

Strong support for NS continues, but fewer people find it useful in civilian employment: IPS study

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While public support of national service (NS) in Singapore remains strong, it is viewed as less important in gaining job-relevant skills and improving job prospects, according to a new study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The study's results released on Wednesday showed that 93 per cent of respondents would support compulsory NS, even if there were no immediate threats to Singapore, while 88 per cent said they would encourage their friends and loved ones to serve, even if NS was optional.

The researchers – Dr Chew Han Ei, Mr Shane Pereira, Ms Pamela Lee, Ms Isabelle Tan and Ms Elizabeth Lim – wanted to understand public attitudes towards NS following changes in education, the work landscape of Singapore, and the geopolitical landscape.

They looked at the aspirations of those in service, and sought to identify challenges that the system needs to address to ensure that it is relevant and effective, and how to improve the NS experience.

The IPS had conducted a similar survey on public sentiments towards NS in 2013.

Dr Chew, an IPS senior research fellow and the principal investigator for the study, said at a media briefing on Wednesday that a check on sentiments and perceptions about NS was due, given the changes that had taken place in Singapore society.

Singapore now has a population that is more educated, and parents are more involved in their sons' NS journey, said Dr Chew.

He added that geopolitical tensions and global uncertainty also invoked strong feelings from respondents about how Singapore needed to defend itself.

"The state of the world... it's not even a backdrop. It's in the forefront. 'What happens if something like the Russia-Ukraine war happens to Singapore? We need to be ready.' Without much prompting, this is what the people we spoke to offered," said Dr Chew.

Between July and October 2022, the researchers carried out a nationally representative survey of 1,002 Singapore citizens and permanent residents (PRs) aged 17 and above, and across genders and ethnicities.

They also conducted 13 focus group discussions that included full-time national servicemen (NSFs), operationally ready national servicemen (NSmen), women, family and spouses of servicemen, C-suite executives, and human resource (HR) managers from companies of various sizes.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were also done with 10 unemployed NSmen.

Public support for National Service (NS)

■ Strongly agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Slightly agree
 ■ Slightly disagree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree

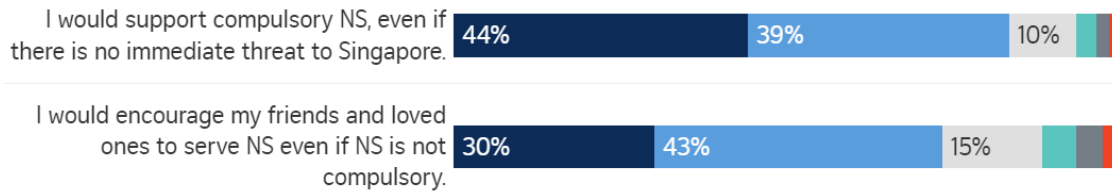


Chart: STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS • Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

The Ministry of Defence (Mindef) funded the study, and questions for the study were framed in consultation with the ministry, said Dr Chew.

He added that the 2013 study showed that there was already “very strong support” for NS, with positive sentiment going beyond 90 per cent. Hence, he predicted there was not much more room for support to go up significantly.

