

3 Surprising Health Facts About The B40 Community

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This article is a 'work in progress'. All statistics and facts mentioned are based on existing studies. When new research comes to light, this article will be updated.

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Who are the B40 Community?

Poverty can be categorized using several different methods. Absolute poverty, relative poverty, situational poverty, and so on. However, since it is so diverse, it is often difficult to categorize and group people. Trying to determine who needs the most help is especially a challenge, with so many types of poverty. To overcome this issue, the Malaysian government set boundaries according to household income. By focusing on income alone, there are much clearer quantitative boundaries that the entire population can fall under.

The Bottom 40% of Malaysia’s economic rung, whose earnings are on the lowest side of the national income spectrum. Generally, the categories of B40, M40 (Middle 40%), and T20 (Top 20%) are further broken down into tiers, such as B1, B2, B3, and so on (see Figure 1).

B40				M40				T20	
B1	B2	B3	B4	M1	M2	M3	M4	T1	T2
Less than RM2,499	RM2,500 - RM3,169	RM3,170 - RM3,969	RM3,970 - RM4,849	RM4,850 - RM5,879	RM5,880 - RM7,099	RM7,110 - RM8,699	RM8,700 - RM10,959	RM10,960 - RM15,039	More than RM15,039

Figure 1: Classifications of Household Income & Basic Amenities Survey Report 2019. [1]

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Everyone that is under B1 classifies as living in poverty because they fall under the national poverty line of RM2208. These communities exist all over Malaysia in both rural and urban demographics. When we talk about the B40 community, admittedly the general public may have some pre-assumptions or stereotypes of how we see them. What they look like, what they wear, what kind of jobs they have, as well as their ethics towards work. Few of us take into account the state of their health, what they eat, their livelihoods and that of those of their children. Even fewer take

time to ponder in their lifestyle choices, such as dietary habits, and if their “cheaper” way of living would have long term consequences.

This article explores three interesting facts that had been identified regarding the B40 community in Malaysia, based on a health perspective . It may help you to understand that people in poverty face a web of food and nutrition-related issues and they require an array of interventions.

1. Over 60% of the Urban Poor Community Community Are Overweight

Whenever we think of the poor, images of thin, scrawny, malnourished, sunken-eyed individuals come to mind. While this is still very true, the irony is that poverty also brings with it unintended weight problems such as obesity. A recent study conducted in an urban poor community in Kuala Lumpur showed that a whopping **65.1% of adults who were part of the study were either overweight or obese**. Only 5.7% of the sample size were underweight and less than 20% had a healthy Body Mass Index (BMI) [2].

Health Of B40 Group in Kuala Lumpur

Body Mass Index (BMI) amongst a B40 community in Kuala Lumpur



Chart: Wiki Impact • Source: Income and obesity in an urban poor community: a cross-sectional study (2020) • Created with Datawrapper

Data showed that in this community of urban poor, extra weight is an obvious issue. So **what could possibly be the leading factor of weight issues among the poor?** Being overweight or obese is a

result of many factors, but synonymous to the urban setting, we can possibly speculate the reasons being:

- Over-consumption of high-fat and high-sugar foods
- Lack of physical or recreational activities
- Poor food choices or eating habits
- Sedentary jobs that don't require much movement or lack of job opportunities rendering some of them jobless

We'd like to further explore this topic - ***could this poverty-overweight paradox be true of other B40 communities in Malaysia?***

