

Pilot Survey of Legal Needs and Access to Justice in Singapore

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Abstract

This study presents the findings of a pilot legal needs survey conducted in Singapore, based on the Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice Guide developed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The objective was to establish the feasibility of the adapted questionnaire and obtain initial insights into legal needs in Singapore. The study positively demonstrated its applicability in the Singaporean context, paving the way for a more comprehensive study.

1 Introduction

Legal needs surveys serve as an increasingly important tool in understanding access to justice, providing crucial data from the perspective of people's needs and experiences as opposed to those of institutions. It is therefore surprising that there has been little to no local research done on surveying the legal needs of individuals in Singapore, with the only publicly available data contained in a single-page topline report prepared by the World Justice Project based on a 2017 survey.²

Prior research on access to justice in Singapore has traditionally centred on judicial attitudes.³ Recently, this has progressed to include studying

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² *Global Insights on Access to Justice 2019: Findings from the World Justice Project General Population Poll in 101 Countries*. World Justice Project, 2019. url: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/global-insightsaccess-justice-2019>.

³ Gary K Y Chan. "Access to Justice for the Poor: The Singapore Judiciary at Work". In: *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 17 (3 2008). url: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/905.

individuals' experiences within formal dispute resolution processes.⁴ While this body of research on formal dispute resolution processes has yielded important insights about the challenges faced by unrepresented litigants, they are unable to tell us anything about individuals' legal problems that fail to reach the attention of legal service providers or formal institutions. Legal needs surveys done in various jurisdictions indicate that many people who encounter legal problems do not seek formal resolution or may choose to resolve these problems outside formal processes. There is thus a growing recognition of the need to broaden the scope of inquiry, which includes exploring informal legal needs and preventive measures, as well as understanding the diverse experiences of different societal groups, to ensure a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of legal needs and access to justice in Singapore.

This gap in understanding can potentially lead to discrepancies in the accessibility and delivery of legal services, an issue that gains urgency in light of Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon's remarks on the broader challenges confronting justice systems globally. His Honour's reference to a "perfect long storm" of socio-economic inequality, truth decay, and waning trust in public institutions⁵ highlights the imperative to address these gaps proactively. It is vital to ensure equal access to legal and justice services. This is not just necessary for maintaining the rule of law, but also crucial in maintaining confidence in public institutions.

Therefore, the publication of the OECD's Legal Needs Survey and Access to Justice Guide⁶ (OECD Guide) presented an opportunity to pilot a legal needs survey in Singapore using best practices learned from legal needs surveys administered elsewhere.

The pilot study's implications extend beyond academic interest; they are crucial for policy development, legal service provision, and ultimately, for promoting greater access to justice. By adapting and applying the framework suggested by the OECD Guide in Singapore, this study aims to provide

⁴ Jaclyn L. Neo and Helena Whalen-Bridge. *Litigants in Person: Principles and Practice in Civil and Family Matters in Singapore*. Academy Publishing, 2021.

⁵ Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon. "Opening Address at Conversations with the Community on 21st September 2023". url: <https://www.judiciary.gov.sg/newsand-resources/news/news-details/conversations-with-the-community-21stseptember-2023>.

⁶ *Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice*. OECD and Open Society Foundations, 2019. doi: <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1787/g2g9a36c-en>. url: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/publication/g2g9a36c-en>.

valuable preliminary insights and set the groundwork for more extensive future research.

2 Methodology

2.1 Pilot study

Pilot surveys provide valuable scope for testing the OECD Guide's questionnaire and methodology. They help by surfacing any potential issues that could affect data quality, including identifying any questions that are unclear, ambiguous or difficult. Initial findings from the pilot survey can also provide an early glimpse into the full study's potential findings and reveal patterns or trends that may warrant prioritisation.

