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## How Strong Is Public Support for the Death Penalty in Singapore?

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**Abstract** Singapore is well known internationally for its uncompromising stance towards law and order and its use of the death penalty in particular for murder and drug trafficking. Until 2012, it was one of the few countries in the world where the death penalty was mandatory for persons convicted of these two crimes. The law was amended in 2012 to give a judge the choice to impose the death penalty or life imprisonment (with caning) for non-intentional murder and drug trafficking in some situations. What do Singaporeans think of the use of the death penalty in their own country? This article reports on some findings of a survey conducted in 2016 on 1500 Singaporeans to assess their knowledge and support of the death penalty.

**Keywords** Death penalty · Deterrence · Public opinion

### Inconsistent But Still Global Trend Towards Abolition

There has been a rising tide towards the universal abolition of the death penalty. Not only has it touched all parts of the world, but the change has also happened over a relatively short space of time. In 2014, only 39 countries were classified as “actively” retentionist<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A country could be retentionist in law but abolitionist in practice. The term “actively” retentionist is used to describe countries which have carried out at least one judicial execution within the last 10 years and have not subsequently announced a moratorium on executions.

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as compared to 51 in 2007, 71 in 2001, 90 in 1995 and 101 in 1988 (Hood and Hoyle 2015).<sup>2</sup> In 2016, Amnesty International recorded executions in only 23 countries (Amnesty International 2017).

However, the march towards complete abolition is an uneven one. Amnesty International noted that there was a dramatic rise of 54% in the number of persons executed in 2015 as compared to 2014 (Amnesty International 2016). The number of persons executed in 2015 was the highest recorded by Amnesty International in more than 25 years (Amnesty International 2016).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, at least six countries had resumed executions in 2015 (Bangladesh, Chad, India,<sup>4</sup> Indonesia, Oman and South Sudan) (Amnesty International 2016).

The picture in Asia is equally mixed—leading some to suggest that the abolition of the death penalty is against “Asian values” (for a contrary view, see Bae 2008). It is estimated that 87% of the total executions in 2016 in the world took place in four Asian countries: Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Amnesty International 2017). China is also very likely to have retained the world’s “top spot” in this list as well, but no accurate figures on the annual number of executions in that country are publicly available (Amnesty International 2017). Moves are currently underway to bring back the death penalty in the Philippines which had abolished it completely in 2006 (Dancel 2017). On the other hand, several countries in Asia have eliminated the death penalty in recent years, namely, Cambodia in 1989, Nepal in 1997, Timor-Leste in 2002, Bhutan in 2004 and Mongolia in 2016.

## Death Penalty in Singapore

The same tensions can be seen in Singapore. The Singapore Government’s public stance is that the death penalty is effective as a deterrent measure and that it ought to have the sovereign right to decide whether to continue with this practice (Chan 2016). Singapore has objected to every United Nations General Assembly Resolution calling for a moratorium on the use of the death penalty since 2007.<sup>5</sup>

But the truth is that the use of the death penalty in Singapore has fallen to very low levels in recent years as compared to the 1990s (Chan 2016). In 1994 and 1995, a total of 76 and 73 persons were executed in those years respectively—which led to Singapore having the “honour” of the highest per capita execution rate per one million population in the world (Amnesty International 2004). It presently executes between two and four persons a year (Chan 2016). In 2012, Singapore also changed its domestic law to allow judges the discretion to impose life imprisonment instead of the death penalty for all forms of murder other than intentional murder and in certain situations of drug trafficking where the mandatory death sentence would have applied before.<sup>6</sup> These changes have led to speculation by some commentators that Singapore may be moving with the global trend towards greater restrictions on the use of the death penalty and its eventual disuse (Hor 2014; Novak 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that not all of the 39 actively retentionist countries carry out executions regularly and those who do may execute less than 10 a year.

<sup>3</sup> The figures do not include executions in China which is unknown.

<sup>4</sup> For terrorist crimes.

<sup>5</sup> Singapore was also a party to the various note verbale opposing the moratoriums. In 2016, Singapore led a small group of countries to introduce an amendment to the text of the General Assembly resolution to reaffirm state sovereignty.

<sup>6</sup> Penal Code (Amendment) Act 2012 and Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Act 2012. The relevant provisions came into effect on 1 January 2013.

