

Singapore sees rising levels of racial and religious harmony, but trust gaps and challenges persist: IPS study

Singapore's racial and religious harmony has improved, with greater trust across communities and stronger appreciation for diversity, according to a recent study by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg. . However, challenges such as trust gaps, cross-race friendship declines, and varying perceptions of discrimination persist, highlighting areas for improvement.

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Singapore's racial and religious harmony has improved steadily over the last five years, with 65.4 per cent of respondents rating the nation's harmony as high or very high, according to a study released by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg—a GONGO established in 2007 to promote racial harmony initiatives in Singapore. However, the study also highlights several areas where gaps persist, particularly among minority communities.

The study, conducted between April and August 2024, surveyed 4,000 Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 18 and above. Senior Minister of State for Digital Development and Information (since 2018), Senior Minister of State for Health (since 2020), and Member of Parliament for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, Janil Puthucheary, who is Chairman of OnePeople.sg, described the findings as reflective of Singapore's enduring commitment to multiculturalism.

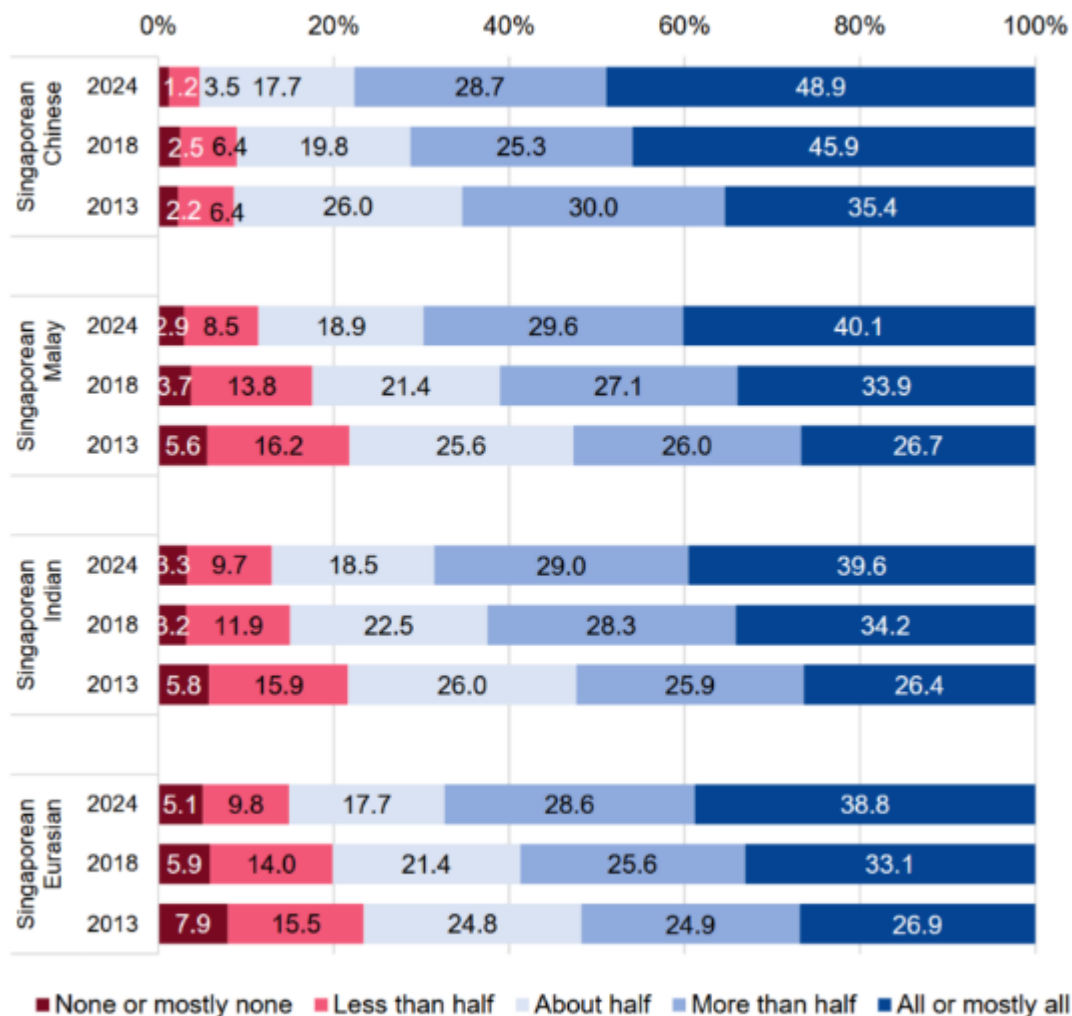
"When it comes to social cohesion, institutional trust, and racial harmony, Singapore stands relatively high compared to many other countries and cities," he said at a press conference.

Progress in trust, but gaps remain

Almost all respondents agreed that Singapore experienced moderate, high, or very high levels of racial and religious harmony. The proportion of those who perceived harmony as high or very high increased in 2024 compared to 2018.

