IPS Study on Attitudes towards the

Use of Capital Punishment

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October 2022

1. BACKGROUND

This study, commissioned by the Ministry of Home Affairs, seeks to fill research gaps pertaining to understanding public opinion of the death penalty in Singapore. Studies that measure public opinion of the death penalty in Singapore remain relatively scarce, with only a handful of public surveys and polls conducted thus far. This study adds to the existing body of research done on public opinion pertaining to the death penalty in Singapore and helps track public support for the death penalty over time. Furthermore, this study will take a comprehensive and nuanced look at people's support for the death penalty, including their support for death penalty in general, their support for different types of offences, and the reasons behind their support (or lack thereof).

Using a survey, this study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) examined people's interest, knowledge, and attitudes towards capital punishment in Singapore, specifically:

1. What are people's attitudes towards the death penalty?

2. How is their engagement with the topic of death penalty like (e.g., their interest in the death penalty, their level of knowledge about the death penalty in Singapore)?

3. What are the reasons for people's attitudes towards the death penalty in Singapore (e.g., deterrent reasons, retributive reasons and other reasons)?

1.1 Method

Data collection was conducted between 3 October 2019 to 13 January 2020 via a door-to-door household interview using the computer-assisted data collection (CAPI) system. Households were selected based on stratified random household sampling to select households according to geographical location and housing type, using the sampling frame provided by the Department of Statistics.

The target respondents of this study were Singapore citizens and permanent residents aged 18 years old and above. Parental or guardian signed consent was obtained before the survey was conducted with young persons aged between 18 and 20 years old. The final sample size was 2,000 people. The details of the respondents' profile can be found in the Annex.

The data collected was weighted using age, gender, and race based on the Population Trends 2019 published by the Department of Statistics Singapore[1] to reflect the general population aged 18 years old and above (see the Annex for the unweighted and weighted distribution of respondents in the sample).

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[1] Population Trends (2019). Department of Statistics, Singapore. Retrieved from https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/population2019.pdf.

2. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE DEATH PENALTY

This section presents the findings on people's knowledge about the death penalty, and their attitudes towards the death penalty for three types of crimes (intentional murder, firearm offences and drug trafficking).

2.1 Knowledge about the death penalty

Our study measured their level of knowledge about issues relating to the death penalty in Singapore. We listed eight statements relating to the death penalty where respondents had to select either "true" or "false" for each statement. Respondents were also given the "do not know" option.

Respondents were relatively knowledgeable about issues relating to the death penalty. Almost half of the respondents (45.7 per cent) had a medium level of knowledge about the death penalty, and over 40 per cent of the respondents (43.6 per cent) of the respondents had a high level of knowledge. About 10 per cent of the respondents had a low level of knowledge about the death penalty in Singapore.[2] See Figure 1 for respondents' level of knowledge about the death penalty in Singapore.

Figure 1: Level of knowledge about the death penalty in Singapore

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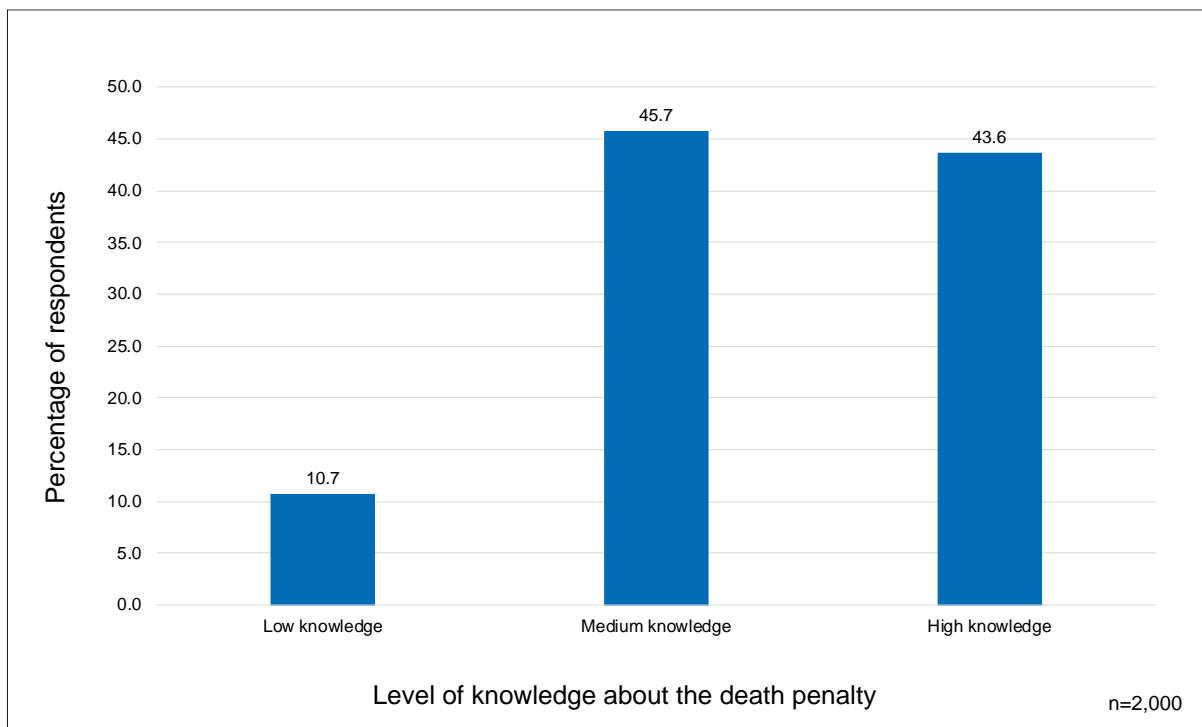
[2] Respondents were grouped into three categories, those with (1) low (gave zero to two correct answers), (2) medium (gave three to five correct answers) and (3) high (gave six to eight correct answers) levels of knowledge about the death penalty in Singapore.

