

## Trust between racial groups in Singapore grows, but stereotyping rises: IPS-OnePeople.sg survey

Survey results found that 43.5 per cent of respondents in 2024 said they form assumptions about someone's behaviour based on their race, up from 35.2 per cent in 2018.

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**SINGAPORE:** Singapore residents' trust in other racial and religious groups saw a significant increase last year, although racial stereotyping rose, according to a survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies and non-profit organisation OnePeople.sg.

OnePeople.sg was first launched by then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2007 as an organisation that champions racial harmony initiatives in Singapore.

The latest findings from the IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony study released on Monday (Feb 3) showed that more than three-quarters or 77.6 per cent of respondents trusted over half of Chinese in Singapore to help them during a national crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

About two-thirds of respondents trusted more than half of Malays, Indians, and Eurasians to do the same.

This was an improvement from the previous studies in 2013 and 2018, said the survey report.

Meanwhile, the proportion of respondents expressing distrust in other racial groups decreased from 42.7 per cent in 2013 to 27.2 per cent in 2024, with similar trends observed for religious groups.

But while the downward trend was "encouraging", there remains room for improvement as over a quarter of Singapore residents still indicate distrust in more than half of other racial groups, said the report.

The third edition of the IPS-OnePeople.sg survey, conducted between April 2024 and August 2024, polled a nationally representative sample of 4,000 Singapore residents aged 18 and above.

The survey compares trends across the waves - distinct periods of time in which survey answers were collected from respondents - wherever possible, across 10 indicators of racial and religious harmony such as inter-racial trust and social cohesion.

"These indicators allow us to compare shifts in attitudes and perceptions over time, providing a clearer picture of Singapore's progress in maintaining harmony and inclusivity," said the report.

About seven in 10 survey respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that they do not let a person's race influence their social interactions - a slight increase compared to previous studies.

Despite this, there was also a rise in racial stereotyping, with 43.5 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that they form assumptions about someone's behaviour based on their race.

This was up from 35.2 per cent in 2018. Racial minorities, along with older, less educated, and less affluent respondents, were more likely to engage in stereotyping, the study noted.

One possible reason for this could be internal biases that people have, where one makes assumptions about others such as based on their age or the way they dress, said chairman of OnePeople.sg Janil Puthucheary during a press conference about the survey findings on Monday.

Hence, one way to interpret the data would be that there was an increase in awareness with people becoming "a bit more self-honest" about the assumptions they form when they meet someone, said Dr Puthucheary, who is also senior minister of state for digital development and information, and health.

"This is not automatically that the assumption is negative," he said, adding that part of the work done by OnePeople.sg is to educate and engage people on the fact that they do have internal biases.

"It's important to recognise that in ourselves so that we can overcome them and behave in a culturally and socially appropriate way ... If you want to say 'regardless of race, language and religion', we have to understand what our internal biases are so that we can overcome them and then behave properly."

## **WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION**

In terms of job evaluations, a majority (63.9 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that race or religion should not be considered, marking a slight increase from 2018 (62 per cent).

Respondents also reported that experiences of discrimination at the workplace have decreased, with 7 per cent indicating that they faced discrimination when applying for jobs or during a job promotion process in 2024, compared to 9.3 per cent in 2018.

While on a decline, the study found that workplace discrimination does still affect racial minorities disproportionately.

Among those who reported discrimination at work, 57.7 per cent felt that the language used by others excluded them from conversations.

Perceived exclusionary behaviour during job promotions was also another common form of discrimination reported, with 47.7 per cent of respondents perceiving that people from other races were being promoted because of their race, and not their qualifications.

In particular, 18.4 per cent of Malay respondents and 16.7 per cent of Indians in 2024 reported feeling racially discriminated against in a job or a job promotion.

This was however a drop from more than a quarter for both Malays and Indians in 2018.

Meanwhile, 3.7 per cent of Chinese respondents in 2024 felt the same way, a dip from the 4.1 per cent in 2018.

Overall, Chinese respondents were most likely to indicate that they had not felt racially discriminated against regarding a job or a job promotion.

When it comes to selecting employees however, respondents overwhelmingly prioritised ability. Race and religion were seen as not or rarely important by more than six in 10 (62.3 per cent) and seven in 10 (72.3 per cent) respondents respectively.

The majority of respondents also felt there were no significant differences in the effort required by various racial groups to achieve a basic, decent life in Singapore, or to reach top positions in companies.

However, about 18 per cent of Malays and Indians felt that they had to work harder or much more than others to have a basic, decent life.

Meanwhile, 25.7 per cent of Malay and 21.7 per cent of Indian respondents felt this was also the case to reach top positions.

The survey noted however that these proportions had decreased marginally, ranging from a 2.7 per cent to 6.2 per cent decline, since 2018.

Differences were also observed across age, race, and education levels.

Older respondents were more likely to believe that people of all races work equally hard to achieve these goals, while younger respondents aged 18 to 35 felt that, in general, Singaporean Chinese and Eurasians need to put in less effort, and Singaporean Malays and Indians need to work harder.

The reason for the latter could be due to individuals being prone to unconscious biases, said the head of IPS social lab and principal research fellow Mathew Mathews.

