunctional industrial food system has led to increased poverty and food insecurity in the United States, leading to an erosion of "equality of capabilities"

and adverse health outcomes (including, ironically, increased levels of obesity).[79] There exists a mutually reinforcing dynamic, in which food insecurity and the resulting negative health outcomes further entrench economic inequality.

As the findings in Chapters 2 and 3 have shown, food insecurity in the community was clearly linked to economic lack. When asked about the causes of food insecurity in their community, the general consensus among focus group participants was "no money", which many related to employment. As previous research has shown,[80] rental flat residents, if employed, tended to be in low-paid jobs and engaged in non-standard forms of employment that offered poorer working conditions (including long hours of work and shift work) and less social protections. Those who were not employed and not looking for work had care responsibilities or health conditions that prevented them from seeking employment outside the home. Despite the ad hoc nature of food aid, residents agreed that it is necessary: that without this source of food—which may be supplementary but in a significant way—residents would suffer greater hardship; one stakeholder felt that, without food aid, "a lot of them will be in trouble".

Meanwhile, food aid initiatives continue to proliferate in Singapore; the pandemic has resulted in even more food aid activity.[81] Despite clear links between food insecurity and income poverty, discourse around food insecurity continues to be centred around improving food aid and the diets of poor people, in which attention is primarily focused on these areas: a) better coordination between organisations to reduce wastage and duplication of services; b) channelling surplus food to the poor, thus reducing food waste; c) promoting health and nutritional awareness so people can eat better on less. The following sections deal with each of these areas in turn, before enlarging the lens to consider 'right to food' frameworks that recognise the structural drivers of food insecurity, including alternative, progressive approaches that point the way to more socially just and ecologically sustainable food systems.

The Costs of 'Better' Food Aid

Food aid wastage is often sensationalised in media reports and on social media: in 2019, a Facebook post in which photos were shared of a 78 year-old man with expired noodles and 50 bottles of unused condiments in his home went viral,[82] resurfacing concerns over the duplication of food aid across neighbourhoods and the vexing problem of 'overserved' vs 'underserved' households, sometimes within the same neighbourhood.[83] Food charities continue to find ways to ameliorate these impacts, whether on a micro-scale (volunteers asking each recipient what they do or do not need/want from each ration pack distributed and removing unwanted items),[84] or through more sophisticated attempts to centralize efforts (such as through a food banking app).[85]

The impetus to mitigate inefficiencies is predictable and sensible. The concern is one of emphasis and framing: that resources—including technological innovations—seem mostly geared towards ensuring 'better' and more efficient food aid distribution, but without a simultaneous acknowledgement of how endemic food insecurity is, and its structural drivers. Through responding to palpable need (i.e. hunger) in tangible ways, food charities play a key, "sometimes irreplaceable role in *managing* (not reducing) the consequences of poverty".[86] The logistical challenges of providing adequate, appropriate, safe and timely food aid to a wide range of potential recipients with varying needs and preferences are immense. Yet responses to food insecurity are mostly and increasingly reliant on voluntary labour,[87] in which

> *"[c]haritable agents are trapped in the dilemmas of seeking to support and empower the marginalized, while acting as proxy delivers of state services, depending on uncertain funding and facing increasing logistical tasks (of securing and training volunteers, as well as appropriately sourcing and managing food stocks).*[88]"

Research on charitable food aid indicates it is a limited strategy incapable of meeting the widespread need for adequate and nutritious food:[89] demand constantly outstrips supply, which is ad hoc and reliant on a multitude of stakeholders with different schedules and agendas. Even if the volume of food aid could be increased, complex challenges remain in meeting the key dimensions of food security, including ensuring that food is utilised, sufficiently nutritious and obtained in socially acceptable ways. The 'poverty relations' engendered in charitable food assistance are incredibly uneven and disempowering, with "one side ... the judge of if and how aid is distributed, and the other side is often forced into thankfulness".[90] As Dowler et al. has asked, why should some people not be able to shop for food like everyone else?[91] For Silvasti and Riches, the solution to food insecurity "is not charitable food aid but the eradication of income poverty".[92] Yet, the authors note the enormous difficulty of making progress on living wage and social security policy when charitable food aid is on offer. Food aid charities are increasingly prevalent, enjoy positive media reception, are strongly backed by public institutions, and generally enjoy widespread societal support.[93]