The statement that received the highest number of correct answers was, *"Singapore has the death penalty for intentional murder"* — 82.1 per cent of the respondents correctly said this was true. More respondents knew that Singapore has the death penalty for intentional murder and drug trafficking (78.8 per cent of respondents answered this correctly) than for the intentional use of firearms to cause hurt (61.2 per cent answered this correctly). Only a small group of respondents (13.1 per cent) gave the correct answer ("False") to the statement, *"In the last five years, fewer than five people were executed yearly"*. Despite the policy change to give courts discretion when sentencing drug traffickers upon certain conditions being satisfied, and discussion in the media and civil society space, only about half of the respondents (54 per cent) knew of the discretionary death penalty for drug-related offences. See Table 1 for how respondents fared for each of the eight knowledge questions about the death penalty.

Table 1: Knowledge about the death penalty

No.	Statements relating to the death penalty	Responses	Percentage (%) of respondents
1	Singapore has the death penalty for intentional murder.	True	82.1
		False	4.9
		Don't know	13.1
2	Singapore has the death penalty for drug traffickers who traffic a substantial amount of drugs (e.g., 1,250 straws of heroin, which can feed about 180 abusers for a week).	True	78.8
		False	2.3
		Don't know	19.0
3	The death penalty is not imposed on persons who are suffering from certain mental illnesses.	True	70.1
		False	7.7
		Don't know	22.2
4	Young persons under the age of 18 are not subject to the death penalty in Singapore.	True	68.3
		False	10.0
		Don't know	21.7
5	All persons sentenced to death by the High Court will have their convictions and sentence reviewed by the Court of Appeal.	True	63.3
		False	6.0
		Don't know	30.8
6	Singapore has the death penalty for the intentional use of firearms to cause hurt.	True	61.2
		False	10.5
		Don't know	28.3
7	Singapore allows for judges to impose life imprisonment instead of the death penalty for cases of offenders who merely transport drugs and who cooperate with the authorities.	True	54.0
		False	14.1
		Don't know	31.8
8	In the last five years, fewer than five people were executed yearly in Singapore.	True	23.3
		False	13.1
		Don't know	63.5

3. SUPPORT FOR THE DEATH PENALTY

3.1 Support for the death penalty in general

We found that almost three-quarters of the respondents (74 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that the death penalty is justified for the most serious of crimes. When respondents were asked whether they supported the death penalty as a form of punishment in general without reference to the type of crime, the level of support was lower — 53.7 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they support the death penalty in general, and 58.6 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they were in favour of retaining the death penalty in Singapore. Finally, about one-fifth of the respondents (22.9 per cent) said they did not approve of the death penalty in all instances. See Figure 2 for respondents' support of the death penalty in general.

Figure 2: Support for the death penalty in general
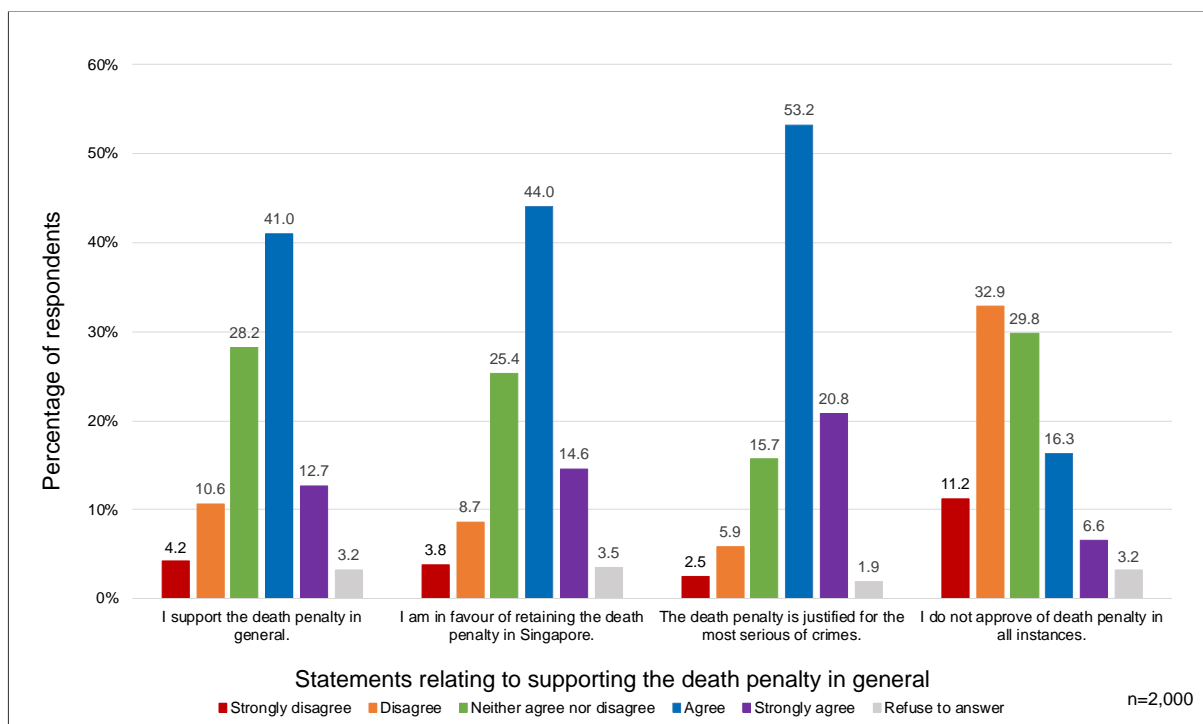
3.2 Support for the mandatory death penalty

We also measured respondents' level of support for the mandatory death penalty for three types of offences — (1) intentional murder, (2) firearm offences and (3) drug trafficking.