Trust in other racial groups during crises has risen over the years, with 72.9 per cent of respondents in 2024 indicating that they trust more than half of at least one racial group other than their own. This is a significant improvement from 65.5 per cent in 2018 and 57.3 per cent in 2013. Despite this upward trend, 27.1 per cent of respondents in 2024 reported that they do not trust other racial groups in a crisis, a notable challenge for policymakers.

Figure 3.1.1: What proportion of people from the following races do you think can be trusted to help you if Singapore faced a national crisis (e.g., Covid-19), responses by wave*



*Example in parentheses for the question item posed to respondents was "SARS" for the 2013 and 2018 waves. Proportions of trust levels for a particular racial group reflected exclude responses of members of that particular racial group.

This trust gap is further evident in differences between how various racial groups are perceived. For example, 77.6 per cent of respondents expressed trust in the Chinese community, but only 69.7 per cent trusted Malays, 68.6 per cent trusted Indians, and 67.4 per cent trusted Eurasians. The report also highlighted in-group preference patterns, where respondents tended to trust their own racial group more readily than others.

Dr Mathew Mathews, principal research fellow at IPS and head of the IPS Social Lab, noted that younger respondents and higher-educated individuals were more likely to express trust for minority groups. For example, 74.8 per cent of non-Malay respondents aged 18 to 35 trusted Malays during a crisis, compared to 65.5 per cent of non-Malay respondents over 65 years old. Similarly, private property dwellers and degree holders reported higher trust levels for minorities.

Declining cross-race friendships and shrinking social circles

The report highlighted a slight decline in cross-racial friendships, with 53.2 per cent of respondents in 2024 reporting having at least one close friend of another race, down from 55.5 per cent in 2018. This proportion remains higher than the 45.6 per cent recorded in 2013, suggesting long-term improvement but recent stagnation.

A key reason for the decline is the shrinking size of friendship circles overall. Respondents in 2024 reported an average of six close friends, compared to 10 in 2018 and eight in 2013. This reduction has limited opportunities for cross-race interaction.

The decline was most pronounced among majority-race Chinese respondents, with only 45.3 per cent reporting cross-racial friendships, compared to 72.5 per cent of Malays and 84.5 per cent of Indians. Dr Mathews attributed this disparity to the population demographics, where minorities are more likely to encounter members of other races in everyday settings.

Perceptions of discrimination persist

Although progress has been made, perceptions of discrimination remain a concern. The study found that 7 per cent of respondents in 2024 experienced discrimination at work related to job opportunities or promotions, down from 9.3 per cent in 2018. Among those who reported discrimination, the most common issues included exclusion from conversations due to language barriers (57.7 per cent) and perceived favouritism toward others during promotions (47.7 per cent).

Malay and Indian respondents continued to perceive more discrimination than Chinese respondents. However, fewer Malays (18.4 per cent) and Indians (16.7 per cent) reported feeling discriminated against in 2024 compared to 2018, when over a quarter of each group reported such experiences.

Dr Puthuchery stressed that while significant progress has been made, the persistence of these issues underscores the need for ongoing interventions. "We must think carefully about how to address these challenges, particularly when it comes to fostering greater inclusivity and interaction," he said.

Multiracial policies remain relevant

The study found that younger Singaporeans are setting higher standards for social cohesion. Among respondents aged 18 to 35, 70.1 per cent agreed that they could learn a lot from other racial groups, compared to 62.8 per cent of those aged 36 to 50 and 58.8 per cent of those aged 51 to 65. Younger respondents were also more likely to view racial diversity as beneficial, with 74.2 per cent of them believing that diversity enhances Singapore's development.

Given the lingering trust gaps and varied perceptions of discrimination, Dr Puthuchery emphasised the continued importance of multiracial policies such as the group representation constituency (GRC) scheme and the ethnic integration policy (EIP) in public housing. These policies ensure representation of minority communities and promote diverse living environments.

"This study shows that people respond to issues based on their race, religion, and other factors, which justifies the continued need for race-based policies," he said.

The findings also align with attitudes toward diversity and multicultural education, with respondents acknowledging the value of national programmes aimed at promoting racial integration. About 71.1 per cent of respondents agreed that racial diversity benefits the country, up from 66.7 per cent in 2018.

Areas for improvement

The report concludes by identifying several areas for improvement. These include enhancing workplace inclusivity, fostering cross-racial friendships, and reducing in-group preferences. Efforts to encourage more intercultural interaction, both in workplaces and social settings, were also recommended.

As Singapore moves forward, the younger generation's rising aspirations for harmony and inclusivity will play a crucial role. Dr Puthuchearry said, "Singapore has come a long way, but there is always room for improvement. It is through sustained efforts that we can continue to build a society where everyone feels included."

The overall outlook remains positive, with Singapore poised to maintain and further its progress in racial and religious harmony as it adapts to changing societal expectations.