2.2 Web survey

Web or online surveys present advantages of cost and speed over face-to-face interviews or paper surveys. On the other hand, web surveys exclude those with limited internet access or low-levels of digital literacy. For the purposes of a pilot legal needs study in Singapore, the advantages of a web survey would seem to outweigh its disadvantages. This is because Singapore has a high internet penetration rate and a high number of smartphone users and web surveys could potentially reach a widespread audience, including those who may not be able to participate in a face-to-face interview due to time constraints.

2.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire used for the pilot study was heavily adapted from the OECD Guide's illustrative longer-form legal needs survey questionnaire⁷ with minor modifications. While the questionnaire was designed primarily for Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews in a face-to-face setting, it could readily be adapted into an online questionnaire.

2.4 Problems covered

The OECD Guide lists various categories of justiciable problems that have been explored in most legal needs surveys. Although some surveys ask

⁷ *Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice.*

questions about a range of distinct problems, the inclusion of more problems in the survey lengthens the time required to complete it and this was likely to negatively impact completion rates.⁸⁹ Researchers need to decide which range of problems to include in the survey depending on their priorities.

Due to the need to ensure that the survey did not take too long to complete, the pilot survey presented a relatively short list of seven out of the eight primary problem categories identified in the OECD Guide,¹⁰ with a few examples provided for each category to aid recall. The seven problem categories are problems or disputes involving: purchasing goods or services; housing; family members; an accidental injury or serious health issue not due to their fault; their employer or the workplace (excluding personal injuries); money owed by them or to them (excluding rent for housing); and obtaining public services.

2.5 Reference period

Data collection was conducted over September and October 2022 and the starting reference point of January 2020 was used when asking whether the respondent had experienced a legal problem. This gave a reference period of just under three years. Most surveys adopted a three-year reference period¹¹ but January was chosen as it may provide an easier reference point for recall.

2.6 Sub-sampling problems for follow up

Due to time constraints, it is not possible to ask follow up questions for all the problems that a respondent reports. To exclude trivial problems, the survey follows the OECD Guide's recommendation to follow up on problems that meet a minimum threshold after all the problems have been reported.

If a respondent reports experiencing multiple problems, the survey asks them to rate the seriousness level for their most recent problems (up to three) within each problem category. Random selection was then used to choose the problem to follow up.

⁸ Mirta Galesic and Michael Bosnjak. "Effects of questionnaire length on participation and indicators of response quality in a web survey". In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73 (2

⁹), pp. 349–360. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfp031>.

¹⁰ The category "community and natural resources" was excluded as it did not seem relevant to Singapore's context.

¹¹ *Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice*.

To rate problem seriousness, participants were shown a rating slider between 1 to 10. Two anchor points were provided: they were told to consider purchasing a faulty washing machine as having a seriousness score of 2 as while being made homeless was a seriousness score of 9. The descriptions for these anchors were taken from another legal needs survey questionnaire.¹⁰

2.7 Sub-sampling advisers

The questionnaire in full can be found here: <https://url>

2.8 Data Collection

Respondents for the survey were drawn entirely from online market research panels through Qualtrics Research Services. Quota sampling was used to ensure that lower income groups were represented. Respondents received an incentive from Qualtrics for their participation.

Individuals aged 18 and above and residing in Singapore were targeted for data collection and all data was collected voluntarily and anonymously. Before the survey was administered, participants were told that could end the survey at any time. Data collection stopped after obtaining 525 responses where the respondent experienced a legal problem (the target was 500).

2.8.1 Survey Responses

	Count	Percent	Average Time
Incomplete	273	23.4%	
Completed	896	76.6%	
Experienced legal problem	525		27m 06s
Did not experience legal problem	371		10m 51s

Table 1: Survey completion statistics.

2.8.2 Demographics

Table 2 shows the breakdown of the survey sample compared with population numbers (from the 2020 Census) on key demographics.

The sample skewed younger and were more highly educated. As a result, individuals aged 65 or older and those who did not complete secondary school education are underrepresented in the sample.

