

SINGAPORE SURVEY ON PUBLIC OPINION ON THE DEATH PENALTY

NUS survey uses a calibrated approach to understand Singaporeans' views on capital punishment

Background

The Singapore Survey on Public Opinion on the Death Penalty is led by Associate Professor Chan Wing Cheong from the NUS Faculty of Law, and the team comprises Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser from the Department of Sociology at the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Assistant Professor Jack Lee from the Singapore Management University School of Law and Ms Braema Mathi from MARUAH.

Discussions on the project started in 2014. Data collection commenced in April 2016 and was completed in May 2016. The target sample of 1500 respondents aged 18 to 74 years is based on a random sample of addresses of Singaporeans. The survey used a slightly modified version of the questionnaire designed by Professor Roger Hood for a similar survey conducted in Malaysia.¹

Conceptualising the project

The objective of this project is to explore the range of dimensions or considerations that influence Singaporeans' views on the death penalty, in particular Singapore's mandatory death penalty for intentional murder, drug trafficking (e.g., 15 gram or more of heroin), or discharging a firearm when committing housebreaking, robbery, extortion or kidnapping even if there was no intention to kill and no one has been injured.

Our approach is that public opinion on capital punishment cannot be tapped simply by asking people whether or not they support the death penalty. It is well known that previous surveys have shown that a high proportion of Singaporeans say that they are in favour of the death penalty. However, the picture revealed by this survey is far more nuanced, showing considerably lower levels of support when the public was asked more specific questions.

The picture is nuanced

Support for the death penalty in general

This survey revealed that, when asked whether they were in general in favour or opposed to the use of the death penalty, very few respondents expressed strong opinions either way. While 70% said they were in favour, only 8% of them said they were strongly in favour, and of the 27% who said they were opposed, only 3% were strongly opposed. This may correspond to the fact that 62% said that they 'knew little or nothing' about its use in Singapore and only half said they were 'interested in or concerned' about the issue, with only 5% being 'very interested or concerned'.

Support for mandatory death penalty

When asked specifically what the penalty should be for intentional murder; trafficking in illegal drugs; and for discharging a firearm, the proportion in favour of the death penalty was higher: 92%, 86% and 88% respectively.

¹ Roger Hood, *The Death Penalty in Malaysia* (The Death Penalty Project, 2013).

However, the proportion of all those interviewed who supported mandatory death penalty was much lower, and an even smaller percentage said they strongly supported it:

For intentional murder	47% (strong supporters 33%)
For drug trafficking	32% (strong supporters 22%)
For firearms offences	36% (strong supporters 28%)

The proportions in favour of the judge being given the discretion to impose a death sentence OR either a life sentence or a period of long-term imprisonment were as follows:

For intentional murder	45%
For drug trafficking	54%
For firearms offences	52%

Reasons for supporting mandatory death penalty and discretionary death penalty

When those who supported mandatory death penalty were asked what their main reason was for doing so, just over 60% said that "unless the punishment is certain, with no exceptions, it will not have a sufficiently deterrent effect":

For intentional murder	62% (28% of all 1500 interviewed)
For drug trafficking	65% (23% of all 1500 interviewed)
For firearms offences	64% (22% of all 1500 interviewed)

As for support for the discretionary death penalty, about half of the sample chose as their first reason: "Circumstances differ and people differ; not everyone who commits one of these crimes deserves to die".

Testing support for the death penalty in reality

To test whether respondents would agree with the court's decision in sentencing persons to death, the sample of 1500 citizens was divided into two groups (750 respondents each, called rotation 1 and rotation 2). Each group was asked to judge six scenario cases — three of intentional murder (a robbery murder, a domestic murder, and a drug-related murder); two of drug trafficking; and one firearms offence), a total of 12 scenarios, all of which led to a mandatory death sentence. Half of the cases had a mitigating factor(s) and half had aggravating circumstances. For details of these scenarios, see the attached Annex. The respondents were asked in each case what sentence they would prefer or think was deserved.

The findings indicated the following:

FIRST, a much lower level of support for imposing the death penalty among the subjects of this survey when confronted with facts about the crime, especially when there were mitigating factors, for example,

1. The highest proportion sentenced to death was for the intentional shooting of a shop keeper during a robbery resulting in death by a man who had previously been imprisoned twice for robbery: 64% chose the death sentence, much lower than the 92% who had said they supported the death penalty for intentional murder.
2. The highest proportion sentencing a drug trafficker to death was 47%.

3. When there were mitigating circumstances, a considerably lower proportion of respondents chose the death sentence. The highest was 52% for the robbery murder by a man with no previous convictions.
4. For all other scenarios where there had been mitigating circumstances, the highest proportion who thought that the crime merited the death penalty was only 28%.

SECOND, although the court had applied the mandatory death penalty law in all 12 scenarios, the citizens who judged them chose death as their preferred sentence in less than half of all the decisions they made: 45% of the murder cases; 29% of the drug trafficking cases; 28% of the firearms cases; and 37% of all cases.

THIRD, even though 47% of the total sample supported the mandatory death penalty for murder and 32% for drug trafficking, far fewer (12% and 10% respectively) actually applied this in practice by sentencing to death all the cases they were asked to judge.

This meant that the proportion who supported the mandatory death penalty for intentional murder and drug trafficking dropped considerably, when faced with the reality of case examples.