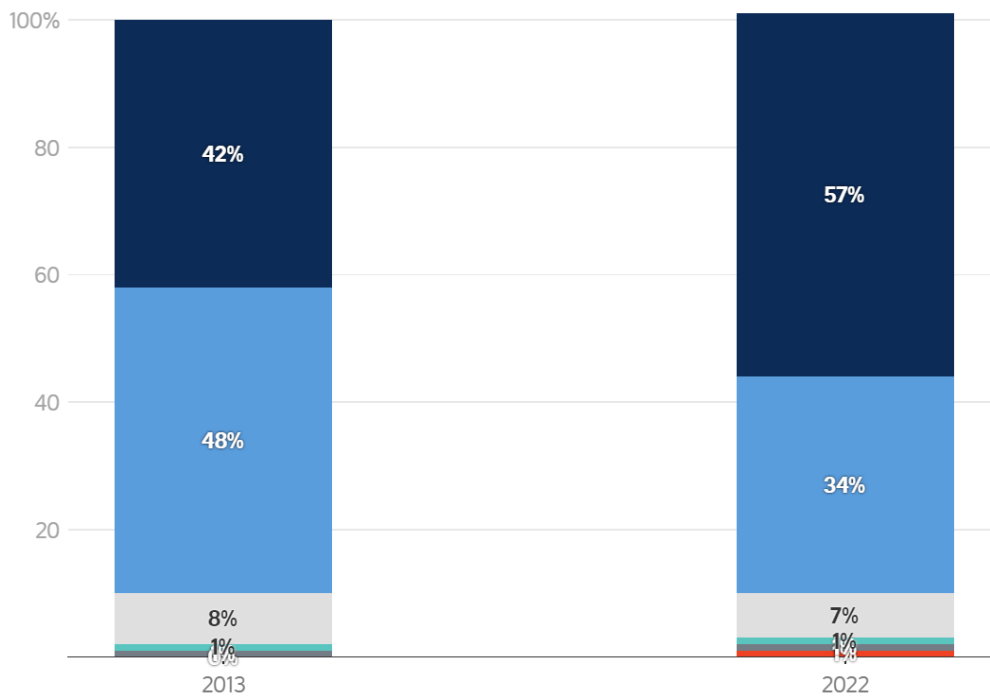
Instead, what he noted from the 2022 study was that the number of respondents who strongly agreed with the relevance and role of NS grew.

The proportion of those who strongly agreed that NS is necessary for the defence of Singapore increased from 42 per cent in 2013 to 57 per cent in 2022.

Necessity of National Service (NS) for Singapore's defence

Is NS necessary for the defence of Singapore?

■ Strongly disagree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Slightly disagree
 ■ Slightly agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Strongly agree



NOTE: IPS conducted a similar NS survey on public sentiments in 2013. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Chart: STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS • Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

Similarly, the proportion of respondents who strongly agreed that NS provides the security needed for Singapore to develop and prosper increased from 37 per cent in 2013 to 53 per cent in 2022.

More respondents also strongly agreed about the relevance of NS.

In the 2022 study, 57 per cent strongly agreed that NS will continue to be important for Singapore – up from 33 per cent in 2013.

Despite strong support for its relevance to national defence, the study found that perceptions of NS as important and valuable for gaining job skills and improving job prospects have weakened since 2013. Some respondents raised issues of finding a balance between serving the nation and supporting their family.

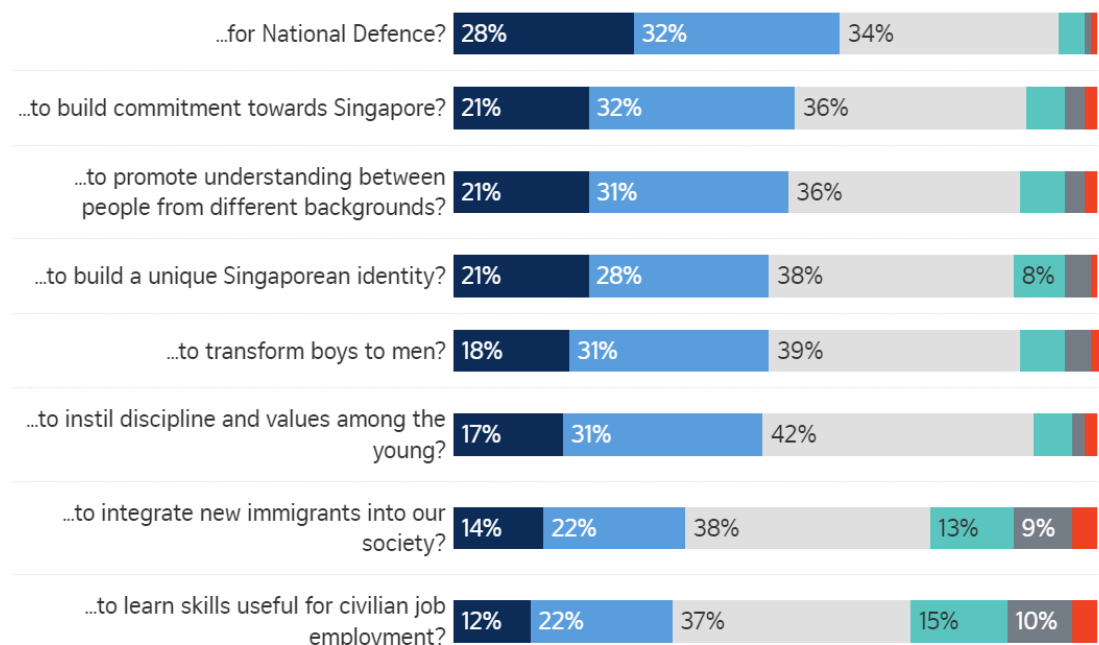
In the focus group discussions, participants who worked in HR expressed concerns about the cost to their companies when male employees were away, even though they strongly supported reservist commitments.