## Why Is Public Opinion Important?

Public support for the death penalty in Singapore is often assumed. In 2016, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said that “there are very high levels of support on the part of our people for the death penalty to remain on our books” (Balakrishnan 2016). In 2007, the then Deputy Prime Minister Professor S Jayakumar said, “the death penalty is the will of the majority” (Jayakumar 2007). A similar sentiment was expressed in 2005 by the Singapore Court of Appeal, the nation’s highest court, in the case of *Chew Seow Leng v Public Prosecutor* (2005: para 40) where the court noted:

The mandatory death penalty imposed under the [Misuse of Drugs Act] reflects our society’s abhorrence of drug trafficking, and counsel presented nothing before this court to show that society’s views have changed on this issue.

It is therefore clear that politicians and judges look to public opinion to support the continued use of the death penalty in Singapore. Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam has recently acknowledged the importance of public opinion in sentencing reviews (Ng 2017).<sup>7</sup> Foreign Minister Balakrishnan has also said, “we do not take this support [for the death penalty] for granted and from time to time, we will continue to review our legislation and make changes according to our circumstances” (Balakrishnan 2016).

Even though the Singapore Government’s overall stance is to remain tough on illegal drugs with the death penalty as an important part of its strategy (Shanmugam 2017),<sup>8</sup> the amendments to its laws in 2012 show that it is also willing to re-examine its policy of mandatory death sentences by introducing means to differentiate the punishment of offenders according to individual culpability and circumstances. It stands to reason that if public support for the death penalty is not as strong as it is thought to be, there will be a greater chance of hastening changes to the use of the death penalty in Singapore.<sup>9</sup>

## Literature Review

Empirical studies have been conducted in the USA following Justice Marshall’s opinion in *Furman v Georgia* (1972) which postulated that an informed public will generally oppose the death penalty. Most of these studies have been done using a pre-test measure of attitudes towards the death penalty, followed by exposure to information about it such as through a criminal justice course on the death penalty, or reading statements or essays about it, and a post-test measure of attitudes afterwards. The subjects were predominantly undergraduate college students. The results of the various studies showed mixed but general support for

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<sup>7</sup> He was quoted as saying, “Penalties and criminal laws can only be enforced if people believe that they are fair and that certain conduct ought to be made criminal . . . . Otherwise they lose credibility”.

<sup>8</sup> Notably, the Minister said in Parliament that (at para [70]), “. . . no Government glorifies in having the death penalty or imposing it on anyone. . . . We are not dogmatic about this. We listen to arguments. We listen to people. We will listen to anyone with a good point of view, and we will make up our mind”.

<sup>9</sup> This of course does not mean that Singapore’s criminal justice policy should be determined by public opinion alone. It is well known that France, Germany, the UK and Canada abolished the death penalty even though it was supported by a majority of the public at the time. See McGann and Sandholtz (2012) for an analysis of countries which are most likely to abolish the death penalty.

what has come to be known as the “Marshall hypotheses”, namely that (see for example, Bohm 1998; Lambert and Clarke 2001; Cochran and Chamlin 2005):

- (1) The general public know little about the death penalty.
- (2) Exposure to information about the death penalty reduced support for it.
- (3) Retributivists tended to be immune to the effects of information about the death penalty.

Variations based on gender, race and social background were also found: the death penalty was supported by more males than females, more middle class than the poor and more whites than African-Americans (Bohm 1998). African-American females in particular were most likely to change their opinions and oppose the death penalty after receiving information about it, while white males were the most intransigent (Bohm et al. 1991). Shifts in opinion have also been found following exposure to information on the use of the death penalty in other parts of the world (LaChappelle 2014).

This present study has some similarities with the studies which investigated the Marshall hypotheses in trying to assess the nature of public opinion on the death penalty. In doing so, it contributes to, and improves on, the body of literature by surveying members of the general population instead of college students. Pre- and post-test measures are not used, but further information on the death penalty was given to those who indicated support for it to see if they would then change their position. This approach overcomes uncertainty in whether results from a convenient sample of college students receiving information in a classroom setting can be generalised to the overall population (Bohm and Vogel 1991, LaChappelle 2014).

