

Perception of racial & religious harmony in S'pore improved in 2024, but many still face discrimination: Study *A sizeable portion said they faced workplace discrimination.*

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A recent study in Singapore showed that more had positive perceptions regarding racial and religious harmony in the country, although many still faced discrimination, especially in the workplace.

The results of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)-OnePeople.sg study on "Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony" was published on Feb. 3.

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

This is the third iteration of the study, after it was conducted in 2013 and 2018.

How it was done

4,000 randomly selected Singapore citizens and permanent residents aged 18 and above participated in face-to-face surveys conducted between April and August 2024.

The survey covered topics such as racial and religious harmony, inter-racial trust, social acceptance, and experiences of discrimination in public and professional spaces.

A booster sample of respondents from minority races was included to ensure their perspectives were well-captured, before the results were weighted to mirror Singapore's racial demographics.

Most feel there's high racial and religious harmony

The study found that about two-thirds (65.4 per cent) of respondents in 2024 indicated that Singapore had high or very high levels of racial and religious harmony.

This is an increase from 57.1 per cent of respondents in the 2018 wave who felt this way.

This meant that nine in 10 respondents in 2024 indicated that they perceived at least a moderate level of racial and religious harmony in Singapore.

For respondents expressing distrust in other racial groups, the proportion decreased from 42.7 per cent in 2013 to 27.2 per cent in 2024.

However, the study noted that Chinese respondents were more likely to indicate high or very high levels of racial and religious harmony, compared to their minority race counterparts.

Younger respondents had different views

There was also a disparity based on the age of respondents, with younger ones less likely to indicate high or very high levels of racial and religious harmony.

While 71 per cent of respondents over 65 years old responded as such, just over half (53.8 per cent) of respondents in the 18 to 35 years old age cohort indicated likewise.

Older respondents were more likely to believe that people of all races work equally hard to achieve certain goals like achieving "a basic, decent life in Singapore", or to "reach top positions in companies".

But younger respondents felt that, in general, Singaporean Chinese and Eurasians need to put in less effort, and Singaporean Malays and Indians need to work harder.

Younger respondents were more likely to indicate higher levels of trust for minority races to help them in the event of a national crisis.

Commenting on the study, Mathew Mathews, a Principal Research Fellow at IPS, explained to the media that younger respondents tend to be the standard bearers for multiculturalism, as they have benefited from multicultural and national education programs in schools.

"They have more diverse friendships and a much more positive attitude towards aspects of diversity," said Mathews.

Nevertheless, Mathews added that progress has been made among older respondents, with more respondents in 2024 indicating that they like to meet people from different races, and that they can learn from other racial groups.

Less people faced discrimination, but still an issue

Respondents were also asked if they had experienced racial discrimination in everyday life, such as on public transport, during leisure time, at work, when applying for jobs, and when being considered for job promotions.

Nearly seven in 10 respondents said that they had never experienced racial discrimination in various aspects of their lives.

This is an increase from under six in 10 for most of these aspects in 2013 and 2018.

More respondents (79.1 per cent) also said they did not feel racially discriminated against when it came to a job or a job promotion in 2024, up from 68.3 per cent in 2018.

Nevertheless, the IPS report noted that a sizeable portion still indicated that they faced workplace discrimination.

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

Respondents who faced racial discrimination at work said the most common form they experienced was the use of languages that excluded them from conversations, faced by 57.7 per cent of affected employees.

34.2 per cent of them said that they were given fewer opportunities at work due to their race, with 20.7 per cent saying they were left out of social activities at work.

23 per cent said their colleagues made jokes about their race.

Leonard Lim, a management committee member of OnePeople.sg, said that their organisation has found that many of these lived experiences are due to a lack of understanding as workers are "unaware" their comments or actions can cause offence.

Lim said that the organisation is partnering with IPS to educate employers and HR practitioners to set up workplace diversity programs, during which conversations about casual racism and racial biases can be held.

Heartening signs for Singapore's social cohesion

Janil Puthuchery, chairman of OnePeople.sg, also highlighted the importance of the workplace as "an increasingly critical area for fostering social cohesion".

On the general upward trend of Singaporeans' perceptions of racial and religious harmony, Janil said it was "heartening" to see these positive signals at various levels.

On younger respondents having different views on racial and religious harmony in Singapore, Janil said that this is a good sign that they have higher aspirations for social cohesion in future.

He said the goal of OnePeople.sg, as it partners with other organisations like IPS, was "not just to maintain the status quo". Instead, it was "to protect the precious harmony that we have and to continually seek ways to improve."

"Each generation should experience a better, more cohesive Singapore than the one before."