Two other indicators of the level of support for the death penalty

FIRST, the respondents were asked to indicate if they would still support the death penalty if it was proven to their satisfaction that the death penalty was “no more effective as a deterrent to others than life imprisonment or a very long prison sentence” or that “innocent people have sometimes being executed”.

This provided clear evidence that support for the death penalty is greatly contingent on these factors:

Crime committed	Per cent generally In favour of death penalty	Per cent in favour, if proven not a better deterrent than life/very long imprisonment	Per cent in favour, if proven innocent people have been executed
Intentional Murder	92	56	35
Drug Trafficking	86	43	28
Firearms Offences	88	47	31

SECOND, all respondents were asked to rank which five policies they believed would most likely be able to reduce very violent crimes leading to death AND which four policies most likely to reduce the trade in dangerous drugs. The results show very low support for a policy of increasing the number of executions.

In both instances, “better moral education of young people” was placed **FIRST** by the majority of respondents (56% and 52% respectively); more effective policing was placed second (27% and 24%), **BUT** “greater number of executions” was placed **FIRST** by only 5% and 7% and **LAST** by 74% and 77% respectively.

What could we deduce?

From our survey, we could deduce that support for mandatory death penalty by Singaporeans was much lower than might have been inferred from previous surveys which sought opinion about the death penalty in general.

When placed in context, support for mandatory sentence, as shown by the scenario decisions, was weaker than often portrayed, in particular for drug trafficking and firearms offences where no death or injury has occurred.

Who supports the death penalty?

In addition to the above tests, we also did a multivariate logistic regression of support for the death penalty by age, religion, and education. The results show that seniors (aged 66 or older) are 1.8 times more likely to support the death penalty than the young (aged 18 to 33); those with degree qualifications are 1.7 times more likely to do so than those with primary or lower education; and Chinese religionists are 2.3 times more likely to support the death penalty than Protestants, while Catholics are 2 times less inclined to do so than Protestants.

We would need to do further research to make an attempt at explaining these findings. In the meantime, we could only raise some plausible hypotheses. With regard to religion as a factor, one hypothesis is that the different religions have different views about forgiveness and punishment. As for age as a factor, it could be that younger Singaporeans are somewhat more liberal with respect to crime and punishment, and for education as a factor, it might be related to Singaporeans' strong belief in security and meritocracy, and its flipside, punishment—essentially, people should get what they deserve, be it reward or punishment.

Annex

Scenarios relating to murder: what sentence do you think he/she deserves?

Rotation 1 (half the sample)

- A man robbed a local shop with a gun and shot the owner in the head. He took away with him \$300 in cash. He had not previously been convicted of any crime. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.
- A woman deliberately poisoned her husband who died, so that she could be free to live with her lover. She was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.
- A young man aged 19 deliberately shot dead a drug dealer who had failed to pay a debt. He had no previous convictions for violence and had said that he killed the victim on the orders of an older man. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Rotation 2 (half the sample)

- A man robbed a local shop with a gun and shot the owner in the head. He took away with him \$300 in cash. He had previously been in prison twice for robbery. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.
- A woman who had been abused by her husband for many years decided to kill him by deliberately poisoning his food. A neighbour discovered the death of the husband and reported it to the police. She was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.
- A man aged 35 with previous convictions for violence and drug possession deliberately shot dead a rival drug dealer who had failed to pay back a debt. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Scenarios relating to drug trafficking: what sentence do you think he/she deserves?

Rotation 1 (half the sample)

- A Singaporean man aged 30 was arrested when he sailed into Singapore. Following a tip-off to the police, 25 kilograms of heroin was found hidden inside the panels in the cabin of the boat. He had a previous conviction for possessing a small amount of heroin, below 15 grams, but claimed that he knew nothing about the hidden heroin. He was convicted of drug trafficking and sentenced to death.
- A foreigner aged 20 was arrested when he arrived at Changi Airport from overseas because his behaviour aroused suspicion. He was found to be carrying a package containing 100 grams of cocaine. He said he was asked to deliver the package by his boss and had no idea what was in it. He had no previous convictions. He was found guilty of drug trafficking and sentenced to death.

Rotation 2 (half the sample)

- A Singaporean woman aged 21 was stopped by Immigration at Changi Airport and when searched was found to have 100 grams of heroin hidden in a false bottom of her suitcase. She claimed that a foreign man she had met on holiday had asked her to carry the suitcase as a special favour. She had no previous criminal record. She was convicted of drug trafficking and sentenced to death.
- A Singaporean man aged 25 was arrested in Singapore on suspicion that he was dealing in drugs. His property was searched and 500 grams of cannabis was seized. He had a previous conviction for selling cannabis in small amounts on the street. He claimed that someone else had left the 500 grams of cannabis at his house without telling him. He was convicted of drug trafficking and sentenced to death.

Scenarios relating to firearms offences: what sentence do you think he/she deserves?

Rotation 1 (half the sample)

- A man aged 19 broke into a house at night carrying a loaded pistol. The householder heard him come into the residence and went to see what was happening, carrying a stick. The burglar shot at the householder but missed his target. He ran away but was later caught by the police, convicted for a firearms offence and sentenced to death. He had no previous convictions.

Rotation 2 (half the sample)

- A man aged 30 broke into a house at night carrying a loaded pistol. The householder heard him come into the residence and went to see what was happening, carrying a stick. The burglar shot at the householder and caused a wound in his arm, which was not fatal. He ran away but was later caught by the police, convicted for a firearms offence and sentenced to death. He has a previous conviction for housebreaking and had served a prison sentence.