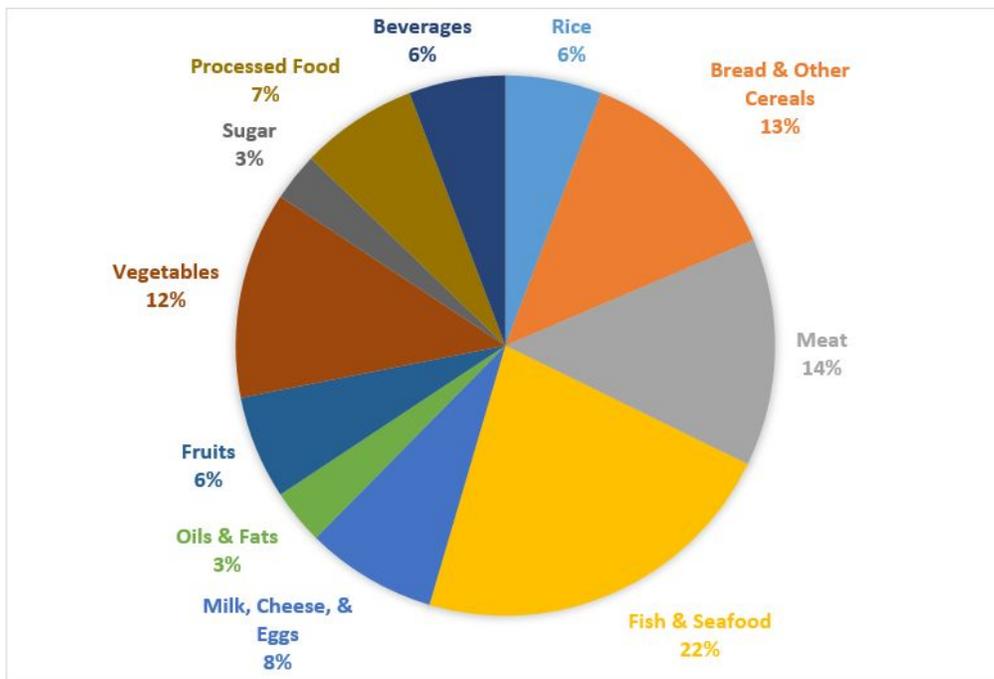
2. Poverty leads to poor dietary habits

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), Malaysia's B40 community spends a little over 24.2% of their monthly income on food, that's approximately RM763 per household. Break that down further, that's basically RM25 per day, per household for food! That isn't much. The report mentioned that the M40 community had RM44 set aside for daily food expenses and the one living with the top 20 (T20) salaries had RM76. Despite these numbers being higher, the percentage out of their average income was much lower. M40s only needing to use 18% of their income and T20s, 12.6% [1].

When you have a minimal budget, decisions on food choices change and the pressing question would be 'what will fill my stomach?' The following breakdown are possible perspectives of food purchasing habits based on presented data from the HES 2019 appendix.

The first items dropped are usually healthier foods – high-quality proteins (meats), whole grains, vegetables, and fruit. What will increase will be low-cost energy-rich starches (rice), added sugars, vegetable fats, and processed food - the cheaper and faster way to ease hunger pangs.

Let's take a look at how the money is spent. If we look at a breakdown of expenditure it looks like the pie chart below. At first glance, it looks like a well-balanced food intake expenditure, but if we dig a little deeper into their decision making, we will find out that their options are narrow and choices are limited.



Source: Household Expenditure Survey Report, Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019

These households spend 36% of their money on basic proteins such as meat and fish. However, we can't say that this means they are getting enough to have a balanced diet. Meat and fish are products that are generally sold in low quantities for higher prices. They usually don't last more than 2 or 3 meals, so they need to be bought frequently. In certain areas, meat and fish are extremely high priced due to transportation costs and middleman profits. The shelf-life factor is the same for bread, fruits, and vegetables that make up 31% of the food expenditure.

When times are hard, members of the B40 population will take to buying even more processed food and instant foods such as instant noodles and they are laden with salt and MSG. To many, this sacrifice is necessary to make ends meet and give them enough energy to get through the day.

Foods like rice, cooking oils, processed foods, sugar, and eggs are usually sold in bulk and can last up to several weeks even with regular consumption. Together they only take up 27% of the food budget. A lower-income family will be more likely to spend RM13 on a tray of 30 eggs that can last up to 2 weeks as opposed to spending RM15-18 for a whole chicken that will be sufficient for only 2-3 meals.

However, as helpful as they may be, these shortcuts in spending have their downfalls. The majority of processed food products like canned food and instant noodles have a high in sodium, salt content and low nutrient, protein, and fibres. Even drinks made at home with high quantities of sugar are dangerous to one's health. Based on the said research, **a household in the B40 community buys 6-8 bags of sugar per month.**

Taking all these factors into consideration, it's no wonder the nation's poor are struggling to obtain a healthy diet. Now times are just getting hard with the global pandemic affecting all sectors, not just health.