¹⁰“Online survey of individuals’ handling of legal issues in England and Wales 2015”. 2016. url: <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/migrations/enuk/files/Assets/Docs/Publications/sri-handling-of-legal-issues-2016appendices.pdf>, Appendices.

Groups	Count	Percent (%)	Population (2020)	Percent (%)
Gender				
Male	438	48.9	1,977,556	48.9
Female	458	51.1	2,066,654	51.1
Age (Age 20+)				
18–34	363	40.5	829,332	20.5
35–49	324	36.2	910,546	22.5
50–64	175	19.5	886,524	21.9
65 or older	34	3.8	614,368	15.2
Ethnicity				
Chinese	718	80.1	3,006,769	74.3
Malay	97	10.8	545,498	13.5
Indian	41	4.6	362,274	9.0
Other	40	4.5	129,669	3.2
Highest Qualification (Age 25+)				
University	452	50.5	982,000	33.0
Diploma/Professional	235	26.2	456,800	15.3
Post-Secondary	81	9.0	296,900	10.0
Secondary	117	13.1	484,300	16.2
Below Secondary	11	1.2	757,800	25.5

Table 2: Survey Sample Demographics Compared To Singapore Population

2.8.3 Household information

Table 3 presents household level information about the respondents compared with population household numbers. Households with a monthly

income below \$2,000 or whose predominant household language is not English are underrepresented in the sample.

3 Preliminary Findings

3.1 Incidence of legal problems

Table 4 shows the percentages of those who experienced a legal problem by demographic groups. More than half the respondents (58.6%) experienced a problem within the reference period. This is similar to the incidence rate (50%) reported by the World Justice Project (although they used a shorter

Groups	Count	Percent	Population	Percent	
			(%)	(2020)	(%)
Monthly household income					
\$9,000 and above	309	34.5	607,218	44.2	
\$6,000–\$8,999	205	22.9	197,591	14.4	
\$4,000–\$5,999	151	17.1	144,205	10.5	
\$2,000–\$3,999	153	16.9	143,526	10.5	
Below \$2,000	78	8.7	280,021	20.4	
Household size					
5 and above	202	22.5	286,396	20.9	
3–4	519	57.9	556,138	40.5	
1–2	139	15.5	530,024	38.6	
Most spoken language					
English	569	63.4	450,993	40.2	
Mandarin	236	26.3	414,782	36.9	
Chinese Dialects	42	4.7	102,954	9.2	
Malay	39	4.4	105,459	9.4	
Tamil	5	0.7	31,168	2.8	
Other	6	0.6	17,520	1.6	

Table 3: Survey Sample Household Level Information

Groups	Experienced a Legal Problem (%)	
	Yes	No
All	58.6	41.4

Age 18–		
34	63.1	36.9
35–49	62.4	37.6
50–64	46.9	53.1
65 or older	35.3	64.7
Highest Qualification		
University	50.5	49.5
Diploma/Professional	26.2	73.8
Post-Secondary	9.0	91.0
Secondary	13.1	86.9
Below Secondary	1.2	98.8
Monthly Household Income		
\$9,000 and above	60.2	39.8
\$6,000–\$8,999	60.5	39.5
\$4,000–\$5,999	56.3	43.7
\$2,000–\$3,999	63.4	36.6
Below \$2,000	42.3	57.7

Table 4: Percent of respondents who experienced a legal problem by demographics

two-year reference period).¹²

Within the different demographic groups, individuals with the following attributes are more likely to report having experienced a legal problem:¹³

- younger;
- more highly educated;
- having a higher household income.

¹² *Global Insights on Access to Justice 2019: Findings from the World Justice Project General Population Poll in 101 Countries*, p. 94.

¹³ Tested for statistical significance to the 95% confidence level using Chi-Square Independence Tests.

Table 5 shows the incidence of legal problems by their categories. Consumer problems were the most reported, followed by housing related problems and money problems.

