

S'pore residents have adapted well to pandemic: Study

Societal trust has had key role, even as fears over livelihoods remain, say IPS researchers

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Over the past year, Singapore residents have better learnt to cope with the pandemic on various fronts, even as many remain cautious over their livelihoods, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found in a new paper.

And societal trust – the “social glue” that builds strong communal bonds and improves psychological well-being – has played a key role in helping the country adapt to the new normal, researchers said.

Broadly, people's attitudes on issues such as job prospects and overall well-being took a hit last year when the pandemic began, but had recovered by the time the study ended last month.

“What we see, one year into the crisis, is that our society is clearly vulnerable to crisis, but Singaporeans are clearly adaptable,” said IPS principal research fellow Mathew Mathews, who also heads the institute's Social Lab for social indicator research.

One reason why society has been able to adapt to the challenges of living in a pandemic has been the raft of government policies that has helped reduce people's concerns and fears, he added.

The study carried out online polls with groups of 500 Singapore residents each at regular intervals between April last year and last month.

It asked for their thoughts on top-

ics such as stress levels and finances, as well as attitudes towards safe management measures and the ongoing vaccination drive. Researchers also polled respondents on their work arrangements, perceptions of the job market and satisfaction with how the Government has handled the pandemic.

Those who had less trust in Singapore and Singaporeans – measured by their responses to questions such as whether the country would remain united and emerge stronger – tended to feel more threatened by the pandemic, and therefore had worse overall well-being.

In contrast, the well-being of people with high levels of trust was less affected by perceived threats posed by Covid-19.

These results show that trust can serve as a form of social capital in the crisis, “protecting people against the harmful and threatening effects of the pandemic”, researchers said. “Enablers of societal trust – such as effective information management, enforcement of desirable social norms, and fair and equitable treatment for all – must therefore continue to be a priority for governments.”

One significant improvement over the course of the year was Singaporeans' sentiments on the job market. Late last May, eight in 10 respondents said they felt the job market in the next six months would be bad. This number had gone down to four in 10 by last month.

When asked about securing a job with similar benefits and pay within six months, should they be retrenched, around 58 per cent of people polled last June said they were not confident about doing so. This had gone down to about 45 per cent by last month.

One year of Covid-19 in Singapore

Over the course of the past year, the Institute of Policy Studies looked at Singaporeans' attitudes towards various social and economic issues. These are some of its key findings.

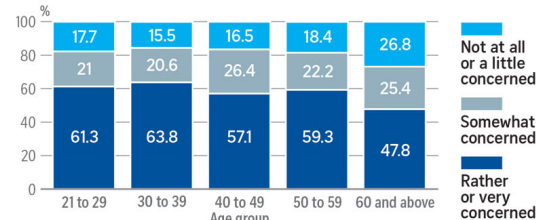
Respondents were given a list of seven statements about lessons learnt from the pandemic, and asked which should be taught to students.



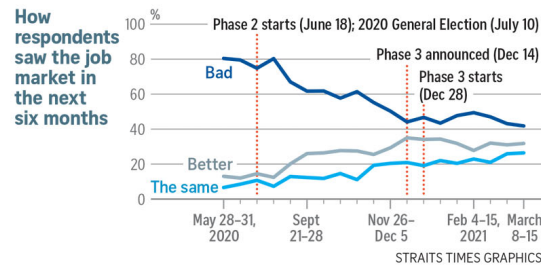
They were more likely to be negatively impacted psychologically, if they were...



Level of concern that the safety and potential side effects of Covid-19 vaccines are not fully known yet*



NOTE: *Survey conducted between Jan 6 and Feb 15.



The higher levels of concern seen last year were likely because many people were worried about job losses, Dr Mathews said. Later on, government schemes to help companies keep workers employed allayed some of these fears.

“The reality is that more people are in the job market, they have not been retrenched and there have been all kinds of training opportunities... That has allowed confidence to hold,” he added.

Sentiments about working from home also improved.

Last September, about 60 per cent of respondents who mostly worked from home said they enjoyed doing so and were productive. By the time the study ended, 80 per cent said they enjoyed working from home, with 73 per cent believing they were productive.

On vaccinations, people surveyed last month were more likely to want to get vaccinated, compared with those surveyed a month before. Concerns over vaccine safety also declined but remained significant, with around half the respondents in March saying they were worried that the safety and side effects were not fully known.

The study also threw up several trends unique to younger participants. Younger people were more likely to be worried about vaccine safety, as well as psychologically impacted by the pandemic.

For instance, three in 10 Singaporeans aged between 21 and 29 – the youngest age group surveyed – were at least somewhat worried about losing their purpose for living, compared with only a tenth of those aged 60 and above.

Just under three in 10 in this youngest group also said they experienced trouble sleeping or staying awake in recent months, compared with a tenth of those in the oldest cohort.

In contrast, younger participants tended to be more sanguine about their prospects in the job market.

When asked if they were confident that they would have a job in the next six months, 60.9 per cent of the youngest participants said they were at least somewhat confident. This figure went up to 64.6 per cent for those aged 30 to 39.

In comparison, around half of those aged 50 and above shared that view.

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DOWN, BUT FAR FROM OUT

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DR MATHEW MATHEWS, principal research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. He also heads the institute's Social Lab for social indicator research.