

Perception of Residents in Regional Cities on Singapore's Crime Situation, Law and Safety

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Abstract

The Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, commissioned a public perception survey in 2018 to seek regional residents' views of Singapore's Crime Situation, Law, and Safety. The survey was administered to respondents from six regional cities (n=7,221) in two phases using telephone interviews. Overall, respondents (a) perceived Singapore to be safe; (b) were aware of Singapore's laws for serious crimes such as murder, smuggling of firearms and drug trafficking; (c) believed that Singapore's laws are strict and deters people from committing serious crimes; and (d) believed that Singapore's law enforcement is effective.

Background

Singapore is widely regarded as one of the safest countries in the world, ranking at the top of various indices (see Table 1). Crime rates are generally low (Reynolds, 2017). Singapore's strict laws, together with its impartial and efficient law enforcement, could have contributed to the low crime rate (Cheong, 2022). For instance, Singapore strictly controls access to firearms and has tough drug laws. The Singapore Police Force enjoys high levels of public confidence, where 87% of respondents in a survey of public attitudes and values conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies reported being confident or very confident in the abilities of the Singapore Police Force (Matthews et al., 2021).

Table 1: Safety and Security-related Indices Topped by Singapore

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Out of 144 countries, Singapore topped The Gallup's Global Law and Order Index from 2015 to 2020 (Gallup, 2020).¹2. Out of 15 countries, Singapore topped the 2021 Rule of Law Index in the East Asia and Pacific Region for Order and Security (ranked third globally out of 139 countries) and Regulatory Enforcement (ranked fourth globally out of 139 countries) (The World Justice Project, 2021) |
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Singapore's strategic location in the centre of Southeast Asia and modern airport with an international reputation (topped the ranking of the Skytrax World Airport Awards for eight consecutive years until 2020) (Skytrax, 2022) helped turn Singapore into a major aviation hub and a popular travel destination both globally and in the Southeast Asia region. Singapore received 19.12 million travellers in 2019, and the largest group of travellers (6.62 million) were from the Southeast Asia region (see Table 2). The tourism industry is also crucial to the Singapore economy, contributing four percent to its gross domestic product (GDP). In 2019,

¹ Singapore was not surveyed in the 2021 Law and Order Index due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

total tourism receipts in Singapore were S\$27.69 billion, up from S\$26.94 billion in 2018 (Singapore Tourism Board, 2022).

Table 2: Visitor Arrivals to Singapore in 2019 (Department of Statistics, 2022; Singapore Tourism Board, 2022)

Year	Region of Residence	Visitor Arrivals ²	Percentage
2019	Southeast Asia	6624323	35%
	Greater China	4571748	24%
	Europe	2132809	11%
	South Asia	1713693	9%
	North Asia	1530353	8%
	Oceania	1320506	7%
	Americas	962711	5%
	West Asia	168902	1%
	Africa	90966	0%
	Others	5	0%
	Total	19116016	100%

It is well established that the perceived safety and security of a country is a key factor in travellers' decision to visit a destination (Mataković & Mataković, 2019; Williams & Baláž, 2015). Travellers' safety and security concerns tend to stem from the fear of crime victimisation rates (George, 2003; Holcomb & Pizam, 2006) and inadequate knowledge of the travel destination (Amir et al., 2015; Boakye, 2010). Specifically, travellers may have concerns of becoming 'easy targets' to criminals in travel destinations with high crime rates and unfamiliarity with the destination could hinder help-seeking (George, 2010).

Various factors contribute to travellers' perception of safety and security of a country. Firstly, previous travel or crime victimisation experiences in a country can influence the perceived safety and security of a country (Feldbauer & Paris, 2020; Yazid et al., 2018). Next, media coverage and portrayal of crimes can also play an important role in influencing a country's perceived safety and security (George, 2003). In some instances, media could be the only available source of information and individuals may perceive it as a reliable source of information. Finally, the perceived effectiveness of law enforcement (George, 2003; Mawby, 2021; Seabra et al., 2013) and strictness of laws within a country (Suryana, 2021) could reassure travellers of their safety as criminals are swiftly arrested and punished.

Singapore's reputation as a safe tourist hub would provide the country with a competitive edge to further cement its status as a popular tourist destination. In view of this, it is important for Singapore to understand how travellers perceive safety, security, and the effectiveness of law enforcement in Singapore to maintain its status as a popular travel destination. It is also important for Singapore to examine and ensure travellers' awareness and perceived effectiveness of its laws, so that the risk of travellers committing a serious offence in Singapore (e.g., possession of a firearm, illicit drug consumption) can be minimised (Stasiak, 2015, as cited in Martyniak, 2020). To this end, the Ministry of Home Affairs commissioned a study to

² International visitor arrivals numbers to Singapore exclude: Malaysian citizens arriving by land; returning Singapore citizens, permanent residents, and pass holders; non-resident air and sea crew (except for sea crew flying in to join a ship); air transit and transfer passengers; and arrivals staying in Singapore for more than a year.

be conducted in six regional cities to establish regional residents' awareness and perception of crime, safety, and security in Singapore.