Previous studies on public opinion on the death penalty have also been criticised for using simplistic “yes/no” questions such as “do you favour the death penalty” which only indicate acceptance of the death penalty, rather than whether it is the preferred choice over alternative punishments (Bowers et al. 1994). This survey seeks to assess the strength of support for the death penalty by posing scenarios to the respondents and asking them to indicate what sentence the hypothetical offender deserved. This approach has been found to be far more accurate in discerning the true level of support for the death penalty (Burgason and Pazzani 2014; Mitchell and Roberts 2012).

## **Methodology**

The public opinion survey instrument used was designed by Roger Hood, Professor Emeritus of Criminology at Oxford University, and had been successfully implemented in 2010 in Trinidad (Hood and Seemungal 2011) and in 2012 in Malaysia (Hood 2013). Some refinements were made to the instrument to take into account the local context.

The survey was translated into Chinese, Malay and Tamil (these are officially recognised languages of Singapore in addition to English) by Q Research Consulting, which was appointed to administer the survey. A pilot survey involving 30 respondents was carried out in March 2016 to gauge the response to the survey, assess if there were difficulties in answering any of the questions and obtain general feedback. Some survey questions were subsequently modified in view of the feedback.

The fieldwork of the survey was carried out between April and May 2016. One thousand five hundred Singaporeans aged between 18 and 74 years old were interviewed face-to-face.

Only Singaporean citizens were selected as it was felt that they rightly have the greatest interest in how the country's laws should be framed.

The respondents were part of a sample of residential addresses purchased from the Singapore Department of Statistics which uses a two-stage stage random sampling procedure. In the first stage, the department creates a sample of geographical locations from across Singapore, and in the second stage, a sample of residential addresses from each of these locations selected in the first stage is drawn. This service provided by the Singapore Department of Statistics ensures that the list of addresses is representative of the national dwelling type distribution, thereby capturing the various socio-economic characteristics of the different population groups across Singapore.

In addition, the "next birthday" method was used in selecting the person in the household to be surveyed. For this study, a conscious effort was made to over-sample Malays and Indians in order to ensure that there would be sufficient cases in these ethnic categories for analysis. The raw data were finally weighted to ensure that the sample mirrors the Singapore general population. The profile of the respondents as compared to the Singapore general population can be found in Appendix 1.

All the completed surveys from each interviewer were randomly checked and at least 20% validated by Q Research Consulting. The required consent form was signed by each respondent before proceeding with the survey. Q Research Consulting reported its fieldwork to the authors on a weekly basis. A response rate of 74% was achieved for this survey.

## Some Findings of the Survey

### Interest and Knowledge

Respondents were first asked how interested or concerned they were in the issue of the death penalty. The results showed a general apathy among the respondents.<sup>10</sup> Only about one in 20 was *very* interested or concerned about the death penalty in Singapore, while four in 10 were *not very* interested or concerned about this issue (see Table 1).<sup>11</sup> Hence, although the number of respondents who said they were interested or concerned is roughly equal to the number who said they were not interested or concerned about the death penalty, there were far more who were *not very* interested or concerned as compared to those who were *very* interested or concerned.

This apathy is also reflected in the next two questions about how much the respondents felt they knew about the death penalty and how often they talked about it with others. There were 1.5 times more respondents who said that they either knew nothing or only very little about the death penalty in Singapore (62%) as compared to those who said they either knew a great deal or something about it (39%) (see Table 2). Furthermore, slightly more than 8 in 10 either did not talk about this issue at all or rarely did so (see Table 3).

We next asked the respondents to estimate the number of persons who had been executed in Singapore in the last 10 years (i.e. from 2006 to 2015) in each of the offence categories covered in this survey. The correct answers are 13 for murder, 16 for drug trafficking and 3 for firearm offences. As can be expected, a wide range of answers was received.<sup>12</sup> Even if we define an

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<sup>10</sup> It can be argued that this apathy may be engendered by the Singapore Government. The number of executions per year was not officially available till 1991, and demographic details of the persons executed are still not publicly released.

<sup>11</sup> Note that the percentages in the tables may not add up to 100% because of rounding of numbers.

<sup>12</sup> However, it can be noted that median and mode responses for each of these offences were quite close to the actual figures.

**Table 1** Interest in the death penalty

Level of interest	Percentage
Very interested or concerned	5
Interested or concerned	45
Not interested or concerned	11
Not very interested or concerned	40

answer as being “more or less correct” if it is within 50% either way of the correct figure,<sup>13</sup> only 4 in 10 of the respondents could give a figure within this range in the case of drug trafficking and even fewer were in this range for the numbers executed for murder or firearm offences (see Table 4). Overall, only 37% of the respondents gave a figure which was “more or less correct”.

