

Study finds evidence of class divide in Singapore

Charissa Yong

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The sharpest social divisions in Singapore may now be based on class, instead of race or religion, a study released yesterday suggests.

The Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Study On Social Capital In Singapore shows that Singaporeans who live in public housing have, on average, about one friend or fewer who lives in private housing.

People who study in elite schools also tend to be less close to those in non-elite schools, and vice versa.

About 3,000 Singapore citizens and permanent residents were interviewed and asked to name the people they have ties with for the study, which is the first of its kind on such a scale here.

Researchers said the findings suggest a clear class divide in Singapore. They called for policies that encourage more mixing along class lines, while pointing out that voluntary groups such as sports clubs and religious organisations are where such mixing happens.

"We have shifted from a society based on race to one based also on class," said National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Vincent Chua, one of the study's three researchers.

"We have done a pretty good job in fostering multiculturalism and mixing between ethnic groups, but maybe the next step now is to increase efforts to increase mixing between class groups," he added.

IPS deputy director Gillian Koh and NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser also worked on the study, which was supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

Respondents were asked about the people in their social networks, including who they discussed important matters with or confided in when they were feeling down.

They were also asked to name who they played sports with, or got help from for household matters such as collecting mail.

Results showed that a typical Singaporean had an average of 5.8 friends in his social network.

Schools and workplaces were the places where Singaporeans made friends from another race, religion or country.

But while people were able to easily name a friend of a different gender or age, and even race or religion, they more rarely named someone from another class.

This preference for those from their own class was strong even after researchers took into account uneven group sizes - about 80 per cent of Singaporeans live in public flats, so there were fewer private-housing dwellers for them to meet.

Despite the vast majority of Singaporeans living in public housing, private-housing dwellers had more ties with others who lived in private homes than with those who lived in public flats.

Dr Chua said: "Even if you give people equal opportunities, they will still gravitate to hang out with their own kind. So, we have to think of ways to disrupt this."

The researchers suggested that Singaporeans stuck to their groups as they could not connect with others due to cultural differences.

For instance, those from outside their circle may speak English differently or have different social norms and hobbies.

NUS' Professor Tan said: "The class divide may be happening because of globalisation, which leads to greater inequality."

He added: "We should continue to equalise opportunities... We don't want to be a society where the class divide and social inequality become wider."

MCCY said in a statement that it is important to have friends and acquaintances from different walks of life, and understand different perspectives and points of view.

It added that over the past years, it had rolled out programmes such as the SG Cares volunteering drive to promote social mixing between people from different backgrounds, and will continue to do so.

It said that ultimately, people have to build this sense of community "one encounter, one relationship at a time. It takes work by all of us".