

Study finds evidence of class divide in Singapore

Researchers call for policies that promote more mixing between different classes

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The sharpest social divisions in Singapore may now be based on class, instead of race or religion, a study released yesterday suggests.

The Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Study On Social Capital In Singapore shows that Singaporeans who live in public housing have, on average, about one friend or fewer who lives in private housing.

People who study in elite schools also tend to be less close to those in non-elite schools, and vice versa.

About 3,000 Singapore citizens and permanent residents were in-

terviewed and asked to name the people they have ties with for the study, which is the first of its kind on such a scale here.

Researchers said the findings suggest a clear class divide in Singapore. They called for policies that encourage more mixing along class lines, while pointing out that voluntary groups such as sports clubs and religious organisations are where such mixing happens.

"We have shifted from a society based on race to one based also on class," said National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Vincent Chua, one of the study's three researchers.

"We have done a pretty good job

in fostering multiculturalism and mixing between ethnic groups, but maybe the next step now is to increase efforts to increase mixing between class groups," he added.

IPS deputy director Gillian Koh and NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser also worked on the study, which was supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

Respondents were asked about the people in their social networks, including who they discussed important matters with or confided in when they were feeling down.

They were also asked to name who they played sports with, or got help from for household matters such as collecting mail.

Results showed that a typical Singaporean had an average of 5.8 friends in his social network.

Schools and workplaces were the places where Singaporeans made

friends from another race, religion or country.

But while people were able to easily name a friend of a different gender or age, and even race or religion, they more rarely named someone from another class.

This preference for those from their own class was strong even after researchers took into account uneven group sizes – about 80 per cent of Singaporeans live in public flats, so there were fewer private-housing dwellers for them to meet.

Despite the vast majority of Singaporeans living in public housing, private-housing dwellers had more ties with others who lived in private homes than with those who lived in public flats.

Dr Chua said: "Even if you give people equal opportunities, they will still gravitate to hang out with their own kind. So, we have to

think of ways to disrupt this."

The researchers suggested that Singaporeans stuck to their groups as they could not connect with others due to cultural differences.

For instance, those from outside their circle may speak English differently or have different social norms and hobbies.

NUS' Professor Tan said: "The class divide may be happening because of globalisation, which leads to greater inequality."

He added: "We should continue to equalise opportunities... We don't want to be a society where the class divide and social inequality become wider."

MCCY said in a statement that it is important to have friends and acquaintances from different walks of life, and understand different perspectives and points of view.

It added that over the past years, it had rolled out programmes such as the SG Cares volunteering drive to promote social mixing between people from different backgrounds, and will continue to do so.

It said that ultimately, people have to build this sense of community "one encounter, one relationship at a time. It takes work by all of us".

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Experts call for policies to bridge class divide

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If not for his interests in collecting toys and comic books, Mr Jedd Jong, 24, may have found it hard to make friends of a different social class, he reckons.

The film critic and writer came from an elite school and lives in private housing, but counts among his friends many from non-elite schools and those living in Housing Board flats, whom he got to know through his hobbies.

His social network illustrates the findings of an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey released yesterday: On the one hand, people from elite and non-elite schools, and those who live in public and private housing, are not really mixing. But the more they play sports and take part in cultural activities or voluntary groups, the more diverse their networks, the Study On Social Capital In Singapore also found.

“Many of my current friends I met through the cosplay community,” said Mr Jong, who thinks it would have been hard to make friends across social groups without the common interests.

The study, which is the first of its kind, has led to some experts cautioning about the emergence of a class divide in Singapore. They called for policies that encourage more mixing along class lines to mitigate this, including tweaking admission policies for primary schools and encouraging more volunteering, including via religious

and community organisations, and more sports activities.

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Vincent Chua, who researches elite school networks, said students from “higher status” backgrounds may tend to have a higher chance of entering elite schools due to better academic performance, for instance.

With schools being one of the places where people get to know peers from different backgrounds, it would not be ideal if top schools became less diverse, added Dr Chua, who worked on the study with NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser and IPS deputy director Gillian Koh.

Pointing to a change in admission rules in 2014, which required all primary schools to set aside 40 places for children with no connections with the school, Dr Chua said this was a move in the right direction.

He suggested expanding the proportion of such places, and also limiting the number of places allotted to children of alumni members.

