

05 July 2023

IPS Study on Public Attitudes towards National Service (NS)

Researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Dr Chew Han Ei, Mr Shane Pereira, Ms Pamela Lee, Ms Isabelle Tan and Ms Elizabeth Lim, recently conducted a study on public attitudes towards National Service (NS). The aim of the study was to better understand public sentiments on *NS as an Institution* and *NS as Lived Experiences*, so as to improve the NS experience. This was done through collating the results from a nationally representative survey on 1,002 Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents (PRs), focus group discussions, and personal interviews, between July and November 2022¹.

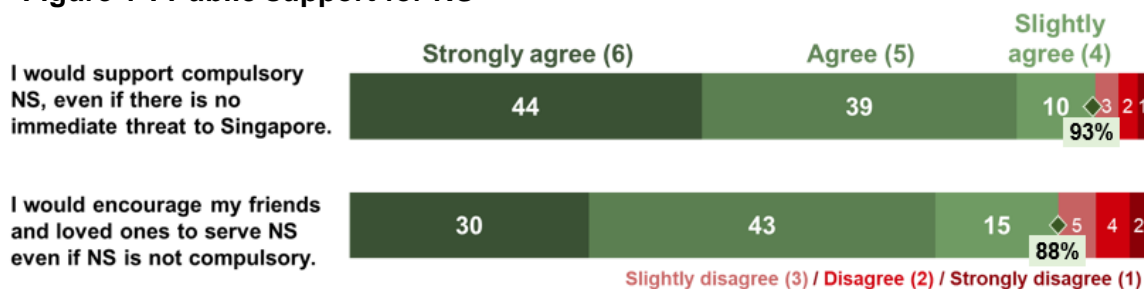
In conducting the study, researchers sought to explore these questions: What attitudes do the public hold towards NS that may have arisen from recent trends in the demography, education, and work landscape of Singapore, the geopolitical landscape, as well as individual/personal aspirations? What are some of the emerging challenges that the NS system would need to address to ensure that it remains relevant and effective? How can the NS system improve our national servicemen’s² NS experience?

Findings

The study demonstrated strong support for compulsory NS.

The nationally representative study found that majority of the respondents (93%) would support compulsory NS, even if there were no immediate threats to Singapore. They would also encourage their friends and loved ones to serve NS if it were optional (88%).

Figure 1³: Public support for NS



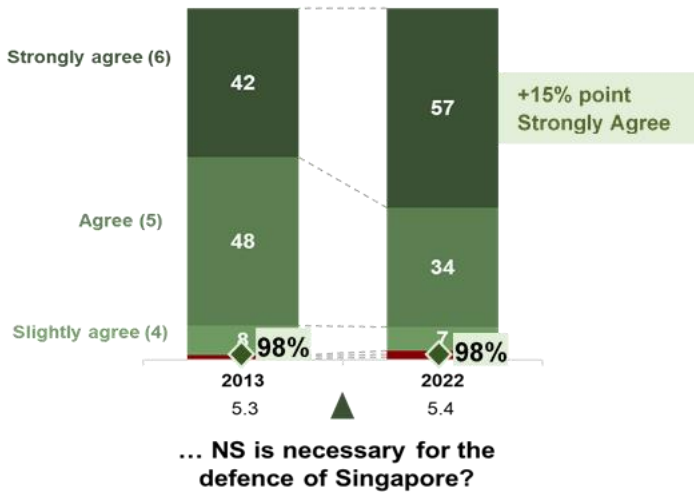
¹ This study gleans insights on public sentiments towards NS in today’s context. While there are similarities with a previous study conducted by IPS in 2013, this study’s focus areas and methodology are tailored to present research interests. Selective comparisons are made in this report for similar questions across both studies.

² National servicemen include both NSF’s (i.e., full-time national servicemen serving their 2-year NS) and NSmen (i.e., Operationally Ready National Servicemen who have completed their 2-year NS and are serving their 10-year ORNS training cycle).

³ Percentages are reported in the charts, which may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Furthermore, almost all respondents agreed that NS is necessary for Singapore's defence. The proportion that strongly agreed increased from 42% in 2013 to 57% in 2022.

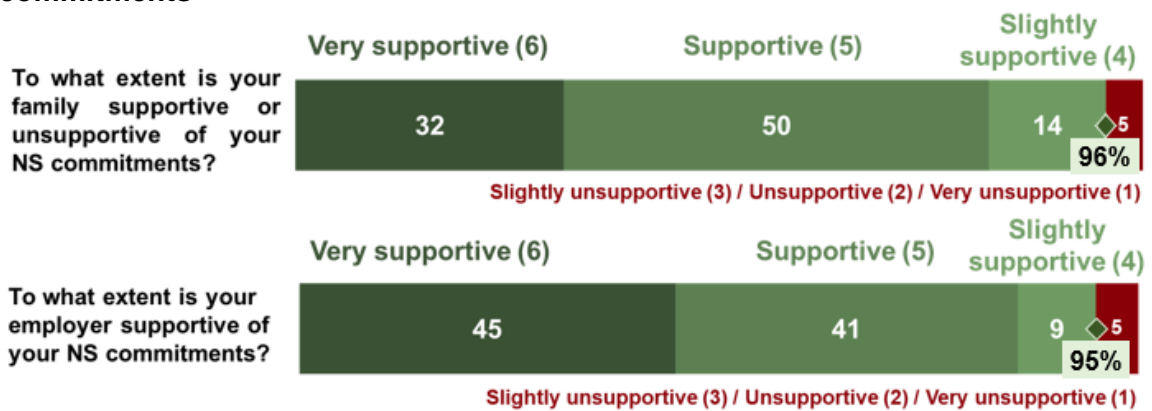
Figure 2: Necessity of NS for Singapore's defence



The study also demonstrated general support from family and employers for national servicemen's NS commitments.

