Most neighbours just say ‘hi’ and ‘bye’

Few displays of trust among HDB residents, study finds; plans now afoot to raise cohesion

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Neighbors may exchange greetings and make small talk, but that’s as far as many Singaporeans go.

Displays of trust, such as looking after house keys or lending and borrowing items, are seldom heard of in Housing Board estates.

Residents’ interactions also tend to be “incidental and minimal”, according to study findings released by the HDB and the National University of Singapore Centre of Sustainable Asian Cities and Sociology department. These findings, however, do not surprise experts.

“The more densely packed we are, the more we value privacy,” said sociologist Paulin Straughan.

“Modern society prides itself on being independent. As a result, we don’t make the additional effort to reach out to our neighbors. Unlike the olden days in a kampong, when neighbors needed each other to borrow rice, for instance.”

“Combined with the work stress that comes with urban living, when you retreat to the sanctity of your own home, you want it to be your own private sphere. Many of us put up a sub-conscious barrier and it becomes a norm.”

Associate Professor Straughan added that such behaviour is prevalent in cosmopolitan and urban cities.

In a bid to find out how design and amenities have contributed to interaction among residents, the year-long study surveyed about 2,200 residents in five HDB towns.

Respondents were asked to score their frequency of interactions with neighbours, from a score of one (never) to five (daily). Overall, they ranked “exchange of greetings/small talk” as the most frequent activity, with a mean score of 3.47.

Safekeeping of house keys and borrowing and lending household items ranked the lowest at 1.11 and 1.25 respectively.

MP for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC Gan Thiam Poh said that he has noticed this lack of neighbourliness in the less mature estates, where neighbors have spent less time together: “To my surprise, I have met residents who don’t even know their next-door neighbors.”

Ms Ellen Lee, MP for Sembawang GRC, said that while most residents are on cordial terms, few are extremely close.

But she added that there are the “rare gems” who have potluck parties together, take care of one another’s children and collect their neighbors’ newspapers or water their plants when they are travelling.

Mr Gan attended a recent wake where he learnt of a Hougang resident who had bought breakfast for her sickly neighbour every day before the latter died.

“She didn’t even ask to be paid back. It was very heartwarming – I think such a good kampong spirit should be encouraged,” he said.

Sales promoter Soon Kam Mee, who lives in a four-room flat in Bishan, said she is close to her neighbor on the 18th floor, partly because their children went to the same kindergarten and primary school. The two buy each other souvenirs when they travel.

But the 56-year-old does not interact much with her immediate neighbors on the eighth storey, as they are “either very busy with work or seldom at home”.

In order to improve bonding between residents, the HDB plans to explore ideas yielded from the study, which involved six focus group discussions with residents.

One includes turning public walkways through housing estates into “social linkways” by adding seats or exhibits to encourage people to linger when they meet a neighbor. Another is a one-stop hub for community activities, or a “neighbourhood incubator”.

The two initiatives will be piloted in Tampines Central from this month until May next year. If successful, they will be adopted at the new Bidadari and Tampines North estates.

Prof Straughan believes infrastructure can play a big part in fostering cohesiveness. “If you allow common congregation spots where people can do things together, it will help,” she said. “But at the end of the day... it’s hard to change human behavior patterns, so it can’t be a short-term effort.”