

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and policy response on single-parent families in Malaysia

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Abstract

Purpose – The study focuses on the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and policy measures implemented by the Malaysian government to address issues during this period. The study examines the impacts on the financial security and mental health of single-parent families in Malaysia.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used a cross-sectional survey to obtain data about single-parent families. To support the information collected with the survey, interviews were conducted with six representatives from six single-parent associations.

Findings – The study identified that policy measures implemented by the Malaysian government have helped improve the financial security of single-parent families. However, for mental health, the support single parents received was not able to provide better quality of life, as the majority were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during lockdown, before they received any assistance from the government.

Research limitations/implications – The study was conducted during the pandemic; thus, the study was not able to include a larger sample of single parents. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to explain nationwide issues. However, the study provides important insights into understanding the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, especially single-parent families.

Practical implications – The study confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected single parents in different ways. Financial security and mental health, the focus of this study, have provided a clear justification for how pandemics could affect people's lives. Specifically, the situation was exacerbated after the implementation of movement control orders in Malaysia, and it has continuously affected the living conditions of single-parent families.

Social implications – The study focuses on single-parent families, a group that receives less attention from the government and policies, although this group is recognized as one of the vulnerable groups. Understanding this context helps to provide a clear guide for how policies can be formulated and provides equal attention to assist this group in the future.

Originality/value – This study focuses on single-parent families. Few studies have examined this perspective using Malaysia as the study context. Moreover, the study analyzes the pandemic situation, and this area is still new and underexplored.

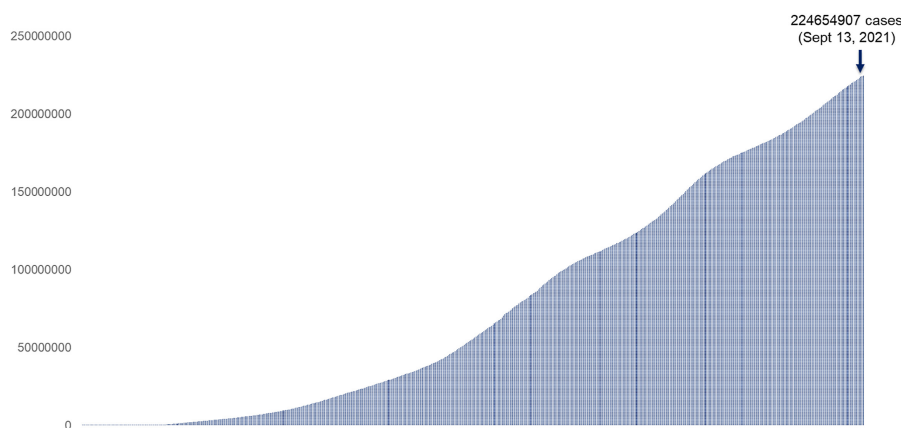
Keywords Policy response, COVID-19, Single-parent families, Malaysia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an unprecedented global phenomenon with wide-ranging repercussions. Its effects are not minor. The magnitude of this pandemic exceeds the limit of the government's capability to manage it. To date, the virus has infected 224,654,907 people throughout the world (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021a, b, c, d); see Figure 1. Data on the reported cumulative total cases show that the United States, India





Source(s): World Health Organization (2021)

Figure 1.
Trend of the COVID-19
pandemic worldwide,
2020–2021 (as of
September 13, 2021)

and Brazil reported the highest numbers of COVID-19 infections worldwide. Following the similar daily trend of the number of infection cases, daily reported deaths due to COVID-19 also fluctuated, where the cumulative total reached 4,470,969 deaths at the end of August 2021. Worsening the disaster, the global population is facing a new fear, as the virus has mutated. Thus, new variants are expected to occur. As of today, four variants of concern (Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta) and four variants of interest (Eta, Iota, Kappa and Lambda) have emerged that have posed an increased risk to global public health (WHO, 2021b). With this new development, managing and controlling transmission of the virus is becoming more difficult and complex.

Since COVID-19 was identified on December 31, 2019, WHO has warned the world of the danger and risk of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as of the potential for new waves of COVID-19 (WHO, 2021a). Public health experts have also warned that the novel coronavirus is likely to become endemic. Therefore, we have left with no other option but to live with it (The Guardian, 2020). With the emergence of new variants, the hope to live a better life is unclear. Thus, governments are taking advice from WHO on how to manage the outbreak. This would assist each country to prepare for serious repercussions of the new development despite still struggling with the existing challenges in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. WHO has introduced technical guidance on COVID-19 that includes, among others, critical preparedness, readiness and response actions for COVID-19, country-level coordination, planning and monitoring, and essential resource planning and guidance for schools, workplaces and institutions. Aid and support from WHO are part of the whole process of the governance of managing the pandemic. However, there are other aspects of governance that the countries must pay attention to and must be done on their own within their limited capability and capacity.

COVID-19 is regarded as a tripartite crisis—health, economic and social. Besides health, the global pandemic has caused a severe global economic crisis, which has led to an increase in unemployment and disruptions of services (such as transportation), retailing, food and beverage businesses and manufacturing industries (Pak *et al.*, 2020). Although it is anticipated that most countries will experience a recession when disaster occurs, the multiple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy are beyond expectation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) regarded this event as the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression (IMFBlog, 2020). Since WHO declared COVID-19 a health emergency in January

2020, the world has been involved in a USD90tn economic crisis (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Its wide-ranging repercussions affected global economic growth in 2020, and it is estimated that global economic growth decreased to an annualized rate of -3.4% to -7.6% , and global trade is estimated to have fallen by 5.3% in 2020.

