SMU
SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

Centre for
Research on Successful Ageing

Staying Connected-

The Importance of Social Integration on the Well-being of Older Adults

ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON SUCCESSFUL AGEING (ROSA)

ROSA is a multidisciplinary research centre based in SMU. It was established with an MOE Tier 3 social sciences research grant, as well as the generous support of The Ngee Ann Kongsi. Research at ROSA seeks to define and measure a holistic construct of well-being and to identify the factors that impact Singaporeans' well-being as they progress through the later phases of life. Through close collaboration with government and other partner agencies, ROSA also aims to translate research insights into policy innovations that advance the well-being of older adults holistically and promote successful ageing in Singapore. ROSA brings together a diverse team of leading international and local researchers in ageing and age-related issues from various disciplines. Through empirical evidence derived from a longitudinal methodological approach, the multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research team advances propositions that promote successful ageing in Singapore.

Coping in the time of COVID-19: Transitioning from the onset of COVID-19, the 'Circuit Breaker', Phase 1, and Phase 2.

ROSA December 2020 Research Brief Series 2A- Executive Summary

Introduction

As Singapore prepares for the final phase of its eased COVID-19 restrictions, examining how older Singaporeans have responded to changes in their daily activities since the onset of COVID-19 and its accompanying restrictions is important in identifying groups which have fallen through the gaps in Singapore's recovery. Using data from the Singapore Life Panel ® (SLP), we depict how older Singaporeans have coped in the past year- with reference the perceptions towards COVID-19, COVID-19 support grants, employment, social engagements and technology use.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to (1) outline the shifts in attitudes towards and impact of the pandemic on seniors as Singapore's COVID-19 situation evolved through the year, (2) identify vulnerable groups which have been slower to recover, and (3) provide policy recommendations to support groups which have fallen behind.

Approach

The study leverages data collected from the Singapore Life Panel, a population representative monthly survey with a monthly response rate of about 7,500 respondents, tracking the lives of Singaporeans aged 55 to 75. The SLP is ongoing and has been running since July 2015. Several modules specifically examining the perceptions and attitudes held towards COVID-19 were fielded from April 2020 to better understand how older Singaporeans were responding to the pandemic.

Key Findings

Perceptions Towards COVID-19

- Respondents were less fearful of the risks associated with COVID-19 at the end of the year compared to earlier months. Respondents' perceived infection and mortality risks decreased from 40.4% and 38.9% respectively, in April, to 27.3% and 29.2% respectively in November.

- Those with a lower education, who only utilise traditional forms of communication (i.e. phone calls, SMS and email), older age groups and women perceived the risks associated with COVID-19 to be higher.

- Fear of COVID-19 has impacted the well-being of older Singaporeans, those who perceived the COVID-19 infection and mortality risks to be higher found it more difficult to cope with their daily activities, maintain a positive mind-set and were less satisfied with life.

COVID-19's Impact on Jobs and Finances

- The unemployment rate among older Singaporeans improved from to 7.86% in June to 2020 to 6.14% November 2020. However, this remains to be higher than November 2019's unemployment rate at 5.29%.

- A significant minority (33.9%) of respondents experienced financial difficulties due to COVID-19. Most common were the need to lower one's standard of living, and being forced to use one's savings or liquidate one's investments, with 25.17% and 16.98% of respondents doing so respectively.

COVID-19 Support Grants

- Respondents knew an average of 4.43 grants out of 9 grants identified for the survey. However, 8.44% of respondents were unaware of any of the grants listed.

- Those who rely on traditional forms of communication, those who use fewer sources of information and those with a primary education were more likely to know of fewer support grants available and more likely to be unaware of any grants.

Communications Technology Usage

- Generally, older Singaporeans who were able to utilize non-traditional forms of communication were better able to keep in touch with their friends, felt less socially isolated and more satisfied with their social life.

- However, the use of the various forms of communication was found to be associated with age and education, with older age groups and those with lower levels education being less likely to adopt non-traditional forms of communication.