It is important that food banks and other food-related charities not be held responsible for "statutory neglect".[94] The needs they meet are urgent and necessary. Research has also found that food banks can be important sites of "caring and social solidarity" in communities. Many organisations that provide food aid also extend care in other ways (beyond food) that matter to local communities.[95] Meanwhile, critical questions need to be asked about the longer-term role of food banks and other related charities in meeting the challenges of food insecurity (what social and political contributions could they make to advance progressive responses to food insecurity and income poverty?),[96] and where statutory responsibilities and commitments should lie in addressing the intersection of food, social, health and environmental policy.

Food Ladders: 'Resilience-Focused Community Self-Organising'

In terms of community-based and driven initiatives, Blake has proposed a 'food ladders' framework that seeks to "[develop] positive engagements through food",[97] with the aim of transforming communities 'hollowed' out by financial and social disadvantage. In such communities, "People are not just hungry, they are also stressed, isolated and lack confidence".[98] Adopting an asset-based approach, the food initiatives Blake observed involved communities and community partners building a 'new foodscape', in which food-using and food-sharing activities aimed to foster positive relationships with food (and each other) and empower members to broaden food horizons (by trying new foods and recipes). The community model served to ensure reciprocity—members were not just receivers but also givers—and sought to build capacities for community self-organising, a vital asset for "building resilience and social sustainability".[99]

Blake's work and recommendations are especially timely in a context where building 'resilience' through ground-up initiatives continues to be actively promoted (even fetishised). The improvements Blake noted in her research are concrete and exemplify how thoughtful

community-based activity can strengthen social capital. However, and this is especially crucial in Singapore's context, policy that emphasises self-organising as "the whole solution to food insecurity" imposes "unreasonable expectations on individuals and in communities that have been hollowed out by austerity and welfare reforms".[100] Blake offers strong words of caution:

> *"Self-organisation at the community scale takes a long time to reach its transformative potential and when community resources are deeply depleted, may never be achieved unless significant outside support is provided. Furthermore, policies that impose stressors on these fragile infrastructures, such as the parachuting of very transitory populations onto vulnerable places, undermine their foundations. ... policy rhetoric advocating community self-organisation as a means for community resilience must be careful not to impose the privilege of affluent populations onto deprived populations and then castigate them for their failure."*[101]

While positive food-using activity can influence local communities' capacities for self-organisation of community resources, this, in and of itself, is insufficient to overcome food insecurity. Ultimately, a "multi-scalar approach" is required: greater support should be provided at local levels to enhance self-organising capacity and ensure the resources required for this; attention must simultaneously be paid to redressing policy decisions "that undermine resources and creates shocks in the first place".[102]

'Healthist' Culture, Poverty and Problematic Notions of Choice

Pamela Attree, who studied healthy eating in poor families in the UK and, in particular, how mothers living in poverty 'managed', raised several issues that were clearly reflected in interviewees' accounts. Attree noted that cost was a key deciding factor in mothers' food choices: the ability to buy healthier, more expensive foods (fruit, vegetables or meat) would often be compromised; in wanting to avoid wastage, they would choose food that was familiar to their children, food that would be eaten with minimal fuss. Mothers would often be responsible for making "strategic adjustments" to poverty, such as the 'juggling' of bills and prioritising of expenditure; they would also be the ones investing time and effort in 'shopping around' for cheaper food. Attree's research found scant evidence that low-income mothers were ignorant of healthy food choices; most mothers wanted to provide healthy food for their children, "but felt constrained by their circumstances".[103] Ong and Ong's research project, which studied the health knowledge, food expenses and diet quality of low-income families in Singapore, found that the higher cost of a healthy diet was driving food insecurity among low-income households. As many respondents were familiar with public health guidelines, "poor health knowledge is unlikely to be the main driver of poor diets".[104] This was also noted by Wicks et al., whose research on food insecurity among disadvantaged individuals in Australia found that respondents had "adequate knowledge and a desire to eat healthful food".[105] As Attree points out,