Many governments around the world have tried to reorganize their financial administration or introduce a new financial policy response to COVID-19, which includes emergency liquidity, macroprudential policy, monetary policy and fiscal policy. This is part of the strategy to minimize the multiplier effects that occurred in 2020, which continued in 2021 and are expected to have a significant impact for the next few years. As of April 2020, the Yale Program on Financial Stability reported that governments and institutions have made nearly 1,700 economic policy announcements regarding COVID-19, which used a mix of fiscal and macroprudential measures in response to COVID-19's economic impact ([Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2020](#)). Despite the struggles of individual governments to maintain financial policies, government expenditures during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a large positive effect on economic growth ([De Ridder, 2021](#)), and thus, were able to reduce the impact caused by this unprecedented event.

In addition to the fiscal policy response to pandemic management, many countries have introduced other policy responses during the first two years since the outbreak emerged. The major policies that have been implemented to date are listed in [Table 1](#). The implementation of these policies has made great changes in the lives of the people in each country, especially those who were severely affected by the situation, such as children, businesses the employed and the poor.

The COVID-19 pandemic has relentlessly affected people's lives. It has spread human suffering and upended people's lives, which leads to social crises. It has attacked societies at their core, leading to a substantial loss of human life. This health crisis is devastating and affects all segments of the population, particularly the most vulnerable social groups, including the poor, the elderly, persons with disabilities, adolescents, aboriginal peoples, refugees and migrants. Their vulnerabilities have been severely affected by limited movement, fewer employment opportunities, lack of financial and social support, stigma and prejudice against them ([United Nations, 2020](#)). Vulnerable groups always receive disproportionate treatment from others due to their background. Moreover, measures for managing the spread of COVID-19, including lockdowns, may have serious economic consequences and unintended effects of exacerbating rather than mitigating the disparities within society ([Singh et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, this must be promptly and properly addressed through relevant policy measures to avoid inequality, exclusion and discrimination against these social groups. Thus, the governments are urged to provide comprehensive and universal social protection systems to safeguard these groups from the side effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Policy responses addressing this issue could act as automatic stabilizers to manage and overcome COVID-19 shocks, especially for handling the social crisis.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia

The first reported case of COVID-19 in Malaysia appeared in early February 2020. However, the situation became severe when the local outbreak increased significantly in March 2020. Thus, the government introduced a nationwide movement control order (MCO) to reduce virus transmission. After the MCO was implemented, and the situation seemed able to be managed, the government eased the restriction on May 4, 2020, under a conditional movement control order (CMCO). Once again, due to a slight positive improvement in addition to demands from the public to open up the economic and social sectors, the government agreed to implement the recovery movement control order (RMCO) on June 10, 2020. Most domestic activities and movement, which had previously been banned, were allowed.

Policy	Country (among countries that implemented these policies)
School closure	a) <i>Required (all levels)</i> : Canada, Ukraine, Iraq, Uganda, Cuba, China, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines b) <i>Required (only at some levels)</i> : Australia, Japan, Cambodia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria, Italy, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Suriname, United States
Workplace closure	a) <i>Required for all but key workers</i> : Australia, China, Cambodia, Mali, Canada, Chile, Panama, Brunei b) <i>Required for some</i> : Madagascar, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Angola, Philippines, Thailand, Nigeria, Germany, United Kingdom, United States, Mexico, Argentina, Peru
Cancellation of public events and gatherings	a) <i>Required cancellations</i> : Australia, China, Russia, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Gabon, Uganda, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, United States, Canada, Ecuador, Peru, Suriname, Guyana
Stay-at-home home restrictions	a) <i>Required (few exceptions)</i> : Malaysia, China, Central African Republic, Panama b) <i>Required (except essentials)</i> : New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, India, Thailand, Kazakhstan, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritania, Gabon, Algeria, Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia
Face coverings	a) <i>Required outside the home at all the times</i> : Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Nepal, Bangladesh, Romania, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru b) <i>Required in all public spaces</i> : Australia, Thailand, Cambodia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Madagascar, United States, Argentina
Public information campaigns	c) <i>Required in some public spaces</i> : China, South Sudan, Yemen, Poland, Germany, Austria, Nigeria, Serbia, Hungary, Uruguay, Spain, Portugal a) <i>Coordinated information campaign</i> : Australia, Canada, United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Panama, Guyana, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Italy, Spain, Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea
Restrictions on internal movement	b) <i>Public officials urged caution</i> : Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Thailand, Gambia, Jamaica a) <i>Movement restricted</i> : China, Australia, Thailand, Philippines, Iraq, Ukraine, Russia, Italy, France, Austria, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Botswana, Gabon, Guinea, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Suriname, United States, Canada, Cuba, the Dominican Republic
International travel controls	a) <i>Total border closure</i> : Australia, Japan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Brunei, Eritrea, Madagascar, Argentina, Bolivia
Contact tracing	a) <i>Comprehensive tracing (all cases)</i> : Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, China, Thailand, Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Iceland, Norway, Ireland, Colombia, Guyana, Ecuador, South Africa, Botswana, Cambodia
Income support	a) <i>Covers >50% of lost salary</i> : Singapore, Japan, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Romania, Serbia, Poland, United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Spain, Qatar b) <i>Covers <50% of lost salary</i> : Russia, China, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan, South Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Algeria, Portugal, Egypt, Iraq, Canada, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador
Debt and contract relief	c) <i>No income support</i> : United States, Mexico, Chile, Mali, Mauritania, Guinea, Madagascar, Mozambique, Estonia, Latvia, Denmark, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Tajikistan a) <i>Broad relief</i> : China, Mongolia, Russia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Japan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Italy, United Kingdom, Ireland, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Cuba
	b) <i>Narrow relief</i> : United States, Canada, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay, South Africa, Nepal, South Korea, Sweden, Finland, Ghana, Algeria, Congo, Somalia, Belarus, Kuwait, Iraq, Peru c) <i>No relief</i> : Chile, Brazil, Suriname, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, Germany, France, Madagascar, Mozambique, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Cameroon, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, the Philippines
Source(s): Our World in Data (2021)	