### Support for the Death Penalty in General

Assuming that the total number of persons executed in Singapore in the past 10 years was indeed the figure that the respondent gave, we asked each respondent if they thought this figure was too many, too few or about right. Slightly more than half of the respondents thought that this was about the right number. Only about one in four thought the number they estimated had been too many, and perhaps more significantly, only 8% thought that the number was too low (see Table 5).

In terms of support for the death penalty, 7 in 10 were *in general*, in favour of *either* a mandatory *or* a discretionary death sentence. However, very few felt strongly about their opinion, either way. Only 9% were strongly in favour of the death penalty, and 3% were strongly opposed to it (see Table 6).

### Support for the Mandatory Death Penalty

The respondents were informed of the current state of Singapore law where the death penalty is mandatory for the following:

- Intentional murder<sup>14</sup>
- Drug trafficking, if the amount found was above certain specific amounts and the person does *not* qualify as either a courier and received a certificate of substantive assistance from the public prosecutor or a courier and suffers from a mental condition that diminishes his or her responsibility<sup>15</sup>
- Discharging a firearm while involved in certain specified crimes, whether or not any harm was caused.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> It will be considered “more or less correct” if the respondent gave a figure between 7 and 19 in the case of murder, between 8 and 24 in the case of drug trafficking and between 2 and 4 in the case of firearms offences.

<sup>14</sup> Penal Code (Chapter 224), ss 300, 302.

<sup>15</sup> Misuse of Drugs Act (Chapter 185), ss 33, 33B. Although the survey distinguished the offences—in accordance with the law—in terms of the drug (heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, cannabis and opium) and the amounts trafficked, the difference in responses was very minor ( $\leq 1\%$ ). The results are taken from questions relating to persons convicted of trafficking 15 g or more of heroin and reported collectively as “drug trafficking offences” in this article.

<sup>16</sup> Arms Offences Act (Chapter 14), ss 4, 4A. These offences are described as “firearm offences” in this article.

**Table 2** Knowledge about the death penalty

Level of knowledge	Percentage
Know a great deal	3
Know something about it	36
Know little about it	51
Know nothing about it	11

Respondents were asked whether they agreed with the mandatory death penalty in such cases, or whether they thought the judge should be allowed to choose the death penalty according to the circumstances of the case, or whether they were against the death penalty and would like to see it replaced with life or long-term imprisonment.

The results showed that a higher proportion was in favour of the death penalty when these three types of crime were specifically mentioned than when asked whether they were in favour of the death penalty *in general*. The support ranged from 87% to 92%, with the strongest support in the case of intentional murder (see Table 7).

However, for all three specific offences, less than half favoured the mandatory death penalty. Even for intentional murder the respondents were evenly divided between those in favour of the mandatory and the discretionary death penalty. With regard to drug trafficking and firearm offences, there was clear preference for the death penalty to be imposed on a discretionary basis according to the factual circumstances of each case: 21% and 17% more respondents preferred the discretionary death penalty to be imposed for these offences respectively.

Furthermore, only a third of respondents were *strongly* supportive of the mandatory death penalty for murder and an even smaller proportion supported it strongly for drug trafficking and firearm offences (see Table 7).

### Decisions in Response to Case Scenarios

The 1500 respondents were randomly divided into 2 groups of 750 respondents each. Each group was presented with 6 scenarios, thus totalling 12 scenarios in all. Half of these scenarios had aggravating features, while the other half had mitigating features. The respondents were asked to judge each of these scenarios and state what sentence they thought the person deserved in each case. The respondents could sentence the offender to one of the following:

- (a) Imprisonment for a number of years chosen by the respondent
- (b) Life imprisonment with the possibility of release under supervision after at least 20 years in prison if found to be no longer a danger to society
- (c) Life imprisonment without the possibility of ever being released
- (d) Death sentence
- (e) Specify another sentence

**Table 3** Frequency of discussion on death penalty with others

Frequency of discussion	Percentage
Many times a year	1
Several times a year	13
At most once a year	32
I never talk about it	54



**Table 4** Estimate of executions in last 10 years

Estimate	Murder (%)	Drug trafficking (%)	Firearm offences (%)
More than 50% above the actual number	38	34	39
More or less correct	28	39	22
More than 50% below the actual number	29	26	38

Of the 12 scenarios, there were 6 cases of murder (2 robbery-murders, 2 domestic murders and 2 drug-related murders), 4 cases of drug trafficking (2 involving heroin and one each involving cocaine and cannabis) and 2 cases of firearm offences (see Appendix 2 for the text of the scenarios and the proportion of respondents who chose death as the appropriate punishment).

