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## Around 17,000 youth in Singapore are not in school, work or training



During the circuit breaker in 2020, Mr Fabian Ang dropped out of secondary school during his N-level year. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO



Shermaine Ang

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SINGAPORE - Around 17,000 youth, aged 15 to 24, in Singapore were not in school, work or training in 2023. This represents 4.1 per cent of youth in the country, a higher proportion than the 3.7 per cent in 2013.

While the Republic's figures remain below the global average of 22.4 per cent in 2020, they are still of concern, said Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development Eric Chua.

"This figure equates to about 17,000 youth who have been unable to reach their full potential and may be at risk of being excluded from society," he said.

He was speaking on Sept 25 at the first Youth Outreach Conference here to tackle the issue of supporting troubled youth, who include "hidden youth" and those on the streets, among others. Hidden youth are those who withdraw from society and isolate themselves at home for long periods of time.

The 2023 numbers he gave for Neet youth – referring to youth, aged 15 to 24, not in employment, education or training – were based on data from the Ministry of Manpower's 2024 Labour Force Survey.

Some 300 social work practitioners, educators and policymakers attended the

three-day conference organised by social service agency Fei Yue Community Services together with the Youth Work Association (Singapore).

Agencies such as Care Corner and Fei Yue have managed to successfully reintegrate some of these youth back into society, said Mr Chua, but more can be done to support Neet youth and reduce their numbers.



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He highlighted the importance of a strong family unit in helping to curb the problem.

“There’s plenty of literature going around to really examine and dive deep into how the family structure has evolved – I would say, has weakened – over the past few decades, and there’s much more that we can do in this respect.”

At the conference held at the National University of Singapore, he also spoke about the changing world that youth today face.

Mr Chua recounted how, growing up in the 1980s, he went to the library to look up information, while social media did not yet exist for him to make comparisons with others, unlike for youth today.

“We live in a world of excesses – excessive information, excessive consumerism. We are made to think or feel that we want a lot of things we actually don’t need in order to feel full, to feel wholesome, to feel happy, to feel content,” he said.

“But very strangely, and perversely, we are also in a time of acute lack. We lack emotional anchors in our lives. We lack actual physical, face-to-face social interactions in our lives.”



At the conference held at the National University of Singapore on Sept 25, Mr Chua said the proportion of Neet youth has risen from 3.7 per cent to 4.1 per cent in Singapore between 2013 and 2023. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO

Mr Fabian Ang, 20, was a Neet youth who stayed home for an extended period as he feared for the safety of his mother and sisters because his father was abusive.

created for the safety of his mother and sisters because his father was abusive.

During the Covid-19 circuit breaker in 2020, Mr Ang dropped out of secondary school. It was his N-level year.

In a video produced by Fei Yue Community Services and shown at the conference, he recounted how his dad would hit his mum during arguments while he and his sisters hid in a room.

“When physical classes restarted, I wasn’t able to concentrate on my studies at all because I was really worried that something might happen at home when I’m not there,” he said.

His school alerted Fei Yue Community Services, which got social worker Fiona Tan to engage him at his void deck every two weeks. It took a year for Mr Ang to open up to Ms Tan and try activities she suggested, such as baking at her office.

Three years on, Mr Ang’s parents are going through a separation. Mr Ang, who did not return to school, is serving national service while volunteering at Fei Yue’s baking programme for youth at risk. He is considering work in the F&B sector or starting a home-based baking business with his mother.

“Before this, I didn’t have things to look forward to. Now, I have things to do and to look forward to in the future,” he said.

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Social workers highlighted the emerging issue of hidden youth.

Mr Benjamin Yeo, assistant director at Fei Yue, said the issue of hidden youth became a problem after the Covid-19 pandemic, when youth realised they could stay at home for extended periods, often glued to their devices.

Fei Yue works with 60 hidden youth, with 20 more on the waiting list. The agency has helped eight young people such as Mr Ang to reintegrate into society, training them in social-emotional skills and offering them ways to explore their interests, such as by attending fishing, zoo-keeping and barista courses.

The work is resource-intensive, with social workers engaging each young person for an average of three years before they are successfully reintegrated, Mr Yeo said.

Social workers said hidden youth typically have low self-esteem, lack social skills, and have poor relationships with their peers and parents, on top of underperforming in school. Many of them retreat into the cyber world and become socially isolated.

“They feel that they are nothing in the real world, but with their cyber identities, they are somebody,” said Mr Yeo.

He called for more employers to partner youth agencies to allow Neet youth to explore their interests in various career paths.

Mr Yeo also called for more local research to shed light on the issue, as he has seen cases of well-meaning adults who tell these youth to go to school, “pushing them further into isolation”.

“That’s why we hope that by creating awareness, more people can have a better understanding (of) hidden youth, and we can be more effective in supporting them to slowly come back to society,” he said.

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