Table 1.
Major policy responses
worldwide (data as of
September 26, 2021)

However, after a new wave of COVID-19 infections in Malaysia in September 2020, the CMCO was reinstated in several states until September 2021.

In Malaysia, there were 1,979,698 confirmed cases and 15,802 deaths as of September 12, 2021 (WHO, 2021a, b, c, d); refer to Figures 2 and 3 to see the trend. The fiscal effects that have to be borne by the government are excessively high (OECD, 2020); this includes Malaysia. Governments have responded to this calamity by proposing relevant policies that cater to all groups of society. Nevertheless, there were criticisms of the unequal attention and treatment given by the government to several groups, including single-parent families. Single parents are very vulnerable during the pandemic. They are struggling to manage their own health and their children's health (Barger, 2021). Single parents are also physically and mentally exhausted and unable to compartmentalize paid work and family (Hertz, Mattes & Shook, 2021). However, they received little attention in policy responses regarding their daily struggles during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected almost all countries. The impact is incalculable. People from all walks of life have suffered, but the most unfortunate groups are the vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly, persons with disabilities and single parents, especially those who are categorized as low-income. In Malaysia, there are three household income classifications: (1) bottom 40% (B40) (household income is below RM 4,850 per month), (2) middle 40% (M40) (household income between RM 4,851 and RM 10,970 per month), and (3) top 20% (T20) (household income exceeds RM 10,971 a month). Data reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) for 2020 revealed that monthly household gross income decreased by -10.3%. Following a similar trend, the median of monthly household gross income also recorded a decline of -11.3%. The median value of monthly household gross income in 2020 was RM 5,209, while in 2019, the median value was RM 5,873 (DOSM, 2021).

Furthermore, the DOSM (2021) reported an additional 12.5% of households in the B40 group in 2020. The DOSM (2021) also revealed that 20.0% of households in the M40 group had moved to the B40 group. Households in the T20 group also experienced similar reverse income growth: 12.8% of this group shifted to the M40 group. This may have been expected due to the severity of the pandemic in Malaysia that started at the end of 2019, in which many people experienced loss of or reduction in income caused by intermittent economic activities due to the closure of the economic sector. This directive was issued by the Malaysian government as part of the strategy to control and manage COVID-19. The government

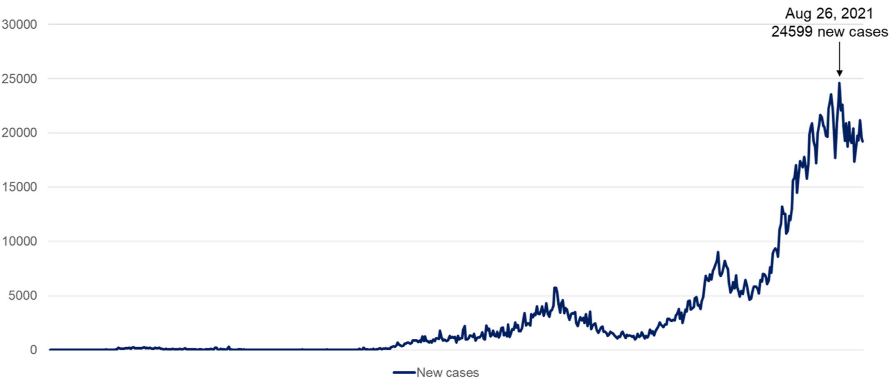


Figure 2.
Trend of new
COVID-19 cases in
Malaysia

Source(s): World Health Organization (2021)