The responses for the use of death penalty for the three types of offences show that people gave higher support for the use of death penalty for specific offences, as compared to its use as a form of punishment in general.

The support for mandatory death penalty was higher for some offences than others. For example, the support for the mandatory death penalty for intentional murder was the highest (71.4 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed), followed by the intentional trafficking a substantial amount of drugs (61.5 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed), and lastly the

5

discharging of a firearm with the intention of causing physical injury (60.1 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed). Clearly, respondents viewed intentional murder as the most heinous crime among the three which justifies the use of the death penalty as a punishment. When considered with the earlier finding that 74 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the death penalty is justified for the most serious of crimes, the support for the use of the mandatory death penalty for these three types of offences show that a majority of the respondents agree that these are serious crimes that justify the death penalty.

See Figure 3 for respondents' support for the mandatory death penalty.

3.3 Support for the death penalty as a form of retribution

This section presents the findings of respondents' support for the death penalty for three types of offences as a form of retribution.

Respondents supported the death penalty as a form of retribution because of the harm to another's life. The crime with the most support for the death penalty as a form of retribution was intentional murder — 70.6 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a person convicted of intentional murder deserves the death penalty because he or she took a life. This was followed by firearms offences, with 64.6 per cent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that a person using firearms to intentionally cause physical injury to another person deserves the death penalty because he or she could have killed or injured another person); and finally drug trafficking, with 64.1 per cent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that a person intentionally trafficking a substantial amount of drugs into Singapore deserves the death penalty because he or she would have harmed the lives of many addicts.

Respondents also supported the death penalty as a form of retribution because of the harm that was caused to the victims' families and friends. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (62.9 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that a person convicted of intentionally trafficking a substantial amount of drugs into Singapore deserves the death penalty because he or she harms the lives of many addicts' families. This was followed by intentional murder and using firearms with intent to cause physical injury — 62.5 per cent and 60.5 percent of respondents respectively agreed or strongly agreed that persons convicted of these deserved the death penalty because the friends and families of the victims would otherwise feel as if justice had not been served.

Taking into account the nature of the harm caused in the different offences, our findings also suggest that slightly more of the respondents supported the death penalty as a form of retribution for direct harm (i.e., caused to the victim) than for indirect harm (i.e., caused to the victim's families and friends). See Figure 4 for respondents' support for the death penalty as a form of retribution.