Survey Methodology

Participants

A total of 7,221 respondents from six regional cities responded to telephone interviews conducted with the assistance of survey companies engaged by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The survey was carried out in two phases, in late 2018 and 2021 respectively. These six regional cities were selected because of the significant numbers of travellers from these cities who visited Singapore in recent years. As the largest group of regional travellers to Singapore in the past few years were aged between 25 to 34 years old (Singapore Tourism Board, 2022), the study focused on respondents aged between 20 to 39 years old who had moderate to high levels of familiarity with Singapore.³

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 38 questions and took respondents an average of 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire consisted of four sections (i) respondent demographics (ii) perception of safety in Singapore, (iii) perception of Singapore's laws and their effectiveness in deterring crimes in Singapore, and (iv) perception of effectiveness of law enforcement in Singapore. Nearly all questions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The only exception was a question that provided respondents with four options (prison sentence, caning, life imprisonment, and the death penalty) and sought their views on which option deterred people the most from ever thinking about trafficking drugs in Singapore. The questionnaire was prepared in English and translated by the survey companies into the native languages of the six regional cities. Independent reviewers who were fluent in both English and one of the translated languages verified the accuracy of the translated surveys. Respondents could participate in the telephone interviews in any of the five languages, including English.

Procedure

The survey companies employed several strategies (e.g., face-to-face and social media referrals, social media posts in travel interest groups, and messaging platforms) to create a respondent database. Trained interviewers from the survey companies retrieved potential respondent information from the database and potential respondents were approached via telephone calls for their interest to participate in the survey. Participation was voluntary and the interviewers explained the purpose of the survey and sought verbal consent from respondents before the start of a telephone interview. The interviewers entered survey responses directly into a database. At least three call backs were made at different times of the day on different days of the week before a potential respondent was categorised as non-contactable.

³ 96.1% of respondents had travelled to Singapore at least once and have previously sought information about Singapore. The remaining 3.9% of respondents (who had never travelled to Singapore) had sought information about Singapore from at least five various types of sources (e.g., travel agents, brochures).

The collected data was cleaned and weighted to approximate a sample representative of the respective cities based on gender, as male respondents were underrepresented in the sample. Youth respondents aged 20 – 29 were also overrepresented in the survey (see Table 3). However, the data was not weighted by age as the relevant population data was not publicly available. Hence, the findings of the survey should be interpreted with this in mind.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variable		Number of Participants (%)
Gender (Weighted)	Male	3626 (50.26)
	Female	3589 (49.74)
Age	20 – 29 years old	5,081 (70.36)
	30 – 39 years old	2,140 (29.64)

Key Survey Findings

Perception of Safety in Singapore

A large majority of the respondents perceived Singapore to be a safe country when they travelled to Singapore (94.3%) and trusted Singapore’s law enforcement to keep them safe (93.8%). Across all cities, 76.5% of respondents reported to not worry about being a victim of crime when they visit Singapore.

Table 4: Findings on the Perception of Safety in Singapore

Statement	% Of respondents who strongly agreed/agreed across the six cities		
	Lowest value	Average value	Highest value
I feel safe if/when I travel in Singapore	88%	94.3%	98%
I trust the law enforcement officer (e.g., Police, Narcotics, Immigration) in Singapore to keep me safe if/when I am in Singapore	85%	93.8%	98%
I do not worry about being a victim of crime if/when I visit Singapore *	69%	76.5%	88%

Note: Values in the table reflect the lowest, average, and highest levels of support for respective statements across all six cities. Items marked with an asterisk denote statements that were phrased negatively during fieldwork to ensure consistency of responses (e.g., I worry about being a victim of crime if/when I visit Singapore).

Awareness of Laws in Singapore

A vast majority of respondents believed that laws against crimes in Singapore are strict (92.5%) and have been effective in preventing crime (91.0%). 88.0% of respondents also believed that people would hesitate against committing a crime in Singapore because of its strict laws.