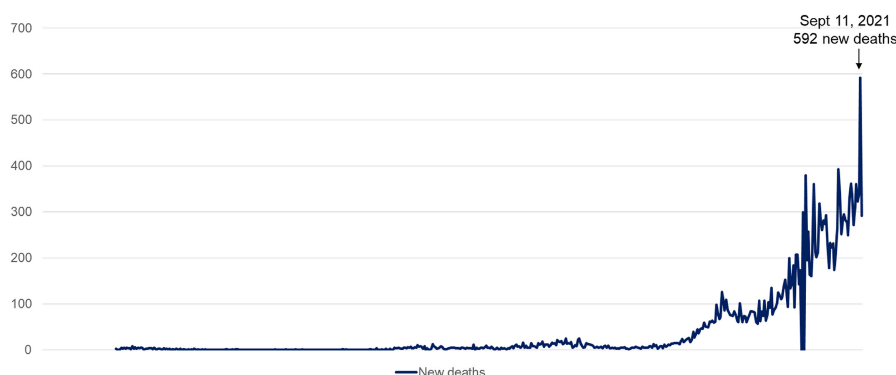


Figure 3.
Trend of new
COVID-19 deaths in
Malaysia

Source(s): World Health Organization (2021)

implemented a series of MCOs. Although they helped to control and reduce the number of daily confirmed cases, the orders had various adverse impacts, especially on the economic sector. [Department of Statistics Malaya \(2021a, b\)](#) data revealed that the unemployment rate increased significantly in 2020 and decreased by a small percentage in 2021, from 3.3% in 2019 to 4.9% in June 2020 to 4.8% in June 2021 (estimate). Within this context, women are more vulnerable compared to men ([Lee, 2020](#)). It is anticipated that this condition will worsen in 2021 for Malaysia due to the quadripartite crisis (health, economic, social and political), which could pose threats to stable growth for the country.

The 2010 Malaysian census (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010) showed that there were 235,240 single mothers in Malaysia (1.7% of the total population). In 2020, DOSM data showed that there were 161,227 single mothers registered with the Women Development Department, although it is expected that the actual number is far higher. This group was highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic ([Hertz *et al.*, 2021](#)) alongside children ([Fry-Bowers, 2020](#)) and the elderly ([Chakrawarty *et al.*, 2021](#)). To understand the trend of single mothers, previous studies associated it with the number of divorces reported in a particular country (CITATION). For Malaysia, 66,440 divorce cases among Muslim couples were reported between March and August 2020 ([Berita Harian, 2021](#)). This divorce rate could indirectly contribute to the increase of single-parent families in the country in the next few years.

In 2020, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia received almost 200,000 applications for Special Assistance for Single Mothers, one of the ministry's policy responses to assist this vulnerable group during the pandemic. However, only 161,909 applicants were eligible to receive one-off aid of RM 300 to ease the impact of COVID-19. In addition, single mothers are eligible to apply for other types of support from the government, such as welfare assistance (called Household Living Aid), healthcare support (under Skim Peduli Sihat), financial business support (such as launching grants, TemanNita Program (managed by Yayasan Tekun Nasional (TEKUN)), microcredit schemes (managed by Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM)) and *Zakat* (which they can apply for from *Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan* (MAIWP) and *Lembaga Zakat Selangor* (LZS)). Other than these policies, in response to the worsening conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has introduced three recovery plans for Malaysia: (1) the PRIHATIN Economic Stimulus Package (ESP), (2) the National Economic Recovery Plan (PENJANA) and (3) the People and Economic Strategic Empowerment Program (PEMERKASA), which are estimated to cost RM250bn (plus RM 10bn under KITA PRIHATIN), RM 35bn and RM20bn, respectively. The

outputs and outcomes of these massive fiscal policies that were introduced within a short period (less than two years) have yet to be revealed, especially to the social group that is the focus of this study.

Policy response to COVID-19 in Malaysia

The first case of COVID-19 in Malaysia was identified in February 2021. When the reported cases increased significantly over the following months, the Malaysian government took drastic decision and action by implementing the first national MCO from March 18 to May 3, 2020. The MCO took place in four phases. During this period, many sectors were ordered to temporarily halt their activities, and very limited economic activities were allowed to operate. Meanwhile, for social sectors, almost all activities were prohibited. These included mass gatherings, and places of worship, nurseries, schools (such as government schools, private schools, international schools and *Tahfiz* centers (religious schools)), training centers and universities were closed temporarily (Prime Minister Office, 2020). The decision to close down many sectors with limited movement showed side effects after a month of implementation. Decisions to implement policies to contain the COVID-19 virus within society had a dramatic impact on people’s livelihoods. WHO (2020) revealed that millions of people worldwide are at risk of falling into extreme poverty. While millions of businesses faced existential threats, more than a billion of the global workforce were at risk of losing their jobs, especially those involved in the informal economy. They have very limited social protection and may lose their productive assets due to lockdowns and business closures. Thus, the majority faced difficulties feeding themselves and their families. Due to this unprecedented challenge experienced by Malaysian citizens, the government has made an effort to introduce relevant policies to address the issues. These policies are explained in Table 2 according to the chronological order of their introduction.