The scenario with the highest level of support for the death penalty was intentional shooting of a shop keeper during a robbery resulting in death by a man who had previously been imprisoned twice for robbery. A total of 64% of respondents chose the death penalty in this case. This is much lower than the 92% who said that they favoured the death penalty for intentional murder.

Of the four drug trafficking scenarios, the highest proportion favouring the death penalty was only 47%; for the other three scenarios, far fewer chose death as their preferred sentence (varying between 17% and 33%). This shows that there is a lack of strong support for the death penalty in drug trafficking offences in general, which is contrary to the Government's stance based on a deterrence rationale (Chan 2016).

Where the scenarios involved mitigating circumstances, a considerably lower proportion of respondents chose the death penalty. The highest proportion was in a robbery-murder scenario by a man with no previous convictions (52%). The next highest proportion was considerably lower. This was the scenario involving a drug-related murder by a young man with no previous convictions who acted on orders: only 28% chose death. These findings show that respondents consider mitigating circumstances to be important in determining if the death penalty is deserved, which is not possible when mandatory death sentences are demanded.

There was a large difference between the proportion of respondents who judged the death penalty to be the appropriate punishment when faced with the factual circumstances in the scenarios and the proportion who had said that they supported the death penalty in the abstract (i.e. with no context). This was true for all three offence types. Table 8 compares the percentage who said they supported the death penalty with the proportion of those who chose the death penalty in any of the six cases of intentional homicide, the four cases of drug trafficking and the two cases of firearm offences considered by the respondents. The difference between them ranged from 47% points for intentional murder to 61% points for firearm offences (see Table 8).

Furthermore, of those who supported the mandatory death penalty for intentional murder, drug trafficking or firearm offences, far fewer actually applied this in practice by choosing the

**Table 5** Opinion on executions estimated in last 10 years

Opinion	Percentage
Too many	26
About the right number	58
Too few	8
Do not know	8

**Table 6** Support in general for the death penalty

Support for the death penalty	Percentage
Strongly support	9
Support	63
Oppose	23
Strongly oppose	3
Not sure	3

death sentence in every scenario involving those offences they were asked to judge (see Table 9). This shows that there is actually very weak support for the mandatory death sentence in actual practice. Most respondents would still wish to use their discretion in deciding whether to impose the death sentence rather than to impose it on all such cases as the current law requires.

Another indicator of the real level of support for the death penalty in general, whatever the category (intentional murder, drug trafficking or firearm offences) and circumstances of the crime, was the very low proportion of respondents—only 5% of the total sample—who chose death as the most appropriate punishment for *all six* scenarios they judged.

### Measures Considered Effective

Respondents were asked to rank various measures which, in their opinion, would be most effective to reduce violent crimes leading to death and to reduce drug trafficking in Singapore. These measures were as follows: “more effective policing”, “better moral education of young people”, “more effective policies to control trade in drugs”, “more effective policies to control possession of firearms”, and “greater number of executions of murderers/people caught in drug trafficking”.

“Greater number of executions” was placed first by only 5% of the respondents for reducing violent crime and only 7% of respondents for reducing drug trafficking. It was in fact placed *last* by 74% and 77% of the respondents, respectively. “Better moral education of young people” was the preferred first choice for more than half of the respondents (56% and 52% respectively). “More effective policing” was placed first by about one quarter of the respondents (27% and 24% respectively).

