

## Racial and religious harmony scores rise in Singapore: IPS study

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SINGAPORE - The outlook on racial and religious harmony in Singapore has improved in the past five years, with more people here rating the nation's state of harmony as high or very high, a recent study found.

At the same time, levels of trust among people of different races here have also risen, while more people agreed that racial diversity is beneficial for Singapore.

These findings by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg signal a commitment to the ethos of multiculturalism that underpins Singapore society, said Dr Janil Puthucheary, chairman of OnePeople.sg, at a press conference on Feb 3.

While there remain areas of concern – such as variations across racial groups on perceptions of discrimination and a slight decline in cross-race friendships – Singapore has continued to improve across a broad set of markers on racial and religious harmony, he noted.

“When it comes to social cohesion, institutional trust and racial harmony, Singapore stands relatively high compared with many other countries and cities,” added Dr Janil, who is also Senior Minister of State for Digital Development and Information and Health.

“The general trend over the last five to 10 years shows continued improvement – whether in racial harmony, interest in other cultures or acceptance of different religions.

“Across the board, these markers have moved in a positive direction.”

Similar studies were done in 2013 and 2018.

The 2024 study also found that each cohort of Singaporeans had higher expectations for social cohesion than those that came before them, noted Dr Janil.

For instance, younger respondents were more likely to believe they can learn a lot from other racial groups, with 70.1 per cent of those aged 18 to 35 saying that they agree or strongly agree with this sentiment, compared with 62.8 per cent of those aged 36 to 50, and 58.8 per cent of those aged 51 to 65.

On the flip side, younger respondents were also more likely to perceive discrimination.

For instance, 34.7 per cent of respondents aged 18 to 35 said Singaporean Malays had to work harder or much harder than others to have a basic, decent life in Singapore, compared with 8.6 per cent of those aged above 65.

Younger respondents were likewise more than four times as likely as those above 65 to say that Singaporean Chinese had to work less hard to achieve a basic, decent life here.

Dr Janil noted that people developed a greater appreciation for what Singapore has achieved in terms of social harmony as they grew older.

That is, the same respondent by middle age might have changed his or her view.

“You need to live a little, work with people, experience all of our cultures and all our races and all our religions... mature a little bit into young adulthood before all your views are fully formed,” he said.

As time passes, each younger generation “raises the bar, setting higher aspirations for the future”, he added.

One trend highlighted by the researchers was a decline in cross-racial friendships from 2018 to 2024.

Based on the responses across all three surveys over the years, the proportion of respondents with at least one close friend of another race had decreased to 53.2 per cent from 55.5 per cent in 2018.

But this is still higher than the 45.6 per cent recorded in 2013.

Part of the reason is that people now have fewer close friends, said Dr Mathew Mathews, IPS’ principal research fellow and head of its Social Lab.

Overall, respondents had an average of over six close friends, regardless of race, a decrease from 10 close friends in 2018 and eight in 2013.

Amid this broader pattern of friendship circles shrinking, there may be fewer opportunities for people of different races to interact, said Dr Janil, adding that this was not just an issue in Singapore.

“We must think carefully about how to address this challenge,” he said.

Another area of concern is that respondents of different racial and religious groups reported different perceptions of discrimination, a finding that has persisted across the three surveys, said Dr Janil.

For instance, when it comes to racial harmony, 65.4 per cent of respondents rated Singapore’s racial and religious harmony as high or very high in 2024.

This is up from 57.1 per cent in 2018, when the question was first asked.

However, this sentiment was not as strongly felt by minority respondents, who were more likely to rate harmony levels as moderate.

While 68.5 per cent of Chinese respondents believed there are high or very high levels of racial and religious harmony here, only 52.4 per cent of Malay respondents, 57 per cent of Indian respondents, and 61.8 per cent of respondents from other racial groups agreed with the statement.

Similarly, while trust levels have generally increased over the past decade, over a quarter of people still do not trust people of other races.

When asked what proportion of people from the various races can be trusted to help if Singapore faced a national crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, 72.9 per cent of respondents indicated that they trust more than half of at least one racial group other than their own in times of crisis.

This was up from 65.5 per cent in 2018 and 57.3 per cent in 2013.

A still-significant proportion – 27.1 per cent – of respondents indicated they do not trust people of other racial groups in times of crisis.

While the proportion of people here who expressed trust in Chinese was 77.6 per cent in 2024, a lower 69.7 per cent expressed trust in Malays, 68.6 per cent expressed trust in Indians, and 67.4 per cent expressed trust in Eurasians.

Given that people were not asked about their own races, this shows a trust gap between the different races that still needed to be addressed, said Dr Mathews.

Asked about the difference in perceptions among people of different races, and what this means for the Government's race-based policies, Dr Janil said there was a continued need for policies such as the group representation constituency scheme and the Ethnic Integration Policy in public housing.

"This study does not directly address those policy questions, but it does show us that people respond to different issues differently, depending on their race and religion and other factors as well, and so the need for some of those race-based policies continues to be present," he said.