> *"Dogmatic nutritional messages do not assist the disadvantaged in making reasonable and moderate choices among available alternatives, but foster a sense of inadequacy and guilt for failing to live up to the standard set by them.*[106] *"*

Despite this, food policies in many high-income countries continue to privilege the "individual choice model",[107] in which achieving good health is seen as a personal achievement. In this increasingly 'healthist' culture, ensuring healthy behaviour is framed as "a moral duty"; consequently, ill health is conceived as "an individual moral failing".[108] While it may appear 'common sense' that a person would 'choose health', this 'choice' can be severely constrained by life circumstances, as residents' accounts in the previous chapters have shown. Health policies that emphasise individual behaviour—with a focus on 'empowered consumerism'"—obscure structural influences on food choices.[109] Attree argues that while health promotion campaigns targeted at improving the diets of low-income families may have some advantages, these are inadequate to overcome the negative impacts of poverty on nutrition.[110] What requires greater attention are the structural determinants of health, and the recognition that there exists a "clear interdependence and indivisibility between the right to food and the right to health". [111]

The Food Waste and Food Insecurity Nexus: Deconstructing the 'Win-Win'

Directing excess food to the poor is frequently couched as a 'win-win-win', in which there are social, economic and environmental gains. Several countries have even passed laws to regulate food waste as food aid;[112] this has also been raised in Singapore.[113] As Pollard and Booth point out, however, "conflating … the two issues [food insecurity and food waste] does not solve the fundamental and complex problems of either of them".[114] First, the focus is on recovery, rather than prevention (i.e. reducing overall wastage). The recovery of surplus food accommodates the problem of over-production in the food system, and provides little incentive for industry to change behaviour.[115] Arcuri further highlights the tensions that arise from the institutionalisation of food charities and their reliance on surplus food, in which surplus food is both something that needs to be reduced (from an environmental perspective) yet also a utility to be maximised (from the food bank's perspective).[116] Additionally, the development of a parallel food economy that relies on cheap, surplus food, particularly in countries with an agricultural sector, can have a distorting effect, leading to greater hardship for those whose livelihoods depend on growing, harvesting, distributing and selling food.[117]

In writing about food insecurity, food aid and food surplus, Caplan highlights how boundaries are becoming "increasingly blurred" between the three key actors—state, market and voluntary agencies. Caplan does concede, however, that in the UK, the state, both at a national and local level, is increasingly looking to "devolve responsibility" for food insecurity "to those willing to pick up the pieces".[118] Uncritical 'win-win' framings contribute to a normalisation of such practices, which become increasingly entrenched when there is a lack of concomitant action to deal with underlying causes of both problems.[119] Hendriks and McIntyre highlight how charitable food aid "stunts the structural transformations required for a more equitable society". In fact, "That the poor depend on waste and corporate food players reap political capital from this is ethically questionable".[120] While the responsibility for ensuring food security is mostly concentrated 'downstream',[121] there are growing calls for attention to be directed to 'upstream' mechanisms and action. Pollard and Booth

recommend a reframing in discussions of food insecurity, in which the focus should be on "supporting human rights and sustainable development to create an equitable and prosperous society".[122]

The Right to Food: Rights-Based Approaches to Food Insecurity

> *"When people come to depend on charity for basic foodstuffs, it is a signal that their right to food has not been sufficiently respected, protected and fulfilled."*[123]
> *— Olivier De Schutter, United Nation's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food*

International development organisations like the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation—of which Singapore is a member country—have recognised the right to food, and the relationship between food and social protection systems (including the need to ensure income security).[124] Article 11 of the UN's International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) recognises "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions".[125] The UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, meanwhile, has pointed out that social protection systems must be "recalibrated to take into account the real cost of living and ensure adequate food for all, without compromising on other essentials".[126] The UN's ICESCR includes the "obligation to protect, respect and fulfil the rights to food".[127] This mandate involves various political commitments by States, including, in the instance of fulfilling the rights to food, ensuring that policies promote access to adequate food. This not only means providing employment opportunities, but also "ensuring a living wage, adequate benefits, social housing, universal child care and so on, including progressive taxation and acting as the provider of last resort in terms of social protection".[128]