### Deterrence and Innocence

Respondents who supported either the mandatory or discretionary death penalty were asked if they would still be in favour of it or would change their mind if: (a) “new scientific evidence proved that the death penalty was not a better deterrent than life or very long imprisonment”, and (b) “it was proved to your satisfaction that innocent people have in fact sometimes been executed”. The proportion in favour of the death penalty dropped in each case, with the

**Table 7** Support for the death penalty for specific offences

Offence	Support for the death penalty (%)	Support for mandatory death penalty (strong support in brackets) (%)	Support for discretionary death penalty (%)
Intentional murder	92	47 (33)	45
Drug trafficking	87	33 (22)	54
Firearm offences	89	36 (28)	53

**Table 8** Proportion who chose death in any of the scenarios judged

Offence	Support for the death penalty in the abstract (%)	Chose death penalty in any of the scenarios judged (%)
Intentional murder	92	45
Drug trafficking	87	29
Firearm offences	89	28

greatest decrease where innocence was the issue (see Table 10).<sup>17</sup> This shows that the support for the death penalty was contingent on the belief that it is uniquely effective as a deterrent and there is a lack of error in convictions.

Although a majority were still in favour of the death penalty even if it were not proven a better deterrent, there were strong shifts in opinion. For example, even though six in 10 would still continue to support the use of the death penalty in the case of intentional murder, four in 10 of those who had supported the use of the death penalty had in fact changed their minds when faced with this possibility. In the case of drug trafficking, half of those who had supported the death penalty would change their minds. The shifts in opinion were even greater if they believed that innocent people have sometimes been executed such that only about a third of those who supported the death penalty would continue to do so.

## International Trends

Respondents were posed two questions relating to the international trends with respect to the death penalty. First, they were informed that many countries around the world have abolished the death penalty and more were doing it every year and that about 100 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes at present. They were asked if they thought that Singapore should follow this international practice and abolish the death penalty.

Secondly, those respondents who supported the mandatory death penalty for at least one type of offence were told that even for countries that have retained the death penalty, most have made it discretionary such that the decision to impose it or not was left to the judge. These respondents were asked if they would still support the mandatory death penalty in view of this international trend.<sup>18</sup> The results are shown in Tables 11 and 12.

These results may show a wish by the respondents that the decision on whether to abolish the death penalty should be made by the nation on its own. They are unlikely to change their opinion even if there is an international trend against this practice. This is consistent with the Singapore Government's stance that the use of the death penalty is a matter of individual sovereignty. However, as the findings in the sections above show, keeping the death penalty in the statute books and whether it should continue to exist in the same form as it is currently practised are two different issues. Furthermore, as shown in the findings above, the *strength* of support for the mandatory death penalty varies, particularly where the offence does not result in direct loss of life such as in drug trafficking.

<sup>17</sup> Note that the figures reported exclude those who are already against the use of the death penalty, so the total proportion who support the death penalty is in fact smaller.

<sup>18</sup> Note that the figures reported exclude those who are already against the use of the death penalty or are in favour of the discretionary death penalty, so the total proportion who support retaining the mandatory death penalty is in fact smaller.

**Table 9** Proportion who support mandatory death penalty and chose death for all scenarios judged

Offence	Support mandatory death sentence (%)	Support mandatory death sentence and chose death penalty for all scenarios judged (as a percentage of total sample) (%)
Intentional murder	47	12
Drug trafficking	33	10
Firearm offences	36	18

## Discussion

In common with studies conducted in other countries such as the USA (see the summary in Finckenauer 1988), Canada (Sarat and Vidmar 1976), Malaysia (Hood 2013) and Japan (Sato and Bacon 2015), it was also found in this survey that Singaporeans apparently favoured the death penalty despite admitting that they knew very little about it, was not interested in it and could not give an accurate estimate of the number of persons executed. Moreover, only a minority of respondents who were already in favour of the death penalty were willing to change their opinions when given more information on international trends. The results in the USA were mixed in this respect (Finckenauer 1988, LaChappelle 2014).

However, the support for the death penalty in Singapore is not as strong as it appears. There was a much lower support for the death penalty when respondents were faced with scenarios of cases—all of which would have merited the mandatory sentence under the current Singapore law—than the proportion who said they favoured it in the abstract. This was particularly so for drug trafficking and firearm offences. This finding is consistent with surveys in other places which also showed that support for the death penalty dropped when respondents were given alternative sentencing options such as life imprisonment without parole (Zorn 2007) or life imprisonment without parole and a requirement that the convicted offender work in prison for earnings which will go towards murder victims’ families (Bowers et al. 1994). It would therefore be misleading to say, without qualifications, that there is majority support for the death penalty in Singapore.

The responses to effectiveness of the death penalty and risk of innocent people being executed also show that proof of the death penalty’s deterrent value and freedom from error in its administration are vital to its support. Prior research in the USA similarly showed that inequitable administration of the death penalty and the possibility of wrongful executions were highly persuasive in changing public opinion (Lambert and Clarke 2001).