No	Policy	Date of announcement	Focus/objective	Cost
1	PRIHATIN economic Stimulus Package (ESP)	27 March 2020	To protect the <i>rakyat</i> (people), support business and strengthen the economy	RM 250bn
2	Short-term economic recovery plan (PENJANA)	5 June 2020	To support the economy to operate in the new Normal via three thrusts: Empower the people, propel businesses and stimulate the economy	RM 35bn
3	PERMAI ASSISTANCE PACKAGE (Perlindungan Ekonomi Dan Rakyat Malaysia (PERMAI) assistance Package)	18 January 2021	To combat the COVID-19 outbreak, safeguard people's and support business continuity	RM 15bn
4	National COVID-19 Immunization program (COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION)	24 February 2021	To achieve herd immunity with at least 80% of the population in Malaysia fully vaccinated against COVID-19	Initial (RM3n)
5	People and economic Strategic Empowerment program (PEMERKASA)	17 March 2021	To drive economic recovery, support businesses and provide targeted assistance to the <i>rakyat</i> and sectors affected by the pandemic	RM20bn

Table 2.
Policies for addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia

Source(s): Author’s work

Literature review

When COVID-19 began at the end of 2019 and early 2020, no one would have guessed this pandemic could affect human civilization. It is a global catastrophe. Many governments are still struggling to find short- and long-term solutions to address various problems caused by the crisis. Several countries managed to control the effect, but many other countries have failed to handle it even after two years. COVID-19 is not only a health crisis but also an economic and social calamity (Shoss, Horan, DiStaso, LeNoble & Naranjo, 2021). It has affected all groups in society. In many of those groups, single parents are the most vulnerable due to the direct impact of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020).

A single parent can be a single mother or a single father (Pujihavuty, Subeqi & Murniati, 2021). Duvall and Miller (1985) stated that single parenthood is recognized as a family with only one parent living with children in the house. Single parents can be defined as a solo parent, where the individual is a divorcee (a person who is separated from their partner) or a widow or widower (a person who has lost his or her spouse by death), separated from their partner and unplanned pregnancy (Stack & Meredith, 2018), or could be a single parent by choice, where a man or woman chooses to become a single parent through donor insemination or adoption (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). Lindwall, Bailer & Daly (2011) defined single-parent families as comprised of a parent or caregiver and one or more dependent children without the presence and support of a spouse or adult partner sharing the responsibility of parenting. Single parents usually manage the household by themselves, playing the role of the sole breadwinner for the family and providing support to their children's social development, including education. In a broader context, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2019) stated that single-parent families include mothers, fathers or grandparents bringing up their grandchildren by themselves (Garcia, Lim, Pascua, Santiago & Tus, 2021).

Single parenthood, where a household headed by a single mother or father, is on the rise everywhere. According to United Nations Women (2020), globally, there were 101.3m single mothers taking care of their children. Single mothers are vulnerable and appear to be invisible to policymakers because they are not counted in national official statistics. Previous studies have shown that the acceptance of single-parent families is increasing, although studies have also argued that there are still stigma and discrimination against single-parent families. This can cause discomfort among single parents in exposing themselves, especially when seeking assistance, although they are among the most vulnerable groups in society (Diaz-Serrano & Flamand, 2020). Looking at the trend of single- and two-parent families, the last several decades have seen changes. Lindwall *et al.* (2011) disclosed that the number of "traditional" two-parent families has declined, while noticing the increasing trend of single-parent families. Data revealed that about 11% of children lived in single-parent families in 1970. However, the percentage spiked to 28% in 2000. It is expected that the number of children living in single-parent households would be much higher if we analyze this trend using the COVID-19 pandemic setting.

Single parenthood is gendered, and it always draws a reality rather than perception that the households are headed by women (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). However, women are said to have more negative economic, social, and health experiences and consequences than men (CBI, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities that include a widening poverty gap, income deprivation and deteriorating work-life balance (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). First, single mothers especially tend to have a low level of education, which makes them unable to compete in the labor market that is always characterized by gender inequality. Moreover, they are usually involved in the traditional breadwinner model, which makes them and their families fragile and vulnerable to the shock of the pandemic. Due to assorted disadvantages, issues and problems experienced by single parents (or specifically, single mothers), it is difficult for the government to formulate effective social protection policies for them (Horemans & Marx, 2018).

Single-parent families have been identified as usually being less financially secure (Clery, Dewar & Papoutsaki, 2021), earning low incomes (Lu, Walker, Richard & Younis, 2019), and juggling multiple jobs and family (Burden, 1986; Wilson, 2015). Single parents have also received disproportionate attention in policy measures (Fisher *et al.*, 2020). As the pandemic continued, single parents were mentally and physically exhausted. They experienced economic hardship even before the pandemic. Despite this, there has been little consideration of the pandemic impact on single parents and their families (Clery *et al.*, 2021). Thus, this study intends to fill this gap by exploring single-mother families' experiences in dealing with the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. The struggle that this group had to confront during this pandemic is beyond the expectations of many people, including themselves. The challenges are expected to be in different forms, mainly in financial insecurity, equity of children's education, job security, comfortable place to stay, utilities and food supply, in addition to other kinds of social protection aspects. These challenges are assumed to have worsened when the government enforced a series of MCOs nationwide. The study also aims to analyze policy measures and their impact on the well-being of single-parent households. This will provide an evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of the policies introduced and implemented during the pandemic.

Research framework

According to analyses in previous studies, single-parent families face various difficulties in their lives, especially after the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most overarching facts highlighted by previous studies are two major concerns: financial security and mental health. Using the impact of the pandemic and policy response as the main events in the analysis, the study further investigates these two themes. The study referred to the family stress model (FSM) to support the theoretical discussion. This model, introduced by Conger *et al.* (2010), provides a foundation for understanding the influence of economic hardship on the well-being of families. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as the background setting of this study, this vulnerable group could not avoid being affected by this health catastrophe.

