

# Survey shows S'poreans support death penalty but ...

SIAU MING EN  
siaumingen@mediacorp.com.sg

**SINGAPORE** – An inaugural in-depth survey released yesterday showed broad support in general among Singaporeans for the death penalty, similar to earlier findings by Government feedback unit Reach. However,

researchers found marked differences in attitudes in the latest survey between various demographic groups — in terms of age, education level and religion — when they drilled down into the details.

The survey of 1,500 Singapore citizens — comprising face-to-face interviews conducted in April and May,

with participants aged between 18 and 74 years — was led by National University of Singapore (NUS) law don Chan Wing Cheong. He worked with NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser, Singapore Management University law lecturer Jack Lee and human rights group Maruah's president Braema Mathi.

A vast majority of the participants

supported capital punishment for those who intentionally kill (92 per cent), traffic drugs (86 per cent) and discharge firearms (88 per cent) in Singapore.

Seniors and degree-holders were the more likely backers: Those aged 66 and older were 1.8 times more likely to support the death penalty, compared with those aged between 18 and 33, for instance. Degree-holders were 1.7 times more likely to support the punishment, versus those with primary or lower educational qualifications. "Chinese religionists", which included Taoists and Buddhists, were 2.3 times more likely to support the death penalty than Protestant Christians, who in turn, were twice as likely to favour the death penalty as Catholics here.

The respondents were asked to judge scenario cases, which were similar to actual court cases. The support level for imposing the death penalty fell when the participants were confronted with the facts of a case.

On why there was greater support among the better educated, Assoc Prof Tan said it could be because the middle-class was subscribed to ideologies of security as well as meritocracy, which perpetuates the belief that "one should get what one deserves". Asst Prof Lee noted that this group may also find it hard to sympathise or empathise with offenders. The researchers said that younger Singaporeans could be more liberal when it comes to crime and punishment, while the various religions have different views about forgiveness and punishment.

In 2013, changes to the death penalty laws gave judges sentencing discretion for certain categories of drug-related and homicide offences.

The Reach survey conducted in June this year found that support was especially strong for having the death penalty as the maximum punishment for violent crimes such as murder, but less so for drug trafficking. It did not make a distinction between mandatory and discretionary death penalty.

In the latest survey, among those who favoured the death penalty, a smaller group indicated that they would support it if it were mandatory. For intentional murder, drug trafficking and for discharging a firearm, 47 per cent, 32 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively, were in favour of the mandatory death penalty.

Assoc Prof Chan stressed the importance of studying the use of the "irreversible" death penalty. There is a need to look at public opinion, since public support is a common reason for the use of capital punishment, he said. Responding to queries, the Ministry of Law said it regularly reviews the laws on the death penalty to "ensure that it continues to serve the larger interests of society", and it will study the survey findings carefully. It reiterated that the death penalty is imposed here for the most serious crimes, sending a strong signal to deter offences that would "severely compromise the safety and security of Singapore".

## ROOM FOR ADJUSTMENT

● Tampines GRC Member of Parliament Desmond Choo, who sits on the Government Parliamentary Committee on Home Affairs and Law, said the survey reflects broad support in Singapore for the death penalty "as a critical element of our criminal justice system". Nevertheless, he noted that capital crimes are "complex and multifaceted". There is scope to work towards a "more calibrated system and greater court discretion", he said.