

Attitudes, behaviours, and the well-being of older Singaporeans in the time of COVID-19: Perspectives from the Singapore Life Panel

ROSA July 2020 Research Brief - Executive Summary

Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of many. In Singapore, particularly for older adults, it is imperative to understand these impacts to better provide for those in need. Using data from the Singapore Life Panel® (SLP), this study explores a wide array of topics to uncover the effects of COVID-19 and government responses on the attitudes, behaviours, and well-being of older adults in Singapore within the social, economic and mental health domains. Additionally, findings are contrasted between respondents of different socioeconomic and education levels, leading to a more robust discussion of policy implications for different vulnerable groups.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to (1) provide a clearer picture on the effectiveness of government interventions to date, (2) uncover gaps in current policy measures and (3) recommend untouched avenues/platforms for executing future policies. Through the analysis of the data, the study identifies trends and attitudes in response to the evolving COVID-19 environment in Singapore to achieve the discussed objectives.

Approach

The study leverages on data collected from the SLP, a population representative monthly survey with a monthly response rate of about 7,500 respondents that tracks the lives of Singaporeans aged 55 to 75. The SLP is ongoing and has been running since July 2015. In the May 2020 and June 2020 runs of the survey, specific questions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic were fielded to better understand how it has affected panel respondents.

Key Findings

Sources of Information

- Respondents relied more on official sources for information regarding COVID-19. Hence, results show that older Singaporeans are sourcing information reliably during the pandemic.
- Those with a higher level of education tend to source for information from newspapers, government sources, social media and internet research more than those with a lower level of education.

Attitudes Toward the Government's Response to the Pandemic

- Respondents showed confidence in the government's response to COVID-19, with 73% stating that they somewhat or completely trust the government's management of the pandemic.
- Most older Singaporeans have heeded the government's advice regarding COVID-19 restrictions - more than 70% of respondents avoided outside activity such as grocery shopping and physical activities. The use of face mask also increased significantly within the month of April, from 1 in 10 to 9 in 10 wearing a face mask most or every time they leave home.

Attitudes Toward Social Cohesion

- Slightly over half of respondents (57%) believed that other citizens would accept personal restrictions in order to help a fellow Singaporean, while less than half (49%) felt that COVID-19 has demonstrated reliable social cohesion in Singapore.
- However, on a positive note, only 19% thought social cohesion appeared weak during the pandemic, and 2 in 3 Singaporeans displayed trust in healthcare equality believing that all Singaporeans have equal chances of receiving necessary treatment regardless of SES.

Economic Indicators

- COVID-19 reduced household spending by 9% in March and by a further 23% in April compared to January 2020.
- Employment income was also reduced by 6% in the month of April, with respondents from low- and middle-SES households experiencing a larger loss of income compared to high-SES households.
- Regardless of income loss, however, consumption spending for all households was reduced by about 18%.
- Expectations for the future economy were also lower, with 32% and 24% of respondents expressing being either very or extremely worried about the economy in general and their own financial situations respectively.

Well-being of Older Singaporeans

- Following the implementation of circuit-breaker measures in April 2020, respondents reported a significant decrease in overall life satisfaction by 3.8% in April 2020 and 4.0% in May 2020, compared to January 2020. The drop in life satisfaction was concurrent with a stark increase in feelings of isolation as the circuit-breaker began in April 2020.
- During the circuit breaker, respondents who lived alone reported experiencing significantly greater increases of feelings of social isolation and decreases in feelings of social satisfaction compared to respondents who do not live alone.

- There was also a non-homogenous effect on interactions with household members during the circuit-breaker, where 53% of respondents reported an increase in family bonding as a result of the circuit breaker, while 10% of respondents experienced increased friction with household members.

Use of Technology in Response to COVID-19

- Less than half of respondents (40%) expressed comfort with scanning QR codes for use in SafeEntry registration, and only 44% felt comfortable holding video conversations with friends or family, highlighting the difficulties that older adults face when adopting new technology into their daily lives, as well as coping with the challenges that COVID-19 measures have imposed.

Anticipation of the Future

- Respondents expressed uncertainty about the future of the pandemic, rating the risks of infection and fatality at an average of 41% and 39% respectively.
- In terms of respondents' worries for the future, 33% stated that they were very or extremely worried about the health of their loved ones and 29% were very or extremely worried about the availability of medical treatment if they contracted COVID-19.
- Additionally, respondents reported increasing expectations for job loss by 5% from January 2020 to May 2020, with older Singaporeans indicating higher expectations of job loss.

Key Recommendations

The findings suggest that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the financial burdens and well-being of older adults in Singapore. However, the findings reveal that certain vulnerable groups experienced greater impacts than others, particularly lower-SES households and individuals who live alone. Findings also indicated how social distancing measures have made it difficult for respondents to connect with close social contacts. This was difficult despite the availability of virtual alternatives, as only half of the respondents felt comfortable holding video calls with family or friends. Hence, this study recommends the following:

- Financial help should be targeted at older adults from low-SES households.
- Measures to help older adults cope with mental health challenges during the circuit-breaker should, in the future, be strengthened and targeted at older adults that live alone.
- Measures to increase digital literacy among older adults should include not only the usage of safe distancing measures, but also how to keep in contact with loved ones virtually.