Table 5: Findings on the Awareness of Laws in Singapore

Statement	% Of respondents who strongly agreed/agreed across the six cities		
	Lowest value	Average value	Highest value

I believe that laws against crimes in Singapore are strict	88%	92.5%	95%
I believe that Singapore's strict laws have been effective in preventing crime	81%	91.0%	98%
I believe that people will hesitate against committing a crime in Singapore, given its strict laws	84%	88.0%	95%
I am aware that drug consumption is a crime in Singapore	86%	95.0%	99%
I am aware that drug trafficking (e.g., selling drugs, transporting drugs for the purpose of selling) is a crime in Singapore	91%	96.1%	99.5%
I am aware that people can receive the death penalty for committing serious crimes (e.g., intentional murder, smuggling firearms, drug trafficking) in Singapore	68%	80.5%	86%
I am aware that people can receive the death penalty for trafficking drugs in Singapore	71%	80.2%	89%

Note: Values in the table reflect the lowest, average, and highest levels of support for respective statements across all six cities.

Perception of Effectiveness of Laws in Preventing People from Committing Serious Crimes in Singapore

Majority of respondents agreed that the death penalty has a deterrent effect for serious crimes (e.g., intentional murder, smuggling firearms, drug trafficking) (86.0%) and drug trafficking (87.2%) in Singapore. Additionally, most respondents believed that the death penalty is more effective than life imprisonment in doing so (77.3% for serious crimes, and 82.5% for drug trafficking). When presented with four legal consequences (death penalty, life imprisonment, caning, and prison sentence), majority of respondents (62.0%) believed that the death penalty deterred people the most from drug trafficking in Singapore (see Figure 1).

Table 6: Findings on the Perception of Effectiveness of Laws in Preventing People from Committing Serious Crimes in Singapore

Statement	% Of respondents who strongly agreed/agreed across the six cities		
	Lowest value	Average value	Highest value
I believe that the death penalty makes people not want to <u>commit serious crimes</u> (e.g., intentional murder, smuggling firearms, drug trafficking) in Singapore because of the potential of being caught, convicted, and sentenced to death	82%	86.0%	95%
I believe that the death penalty makes people not want to <u>traffic substantial amounts of drugs</u> into Singapore because of the potential of being caught, convicted, and sentenced to death	83%	87.2%	96%

I believe that <u>compared to life imprisonment</u> , the death penalty is more effective in discouraging people from <u>committing serious crimes</u> (e.g., intentional murder, smuggling firearms, drug trafficking) in Singapore	69%	77.3%	91%
I believe that <u>compared to life imprisonment</u> , the death penalty is more effective in discouraging people from <u>trafficking drugs</u> into Singapore	75%	82.5%	92%

Note: Values in the table reflect the lowest, average, and highest levels of support for respective statements across all six cities.

Perception of Law Enforcement in Singapore

Across all cities, 89.2% of respondents were confident in Singapore’s law enforcement. A vast majority of respondents believed that people who committed offences in Singapore would be caught (93.3% for serious crimes, 91.7% for drug consumption, and 94.2% for drug trafficking). Majority of respondents also believed that people would not be able to evade punishment when caught in Singapore (81.5% for serious crimes, 86.2% for drug consumption, and 89.0% for drug trafficking).

Table 7: Findings on the Perception of Law Enforcement in Singapore

Statement	% Of respondents who strongly agreed/agreed across the six cities		
	Lowest value	Average value	Highest value
I think the law enforcement officers (e.g., Police, Narcotics, Immigration) in Singapore are effective in catching people who commit crimes	84%	89.2%	97%
I think people will likely be caught if they committed a crime in Singapore	90%	93.3%	97%
I think people will not be able to get away from being punished if they were caught for committing a crime in Singapore *	74%	81.5%	92%
I think people will likely be caught if they consumed drugs in Singapore	85%	91.7%	97%
I think people will not be able to get away from being punished if they were caught for consuming drugs in Singapore *	79%	86.2%	95%
I think people will likely be caught if they got involved in drug trafficking activities in Singapore	90%	94.2%	98%
I think people will not be able to get away from being punished if they were caught for being involved in drug trafficking activities in Singapore *	82%	89.0%	96%

Note: Values in the table reflect the lowest, average, and highest levels of support for respective statements across all six cities. Items marked with an asterisk denote statements that were phrased negatively during fieldwork to ensure consistency of responses (e.g., I think people

will be able to get away from being punished if they were caught for committing a crime in Singapore).

Conclusion

Previous studies have found that most locals felt very safe in Singapore (e.g., Gallup, 2020) and had high levels of confidence in the Singapore Police Force (Matthews et al., 2021). The present study found similar findings among residents from regional cities. Specifically, the study found that regional residents a) perceived Singapore to be safe, b) were aware of laws for serious crimes such as murder and drug trafficking, c) believed that our laws deter serious crimes, and d) believed that our law enforcement is effective.

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