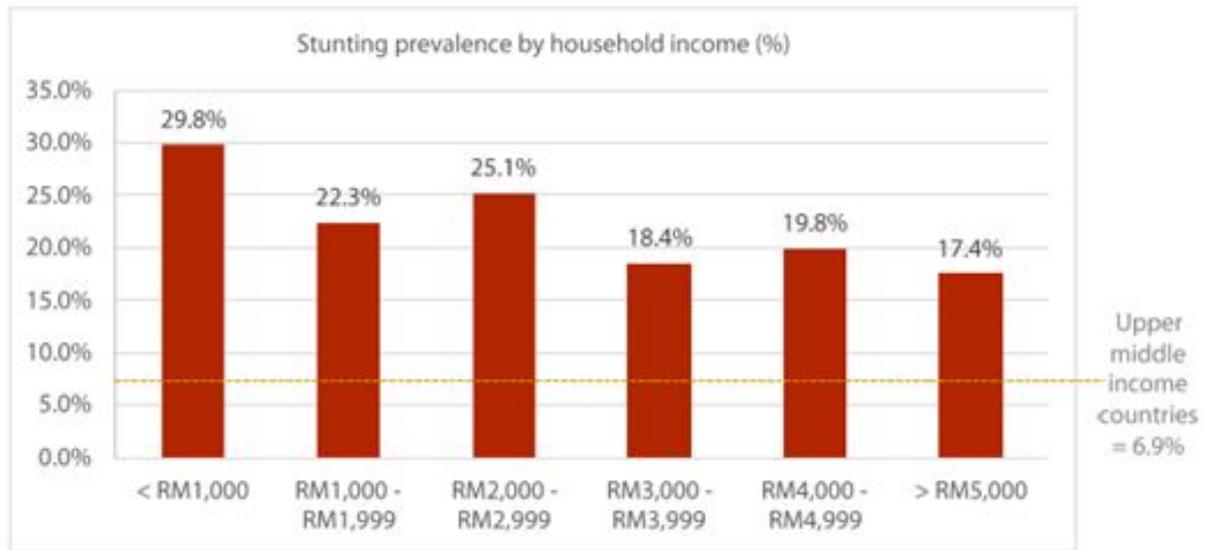
3. Children Still Suffer From Stunted Growth

The minute a child is born, right up to their second birthday is a crucial window to prepare and forecast a child's overall health and development. It is during this period that good nutrition is provided for a healthy life.

Issues with child nutrition are very delicate. The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019, identified that the national prevalence of underweight children was 14.1%. Instances of underweight children were more prominent in rural communities, and the highest prevalence was noted among those from B40 income groups. This translates to quite a large portion of Malaysia's children not getting enough food. Ultimately leading to much more severe problems like stunting [3]. The earliest signs of stunting are detected when the child doesn't meet their expected height, weight, or developmental milestones. It may not sound like a big issue, but stunted growth has both short term and long term problems. Short term effects include a higher risk of dying from repeated infections such as diarrhoea. Longer-term effects usually include adult obesity, leading to diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. What a horrible chain of effects waiting to happen - the potential of death by disease and if they survive, the long-term effects may include being overweight and having life-threatening diseases [4]

As of 2016, The National Health and Morbidity Survey showed that **children under the age of 5 years stood a 20.7% chance of stunting [5]**. This number has increased in recent years, with figures rising to 21.8% in 2019. How is this related to the B40? Unfortunately, **stunting stats are much**

higher in poorer households throughout Malaysia. Households earning less than RM1000 per month have almost double the risk of having a child with stunted growth compared to a household that earns more than RM5000 [6].



Source: Stunting prevalence by household income in Malaysia (NHMS 2016) - referenced from Kok (2019)

Although there is not one main cause for stunting in children, it can generally be routed back to malnutrition. Many of the B40 communities are not able to maintain a free flow of funds for the “right” kinds of food for the crucial first two years of a child’s life. Many of these households in question live meal by meal, making ends meet where they can. Usually, a nutritious diet is sacrificed in order to fulfil this. The question then remains, **“Can the nation’s poor afford a healthy diet and sustain it?”**

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