Social Engagements

- During the circuit breaker, many seniors drastically reduced the frequency at which they participated in various social activities. Since the end of the Circuit Breaker, most seniors have gradually resumed their social activities and have since returned to their pre-COVID-19 routines in November.

Key Recommendations

Our findings suggest that older Singaporeans have been adjusting to living life amidst a pandemic and their well-being has been improving since the end of the circuit breaker. However, the older groups, the less educated, those who rely on traditional forms of communication and those who do not keep informed on COVID-19 through various sources of information have been slower to adapt. Thus, to safeguard the well-being of older Singaporeans, specifically that of the former groups, we recommend the following:

1. Setting up grassroots initiatives to keep older Singaporeans invested and informed on the latest COVID-19 developments. Such initiatives can target less

technologically savvy older adults in community spaces to keep them updated on information on COVID-19

2. Create new channels to disseminate up-to-date information on COVID-19 which would be accessible to all Singaporeans regardless of digital literacy (e.g. Via SMS and digital display panels at HDB estates)

3. Empower seniors with the digital skills to keep informed themselves

Voter efficacy, political engagement, and well-being among older adults in GE2020

ROSA December 2020 Research Brief Series 2B- Executive Summary

Introduction

GE2020 was monumental for many reasons, but most significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the first election where physical rallies were not allowed and parties had to resort to alternative mediums to garner support, including the use of social media. This raises the question of how well older adults in Singapore were able to adapt to such changes, and what effects this may have had on feelings of political engagement and voter efficacy among these older adults. This research brief hence examines the trends in feelings of political engagement and voter efficacy among older adults and how well-being among that demographic was impacted by such changes.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to (1) outline the trends in voter efficacy, political engagement, and political participation among older adults in Singapore, (2) draw associations between these trends and well-being among older adults, and (3) provide policy recommendations on how to improve feelings of voter efficacy, political engagement, and political participation as a means to increase well-being among older adults.

Approach

The study leverages data collected from the Singapore Life Panel, a population representative monthly survey with a monthly response rate of about 7,500 respondents, tracking the lives of Singaporeans aged 55 to 75. The SLP is ongoing and has been running since July 2015. A module specifically examining respondents' views on GE2020 was fielded in August 2020, the findings from which serve as the basis for this paper.

Key Findings

Voter efficacy and political engagement

- A large majority of respondents (85.21%) agreed (slightly agreed, moderately agreed, or strongly agreed) that by voting they would be able to elect a politician or political party whose views they shared, and 89.44% of respondents agreed that their vote made a difference in GE2020

- Most respondents (83.17%) agreed that they were able to keep up with the key issues that were raised during GE2020, and 78.93% of respondents agreed that the internet had allowed them to better understand what the different political parties have done for Singapore

- Education level is observed to be associated with the level of voter efficacy and political engagement felt by respondents, with the higher educated experiencing higher levels of both

GE2020 and Well-being

- Stronger feelings of voter efficacy and political engagement were associated with higher levels of subjective well-being

- This trend was similarly observed across several domains of life satisfaction including satisfaction with social contacts and family life, satisfaction with one's job, satisfaction if one's total household income, satisfaction with one's economic situation, and satisfaction with one's health

Political Participation

- 45.80% of respondents reported having not listened to or interacted with representatives from any political party either online or in person throughout the election, while a majority (81.74%) had done so for 3 parties or less, despite there being a total of 11 political parties contesting for the GE2020

- Respondents' level of education and housing type were observed to be correlated with the number of parties that respondents listened to during GE2020. Those of a higher education and those living in private properties such as condominiums and landed properties listened to more parties as compared to those with lower education or those living in smaller HDB flats respectively

Social Media use and GE2020

- More than a third (39.46%) of older adults surveyed used social media platforms for campaign news. Social media was the third most used source of campaign information, after the Television (used by 74.88% of respondents) and Newspapers (used by 47.76% of respondents)