The FSM incorporates several facets of economic strain. The first argument proposed in the model is economic hardship, which is defined as having difficulties in sustaining sufficient income, especially when faced with devastating economic situations. Economic hardship subsequently leads to economic pressure or financial strain. This leads to unmet material needs or financial distress. This then appears to be the main reason that negatively affects individual emotions and behaviors. When an individual is unable to regulate their emotions and behavior psychologically, they become involved in conflict and hostility, which forces them to distance themselves and withdraw from a relationship. Consequently, the quality and stability of the relationship are at stake (Conger *et al.*, 2010). Ultimately, the people surrounding them, particularly their children, are affected (Evans, 2004; Neppl *et al.*, 2015). Figure 4 provides an illustration of the revised FSM using the COVID-19 pandemic setting that is referred to in this study. The research model is the revised version from Hill's (1949) ABX model and Wu and Xu (2020).

Methods

This study adopts a quantitative approach, which is supported by qualitative data. The data were collected in two phases: a cross-sectional social survey and interview sessions. First, we conducted interview sessions with six representatives from six different single-parent associations. The main motivation for conducting the interviews was to understand the situation of single parents in Malaysia. Due to pandemic that tremendously affect peoples' life from many aspects, it is very sensitive for anyone to openly discuss this matter. Getting an

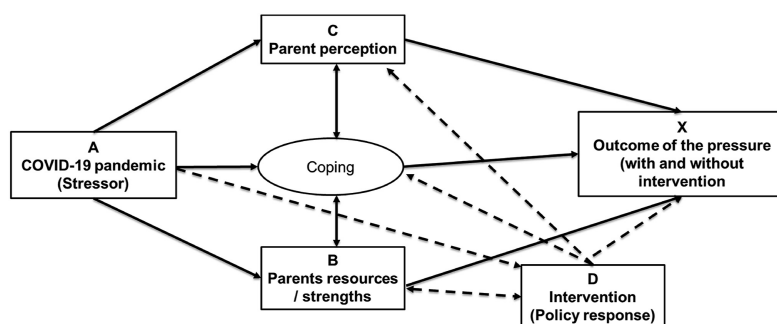


Figure 4.
Research framework

Source(s): Author's work based on Hill's (1949) ABX model and Wu and Xu (2020)

initial understanding of the study population was crucial to ensure that the instrument used reflected the actual context of the situation. Second, we conducted a social survey among single parents. As single-parent families are regarded as gendered, we decided to focus on single mothers as the study sample.

The social survey was distributed through an online platform. Lumsden (2007) listed several advantages of using online (web-based) questionnaires, among others, including saving money, speeding up the distribution process, better appearance of the survey form, flexibility, functionality and usability. We also considered the current pandemic situation when collecting data. Concerning safety issues, it was less risky to adopt an online survey as the main method for this study. However, Andrade (2020) advised that an online survey could present two methodological limitations, namely, the inability to describe the population where the survey was distributed and the selection of the respondents in the study. To address this limitation, we set two main inclusion criteria for self-selecting respondents: (1) They must be a single parent and (2) they must be members of one of the registered single-parent associations. Thus, we contacted more than 55 single-parent associations in the Registrar of Societies (ROS). Of the 55 associations, only 6 accepted the invitation to participate in the study. This limitation confirmed the nonresponse problem in the survey mode that was noted by Kennedy and Vargus (2001).

The questionnaire was divided into four sections: (1) respondent's background, (2) views on policy response (focusing on the PERMAI Assistance Package), (3) financial security (adopted and adapted from Lawrence, Halbesleben & Paustian-Underdahl (2013)) and (4) mental health (adopted and adapted from General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12)). Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25.

Results

In this section, we discuss the results focusing on the impact of policy response regarding two main themes: financial security and mental health. Overall, we collected only 46 valid responses. Valid responses mean that the respondents completed all questions in the survey. Due to the low valid response rate, the results cannot be generalized to the context of single-parent families in Malaysia. Therefore, we explore the feedback generated from the survey. The low number of responses can be associated with two main reasons: (1) The respondents did not have adequate technology skills (according to Informant A), and (2) they did not have sufficient Internet connectivity or Internet data plans to participate in the online survey (according to Informant B).

Of 46 respondents, 52.2% were Malay, followed by Kadazan-Dusun (26.1%) and others (15.2%). The median age of the respondents was 36.17 years old. The majority (60.9%) lived in rural areas, 28.3% lived in urban areas and 10.9% lived in suburbs. Regarding the highest education attainment, 39.1% received the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* certificate (completed upper secondary school), followed by Standard 6 (completed primary school) (17.4%), *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR) (completed lower secondary school) (15.2%), bachelor's degree (6.5%), diploma (6.5%) and master's degree (4.3%). Based on job status responses, 67.4% said that they were unemployed, while 32.6% stated that they had a job. The median monthly income was RM 956.83.