"It's more of a recognition about the fact that there are barriers, more discussion today which is accessed by younger people about discrimination, about what goes on."

People are becoming "more and more aware" about those issues compared to those who are older, Dr Mathews added.

## **HIGH LEVEL OF RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY**

The latest report found that two-thirds (65.4 per cent) of respondents in 2024 rated Singapore's racial and religious harmony as high or very high - up from 57.1 per cent in 2018.

At the same time, racial minorities were more likely to indicate that racial and religious harmony was at moderate levels. Older respondents were also more likely to indicate high or very high levels compared to those who were younger.

Similar to previous studies, racial and religious acceptance remained the highest for public relationships such as colleague or neighbour, compared to personal relationships like sibling-in-law or spouse.

When asked, 78.2 per cent of respondents indicated that they would accept a local-born Chinese as their sibling-in-law. In comparison, 62.1 per cent of those surveyed said they would accept a local-born Malay, and 62.4 per cent a local-born Indian.

In contrast, more respondents said they would accept a local-born Chinese (94.4 per cent), a local-born Malay (91.3 per cent), and a local-born Indian (90.3 per cent) as a colleague.

Nevertheless, the racial and religious acceptance for all groups, including new citizens, in public and private relationships had increased over the three studies, IPS noted.

At the same time, just over half of those (53.2 per cent) said they have at least one close friend of another race.

While this is a significant increase from a decade ago (45.6 per cent), there was a marginal decrease compared to 2018 (55.5 per cent).

The decline could be attributed to an overall decline in close friends, the report noted.

Regardless of race, the average number of close friends in 2024 was 6.49, a decrease from 10.67 in 2018 and 8.33 in 2013, as reported by respondents.

Chinese respondents were significantly less likely to report having at least one close friend of another race (45.3 per cent), compared to their minority-race peers - 72.5 per cent of Malays, 84.5 per cent of Indians, and 85.1 per cent of "Others" respondents.

"This is most likely due to demographics of the population, with minorities much more likely to encounter and subsequently build friendships with majority race persons," the report said.

Younger respondents and HDB-dwellers were more likely to report cross-racial friendships compared to their older and private property-dwelling counterparts.

The shift in the number of cross-racial friendships was "unexpected", said Dr Puthucheary. He added that such friendships are important to Singapore's approach in maintaining social cohesion, integration, peace and harmony across society.

He pointed out that while more people are open to cross-racial friendships, shrinking social circles means less opportunities to form and strengthen such friendships.

"This is not a Singaporean issue, not just a Singapore issue. Many countries face similar trends. We have to think very carefully about how to address this challenge."

## **TENSIONS**

Majority of respondents in 2024 felt that Singapore is free from racial and religious tensions.

More than eight in 10 agreed that they do not experience such tensions in their daily lives. Older respondents and those with lower educational qualifications were more likely to hold these positive views, the report found.

More than three-quarters of respondents aged above 65 also said they never felt upset because someone insulted their race or racial customs. This was higher than the 42.3 per cent reported for those aged 18 to 35 years old.

Chinese respondents were also more likely to say they have never felt upset in the past year by racial insults, than minority-race respondents.

However, certain religious practices, such as the burning of religious items and loud events at void decks, "continue to irritate" 13.7 per cent and 10.1 per cent of respondents respectively in 2024, the report said.

This is compared to the 16 per cent for burning of religious items and 9.3 per cent for loud events reported in 2018.

While some cultural practices remain as matters of tension, 71.1 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that racial diversity is beneficial for Singapore.

This was a 4.4 per cent increase from 2018, with Malay and Indian respondents being more likely to value diversity than their Chinese counterparts.

Younger respondents were also more likely to express a strong belief in learning from other racial and religious groups.

This could signify that the multicultural narrative is "increasingly accessible" to younger cohorts of Singaporean residents who have gone through national education programmes, said IPS.

Interest in understanding other cultures' customs and practices had also grown slightly.

About four in 10 respondents (41.8 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that they had an interest in understanding other racial groups' customs and practices, up from 38.3 per cent in 2018.

Likewise, 37.9 per cent of respondents were interested in learning about other religious beliefs and practices, compared to 33.9 per cent in 2018.

Racial and religious minorities, as well as younger respondents, were more likely to be curious about different customs.

The survey results overall act as a "reality check" on the state of social cohesion, racial and religious harmony across Singapore, said Dr Puthucheary.

He added that the workplace was "increasingly important" for OnePeople.sg's work on social cohesion.

"In other words, yes, things are improving in the workplace, but as things are improving more in all the other spaces, we have to pay more attention to what happens in the workplace.

"So the workplace becomes a relatively more significant area of focus."

In a response to the survey results, OnePeople.sg said that it was working to address divides that extend across generational, educational and socio-economic lines.

The organisation had commenced a series of community dialogues in collaboration with educational institutions, ethnic and religious organisations to foster open and respectful exchanges.

This will allow participants of diverse backgrounds to better understand one another's perspectives and build meaningful connections, said OnePeople.sg.

It had also launched the Workplace Diversity Programme in partnership with IPS which had seen "positive results".

Through tailored workshops, OnePeople.sg said it aims to help organisations create environments where employees of all backgrounds feel valued and respected.