Findings from the surveys and focus group discussions also indicated strong support from family and employers. More than nine in 10 (96%) national servicemen felt that their families were supportive of their NS commitments. Similarly, more than nine in 10 (95%) employed national servicemen felt that their employers were supportive of their NS commitments.

Figure 3: Family and employer's support for national servicemen's NS commitments



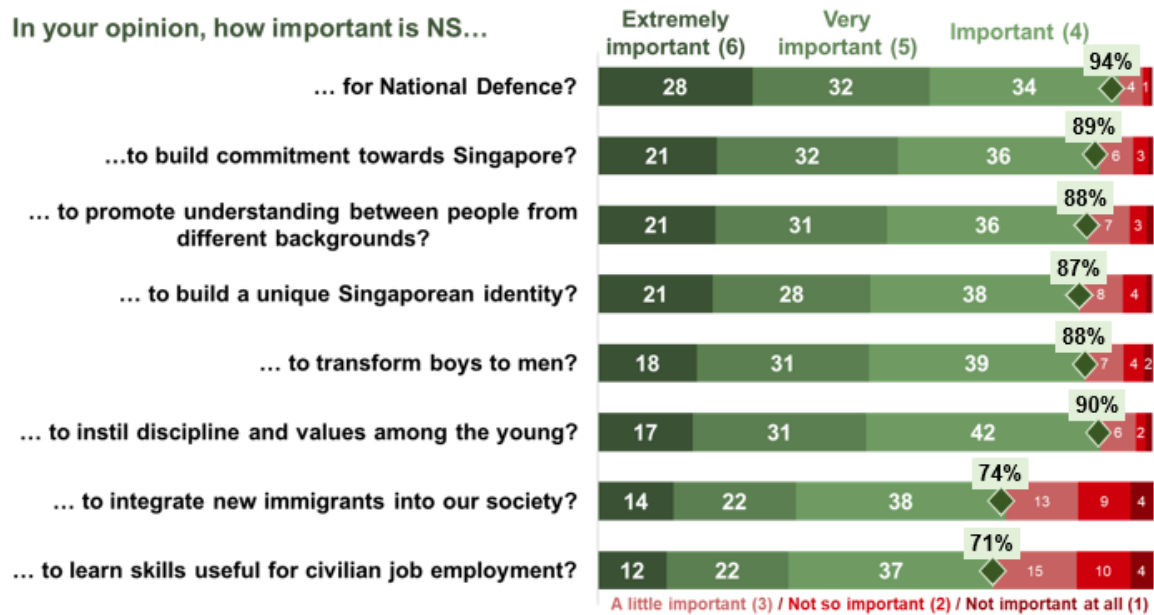
To add, nearly nine in 10 (89%) respondents indicated that they felt proud that their family member(s) are serving or have served NS. In focus group discussions with parents and family members of national servicemen, respondents voiced support and noted that it helped enhance national servicemen's maturity and confidence. In the focus group discussions, participants who were HR workers or worked on HR-related matters pertaining to NS callup matters expressed strong support of employees' reservist commitments, though some expressed concerns about the resource costs to their

respective companies.

The study suggested that the importance of NS for defence is highly important, but it is viewed as less important for learning useful skills for employment.

In thinking about the importance of NS across different functions, NS was viewed as being highly important for national defence, for building commitment towards Singapore, and for promoting understanding between people from different backgrounds. Beyond these societal functions, NS was also perceived as being highly important for aspects related to personal character development, such as instilling discipline and values in the young.

Figure 4: Importance of NS across various functions

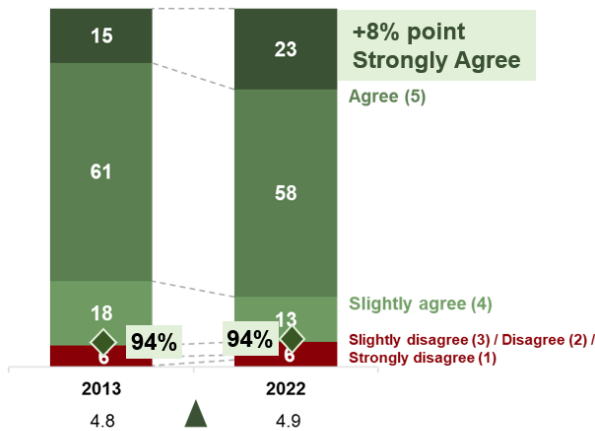


NS was, however, viewed as less important for learning skills useful for civilian employment, with said importance declining from 82% in 2013 to 71% in 2022. In many focus group discussions, sentiments emerged that NS should include more non-military training. This could be a result of the growing pressures for all to upskill and commit to lifelong learning, coupled with perceptions that NS involved some trade-offs to national servicemen's education and career trajectories.