One question asked respondents their opinions of their living conditions during the pandemic and their expectations for 2022. The majority of the respondents said that their living conditions worsened when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Despite being affected by the situation, many (26.1%) were positive that their lives would get better, but the majority (69.6%) did not know what would happen in 2022. Respondents were also asked whether COVID-19 had affected their employment status. The majority chose "Yes" (21%), followed by "Not relevant because they are not working" (39.1%); only 15.2% chose "No". Those who answered "Yes" chose two main reasons for the change in their employment status: (1) They had been fired or (2) they had been furloughed.

The respondents were also asked about the types of assistance and support they had received from the government. Nine types of assistance and support were provided under the PERMAI Assistance Package. Of these nine types, BPN (which is financial support) had the highest recipient rate from single parents with 76.1%, followed by free 1 GB daily Internet data (34.8%), KWSP i-Sinar (32.6%), food basket (28.3%) and special tax relief (13%). These data indicate that although the government's response to reduce the burden during the pandemic was broad but inclusive, single parents also enjoyed the benefits of these policy measures. However, the policies catered only to short-term problems, which could not be sustained throughout the recovery period as the country recognizes COVID-19 as an endemic disease that is expected to continue to circulate. One of the representatives from a single-parent association, informant C, proposed that assistance and support for single parents should be strengthened considering their condition, which is always neglected and discriminated against in the labor market and in society. These situations have forced single parents to be unable to compete for better opportunities that could help them improve their living conditions as well as for their children. This was supported by informant D, which reflected on the situation in Sabah, in which single parents, usually mothers, had low education levels. Thus, they struggled to find better jobs and high salaries because jobs always require at a minimum the completion of secondary school with a *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* certificate. Many also have daily income, which cannot sustain their lives compared to those who have monthly income. Meanwhile, informant E earnestly suggested that the government revisit current existing policies related to single parents. The existing policies must be revised according to the current situation to ensure equal opportunities and fair distribution to single parents, particularly regarding monetary and non-monetary support from the government for single parents who are categorized in the bottom 40% group (B40). Although informant E admitted that, for the last 20 years, much improvement has been made to support single parents, new challenges (such as technology advancement), the emergence of new social problems and other more important issues have sidelined single-parent issues.

Figure 5 shows the status perceived by single parents during these two different periods. It reveals that 63% of the respondents agreed that *Bantuan PRIHATIN Nasional* (financial support) helped them minimize their burden after the government implemented a series of MCOs. Other than financial assistance, food baskets (28.3%), free Internet data (23.9%), KWSP i-Sinar (21.7%) and moratorium assistance and loan repayment assistance (19.6%) gave relief to single parents experiencing hardship during this period.

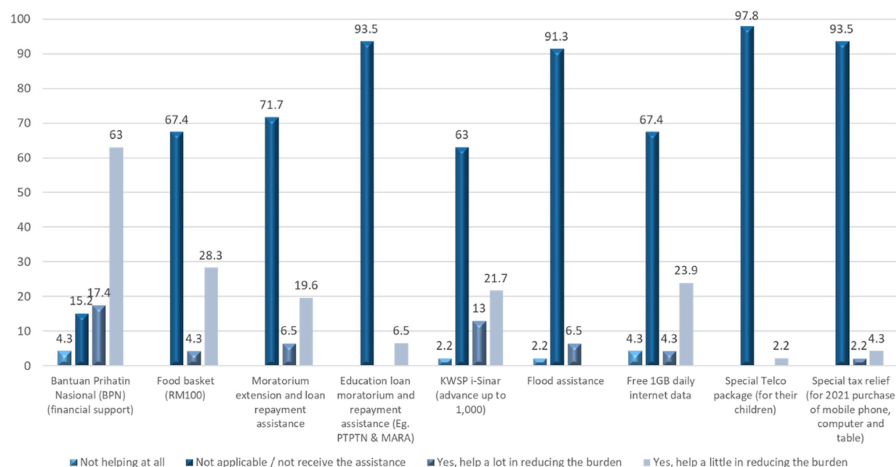


Figure 5. Respondents' assessment of the PERMAI assistance package

Source(s): Author's work based on the survey data

In parallel with these findings, informant A stated that there were many single parents in dire need of assistance, such as financial support and food aid, especially during the MCOs. Informant D added that during this period, many experienced financial crises, where they could not go to work and did not have daily wages. Many could survive less than a month with their savings. Although some did not have problems requesting such assistance, according to informant A, there were also single parents who felt it was embarrassing to apply for such assistance, and thus, asked their close friends or personally contacted non-government bodies or volunteers to get support with one particular condition, which was not to reveal their identity to anyone. This put the non-governmental organization (NGO) volunteers in a dilemma, as they have to record all activities that they conduct as part of the audit requirements. However, due to the anonymous requests, the NGOs were left with no choice to follow the requests, although they knew that they would be in difficult situations when reporting their activities later. Informant C raised similar concerns. According to informant C, these kinds of assistance, especially the food basket program, provided great help to single-parent families when they were infected by the coronavirus as they could not go outside while undergoing home quarantine. Meanwhile, financial assistance and the moratorium extension provide great relief to single-parent families who earn daily pay, such as those who operate small food stalls. Another good initiative from the government was providing free Internet data. This has helped many children follow online learning activities during the MCOs. Analyzing the types of assistance or support received by single-parent families, not many benefited from the initiatives. For example, informant E said that many were unable to prepare the devices for their children to participate in online classes. Informant D said that in her area, Internet connectivity was very poor; therefore, free Internet data did not provide much help to single parents in her area. These situations provide a gap for those who are desperate for other kinds of support that are available to them during this difficult time.