While 94 per cent of respondents viewed NS as a “rite of passage for the Singapore man”, 71 per cent of them thought NS is important for learning skills useful for civilian employment – down from 82 per cent in 2013.

Importance of National Service (NS) across various functions

In your opinion, how important is NS..

Extremely important Very important Important A little important Not so important Not important at all



NOTE: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
 Chart: STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS • Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

Dr Chew said that the general call nationwide to upskill should extend to national servicemen.

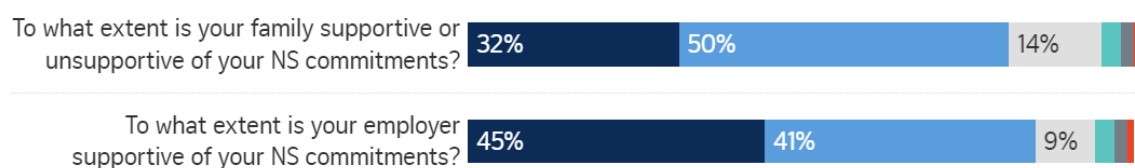
The research team recommended that Mindef should look at how to help servicemen, especially those in their final months of service, transit to the next phase, whether as a student or worker.

“Create opportunities to learn useful skills such as writing a curriculum vitae, financial management or just picking up short courses to ready them for the transition,” said Dr Chew.

He added that people should start thinking about lifelong learning from a younger age.

Family and employer’s support for national servicemen’s National Service (NS) commitments

Very supportive Supportive Slightly supportive Slightly unsupportive Unsupportive Very unsupportive



NOTE: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
Chart: STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS • Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

A spokesman for Mindef said the ministry recognises the importance of helping servicemen make the transition to work or school.

For example, NSF’s have access to the SkillsFuture@NS Learning eXperience Platform, which gives them access to online courses, an online repository of resources, and a job and course portal.

They also get opportunities to participate in SkillsFuture@NS career and education fairs during their full-time NS.

Since 2018, Mindef has also progressively introduced Work-Learn Schemes for several vocations, in roles critical for Singapore’s defence, such as in the areas of artificial intelligence and engineering.

Under these schemes, NSF’s can attain a diploma or partial university credits from Institutes of Higher Learning while doing full-time NS and an additional period of regular service.

The study also suggested that more attention could be paid to those from lower-income households, whose ability to contribute to income may be diminished when fulfilling their NS duties.

A 20-year-old man who took part in the focus group discussions shared that he struggled to contribute to his family while he was in service.

“I (can) only help out for a bit. Maybe it’s just \$20 (or) \$10,” he told researchers. “That’s why I chose to... moonlight at that point of time, just to work and get more money for my family.”

A Mindef spokesman said NSF’s whose families face financial hardship may approach their unit commanders to apply for financial assistance, or seek approval to work outside of their

service if it does not compromise the NSF's personal well-being or his ability to perform his NS duties.

Each request is assessed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the specific circumstances, added the spokesman.

In July, the NS allowance, which supports NSFs in their basic personal upkeep, was also increased by \$125 to \$200, depending on rank and vocation.

Overall, the study's findings affirmed the strong conviction that NS contributes to national defence and economic development.

Dr Chew said: "(The results) are a clear indication that NS is an integral part of Singapore's society. In fact, it has become more integral in the current milieu and looks set to remain so for the future."