

Young people prioritise careers and financial security over getting married Study

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SINGAPORE - Young people prioritise their careers and financial security over goals like getting married, according to a new study on their aspirations as they move from adolescence to adulthood.

Having a good career and being in good health were ranked as their top priorities in the next five years, while getting married and having their own homes were further down the list.

The study also found that two in five young people aged 22 to 29 in 2022 had never been in a relationship.

Conducted by the National Youth Council (NYC) and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab, this is the first national longitudinal study on youth. Called the Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth Steps), it followed a representative sample of more than 3,000 young people aged between 17 and 24, starting from 2017 until 2022.

Mr David Chua, chief executive of NYC, said at a media briefing about the study's findings on Aug 5 that the results help to find out how the Government and other organisations involved in youth development can help young Singaporeans work towards their aspirations.

IPS adjunct senior research fellow Chew Han Ei, principal investigator of Youth Steps, said that contrary to the narrative that young people are "quiet quitting" – which refers to being disengaged and doing the bare minimum in their jobs – the results show that they prioritise their career above other life goals.

Almost 80 per cent of respondents said that they have made plans to work towards their aspirations, and nearly seven in 10 had plans to upskill within the next five years, he said.

About two-thirds of young people said they were satisfied with life, but the figure has dropped with every passing year, from 74 per cent in 2017 to 60 per cent in 2020. This recovered to 64 per cent as the Covid-19 pandemic receded in 2021 and 2022.

The falling satisfaction is consistent with the happiness curve theory, where happiness follows a U-shaped curve which starts off high in youth, wanes as individuals enter their 20s, and reaches a trough in their 40s and 50s, before picking up in their 60s, said Dr Chew.

The study also found that more young people felt that the pandemic had a positive impact on their lives in 2022 (43 per cent), compared with 2020 (31 per cent).

NYC's Mr Chua said: "Now they're looking back and seeing that that was also the positive growth period and that bears well in terms of their resilience and how they perceive such a crisis to be new avenues of growth and challenge."

Careers

Although young people reported experiencing more job stress, more also indicated being able to tolerate work pressures and being satisfied with their jobs.

Having good opportunities for progression and job security were their top considerations in a job, the survey showed.

Among those who were not working, more than four in 10 felt that their lack of connections hindered the pursuit of their chosen career path. This was consistently cited as the top barrier to employment since 2019.

Mr Chua said government and non-government entities need to do more to help young people find their way in their careers, for instance in how to get an internship or enter an industry. He cited the Mentoring SG initiative which connects young people with mentors through an online platform to help them build social capital.

More than three-quarters of young people also found it important to have a job that would allow them flexibility in 2022, up from 60 per cent in 2018.

Relationships

Dr Chew said the focus on education and career may hinder young people from pursuing relationships.

He said the pandemic limited the opportunities for them to date, as it prevented them from attending university orientation activities, having lunch with colleagues and going to other gatherings.

The top three barriers to dating for single young people were not having met the right person yet, having more important priorities, and finding dating in Singapore stressful, the study found.

“From young, their parents would say, study hard, get a good job and then get married. Maybe that has sunk in, and the young people are thinking of this linearly,” said Dr Chew of this group, adding that young people can actually pursue their career and relationships simultaneously.

“Young people want it all. They want to be successful in their careers. They also want to have time to pursue their passions outside of work. They are optimistic about the opportunities, but they are also stretched in many, many directions.

“So I think having the right mentors, the right guides, the right role models is quite important for this group, who may be finding themselves at the workplace and in real life.”

Youth Steps will be extended for another five years from 2024 to 2028, and led by IPS Social Lab research fellow Teo Kay Key, who will follow the group into their mid-30s as they marry and start families, Dr Chew said.

The findings will help policymakers support young people in their aspirations to thrive as they enter their 30s, he added.