In advocating for a rights-based approach to addressing food poverty, Dowler and O'Connor deem that "rights rhetoric" allows for the "reanalysing and renaming [of] 'problems' as 'violations'", it clearly identifies what must not be tolerated.[129] Pollard and Booth see a human rights approach as necessary to (re)orientate us towards addressing the social determinants of food insecurity, which should include actions such as better regulation of labour conditions, as well as enhancing social protection programmes.[130] It requires "high-level political commitment", and robust structures and governance mechanisms to coordinate, monitor, evaluate and ensure accountability.[131] While Dowler and O'Connor note a certain wariness among some civil society groups to adopt rights-based approaches—due to a lack of familiarity and concerns it may be "alienating and divisive",[132] the authors point to the potential for activists working in different realms (such as the right to health, or the right to housing) to collaborate, and highlight a growing body of work to guide the operationalisation of rights-based approaches.[133]

Food Security, Social Policy and Sustainability Principles

If food insecurity is understood as a multidimensional experience determined by interlocking structural forces,[134] efforts to address it must be holistic, and

extend beyond the provision of welfare and health services to encompass "issues of basic human rights, sustainable development, health inequalities and social inclusion".[135] In fact, Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is 'Zero Hunger', and the 2030 target is to "end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round".[136]

A necessary caveat here regarding the use of the term 'sustainability', a loaded concept that needs to be used and assessed with caution. The Brundtland Commission famously defined sustainable development in its 1987 Brundtland Report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".[137] This broad and value-laden definition generates consensus but lends itself to manipulation and misuse (including by perpetrators of unsustainability). The term 'sustainable' is often used erroneously in a literal and narrow sense: to indicate how something (like economic growth) should be *sustained*, that is, prolonged without interruption. The *sustainability paradigm*, however, is one that recognises the interconnectedness of economic, social, cultural and ecological concerns in the pursuit of wellbeing. It embodies key interlocking principles, namely: inter-generational and intra-generational equity, ecological protection and enhancement, the protection and enhancement of social and cultural capital, the promotion of steady state economics (rather than an 'exploitist' model of growth), participatory democracy and a precautionary policy approach. A sustainable development paradigm recognises complex, adaptive systems, and acknowledges that sustainability imperatives are causally interdependent and need to be dealt with in tandem.[138]

Dowler introduces the term 'sustainable' into discussions of food insecurity in two critical ways: she discusses the need for "affordable sustainable food" as well as "sustainable livelihoods". The first warns against turning towards the "market answer" of "cheap food" as a solution to food insecurity. While lower food prices may help poor families pay for food, low food prices often rely on the suppression of wages and limited job security within the food system, undermining environmental and social sustainability.[139] Additionally, food initiatives that offer low food prices tend to rely on food surplus or waste generated from the system; the range of foods offered and membership to access such foods are limited—it is "not a socially sustainable solution".[140] While offering significant gains for corporations, there is little upstream recognition of why people cannot afford the food they need for health and wellbeing: inadequate wage levels, the erosion of social security structures, and other obstacles to food access and utilisation. A more holistic, long-term approach would be to orientate the food rights movement to ensuring "affordable sustainable food", and recognise that people with less money or cultural capital may also "share the desire to eat in ways which enhance sustainability or challenge corporate capitalism, even though their immediate priorities are avoiding hunger".[141] This inclusive approach also involves "generating sustainable livelihoods", which requires state action to ensure incomes are adequate to meet minimum needs.[142] (For Chambers and Conway "a livelihood is socially sustainable [if it] can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, and provide for future generations"; livelihoods also need to be environmentally sustainable.)[143]

Globally, issues of food insecurity have been linked to a profit-driven and ecologically damaging industrial food system,[144] increased economic inequality[145] and a breakdown in social protection systems.[146] Dealing with food insecurity is an issue of both social and ecological justice, and requires "moral, legal and political action".[147] There are 'joined-up' food policy programmes in countries like Brazil (which amended its constitution in 2010 to include the Right to Food),[148] where public

