

# Public Opinion on the Death Penalty: Findings from a Singapore survey



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“The Death Penalty: Yea or Nay?”  
MARUAH

# Methodology

- Sampling frame: Singaporeans, aged 18 to 74.
- Sample size = 1500
- Oversampling of Malays and Indians, and weighted
- Based on a random sample of addresses purchased from the Department of Statistics
- Fieldwork period: Apr 9 to May 31, 2016

# 6 major topics

1. Interest and knowledge
2. Support for DP, general and specific; mandatory and discretionary
3. What if there are compelling reasons against DP?
4. Judging 12 scenario cases, mitigating and aggravating factors. To what extent do respondents differ from judges?
5. Perceived effective alternative measures for reducing violent crimes leading to death and for drug trafficking
6. Support for DP by Demographics

# Topics 1-2: Interest and knowledge

## Support for DP, general & specific

- Interest and Knowledge
- Support for the DP in **general**
- Support for the DP for **specific** offences--murder, drug trafficking, and for firearms offences—and preference for mandatory or discretionary sentence
- **Extent of support** for mandatory DP
- **Reason(s) for support** of **mandatory** sentence
- Reason (s) for support of **discretionary** sentence

# Interest and Knowledge

Indicators of Interest	Proportion	Questions
Proportion interested and concerned	50%	What if they were more interested?
Talk with others about DP frequently	15%	Those interested/concerned more likely to support the DP.
Indicators of Knowledge		
Know something about the issue	39%	What if they were more well informed?
Proportion who gave a good estimate of the number of DP meted out past 10 years (Actual = 32)	24%	Those who said they are well informed more likely to support DP.

# Support for the Death Penalty in General

Support or Oppose?	Proportion
Support	62%
Strongly Support	8%
Oppose	24%
Strongly Oppose	3%
Not Sure	3%

**70%**

Comparative figure  
from a REACH  
survey is 80%

# Support for Mandatory/ Discretionary Sentence (%)

Crime	Support for DP	Support Mandatory DP (strong support)	Support Discretionary DP	MDP - DDP
Murder	92	47 (33)	45	+2
Drug trafficking	86	32 (22)	54	-22
Firearms offences	88	36 (28)	52	-16
Top reason	deterrent effect		circumstances differ	DDP > MDP Except for murder

## **Topic 3: 12 scenario cases, mitigating and aggravating factors**

- 2 rotations of 6 scenarios each (to prevent response bias and for reliability check)
- Half of sample responded to Rotation 1; the other half, Rotation 2.
- Each rotation has 3 cases of murder, 2 cases of drug trafficking, and 1 case of firearm offence.
- In total, 12 scenario cases.
- **All cases were sentenced to death by the judge. To what extent did our respondents concur with the judge?**

## 12 scenario cases: To what extent do the judge and the respondents concur on the DP? (%)

Crime	Case	R01	R02	Mean	Implications
Murder	B18	<b>52% mitigating</b>	<b>64% aggravating</b>	45%	<p>The highest proportion was 64%, as compared to 92%, who supported DP for murder.</p> <p>12% chose the DP for all cases they judge, as compared to 100%.</p>
	B19	51%	17%		
	B20	28%	58%		
Drug Trafficking	B21	<b>47%</b>	<b>17%</b>	29%	<p>The highest proportion was 47%, as compared to 86%, who supported DP for drug trafficking.</p> <p>10% chose the DP for all cases they judge, as compared to 100%.</p>
	B22	21%	33%		
Firearms offences	B23	25%	32%	28%	

Mitigating, e.g., no previous conviction.

## Topic 4: What If's ...

- **What if** “there is evidence to prove that DP is not a better deterrence than life/long imprisonment”?
- **What if** “innocent people have in fact sometimes been executed”?
- **What if** “most countries have abolished mandatory DP, leaving the decision to the judge”?

# WHAT IF DP is less of a deterrence or if innocent people have in fact been executed?

Crime	Generally in favor of DP	Still favor DP, even if proven not a better deterrent than life/very long imprisonment	Still favor DP, even if proven innocent people have been executed
Murder	92	56	35
Drug Trafficking	86	43	28
Firearms offences	88	47	31

# Main reason for preferring the DP

Crime	Main Reason	Proportion of those who choose the DP
Murder	Retribution: “a life for a life”	26% to 39%
	<b>Deterrence: “deter others”</b>	38% to 45%
Drug Trafficking	Gravity: “a serious crime”	24% to 30%
	<b>Deterrence: “deter others”</b>	57% to 61%
Firearms offences	Gravity: “a serious crime”	33%
	<b>Deterrence: “deter others”</b>	50%

**Deterrence is given as a key reason for choosing the DP. Does DP have a deterrent effect in practice?**

## Topic 5:

Perceived effective alternative measures for reducing “violent crimes leading to death”, and for drug trafficking

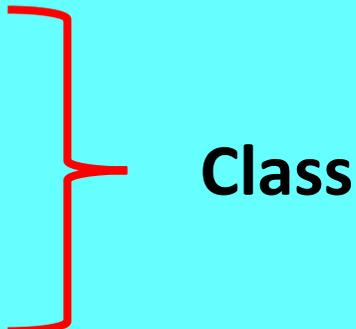
- More effective policing
- **Better moral education**
- More effective control
  - **More executions**

## Perceived effective alternative measures for reducing violent crimes leading to death or drug trafficking (%)

Crime	More effective policing	Better moral education	More effective control	More executions	Implications
<b>Murder</b>	27	56	--	5	Moral education preferred; DP, much less so.
<b>Drug Trafficking</b>	24	52	17	7	

Note: Figures refer to proportion who ranked the policy/measure as first choice

# Topic 6: Support for DP by Demographics

- Gender
    - Age
  - Ethnicity
  - Religion
  - Religiosity
  - Education
  - Individual Income
  - Household Income
  - Housing Type
- 
- Class

# Support for the DP by Demographics

- Seniors (aged 66 or older), 1.8 times **more likely** than the young (aged 18 to 33).
- Those with degree qualifications, 1.7 times more likely than those with primary or lower education.
- Chinese religionists (Taoists/'Pai-Shen'), 2.3 times more likely than Protestants.
- Catholics, 2 times less likely than Protestants.
- Those who score high on "religiosity", less likely to support DP.
  
- **Note: I also found no significant difference between demographic categories in their preferred sentences in the 12 scenario cases. Perhaps, the generic question solicits a knee-jerk response, while the 12 scenario cases solicits a considered response.**

# A hypothesis

- A hypothesis on why the higher the educational level, the more likely to support DP
- Middle class subscribe to the ideology of security and meritocracy. The former translates into stronger support for law and order; the latter, into believing that one should get what one deserves, be it reward or punishment.

# Conclusion

- Support for mandatory death penalty 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 the death penalty, as shown by the scenario decisions, was weaker than often portrayed, in particular for drug trafficking and for firearms offences where no death or injury has occurred.
- **When asked if the DP should be abolished, following international trends, about 72% said NO. My sense is that Singaporeans are more likely to support DDP, less so for MDP.**