



# Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பிளாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

Websites:  
[www.consumer.org.my](http://www.consumer.org.my)

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia  
Tel: 604-8299511 Fax: 604-8298109  
email: [consumerofpenang@gmail.com](mailto:consumerofpenang@gmail.com)

## Press Statement

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### **The Government needs to incorporate suicide prevention in MCO plans**

In 2020, 266 took their own lives between 19 March and 30 October while there were 1,080 suicide attempts according to the Health Ministry. The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) is concerned because these figures are just the tip of the iceberg and on the rise. The government needs to incorporate suicide prevention in its Movement Control Order (MCO) plans.

Government agencies were flooded with a total of 145,175 distress calls between 25 March 2020 and 20 May 2021. A breakdown shows that 85.5 percent of the calls were related to mental health issues requiring emotional support and counselling pertaining to acute stress, anxiety, depression, abuse, and suicidal behaviour. Twenty-five per cent of these cases were attributed to debts; 24 per cent to family problems; and 23 per cent to marriage problems that affected their mental health.

Never has Malaysians witnessed the despair of so many jobless, hungry and homeless people, having to depend on soup kitchens for their meals. According to the Department of Statistics, as of February 2021, there were 777,500 Malaysians unemployed. Such a situation causes despair and hopelessness besides the feeling of loneliness during the pandemic that has driven people into suicidal tendencies.

Such a worrying trend is the consequence of the various forms of Movement Control Order (MCO) since the start of the pandemic last year. Besides the effects of isolation, the majority of Malaysians are left to survive on their own since businesses and jobs are badly affected by the MCO. There is little financial aid reaching those in need during the current MCO. Prihatin Rakyat 1.0 was announced in March 2020 and Prihatin Rakyat 2.0 in January 2021. The RM40b Pemerkasa Plus financial aid package for MCO 3.0 is insufficient considering that some of whom have already depleted their life savings and are jobless.

We propose a multi-prong approach to the problem:

- The government should coordinate in compiling a comprehensive list of counselling hotlines of government agencies and NGOs such as Befrienders. The list can be sent as viral messages in different languages through social media. It is because, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC)'s 2020 report, the frequency Malaysians share online contents is astounding: 19.2 percent on a daily basis; 49.1 percent on a weekly basis; and 18.9 percent on a monthly basis.
- The government should try to involve psychologists to assist or advise during this pandemic. Malaysia is grossly lacking psychologists as the Malaysia's Mental Health Advisory Council revealed that there is only one clinical psychologist to every 980,000 of the population.
- Government ministries and their agencies should proactively work together with non-government organisations (NGOs) in preventing suicides. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM); Ministry of Education (MOE); Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE); and Ministry of Youth and Sports should use their machineries and contacts to facilitate counselling or help people under their respective portfolios. For example, MOE and MOHE can engage the

participation of teachers to counsel students who are distressed or put them through to appropriate counsellors because students are more likely to trust their teachers than a stranger.

- Economists are needed to input creative ideas on how to stimulate the local economy. One proposal is for the government to create online platforms for job seekers and the marketing of food/products since people are home-bound during MCO. Such marketing platforms may help to promote local businesses. Currently a sizable amount of online transactions involve overseas purchases and this means draining our Ringgit from the country while local businesses are competing for whatever market share remains.
- People should take the initiative to visit Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM)'s website such as <https://www.bnm.gov.my/covid19> for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to see how they can seek assistance. For individuals, they can seek advice about restructuring their debt from the Credit Counselling and Debt Management Agency, commonly known as Agensi Kaunseling dan Pengurusan Kredit (AKPK), at <https://www.akpk.org.my/about-us>.
- Government agencies should also work with various NGOs that either provide dry rations or operate soup kitchens for the homeless and the poor. Some of the food can be obtained from the existing food banks and NGOs can assist in food distribution to needy families. Many of these NGOs have invaluable grassroots contacts that they have been working with, some for decades, or through their own contacts. The government does not need to reinvent the wheel.

The government should also re-look at the entire National Recovery Plan (NRP) because Malaysia has been holding onto the belief that we can develop herd immunity if 80 percent of the population is vaccinated. The 80 per cent is just an estimation by scientists. Although it would be good to achieve that for individual protection, it appears now that 'herd immunity' may not even be possible based on three factors: emergence of new variants, waning immunity and whether vaccines can actually prevent transmission.

The World Health Organization stated that "the percentage of people who need to be immune in order to achieve herd immunity varies with each disease". To achieve herd immunity against measles requires about 95 per cent of a population to be vaccinated; polio, about 80 per cent; and Covid-19, unknown. 'Herd immunity' was cautioned by Nature in its 18 March 2021 issue that it might elude scientists' expectation.

The government should be pragmatic in its approach. Speed up the vaccination process as of 28 June 2021, only 15.96 per cent of the population received the first dose and 6.22%, the second dose. At this rate, it is impeding an early achievement of protecting the people through vaccination (even if it is not for herd immunity), without which the people will remain unprotected.

The government having known that at least 25 per cent of the suicide attempts are debt-related, it should not allow community credit companies or money lenders registered under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT) to operate during phase one of the movement control order (MCO). Such a decision is not a solution as it will drive people deeper into debt.

We call upon the government to effectively help to bring suicide rate down since it is known that it is the resulted of an economic plight during the current pandemic.

**MOHIDEEN ABDUL KADER**

**President**

**Consumers Association of Penang (CAP)**