

# Singaporeans' Attitudes to National Service

Report

October 2013

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong  
Senior Research Fellow, IPS

Yang Wai Wai  
Associate Director, IPS

Henry Ho  
Senior Research Analyst, IPS

## **Institute of Policy Studies Survey Report Singaporeans' Attitudes to National Service**

### **Background**

1. The Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, has conducted a survey to gauge public attitudes to National Service in Singapore.
2. This study provides insight into public perceptions of a national institution with a 46-year-old history. The information will allow an evaluation of the level of trust and support for National Service, which has come to symbolise a collective journey that is entrenched in the Singaporean identity.

### **Findings**

3. There is strong public support for National Service. Singaporeans see National Service as fulfilling a social mission beyond its defence mandate. Respondents were asked to rate the perceived purpose of National Service (i.e., "What does National Service mean to me?") on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (Not important at all) to 6 (Extremely important). The top three ranked indicators are testament to the ingrained perception of National Service as a rite of passage for the Singaporean male, as well as for military deterrence (See Table 1).

**Table 1: What does National Service mean to me?**

*Indicators ranked by scores (maximum score: 6)*

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Score</b>
1	To instil discipline and values among the young	4.90
2	For National Defence	4.86
3	To transform boys into men	4.83
4	For National Education	4.65
5	To build a unique Singaporean identity	4.61
6	To promote understanding between people from different backgrounds	4.55
7	To learn skills useful for civilian job employment	4.35
8	To integrate new immigrants into our society	4.02

4. The institution of National Service is largely regarded as a social equaliser, which embodies fairness, equality and identity. More than 94% of respondents agree that Servicemen from different family backgrounds are treated equally during National Service, and that National Service policies are applied consistently to everyone in similar situations.

5. Singaporeans believe that National Service is needed in order for Singapore to develop and prosper. Many express trust and faith in training safety during National Service. An overwhelming majority (94%) of respondents express confidence in the quality of medical support that Servicemen receive, in what may be interpreted as a strong endorsement of the institution.

6. Servicemen generally feel secure in the knowledge that they have their families' (95%) and employers' (89%) support during National Service and In-Camp Training. More than three-quarters of employed Servicemen say their employers adjust their workload, taking into account their National Service commitments. However, two out of five Servicemen interviewed are of the impression that their employers prefer to hire people who do not have National Service commitments.

7. Overall, respondents would like to see more matching of Servicemen's personal skills and abilities to National Service vocations. When asked to rank the items most likely to motivate Servicemen during National Service, 22% of respondents highlighted the importance of job fit, over greater recognition and flexibility in enlistment and training schedules (See Table 2). Interestingly, there is no single dominant reason, with opinions fairly spread out.

**Table 2: What is most likely to motivate Servicemen during National Service?**

*% of respondents who ranked item as most important*

Ranking	Indicator	%
1	More matching of Servicemen's personal skills and abilities to National Service vocations	22.0
2	More public recognition for Servicemen's contributions	17.1
3	More recognition for Servicemen at certain life stages, e.g., marriage, childbirth	14.3
4	More options on enlistment dates	13.2
5	More options for In-Camp Training schedule	12.6
6	More recognition for Servicemen at certain stages, e.g., completion of full-time National Service and In-Camp Training	11.9
7	More engagement with the public to improve understanding of National Service, e.g., Army Open House	8.9

8. Conversely, fewer respondents are likely to agree that National Service prepares Servicemen with useful vocational skills. When posed with a list of items that represent perceived benefits and impact of National Service, the item "National Service improves one's civilian employment prospects", was

ranked the lowest (See Table 3). Nonetheless, 88% of respondents agree with the statement.

**Table 3: What are the perceived benefits and impact of National Service?**  
*Indicators ranked by score (maximum score: 6)*

Ranking	Indicator	Score
1	National Service will continue to be important for Singapore in the future	5.16
2	National Service is essential/necessary for Singapore's survival	5.12
3	National Service teaches many important life values	5.03
4	National Service is a rite of passage for the Singaporean man	5.01
5	National Service increases the sense of rootedness in Singapore	5.00
6	National Service develops leadership skills	5.00
7	National Service makes a person more resilient (able to recover from failures or cope with difficulties)	5.00
8	National Service provides opportunities to learn something useful	4.97
9	National Service helps Singaporeans understand people from different backgrounds	4.94
10	National Service improves one's civilian employment prospects	4.58

9. A majority (84%) of Singaporeans say that the current two-year duration of full-time National Service is “just right” in fulfilling its defence mandate. This sentiment cuts across socio-economic class. Only 15% think that National Service is too long.

10. Women are generally more positive than men about the perceived benefits and impact of National Service. 42% of men and 36% of women would like to see women serve National Service. On the issue of whether women should contribute to defence as volunteers, both men and women are equally supportive (80%).

11. Respondents were also asked *how* women could contribute to defence as volunteers. Less than a quarter recommend a two-year full-time National Service option for women, compared to more than half who support a shorter military service. Over 70% of respondents, both men and women, support the idea of women serving in the defence force in a professional role and/or women serving as volunteers to help out in National Service events.

12. Of the women who agree that two-year full-time National Service is a viable option, less than 10% are willing to take the option for herself (See Table 4). Interestingly, women under the age of 30 years are more inclined to opt for full-time National Service, if given the opportunity; more than 13% say they will take the option.

**Table 4: How can women contribute to defence as volunteers?**

*Women respondents only (multiple selections allowed)*

Items	% who agree	% who will take option
Serve two-year full-time National Service	21.7	9.3
Serve a shorter military service	52.7	21.9
Serve in the defence force in a professional role	71.1	35.8
Serve as a volunteer to help out in National Service events	72.5	56.4

13. Singaporeans are generally supportive of first-generation Permanent Residents (PRs) contributing to defence as volunteers. More than 43% of respondents support two-year full-time National Service and/or shorter military service for first-generation PRs, and more than 60% advocate service in the defence force in a professional role and/or as a volunteer to help out in National Service events.

## Methodology

14. A total of 1,251 Singapore citizens were interviewed across a period of two months (12 July – 15 September 2013). The data was collected using a simple random method. The Department of Statistics provided the sampling frame of households; within each household, the interviewee was selected using the last birthday method.<sup>1</sup> The overall profile of the sample is representative of the national demographic profile.

15. An invitation letter was sent to all households, prior to the interviewers' house calls. The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews which took 20 to 30 minutes to complete, on average.

## Conclusion

16. There is strong support for National Service as an institution. Singaporeans see National Service as fulfilling a social mission beyond its defence mandate. There is trust and faith in training safety and medical care within the institution.

17. National Service has come to symbolise a collective journey that is deeply entrenched in the Singaporean identity. It embodies equity and universality, and levels the playing field.

---

<sup>1</sup> This sampling methodology included PR respondents but as the numbers were too small to be meaningful, PR data was excluded from further analysis.

18. More could be done to match Servicemen's personal skills and abilities to National Service vocations. This would lessen the perceived opportunity cost of serving two-year full-time National Service.

19. Positive sentiment for National Service is stronger among women, possibly because they do not have personal experience of it. Most Singaporeans are not in favour of compulsory National Service for women but are receptive to having women contribute to defence as volunteers. Interestingly, one out of 10 women say they would volunteer to serve full-time National Service, if given the option.

20. About two-thirds of Singaporeans interviewed are receptive to having first-generation PRs contribute to defence as volunteers.

### **Further Information**

For queries on the IPS Survey on Singaporeans' Attitudes to National Service, please contact the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong at [ips.soclab@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ips.soclab@nus.edu.sg) or Tel: 66013222.