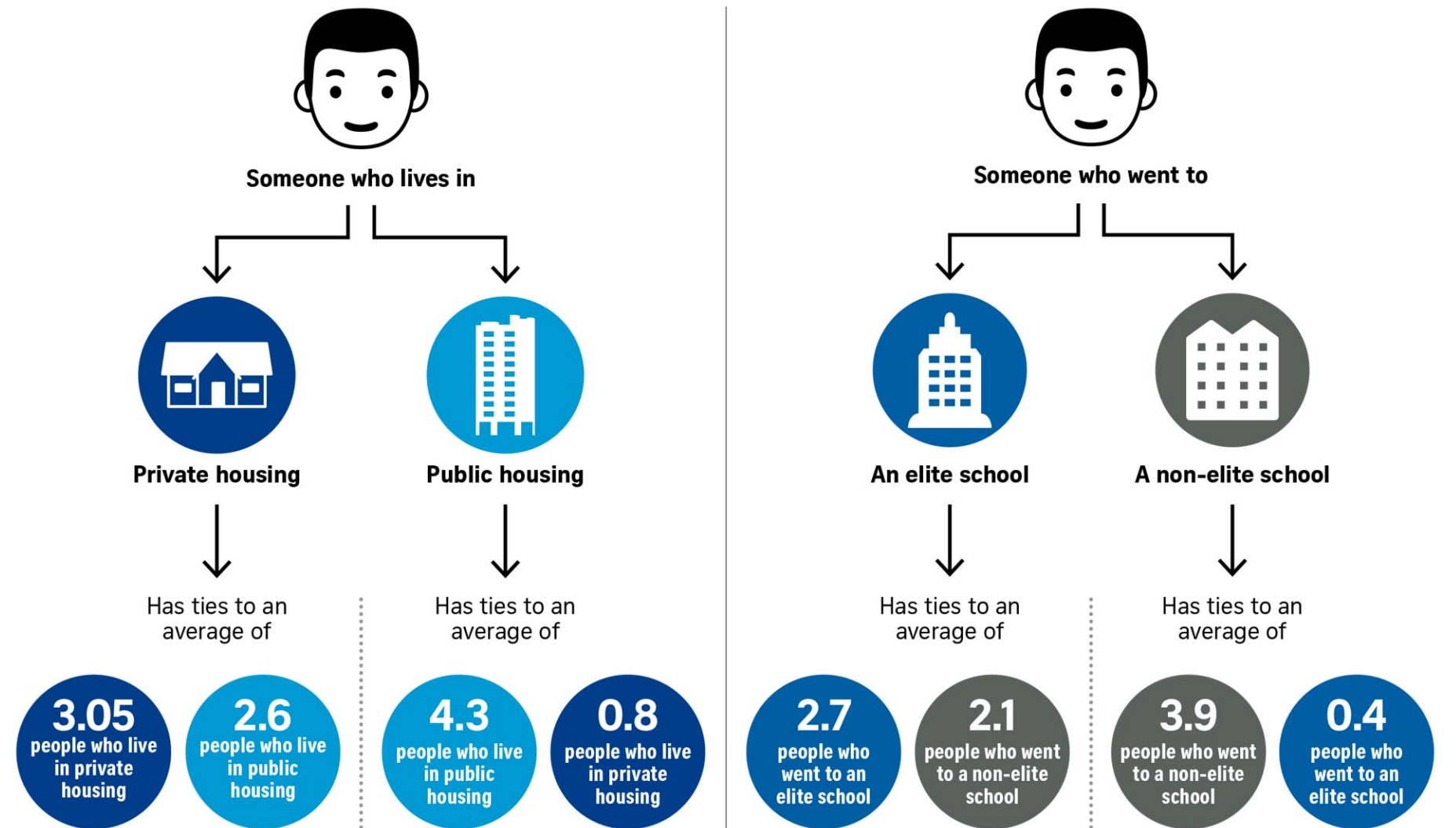
But Professor Tan said putting different groups together “does not by itself lead to integration”.

He suggested activities and projects across schools that would encourage students from different backgrounds to mingle and work together towards a common goal.

The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) said in response to Straits Times queries that it had introduced initiatives to promote mixing across different societal boundaries over the years.

It cited the Outward Bound Singapore camp that all Secondary 3 stu-

How diverse are Singapore's social networks?



NOTE: Results take into account uneven group sizes.

Source: A STUDY ON SOCIAL CAPITAL (2017), INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

dents will have to go for from 2020, as well as arts and heritage programmes and sports initiatives introduced to foster deeper community bonding and bring people from different backgrounds together.

The SG Cares movement has also helped to forge partnerships across various organisations such as companies, schools and public agencies, strengthening the civic culture and volunteerism, said MCCY.

“MCCY will continue to build social capital by stepping up its com-

munity engagement efforts in building a cohesive and caring community,” it added.

At the school level, individual schools such as Nanyang Girls High School have also encouraged students to interact with people from all walks of life.

In a statement to The Straits Times, the school said its students get to work, learn and play with students from other schools. They also take part in projects when they are in Secondary 2 in which they en-

gage different communities, such as those with special needs and lower-income families.

But the researchers say the onus is also on individuals to step out of their comfort zones and mix outside their social class.

Dr Koh said: “Our call to action is to mix more without consciousness about status. Hopefully, we find many platforms where status doesn’t matter.”

Another finding from the study was that those with more diverse

networks tend to have stronger feelings of national pride and trust towards people from other races, religions or countries.

Having more friends from different backgrounds broadens people’s world view, said the researchers.

“It is in everyday life that we foster these connections, and it is with these connections that you think nationally instead of just within your own group,” said Prof Tan.

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