This study also attempted to further understand the status of financial security and mental health among single parents before the COVID-19 pandemic and after the government implemented the first phase of the MCO, before and after the government introduced the PERMAI Assistance Packages. Figure 6 provides a clear illustration of the effect of the

COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the policy response. It can be concluded that policy measures taken by the government provided significant relief to single-parent families regarding their financial security. However, this trend is very different for mental health. This figure shows that the single parents were not doing well during or after the MCO (with the policy response). This is probably due to inactivity during the MCO, which made them feel uncomfortable sitting at home and not being able to work during this period. This is similar to informant C's concern: Many of the single parents in her association had this problem, especially when they were quarantined at home. Some did not have family members who lived nearby to call for help. They could ask for help from either a neighbor or her (because many of them knew her as the leader of the single-parent association). Informant C also stated that because they also do not have sufficient funds to support those in need, they requested financial help from other people such as members of Parliament or state assemblymen for their areas. She said that they were also lucky that funds came not only from these people but also from members of the public who lived in that area for families in need, not only single-parent families but also other families. She said that this was a blessing in disguise of the emergence of COVID-19, where many people were willing to help other people regardless of their background, a situation that was infrequent before the pandemic.

Conclusion and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has definitely affected peoples' lives. As pointed out by the World Bank during the "Long COVID – East Asia and Pacific Economic Update" webinar, which was held on September 29, 2021, it is, indeed, long COVID-19, and we are unable to foresee exactly when it will end. Recognizing this unfavorable situation, the government should implement clear and inclusive policy measures. Short- and long-term plans are needed to make sure the country is able to deal with the unprecedented impacts of the pandemic, as well as the side effects of the policy measures that have been implemented or will be implemented in the future. Attention to every single change that happens in the country or at the global level needs a thorough analysis and evaluation to ensure precautionary measures can be implemented promptly. In addition, the policy responses should also consider different groups of society that exist in the country. Although it is difficult to create a specific policy for a specific group of people with limited resources, it is recommended that government machinery be fully utilized in ensuring that all groups, especially vulnerable ones, are considered and receive equal attention. Moreover, the side effects of the new policy measures must be handled immediately to ensure they do not create other major issues or problems. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic will leave long-lasting scars. Thus, the existing policies should be revisited, revised or revamped to adapt to the new challenges.

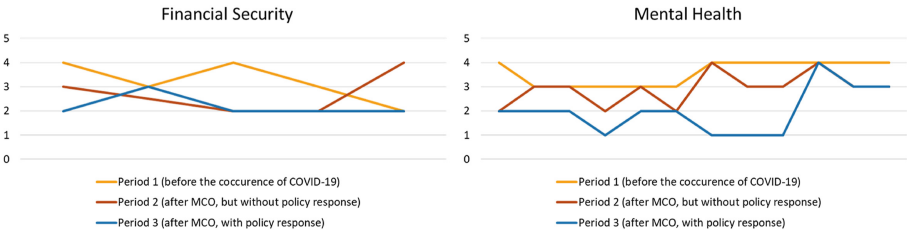


Figure 6.
The impact of the movement control order and policy response on financial security and mental health

Note(s): 1 refers to a negative situation, and 5 refers to a positive situation

Source(s): Author's work based on the survey data

Concerning the COVID-19 situation and findings of the study, there are several recommendations we would like to highlight. We propose that the government should formulate a policy that pays attention to single-parent family issues. As stated, the government has made efforts to assist single-parent families; however, the efforts did not last due to many new challenges that emerged throughout this period until the arrival of COVID-19. Therefore, now is the best time for the government to collect more comprehensive data on single-parent families to identify areas in which the government could do more to provide a better life for single-parent families.

This study focused on two issues: financial security and mental health. For financial security, although it is important to provide single-parent families with financial assistance, this strategy can help single parents to live in a comfortable life only for a temporary period. They will request more financial help from the government once they are unable to maintain their lifestyle. The government should formulate programs that can help single-parent families sustain themselves in the future, such as providing upskilling or reskilling programs, providing platforms or collaborating with existing providers for online business platforms to train parents in online businesses or expand job opportunities in the markets. The government should also work closely with the single-parent associations to identify the current needs of the majority of single parents, and the attention should be focused nationwide, including Sabah and Sarawak, which were said to have always been sidelined in many federal policies.

Meanwhile, for mental health issues, it is important for the government to raise awareness about mental health, not only for single parents but also for the entire society. For single parents, it is important to provide programs on mental health, and several members from each single-parent association could be trained to deal with mental health issues. The members of single-parent associations who are usually their friends, due to having similar family backgrounds, probably would have fewer problems becoming comfortable with those who experience mental health disorders. Immediate help and support can be given to them if the members or friends are aware of the situation.

In addition to these two aspects (financial security and mental health), other aspects such as children who live in single-parent households should not be taken lightly, as they will also be affected by the situation. A more inclusive policy on single parents should be formulated by taking into consideration various indicators and affected groups of people to ensure they are not sidelined once again and that they are protected from a challenging world in the future.

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