food banking operates alongside those run by businesses and NGOs. In India, there is a government-controlled Public Distribution System (PDS) that aims to provide essential food items to households.[149] These programmes invite examinations of the feasibility and complexities of public food banking and the nature of state involvement, including the accountability mechanisms required and how such food-related policies need to be 'joined up' with other programmes and policies (including those related to wages and employment) to eradicate poverty and hunger. Levkoe, meanwhile, advocates a "transformative food politics", which describes actions taken to deal with structural challenges rooted in the industrial food system, "rather than just the symptoms". In examining alternative food initiatives (AFIs), Levkoe identifies that when social justice is not at the core of the work, efforts end up privileging problematic individual choice models that focus narrowly on 'empowered' or ethical consumption.[150] Dowler locates ways forward through "hybrid initiatives" that are collaborative and engage in policy analysis and advocacy, as well as practical ground level responses; efforts that "offer voice, creative ideas and shared possibilities for action".[151] These efforts must necessarily involve grassroots organising and empower citizens to "speak to those with power" so as to change structural elements. Ultimately, recognising the right to food is to acknowledge "that people [must] be enabled to engage and feed themselves in ways they see fit … so as to achieve well-being and potential for themselves and the planet".[152]

Scarcity in a world of plenty is a conspicuous yet normalised malaise. Discomforting juxtapositions of hunger amid excess are occasionally magnified in attempts to catalyse community action, but approaches to food insecurity overwhelmingly continue to emphasis 'better' and more food aid. In 2021, as wealth levels continue to rise in many advanced economies despite the pandemic, the persistence (and growth) in food insecurity demands attention to fundamental questions about inequalities in our food ecosystems, and political commitment to dealing with the social determinants of food insecurity. Such efforts will certainly include food aid, but must extend beyond charitable food responses to allow for multi-scalar, collaborative action that shifts us, collectively, towards more socially just and environmentally sustainable food systems. Food insecurity in wealthy societies poses important ethical and political questions that demand our attention and scrutiny: if we recognise the human right to food, access to adequate food should no longer be treated as a gift or act of benevolence, but a fundamental right and statutory obligation.

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Appendix A: Who We Spoke To

Most of the interview participants lived in households where there was at least one child aged 18 years old and below; many had families with young children, including infants. Of the 54 research participants:

- 51 lived in households where there was at least one child aged 18 years or below;
- Almost three quarters (40 interviewees) were female;
- Participants included Malay, Chinese and Indian residents, as well as six transnational families, where the interviewees were either Indonesian or Filipino (see Table 1).

Table 1: Race/Nationality of Interviewees

	Number	Percentage
Malay	31	57.41%
Chinese	10	18.52%
Indian	7	12.96%
Filipino	3	5.56%
Indonesian	3	5.56%
Total	**54**	**100.00**

Most of the interviewees were in their 30s and 40s, but the ages of members interviewed ranged from 27 years old to 68 years old (see Figure 2).