Figure 3: Support for the mandatory death penalty for three types of offences
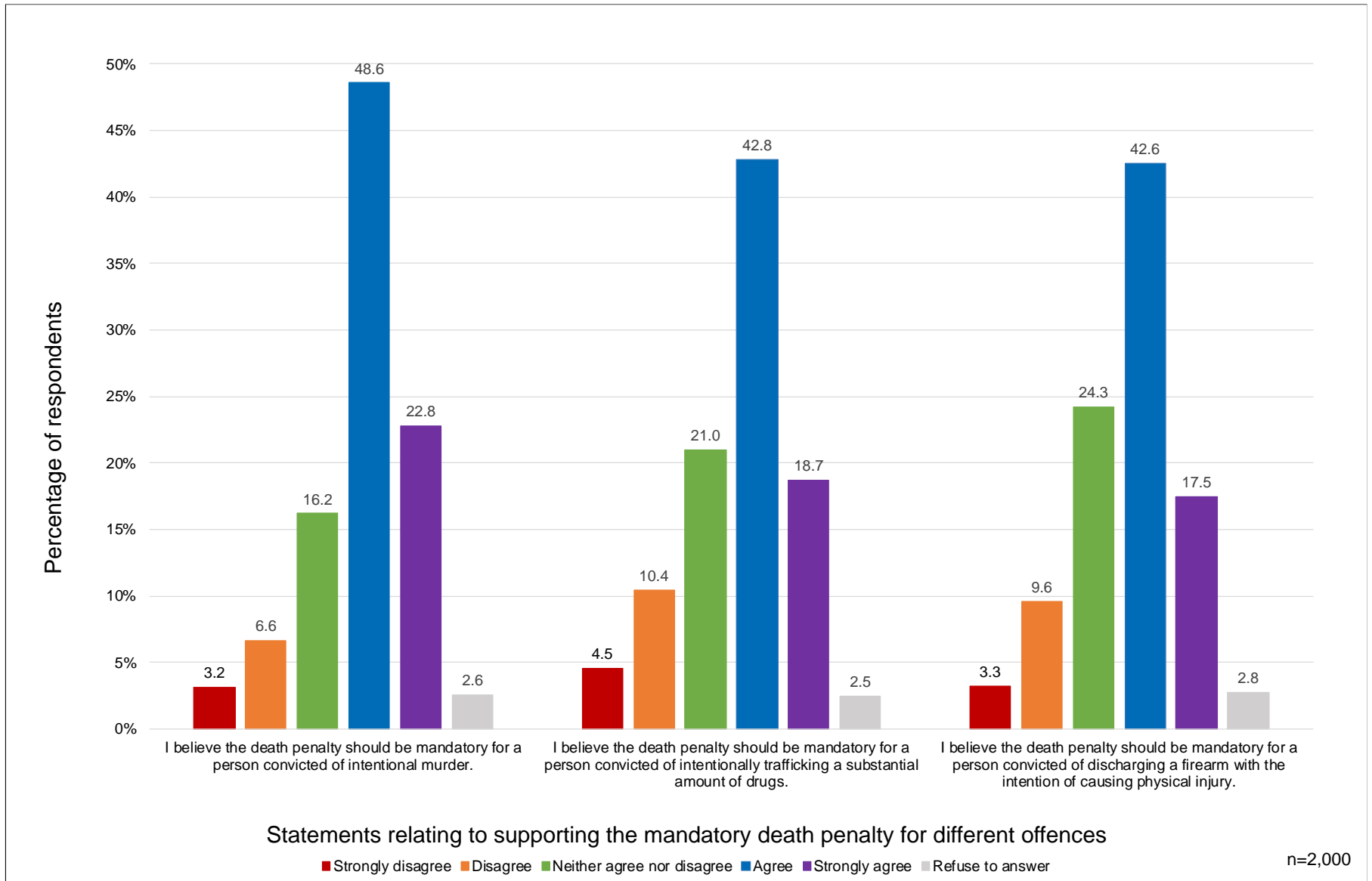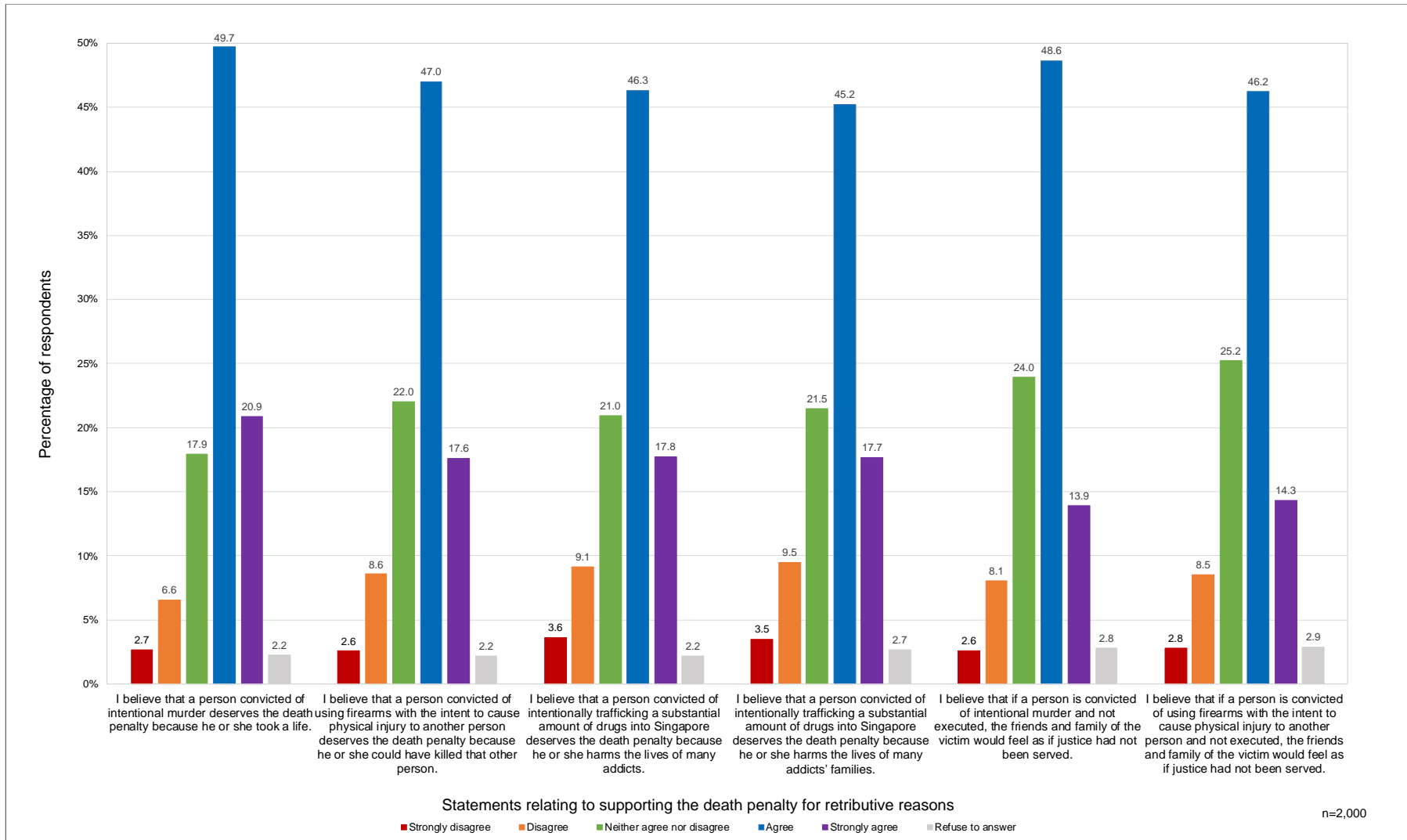
Figure 4: Support for the death penalty for retributive reasons

Percentage of respondents

	I believe that a person convicted of intentional murder deserves the death penalty because he or she took a life.	I believe that a person convicted of using firearms with the intent to cause physical injury to another person deserves the death penalty because he or she could have killed that other person.	I believe that a person convicted of intentionally trafficking a substantial amount of drugs into Singapore deserves the death penalty because he or she harms the lives of many addicts.	I believe that a person convicted of intentionally trafficking a substantial amount of drugs into Singapore deserves the death penalty because he or she harms the lives of many addicts' families.	I believe that if a person is convicted of intentional murder and not executed, the friends and family of the victim would feel as if justice had not been served.	I believe that if a person is convicted of using firearms with the intent to cause physical injury to another person and not executed, the friends and family of the victim would feel as if justice had not been served.
Strongly disagree	2.7	2.6	3.6	3.5	2.6	2.8
Disagree	6.6	8.6	9.1	9.5	8.1	8.5
Neither agree nor disagree	17.9	22.0	21.0	21.5	24.0	25.2
Agree	49.7	47.0	46.3	45.2	48.6	46.2
Strongly agree	20.9	17.6	17.8	17.7	13.9	14.3
Refuse to answer	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.7	2.8	2.9

