

Most in Singapore don't think racism occurs frequently: IPS study

Justin Ong

The Straits Times, 02 Jul 2021

Most of the population in Singapore feel that racism does not occur often in their living vicinity, but this proportion has dropped over the years.

And while there is general support for and acceptance for multicultural living, Singapore residents remain split when it comes to trusting people of differing religions and nationalities.

These were the findings of a study released on Friday (July 2) by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) think-tank.

This third and final report under the World Values Survey, a global research project monitoring changing public beliefs and their impact over time across 80 societies, focused on the lived experiences of Singaporeans and permanent residents (PRs) aged 21 and above.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of more than 2,000 individuals from November 2019 to March last year.

When asked how frequently they saw racist incidents in their neighbourhoods, 5.7 per cent of respondents replied either "very" or "quite" frequently, 28.7 per cent said "not" frequently and 65.7 per cent indicated "not at all" frequently.

The study noted that respondents reported greater frequencies of racist behaviour compared with the last time the wider survey was held, in 2012.

At the time, 79.2 per cent said such incidents do not happen at all frequently.

Head of IPS' social lab, Dr Mathew Mathews, said that race was less salient as a topic back in 2012, while in recent years, people have become more conscious about the fact that racism is present.

The study found that younger and more educated respondents were more likely to recognise and indicate frequent incidents of racism in their neighbourhoods.

It said that this was likely due to greater awareness among those two groups of what constitutes racism, whether through subtle or explicit behaviours.

The researchers also found that Chinese respondents (4.8 per cent) reported the lowest frequency of racism, while Indians (13.8 per cent) reported the highest.

"Given that the Chinese are the majority race, it is likely that they are usually not the targets of such behaviour," the study noted.

Dr Mathews said it was also important to compare Singapore with other multicultural societies.

Of these, only Indonesia had a lower proportion (3.8 per cent) of respondents perceiving racism as occurring frequently. These figures were 28.4 per cent in Malaysia, and 23.5 per cent in the United States, and 17.8 per cent in Australia.

IPS also found that about 2 per cent of Singapore's respondents did not want to live next to people of a different race, language, or religion.

"These patterns imply that acceptance of individuals with different practices and cultural heritage are similarly high across different sectors of society," the study said.

In separate questions related to trust levels, nearly half of the respondents said they trusted people of other religions somewhat, but 44.9 said they did not trust them very much.

About 5 per cent said they did not trust them at all, while 2.2 per cent trusted them completely.

The study found that Christians, Muslims and Hindus in Singapore were more likely to be more trusting of other religions. They were the only groups with more than 50 per cent selecting the "trust somewhat" or "trust completely" options.

Respondents were just as split when it came to trust of other nationalities.

Nearly half said they did not trust them very much, while 41.4 per cent indicated "somewhat", 7.5 per cent "not at all", and 1.6 per cent "completely".

In contrast, 12.1 per cent of respondents in Britain said they completely trusted people of other religions, while the figure was 11.2 per cent for other nationalities.

In Singapore, trust levels towards people of differing religions and nationalities have dipped since the last survey in 2012 - from 58.9 per cent to 50.2 per cent when it came to religion; and from 50.8 per cent to 43 per cent in relation to nationality.