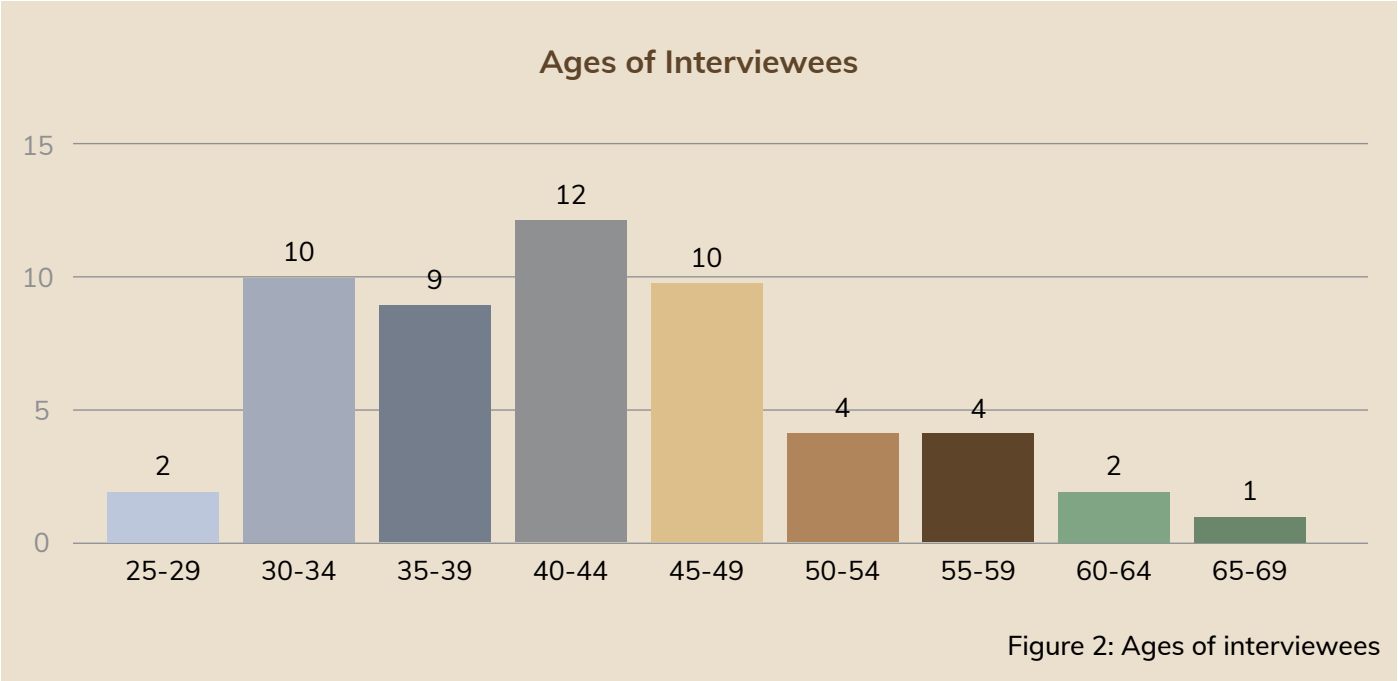

Figure 2: Ages of interviewees

In terms of household size, most households comprised between three to six members, with the smallest household size being two, and the largest a household with 12 members (Figure 3).

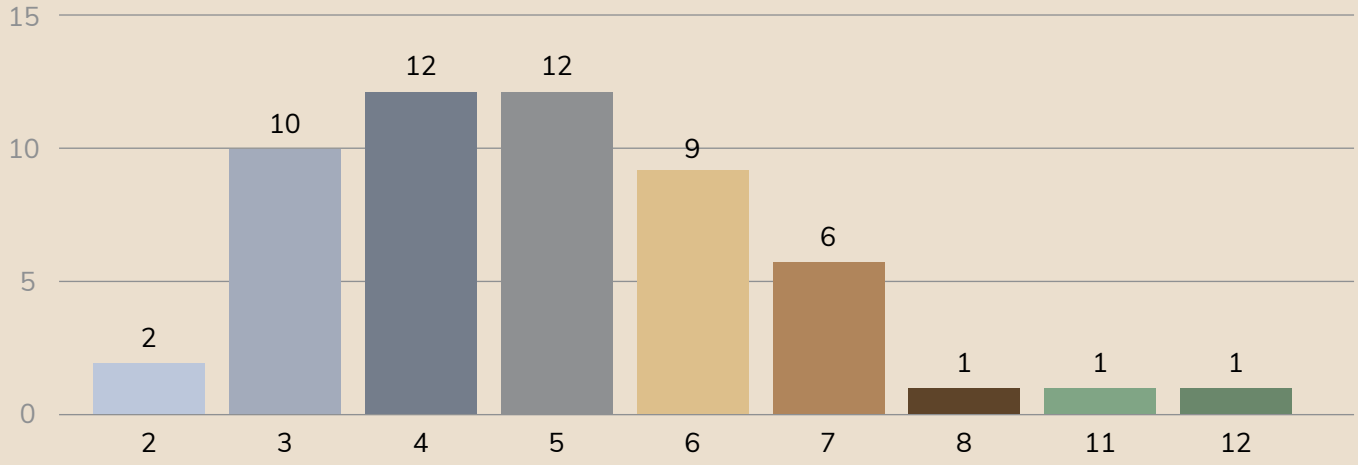

Figure 3: Household sizes of interviewees

Endnotes

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[30] Nagpaul, Sidhu, and Chen, 10.

[31] Nagpaul, Sidhu, and Chen, 12.

[32] Yeung, 'Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study: Research Update'.

[33] Yeung, 10.

[34] Yeung, 8.

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