The low level of support for the mandatory death penalty (as revealed by the answers to the scenarios as well as the general questions) indicates that there is no likelihood of opposition to further development of the law following the reforms made in 2012 which allowed a judge discretion whether to impose a sentence of life imprisonment or death in certain cases of murder

**Table 10** Support by those already in favour of the death penalty if it is not proven a better deterrent or if innocent persons have been executed

Offence	Support death penalty even if not proven a better deterrent (%)	Support death penalty even if innocent persons have been executed (%)
Intentional murder	61	38
Drug trafficking	50	32
Firearm offences	54	35

**Table 11** Support for the death penalty when informed that many countries have abolished it

Support	Percentage
Yes, Singapore should abolish the death penalty	27
No, Singapore should keep the death penalty	70

and drug trafficking. There is unlikely to be any adverse outcry should the Government further relax the criteria for life imprisonment to be granted for these offences or review other offences carrying the death penalty. There is in fact no strong interest or active discussion on the topic. Increasing the number of executions is generally not thought to be an effective measure to reduce violent crime or drug trafficking.

From the responses to the scenario cases, it can be seen that there is no overwhelming support for the death penalty, even in cases with aggravating features such as a robbery, a hapless victim or where the offender has previous convictions. Furthermore, there was strong support for taking mitigating circumstances into account in determining what the appropriate sentence is.

The overall findings of this survey show that while a majority of the public is in favour of the death penalty when the question is asked in general terms, it is certainly not an opinion which is held strongly or unconditionally. The nature of public opinion on this topic must therefore be understood before it can be said that the death penalty in Singapore needs to be retained because the public supports it.

## Future Research

It is hoped that this survey will inform discussions on the death penalty and possible future sentencing reforms in Singapore. A slightly more ambitious aim is to counter the comment that “while Asia is the most important region of the world when it comes to capital punishment, it is also one of the most understudied” (Johnson and Zimring 2006: 91). It is hoped that the survey findings will contribute to the growing body of literature on public support for the death penalty in different Asian countries, such as Malaysia (Hood 2013), Japan (Sato and Bacon 2015) and China (Bakken 2013, Jiang 2016).

In terms of improvement to the survey methodology, the actual swing in opinion in the present survey may be even greater considering that respondents may be inhibited from revising an opinion which had been publicly declared to the interviewer (Bohm 1990). Future surveys could perhaps eliminate the public commitment aspect by having respondents key in their replies to the questions on a notepad without showing them to the interviewer.

Further analysis will also need to be made on reasons why respondents said they supported either the mandatory or the discretionary death penalty; whether there are differences in support for the death penalty according to the respondents’ demographic characteristics such as gender, age group, religion and ethnicity; and whether certain demographic groups are more likely to change their opinions when confronted with information on the death penalty (Unnever et al. 2005).

**Table 12** Support by those already in favour of the mandatory death penalty when informed that it is discretionary in many retentionist countries

Support	Percentage
Yes, Singapore should abolish the mandatory death penalty	31
No, Singapore should keep the mandatory death penalty	66

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### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** The survey was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The survey was approved by the National University of Singapore's Institutional Review Board (Approval Number NUS 2672, Reference Code A-15-178).

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## Appendix 1

**Table 13** Demographic profile of the survey respondents ( $n = 1500$ ) as compared to the Singapore general population

	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents	Percentage of general population
Gender			
Male	757	50	50
Female	743	50	50
Age			
18 to 34 years	583	39	34
35 to 54 years	561	37	36
55 to 74 years	356	24	30
Ethnicity			
Chinese	964	64	77
Malay	257	17	15
Indian	257	17	7
Others	22	1	1
Housing type <sup>a</sup>			
Studio/1- and 2-room HDB	65	4	6
3-room HDB	258	17	18
4-room HDB	545	36	32
5-room HDB/executive/maisonette/HUDC	397	26	24
Executive condominium/condominium/other apartments	161	11	14
Landed properties	72	5	6
Others	2	0	0

The general population data on gender, age and ethnicity are derived from *Population in brief 2016* for Singaporeans between 15 and 74 years old, whereas the data on housing type are derived from the *General household survey 2015* which includes both Singaporeans and Singapore Permanent Residents.