Statements relating to supporting the death penalty for retributive reasons

n=2,000

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Neither agree nor disagree   Agree   Strongly agree   Refuse to answer
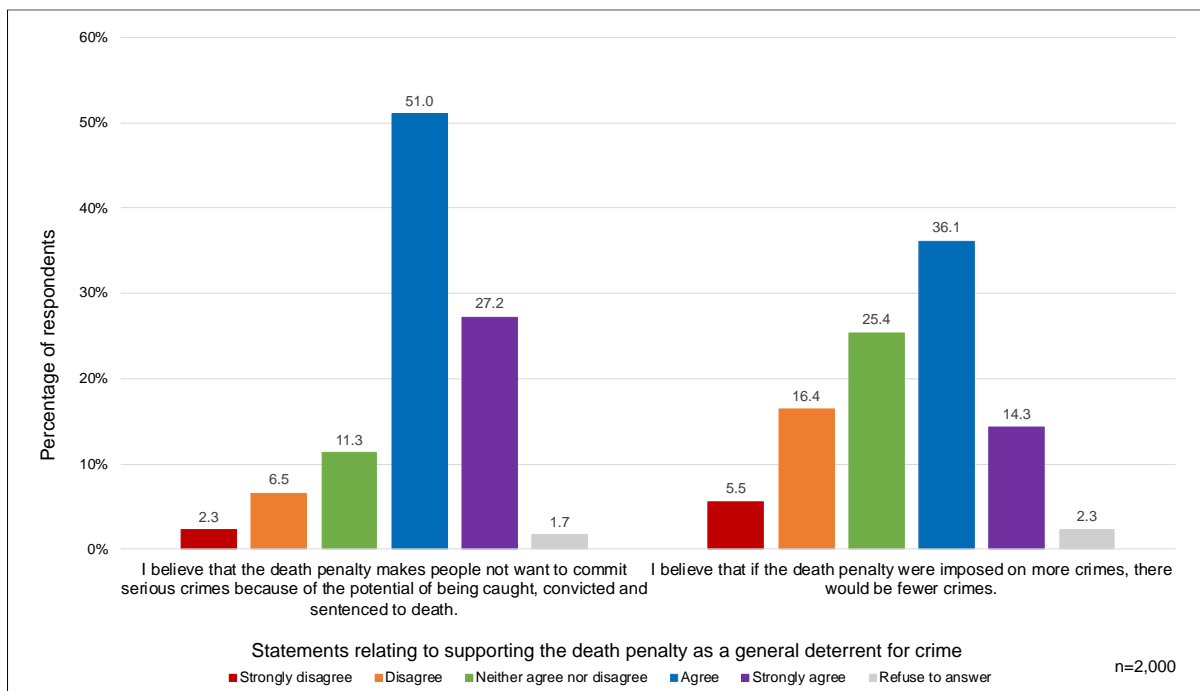
3.4 Support for the death penalty as a deterrent

Comparing the level of support for the death penalty for retributive and deterrent reasons, the respondents showed stronger support for the death penalty as a form of deterrent than as a form of retribution. When it came to respondents' support for the death penalty as a deterrent, 78.2 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the death penalty serves as a deterrent for serious crimes in general.

Despite the support for the death penalty as a deterrent, only half of the respondents (50.4 per cent) believed that there would be fewer crimes if the death penalty were imposed on more crimes. This corroborates the findings presented earlier, which showed that the majority of respondents felt that the death penalty was justified for the most serious of crimes. This may imply that respondents' support for the death penalty as a deterrent largely applies to the most serious of crimes but not the less serious ones. See Figure 5 for respondents' support for the death penalty as a general deterrent for crime.
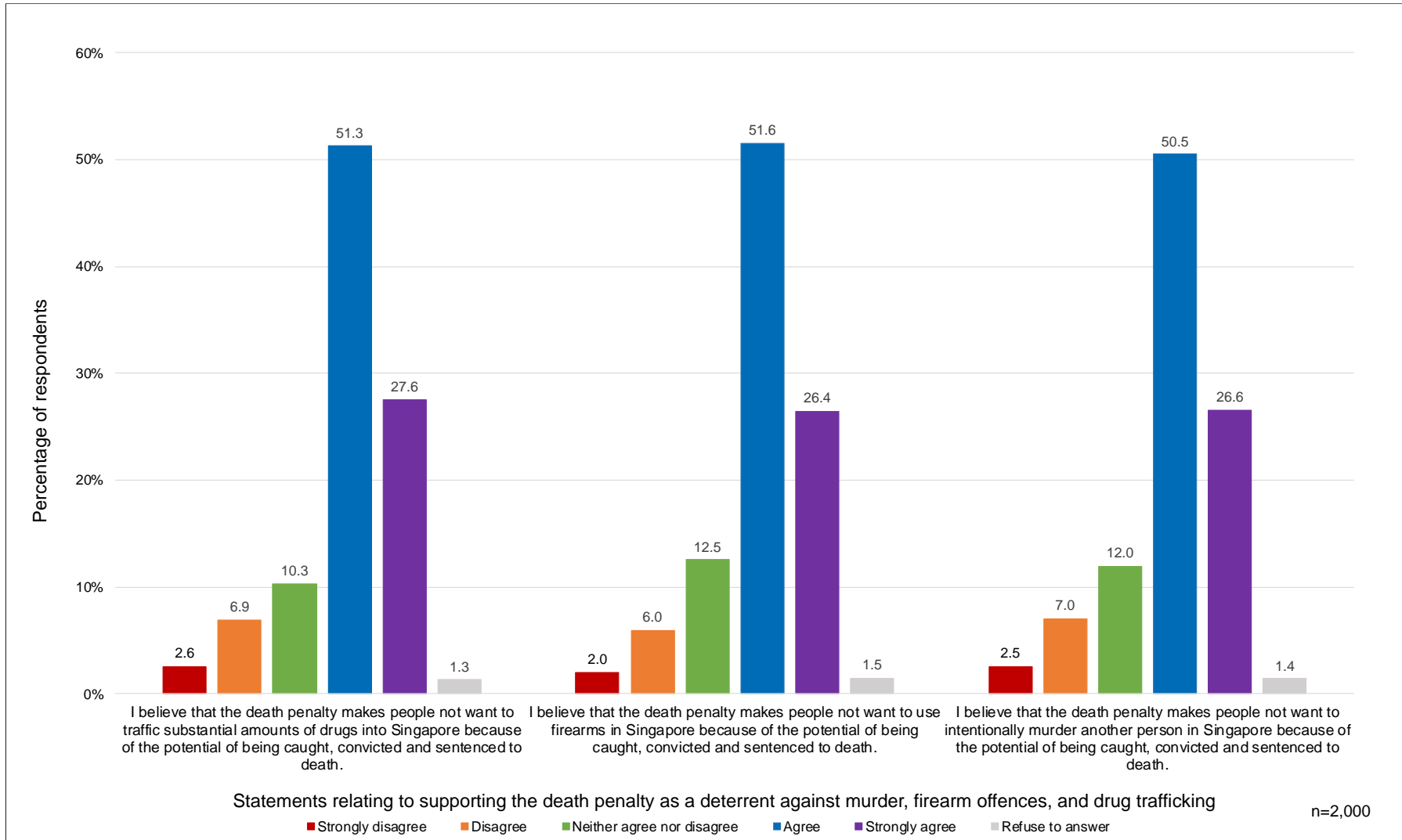
Figure 5: Support for the death penalty as a general deterrent for crime

