

IPS Social Lab Launches Landmark Study of 5,000 Households

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In photo: Staff of IPS Social Lab

Who makes the major household decisions? How often do you keep in touch with your family members? How often do you have meals together?

These are just some of the questions that interviewers will ask households across the island, as part of Singapore's first long-term national survey on families. From November 2014, more than 40 interviewers will be going from door to door to get answers to these questions.

The research project by the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Social Lab survey research unit will track 5,000 Singaporean households over the years, in a bid to understand how social behaviours and cultural norms evolve with the changing times.

The Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics is helmed by Dr Tan Ern Ser, Associate Professor at the Sociology Department of National University of Singapore (NUS) and Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Senior Research Fellow at IPS.

Family Networks and Communities

The focus of the study is on family resilience and social mobility. Survey respondents will be asked how they cope with life and its daily demands, including childcare arrangements and eldercare responsibilities. They will also be asked about their education and housing aspirations, and their quality of engagement with family members and neighbours.

Dr Tan, who heads the Social Lab team at IPS, says the research results will give important feedback on the challenges related to family bonding and functioning, and provide insight into the well-being of families in the context of today's society.

"With the family as the focal point, the study can help identify families at risk, vulnerable groups and possible points of intervention. Policymakers will be able to assess the needs of families and the effectiveness of social policies over time," says Dr Tan.

The findings will also give indicators on how families pull through difficult social and economic situations. This helps researchers understand how Singaporeans persevere and thrive in the face of unexpected problems and challenges, such as divorce, death and financial crises.

Establishing a Connection

Trained interviewers will be deployed to collect the data, which will take place over six to nine months. IPS Social Lab has commissioned Ascentiq Pte Ltd, an independent market research company, to conduct the fieldwork.

Interviewers play a pivotal role, says Dr Leong, who is Principal Investigator of the study. "Besides just knocking on doors and getting people to take part in the survey, interviewers have to make the first approach and establish a connection with the household," says Dr Leong.

Interviewers were selected through a rigorous screening process, which involved familiarity with the strict ethical guidelines set by the NUS Institutional Review Board.

In the run-up to the project launch, the mainly bilingual team of interviewers had to undergo intensive training to hone their interview skills and also to bone up on their knowledge of data collection, so as to explain the value and integrity of the data collection process to potential survey respondents.

There was also a conscious effort to recruit interviewers for the longer term. IPS Social Lab and Ascentiq paid special attention to selecting interviewers who were interested in the themes of family well-being and social bonding that are central to the project. Interviewers' experience in conducting prior surveys in the community was also considered.

Among the team of interviewers are two husband-and-wife couples. The interviewers come from varied backgrounds, and have experience in teaching and voluntary welfare organisation work, among others.

Building a Bigger Picture

Given the longitudinal nature of the Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics, interviewers will visit the same households each year. In the first year, only the heads of households will be surveyed. In subsequent years, other household members may be interviewed in addition to the head of the household from the previous year. By following the same respondents over the years, researchers seek to build a coherent picture of how families evolve.

“The survey respondents in our study are part of a community, an eco-system, which will reveal important insights into the Singaporean family,” says Dr Leong. “It’s not just a ‘census’ of the family, but a research study dedicated to tracking the forces of change that affect the resilience of the family.”

There will be a concerted effort to retain members of the panel from year to year, through regular contact, events and the release of relevant findings. The importance of connecting and building rapport between the interviewer and the survey respondent is critical to the long-term success of the project.

One of the events planned around the Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics is a series of focus group discussions. The public sessions will target different segments of society to solicit public feedback and gather ideas for further waves of the survey.

Updates on the Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics can be found [here](#).

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