Key Recommendations

Given the association between voter efficacy, political engagement, and well-being among older adults, this brief thus makes a recommendation to increase feelings of voter efficacy and political engagement among older adults as a means to increase well-being. As SES is seen to be associated with levels of voter efficacy and political engagement, this brief recommends that campaign news and information about the issues surrounding general elections should be made more accessible as a means to increase voter efficacy and political engagement, particularly for individuals of a lower SES. One possible way for this to be done would be to educate older adults on how to use social media to keep engaged in political processes as other research has shown that social media use increases feelings political engagement and voter efficacy. Such initiatives should, however, also include equipping older adults with the skills to discern political misinformation from legitimate information, as well as to discern objective news sources, as the misuse of social media has also been shown to lead to political polarization in certain contexts.

Glimpse into the Social Capital of Seniors Based on the Singapore Life Panel

ROSA December 2020 Research Brief Series 2C- Executive Summary

Introduction

Social relationships have been identified as a key predictor of well-being, particularly among older adults. Hence, to better understand and identify strategies to promote successful ageing, a detailed look at the trends and mechanisms which underpin social relationships among older Singaporeans is crucial. Using data from the Singapore Life Panel ® (SLP), we examine the social relationships of older Singaporeans and aim to propose policy recommendations to promote the well-being of our seniors.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to identify (1) the trends of social relationships among older adults, (2) the factors which affect the trends of social relationships for older adults, and (3) how the identified factors and trends work in tandem to affect well-being.

Approach

The study leverages data collected from the Singapore Life Panel, a population representative monthly survey with a monthly response rate of about 7,500 respondents, tracking the lives of Singaporeans aged 55 to 75. The SLP is ongoing and has been running since July 2015. Questions on social networks were fielded in August 2020 to better understand the social networks of panel respondents and its relation to their well-being.

Key Findings

Social Network Composition

- Older Singaporeans' social networks were more likely to be comprised primarily of family members. The average respondent reported having around four close family members compared to around two close friends, co-workers and, fewer than two neighbours.

Perceived Social Support

- Older age groups (age 65-69 and 70-74) reported higher perceived frequency of social support than the younger age groups (age 55-59 and 60-64), in terms of having someone to talk to, count on in a time of need, and receive love and affection from.

Characteristics of older Singaporeans' close social network

- When asked to list their top five closest contacts, 19% of respondents listed their spouse and four relatives. Close to half of married respondents (48%) included their spouse as a close contact. Further, when married respondents listed their spouse as a close contact, they were also more likely to include more kin as other close contacts than non-kin.

- For 18% of respondents, kin and friends were equally regarded as close contacts.

- Within this close social network of older Singaporeans, most contacts were close to the respondent, knew of each other in the circle and had known the respondent for around 10 years.

Characteristics of older Singaporeans' extended social network

- Generally, older Singaporeans did not have many contacts of different occupations. However, they did know of people across various levels of occupation prestige, and knew of individuals with fairly high-ranking positions.

Social Network, Health and Well-being

- The quality of social ties is more important to older Singaporean's well-being than its quantity. The positive association between network size and health satisfaction loses its predictability when controlling for perceived frequency of social support received.

- Older Singaporeans reported higher levels of health satisfaction when they have more friends or acquaintances in different occupations, less friends spanning across too diverse of occupations or more friends in more prestigious occupations.

Key Recommendations

Our findings suggest that older Singaporeans only benefit from their social networks when coupled with the provision of social support. Hence, aside from encouraging social contact with seniors through phone calls and visits, additional resources could be provided to facilitate the ease at which close contacts of seniors of seniors are able to provide them with social support.

Further, neighbourly ties were found to be important to older Singaporean's health satisfaction. Hence, policies should look to establish more neighbourly ties within older adults' social network. These ties would not only improve the well-being of seniors but also increase the availability of social support within close proximity.