In addition, we also looked at respondents' support for the death penalty as a deterrent against committing three types of offences (i.e., intentional murder, firearm offences, and drug trafficking).

We found that support for the death penalty as a deterrent against drug trafficking was the highest — 78.9 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the death penalty deters people from trafficking substantial amounts of drugs into Singapore because of the potential of being caught, convicted, and sentenced to death. This was followed closely by firearm offences (78 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed), and intentional murder (77.1 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed. See Figure 6 for respondents' support for the death penalty as a deterrent against intentional murder, firearm offences, and drug trafficking.

Figure 6: Support for the death penalty as a deterrent against intentional murder, firearm offences, and drug trafficking
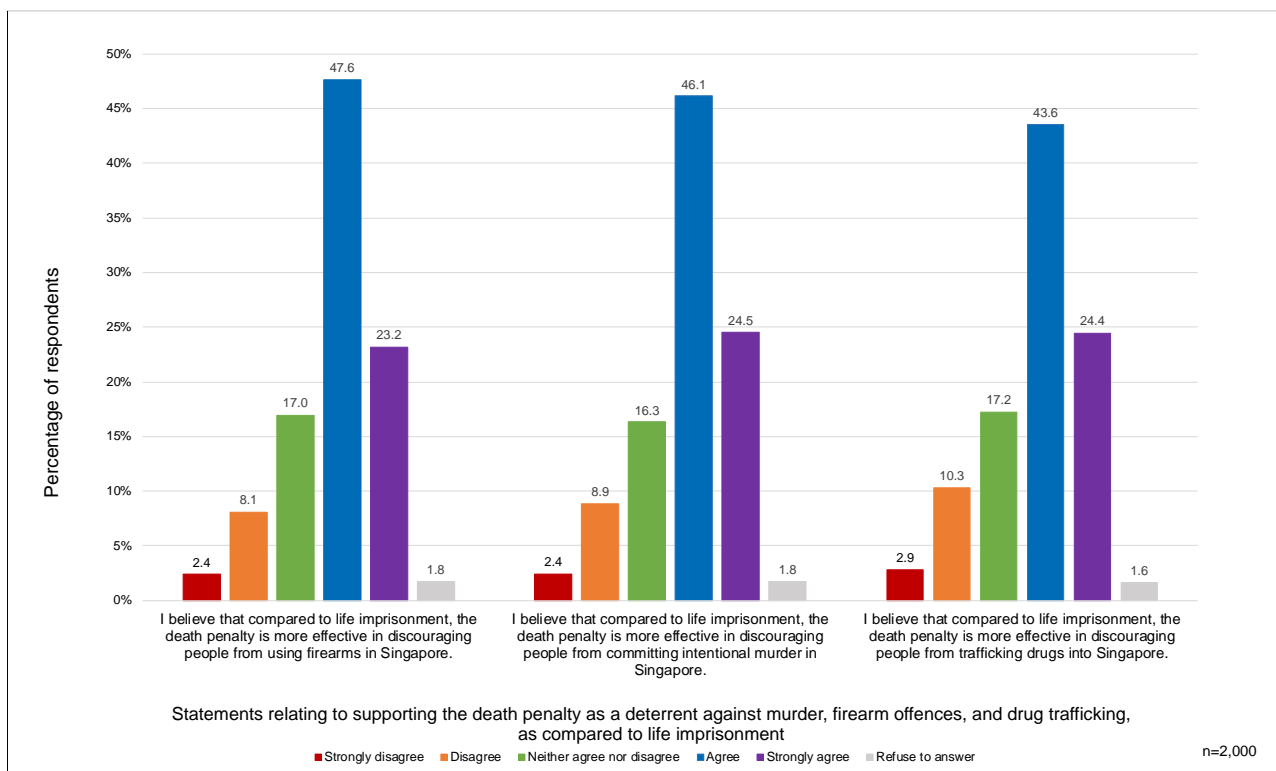
In addition to measuring respondents' support for the death penalty as a deterrent against the three types of offences, we also looked at respondents' support for the death penalty as a deterrent against the same offences, as compared to life imprisonment.