The study demonstrated that overall confidence in training safety is high.

Current sentiments reflect the strong emphasis on training safety in recent years, with 94% of national servicemen expressing confidence that NS training is conducted safely. The proportion of respondents that strongly agreed that NS training is conducted safely has increased from 15% in 2013 to 23% in 2022. Focus groups also alluded to a positive and increased focus on safety and health as a contributing factor to positive NS experiences.

Figure 5: Perceptions of training safety

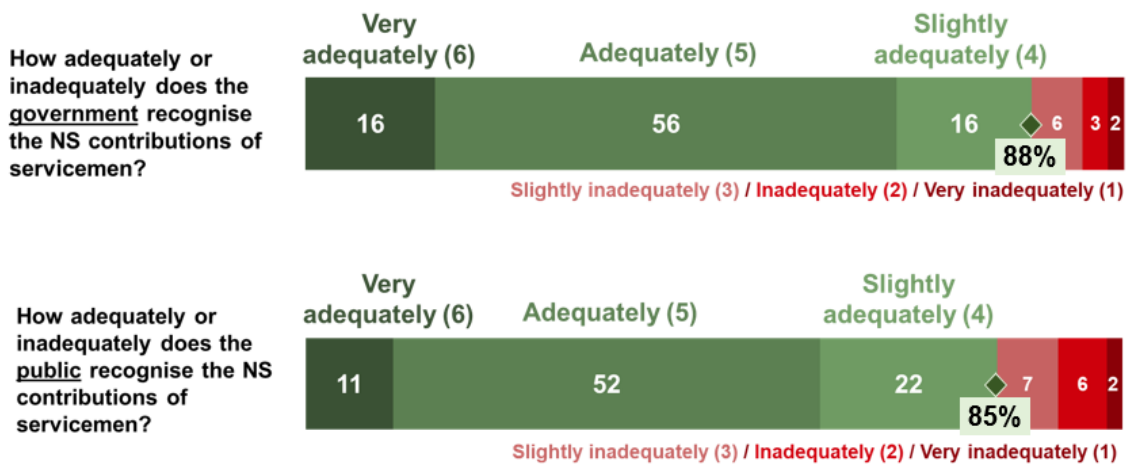


To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
NS training is conducted safely.

The study demonstrated that overall recognition for NS contributions by the government and public is adequate.

In terms of recognition, over 80% of respondents felt that the government and public adequately recognised the NS contributions of national servicemen. About four in five national servicemen felt that their needs during NS are considered (84%) and that their contributions are valued (80%), at least to some extent.

Figure 6: Perceptions of recognition for NS contributions



In terms of motivators, most national servicemen agreed that they would be motivated by more employer support and good unit leadership. More recognition in the form of monetary

benefits to support life stage needs, such as childcare and housing, would also be appreciated. More attention could be paid to those in lower-income households as well as to national servicemen whose ability to contribute to their household income may be diminished when fulfilling their NS obligations.

Conclusion

The study provides a snapshot of the general public's perceptions of NS, and insights on possible emerging areas of concern.

While NS is viewed as important for building a national identity and for fostering social cohesion amongst other maturation functions, NS may increasingly be seen as a disruptor of work given the pace of change in the labour market. As it is, perceptions of NS as important and valuable for imparting employable skills and for improving job prospects have weakened since 2013. On possible ways to address this, Dr Chew Han Ei, IPS Senior Research Fellow and Principal Investigator said, "MINDEF should think about how to help servicemen, especially those in their final months of service, transit to their new phase in life whether as a student or worker. Create opportunities to learn useful skills such as writing a CV, financial management or just picking up short courses to ready them for the transition."

The overall findings affirm that there is a strong conviction that NS contributes to national defence and economic development. Public support for NS, including family and employer support for NS, also remains high. IPS Research Associate Mr Shane Pereira, one of the researchers of the study, added: "Belief in the necessity of NS for Singapore's defence remains strong. This strong societal affirmation on the value of NS provides an important basis and foundation upon which MINDEF can design its policies to enhance the NS experience."

Further Information

For queries on the IPS Study on Public Attitudes towards National Service (NS), please contact the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr Chew Han Ei at han.chew@nus.edu.sg, tel: +65 66013222.

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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was established in 1988 as an independent think-tank to study and generate public policy ideas in Singapore. IPS became an autonomous research centre of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore in 2008. Today, IPS continues to analyse public policy, build bridges between thought leaders, and communicate its findings to a wide audience. The Institute examines issues of critical national interest across a variety of fields, and studies the attitudes and aspirations of Singaporeans through surveys of public perception. It adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in its analyses and takes the long-term view in its strategic deliberation and research. For more information about IPS, visit <https://www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips>

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