<sup>a</sup> About 80% of Singaporeans live in public housing built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) or the Housing and Urban Development Company (HUDC). The latter built housing for the middle income group who did not qualify for HDB flats between 1974 and 1982, with HDB taking over HUDC thereafter. Private housing comprise condominiums/apartments, landed properties and others.

## Appendix 2

*Scenarios relating to murder: what sentence do you think he/she deserves?x*

### Rotation 1

- A man robbed a local shop with a gun and shot the owner in the head. He took away with him \$300 in cash. He had not previously been convicted of any crime. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

*[Robbery murder (mitigating): 52% agreed with the death sentence]*

- A woman deliberately poisoned her husband who died, so that she could be free to live with her lover. She was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

*[Domestic murder (aggravating): 51% agreed with the death sentence]*

- A young man aged 19 years deliberately shot dead a drug dealer who had failed to pay a debt. He had no previous convictions for violence and had said that he killed the victim on the orders of an older man. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

*[Drug-related murder (mitigating): 28% agreed with the death sentence]*

### Rotation 2

- A man robbed a local shop with a gun and shot the owner in the head. He took away with him \$300 in cash. He had previously been in prison twice for robbery. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

*[Robbery murder (aggravating): 64% agreed with the death sentence]*

- A woman who had been abused by her husband for many years decided to kill him by deliberately poisoning his food. A neighbour discovered the death of the husband and reported it to the police. She was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

*[Domestic murder (mitigating): 17% agreed with the death sentence]*

- A man aged 35 years with previous convictions for violence and drug possession deliberately shot dead a rival drug dealer who had failed to pay back a debt. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

*[Drug related murder (aggravating): 57% agreed with the death sentence]*

*Scenarios relating to drug trafficking: what sentence do you think he/she deserves?*

### Rotation 1

- A Singaporean man aged 30 years was arrested when he sailed into Singapore. Following a tip-off to the police, 25 kg of heroin was found hidden inside the panels in the cabin of the boat. He had a previous conviction for possessing a small amount of heroin, below 15 g, but claimed that he knew nothing about the hidden heroin. He was convicted of drug trafficking and sentenced to death.

*[Drug trafficking (heroin) (aggravating): 47% agreed with the death sentence]*

- A foreigner aged 20 years was arrested when he arrived at Changi Airport from overseas because his behaviour aroused suspicion. He was found to be carrying a package containing 100 g of cocaine. He said he was asked to deliver the package by his boss and had no idea what was in it. He had no previous convictions. He was found guilty of drug trafficking and sentenced to death.

*[Drug trafficking (cocaine) (mitigating): 21% agreed with the death sentence]*

## Rotation 2

- A Singaporean woman aged 21 years was stopped by Immigration at Changi Airport and when searched was found to have 100 g of heroin hidden in a false bottom of her suitcase. She claimed that a foreign man she had met on holiday had asked her to carry the suitcase as a special favour. She had no previous criminal record. She was convicted of drug trafficking and sentenced to death.

*[Drug trafficking (heroin) (mitigating): 17% agreed with the death sentence]*

- A Singaporean man aged 25 years was arrested in Singapore on suspicion that he was dealing in drugs. His property was searched, and 500 g of cannabis was seized. He had a previous conviction for selling cannabis in small amounts on the street. He claimed that someone else had left the 500 g of cannabis at his house without telling him. He was convicted of drug trafficking and sentenced to death.

*[Drug trafficking (cannabis) (aggravating): 33% agreed with the death sentence]*

*Scenarios relating to firearm offences: what sentence do you think he/she deserves?*

## Rotation 1

- A man aged 19 years broke into a house at night carrying a loaded pistol. The householder heard him come into the residence and went to see what was happening, carrying a stick. The burglar shot at the householder but missed his target. He ran away but was later caught by the police, convicted for a firearms offence and sentenced to death. He had no previous convictions.

*[Firearms (mitigating): 25% agreed with the death sentence]*

## Rotation 2

- A man aged 30 years broke into a house at night carrying a loaded pistol. The householder heard him come into the residence and went to see what was happening, carrying a stick. The burglar shot at the householder and caused a wound in his arm, which was not fatal. He ran away but was later caught by the police, convicted for a firearms offence and sentenced to death. He has a previous conviction for housebreaking and had served a prison sentence.

*[Firearms (aggravating): 31% agreed with the death sentence]*

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