Respondents' support for the death penalty as a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment was highest for firearm offences in Singapore (70.8 per cent of them agreed or strongly agreed). This was closely followed by intentional murder (70.6 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed), and drug trafficking (68 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed).

See Figure 7 for respondents' support for the death penalty as a deterrent against intentional murder, firearm offences, and drug trafficking, as compared to life imprisonment.

Figure 7: Support for the death penalty as a deterrent against three types of offences, as compared to life imprisonment
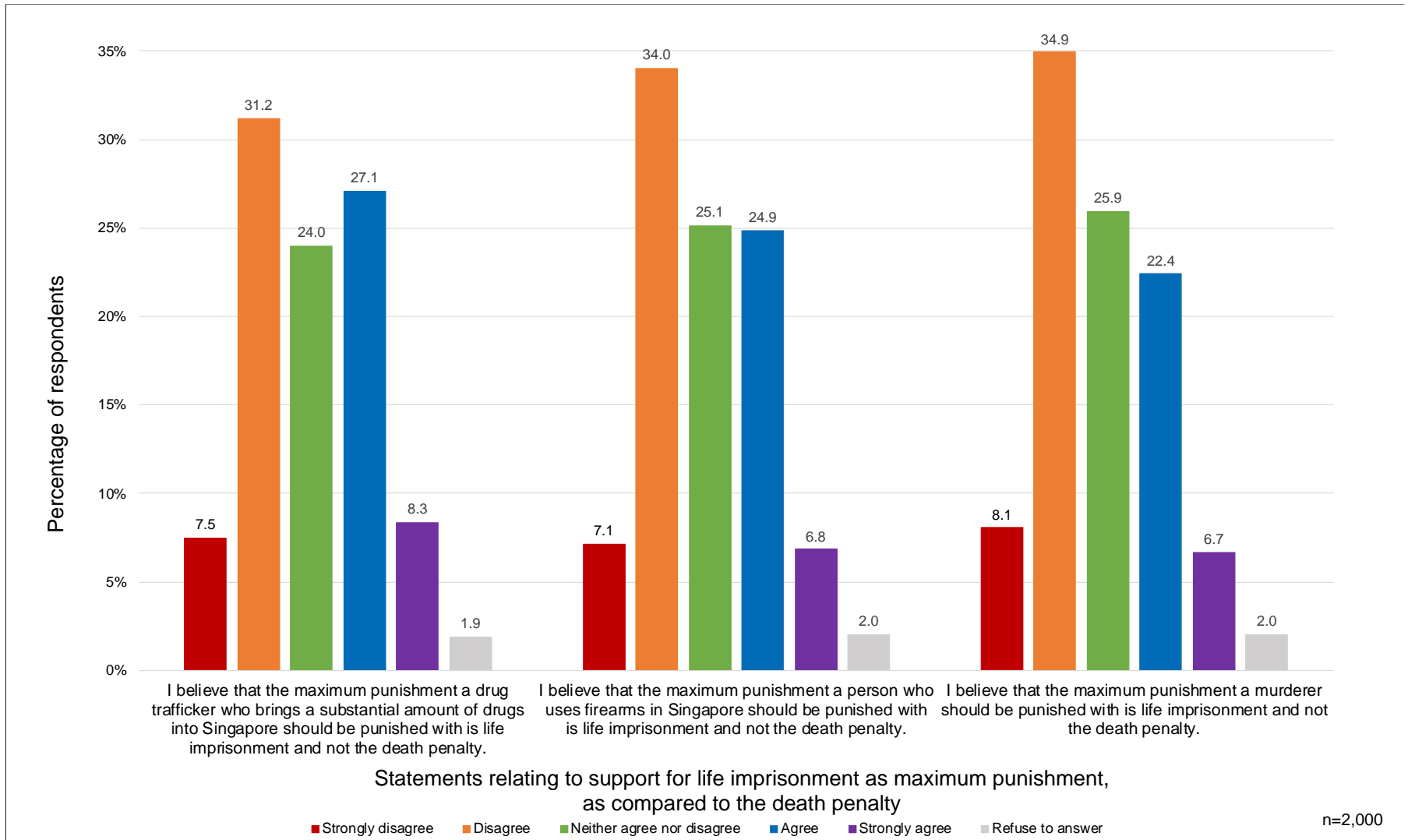
3.5 Support for life imprisonment

In addition to looking at respondents' support for the death penalty as a deterrent against the three types of offences as compared to life imprisonment, we also looked at respondents' support for the life imprisonment as a form of maximum punishment for the same offences, as compared to the death penalty.

In general, we found lower support for life imprisonment as a form of maximum punishment as compared to the death penalty. Just over a third (35.4 per cent) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the maximum punishment for drug trafficking should be life imprisonment and not the death penalty. This was followed by firearm offences (31.7 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed), and intentional murder (29.1 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed).

The low support for life imprisonment corroborates our earlier findings that found a high level of support for the death penalty as a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment against all three offences. See Figure 8.

