

Chinese Singaporeans more likely to worry about immigration: survey

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Singaporeans who are better-educated or younger are more sensitive to potential fallout from any mismanagement of racial and religious issues compared to their older and less-educated fellow citizens, a study has found.

The study also found that Chinese respondents felt more likely than other groups in Singapore to experience an erosion in their national identity and loss of trust in the government if immigration issues were not managed properly.

Released on Tuesday by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the working paper, called Fault lines in Singapore: Public Opinion on their Realities, Management and Consequences, examines five fault lines in Singapore and how residents here perceive the consequences if these fault lines are mismanaged.

The five fault lines are: race, religion, immigration, socio-economic status, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) matters.

Dr Mathew Mathews, an IPS senior research fellow who led the study, said that these fault lines were identified based on their mentions in public discussions such as in the media and in forums.

The study surveyed 4,015 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents from August last year to January this year.

Along with religion, the study found that LGBT issues were the most likely to result in a polarisation in society, with a clear divide between older and younger Singapore residents on the implications of mismanaging LGBT issues.

How people view the fault lines

Race and religion: These two fault lines were identified by close to half of the participants as having the potential to result in suspicion, mistrust and anger among racial and religious groups if not managed well – significantly higher than for the other three fault lines.

Younger respondents also perceived the consequences of mismanaging issues of race and religion to be “more ominous” compared to older respondents.

Almost three-fifths of those aged between 18 and 25 said that anger among and against communities would occur if race issues were mismanaged. Only two-fifths of older respondents aged above 65 felt the same way.

Those holding higher qualifications appeared to be more sensitised to the potential fallout of mismanaging race and religion.

More than three-fifths of degree holders said that mismanagement would result in anger against particular communities, while only two-fifths of respondents with Institute of Technical Education or lower qualifications said it would do so.

More years in school could have led those with better qualifications to internalise narratives on the importance of sustaining a multiracial harmonious society, the authors said.

Immigration and social-economic status

The survey respondents, particularly Chinese respondents, felt that mismanaging immigration could impact their national identity and trust in the government the most.

About 44 per cent of Chinese respondents said that if mismanaged, immigration could lead to a decrease in national identity. This was about 12 percentage points more than the proportion of minority respondents who felt the same way.

The authors said that this could be due to fears that immigration could change their distinctly Singaporean-Chinese identity.

More affluent respondents also expected more severe consequences to social cohesion if the question of immigration was not managed properly.

About 50 per cent of those living in private property said that their trust in government and national identity would erode, compared to less than 40 per cent of respondents living in three-room or smaller government-built flats.

LGBT issues

Views on the consequences of mismanaging LGBT issues were split across age and educational levels.

About 50 per cent of those aged 18 to 25 felt that mismanaging LGBT issues could result in anger against particular communities as well as a polarisation in society. However, less than 40 per cent of older respondents aged above 65 felt the same.

More than half of those who held a bachelor's degree and above felt that mismanaging LGBT issues would lead to a polarisation of views as well as anger in society. In comparison, only a third (or less than 35 per cent) of those with secondary school qualifications and below felt the same way.

Differing approaches to deal with fault lines

The study looked at two types of approaches to manage these fault lines, which could take the form of state intervention or public discussion such as dialogue sessions, and examined how people's preferred approach varied across different backgrounds.

In general, respondents were most likely to feel that there is sufficient government involvement across the five fault lines – and fewer than half felt that more government involvement was necessary for all five fault lines.

Race and religion

When it came to race and religion, about two-thirds of the respondents said that there was enough state involvement in these issues, higher than that for the remaining three fault lines.

However, older respondents indicated that they wanted to see more state involvement in racial and religious issues.

33 per cent of those aged above 65 wanted more government involvement in mitigating issues of race compared to only 24 per cent of those aged between 18 and 25.

The authors said that the older respondents' desire for the state to keep the peace could be because they experienced race and religion-motivated incidents such as the racial riots in the 1950s and 1960s.

Most people surveyed said that there was enough discussion on race and religion in Singapore.

Just under 60 per cent of the respondents said so, compared to around 40 per cent of respondents who said that there should be more discussion on other issues such as social-economic status and immigration.

The authors said this suggested that race and religious issues had received “broad airing” and handled in “a fairly inclusive fashion” since Singapore’s independence.

However, minority respondents wanted more public dialogue on race and religion.

While 35 to 40 per cent of Indians and Malays said that there should be more public discussion on these issues, only 25 per cent of Chinese respondents shared the same sentiment.

The survey also found that nearly half of the Malay and Indian respondents would actively investigate inflammatory texts or emails on race and religion, compared to 37 per cent of Chinese respondents.

About two-thirds of younger people were also more proactive in investigating the source of such material by checking with a friend to find out more, compared to only half of the respondents aged 65 and older.

Immigration and social-economic status

The study found that higher-educated and younger respondents wanted the state to do more to mitigate immigration and class issues.

Half of those aged between 18 to 25 wanted more government involvement in class issues compared to 43 per cent of their older counterparts.

The authors said that the difference in perception across age groups could be because younger people were exposed to increased competition in the job market, making the issue of inequality more pertinent to them.

More than half of the respondents who were degree-holders wanted the state to manage class-related issues more, compared to 40 per cent of respondents with secondary school qualifications and below. This could be because higher-educated respondents may have more awareness of the consequences of mismanaging class-related issues.

For immigration issues, half of the degree-holders wanted more state intervention, while the figure was 45 per cent for those with secondary education and below.

Citing the example of a recent case where a condominium resident yelled at the estate's security officer, the authors said that the online backlash surrounding the incident, with people making reference to the resident's alleged foreign origins and calling for action against him, demonstrated expectations by people here for the government to mitigate class and immigration issues.

LGBT issues

Millennials, especially those with liberal sexual values, were more likely to be in favour of both state involvement in and public discussion on LGBT issues.

Close to half of those aged between 18 and 25 want more government involvement in the issue, compared to 40 per cent of those aged above 65

Half of the younger respondents wanted more public discourse on the issue compared to 42 per cent of those aged above 65.

This could be due to millennials generally holding more liberal views, the authors said.

The study found that Christians and Muslims also wanted greater state involvement in these issues, although this was more likely for reasons such as wanting the state to retain Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between men, and stemming the rise of pro-LGBT discourse and events such as Pink Dot.