

Government satisfaction key in how Singapore residents cope with pandemic: IPS study

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SINGAPORE: Government satisfaction and societal trust are two key predictors of positive social outcomes with regard to how Singapore residents have been coping amid the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Survey respondents who were more satisfied with government performance showed "better attitudes towards coping with various safe management measures and also improve one's willingness to vaccinate", the study released on Monday (26 April) showed.

Those with higher levels of societal trust were "less likely to be affected by perceptions of threat brought about by the pandemic". Those with lower levels of societal trust – the "social glue" that facilitates strong, communal bonds – were more likely to experience lower levels of well-being and a greater sense of threat.

"Societal trust affects people's willingness to comply with various kinds of measures. Assuming you've got various kinds of measures, which can be quite inconvenient, if there is no societal trust, (then) the tendency to comply with those measures then kind of goes down," said IPS' principal research fellow Mathew Mathews.

The study, titled "The COVID-19 Pandemic In Singapore, One Year On: Population Attitudes And Sentiments", gathered Singapore residents' views on a host of pandemic-related issues from April last year to March this year.

The online survey was conducted using data from Toluna, a technology company that specialises in consumer insights, with IPS researchers collecting responses from residents aged 21 and above in 22 waves over this period. Each wave comprised over 500 respondents whose profiles approximated the national population in terms of race, gender and housing type, said the IPS report.

Given the survey's online nature, it was noted that this resulted in lower proportions of older respondents and those from lower-income families. The survey was also conducted in English, which "does not account for the small number of those who are more proficient in a vernacular language", said the report.

Here are some of the study's other key findings:

1. Government satisfaction, cost of living

Over the period of the study, at least three-quarters of respondents said they were satisfied with the government's overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This attitude also carried over to other areas of the government performance, such as keeping the healthcare system running, which saw a 90 per cent satisfaction rate, and its efforts to protect jobs, which saw a satisfaction rate of around 70 per cent.

Respondents were also generally positive about government efforts to help vulnerable groups, such as low-wage foreign workers, amid the pandemic. At least 60 per cent of respondents felt, however, that more could be done to help Singaporeans cope with the cost of living.

On the jobs front, perceptions of the job market improved from late May last year, when 80 per cent believed it would be bad, to around 42 per cent reporting the same sentiment last month.

While about 65 per cent of respondents over the past year believe the Singapore government can successfully lead and navigate the country through a post-pandemic world, about half of those surveyed believe Singaporeans are too dependent on the government to resolve economic problems.

2. Societal trust

In a positive sign for societal trust, the proportion of respondents who believed Singapore would stay united and continue observing safety measures remained stable – at 70 per cent – over the past year.

The proportion of those who trusted that Singapore would emerge out of this crisis stronger and more resilient also grew from 60 per cent in July last year to 72 per cent in March this year.

While about 25 per cent to 30 per cent of respondents felt more negatively towards immigrant groups due to COVID-19, this figure also did not increase over the course of the study. More than half – over 55 per cent – also trusted that Singaporeans would not pick out groups or individuals to blame them for the pandemic.

3. Psychological well-being

While respondents showed they had adapted well in coping with the challenges brought about by the pandemic, many remained cautious about their jobs and future opportunities.

Half of survey respondents in April last year reported being stressed by the pandemic, and this proportion decreased to around 30 per cent last month. Nonetheless, the majority of respondents reported that they did not experience notable behavioural or psychological disturbances, even during the earlier stages of the pandemic.

However, younger Singapore residents appear to have been more greatly impacted by the pandemic in terms of their psychological well-being. At least three in 10 aged 21 to 29 were rather or very worried about "losing their purpose for living" as opposed to only 1 in 10 among those aged 60 and above.

Additionally, 27 per cent of those in the 21 to 29 age group experienced trouble sleeping or staying awake in recent months, as opposed to only nine per cent of those aged 60 and above.

4. Attitudes towards safe management measures, vaccines

Regarding attitudes towards the safe-management measures (SMMs) imposed during the pandemic – such as the wearing of masks, use of the TraceTogether device and app, and limits on the number of people at social gatherings – the study found that the perceived inconvenience of the SMMs generally decreased over time.

For instance, while 34 per cent of respondents in May last year found it inconvenient or totally inconvenient to have to scan multiple QR codes at various entry points, 30 per cent of respondents felt the same way in March this year.

Meanwhile, while about half of those surveyed still held concerns about vaccine safety, older respondents – those aged 60 and above – were found to be less worried about the issue. About half of the respondents also expressed concerns that they would be given a type or brand of vaccine that they did not trust.

5. Changing work arrangements

By March 2021, around 68 per cent of the working population among those surveyed said they work mainly in the office.

Of those working from home, at least 80 per cent felt they enjoyed the arrangement, while around 50 per cent of all working respondents said that an increased frequency of working from the office should be made the new norm in Phase 3.

About 40 per cent of respondents also reported that they were afraid of being infected with COVID-19 as they return to their workplaces more regularly.