Figure 8: Support for life imprisonment as maximum punishment, as compared to the death penalty

Percentage of respondents

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Refuse to answer
I believe that the maximum punishment a drug trafficker who brings a substantial amount of drugs into Singapore should be punished with is life imprisonment and not the death penalty.	7.5	31.2	24.0	27.1	8.3	1.9
I believe that the maximum punishment a person who uses firearms in Singapore should be punished with is life imprisonment and not the death penalty.	7.1	34.0	25.1	24.9	6.8	2.0
I believe that the maximum punishment a murderer should be punished with is life imprisonment and not the death penalty.	8.1	34.9	25.9	22.4	6.7	2.0

Statements relating to support for life imprisonment as maximum punishment, as compared to the death penalty

n=2,000

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree ■ Refuse to answer

13

4. CONCLUSION

The majority of respondents supported the use of the death penalty in Singapore, especially in the context of serious crimes. In particular, support was high for the mandatory death penalty for specific offences (i.e., intentional murder, drug trafficking and firearm offences). We found greater support for using deterrent reasons as justification for the death penalty, as compared to using retributive reasons. Furthermore, support for the death penalty as a deterrent against drug trafficking was the highest among three different offences. Respondents also perceived the death penalty to be more effective than life imprisonment in deterring all three offences.

ANNEX

Respondents' Profile and Demographic Traits

Table 1 shows the breakdown of respondents by their citizenship, age, gender, ethnicity, education, housing type, monthly household income, marital status, and number of children.

Singapore citizens and permanent residents made up 89 per cent and 11 per cent of the respondents respectively. In terms of age, about a fifth of the sample (19 per cent) were younger than 30 years old. Almost 55 per cent of the sample was between 30 and 60 years old. There was an almost even split of male and female respondents. After weighting the data, the ethnic representation of the sample was quite close to that of the general population, with slightly fewer Malays (12.6 per cent) and slightly more Indians (8.6 per cent) and Others (3 per cent).

Slightly more than half of the respondents (53.4 per cent) had diploma education and above. The majority of the respondents (74.4 per cent) stayed in HDB 4-room flats, HDB 5-room flats/executive flats, condominiums/other apartments, or landed property, with close to 20 per cent living in private residences.[3] Close to one quarter of the respondents (22 per cent) earned a monthly household of $9,000 and above.[4] Slightly over a third of the respondents (37.9 per cent) earned a monthly household of less than $3,000.[5]

The majority of the respondents were married and close to one third (28.4 per cent) were single (never married). A small minority (8.3 per cent) were separated, divorced, or widowed. More than one third of the respondents (36.9 per cent) did not have children. Among the majority (63.1 per cent) who do, 22.9 per cent had young children (aged 0 – 12 years), 11.2 per cent had children who were teenagers (aged 13 – 18 years), and 36.2 per cent had children who were older than 19 years.

Table 1: Percentage of respondents by citizenship, age, gender, ethnicity, education, housing type, monthly household income, marital status, and number of children

Demographics of respondents		Percentage (%) of respondents
Citizenship	Singaporeans	89.1
	Permanent Residents	10.9
Gender	Male	48.5
	Female	51.5
Age	18 – 20	2.7
	21 – 24	7.4

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[3] We collapsed the six dwelling types (i.e., "HDB 1- or 2-Room Flat", "HDB 3-Room Flat", "HDB 4-Room Flat", "HDB 5-Room Flat/Executive Flat", "Condominium/Other Apartments", and "Landed Property") into four types — "HDB 1- to 3-Room Flat", "HDB 4-Room Flat", "HDB 5-Room Flat/Executive Flat" and "Private Housing".

[4] The national median household income as of 2018 is $9,239.

[5] We combined all responses that indicated a gross monthly household income of $10,000 or more into a single category – "$10,000 and above".

	25 – 29	8.9
	30 – 34	8.4
	35 – 39	9.6
	40 – 44	8.9
	45 – 49	9.6
	50 – 54	9.5
	55 – 59	8.9
	60 – 64	8.0
	65 – 69	7.2
	70 – 74	6.7
	75 – 79	2.1
	80 – 84	1.6
	85 & above	0.5
Ethnicity	Chinese	75.8
	Malay	12.6
	Indian/Others	11.6
Education	Below Secondary	10.7
	Secondary	26.6
	Post-Secondary (Non-Tertiary)	9.2
	Diploma and Professional Qualification	21.9
	University and above	31.5
Housing type	HDB 1- to 3-Room Flat	25.6
	HDB 4-Room Flat	32.1
	HDB 5-Room Flat / Executive Flat	22.2
	Private housing	20.1
Monthly household income	No working person / Retiree household	15.0
	Below $1,000	3.1
	$1,000 – $1,999	8.8
	$2,000 – $2,999	11.0

	$3,000 – $3,999		9.6
	$4,000 – $4,999		7.8
	$5,000 – $5,999		8.5
	$6,000 – $6,999		4.9
	$7,000 – $7,999		4.8
	$8,000 – $8,999		4.4
	$9,000 – $9,999		3.6
	$10,000 and above		18.4
Marital status	Single (Never married)		28.4
	Married		63.4
	Separated / Divorced		5.4
	Widowed		2.9
Number of children	No children		36.9
	With children	0 – 12 years old	22.9
		13 – 18 years old	11.2
		Older than 19 years old	36.2

Unweighted and Weighted Distribution of Respondents

Table 2: Unweighted distribution of respondents

	Chinese		Malay		Indian & Others		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
18 – 29 years	129	105	40	33	21	21	349
30 – 39 years	126	146	37	42	19	22	392
40 – 49 years	136	159	18	17	29	32	391
50 – 59 years	132	142	16	26	18	19	353
60 – 69 Years	123	142	16	15	12	17	325
70 years & above	96	71	8	6	5	4	190
Total	742	765	135	139	104	115	2000

Table 3: Weighted distribution of respondents

	Chinese		Malay		Indian & Others		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
18 – 29 years	135	134	34	32	21	23	379
30 – 39 years	126	139	24	24	21	26	360
40 – 49 years	131	145	18	19	31	27	371
50 – 59 years	136	141	24	25	23	20	369
60 – 69 years	120	124	16	18	13	12	303
70 years & above	81	104	8	10	7	8	218
Total	729	787	124	128	116	116	2000