	Experienced a Legal Problem (%)	
	Yes	No
Consumer	40.3	59.7
Housing	28.4	71.6
Money	25.2	74.8
Workplace	24.8	75.2
Public Services	23.4	76.6
Accidental Injury or Health	22.7	77.3
Family	21.2	78.8

Table 5: Percent of respondents who experienced a legal problem by problem category. Base: all who experienced a legal problem (n=525).

3.2 Problem resolving behaviour

Information seeking More than two-thirds of those who faced a legal problem obtained information to help them understand or solve it, with over half who faced a legal problem obtaining information from online sources. Respondents who were younger were more likely to have obtained information from online sources.

	Count	Percent (%)
Did not obtain information	162	30.9
Obtained information	363	69.1
Total	525	100.0
Sources of obtained information (n=525): A		
website, online/phone app or online video	296	56.4
A leaflet, book or self-help guide	88	16.8
Newspapers or magazines	88	16.8
Television or radio	50	9.5

Table 6: Number of respondents who obtained information to help them better understand or resolve their problem.

Obtaining advice or help Comparatively, a higher proportion of respondents of those who faced a legal problem, nearly three-quarters, sought help or advice to solve it. Around half who faced a legal problem sought help or advice from their family, friends and acquaintances.

	Used Online Sources (%)	
	Yes	No
AgeGroups		
18–34	39.7	60.3
35–49	37.0	63.0
50–64	16.6	83.4
65 or older	8.8	91.2

Table 7: Percent of respondents who obtained information online by age.

The main reasons for not obtaining help were: it was not needed (43.6%); the problem was not important enough (11.4%); and thought it would not make a difference (10.7%).

	Count	Percent (%)
Did not obtain advice or help	140	26.7
Obtained advice or help	385	73.3
Total	525	100.0
Sources of advice or help (n=525):		
Family, friends or acquaintances	259	49.3
Government, town council, MP or politician	79	15.0
Lawyer or professional advisor	73	13.9
Health, welfare, financial services or other professional	69	13.1
Community/religious leader, NGO/charity, trusted person	63	12.0
Employer, trade union or trade/professional association	60	11.4
Court, tribunal, dispute resolution organisation or police	56	10.7

Table 8: Number of respondents who obtained advice or help to resolve their problem.

	Count	Percent (%)
Knew where to get good information or advice:		
Strongly agree or agree	393	74.9
Neither agree nor disagree	95	18.1
Strongly disagree or disagree	37	7.0
Total	525	100.0

Table 9: Whether respondent knew where to get good information or advice.

	Count	Percent (%)
Was able to get all the expert help needed:		
Strongly agree or agree	315	60.0
Neither agree nor disagree	144	27.4
Strongly disagree or disagree	66	12.6
Total	525	100.0

Table 10: Whether respondent was able to get the needed expert help.

3.3 Participating in Resolution Processes

Beyond obtaining information or seeking help, over 76% of individuals who faced a legal problem took steps to resolve it, with about 45% communicating with the other party as part of the process. Other steps taken include turning to third parties to resolve the problem, such as a formal designated authority (public regulator or enforcement agency), the police, or the courts.

	Count	Percent (%)
Nothing was done	125	23.8
Took steps to resolve the problem	400	76.2
Total	525	100.0
Steps taken (n=525):		
Communicated with other party	237	45.1
Turned to public regulator; enforcement agency	90	17.1
Reported to police	62	11.8
Went to court or tribunal	60	11.4

Participated in mediation, conciliation or arbitration	59	11.2
Turned to community leader or organisation	58	11.0
Used a formal appeal process	53	10.7
Turned to religious authority	52	9.9
Turned to other third party	46	8.8

Table 11: Number of respondents who took steps to resolve their problem.

A high proportion of those who participated in formal mediation, conciliation or arbitration rated the process positively on fairness, respect, clarity, consistency and timeliness. Comparatively, other formal processes received slightly lower proportions of high ratings on these same metrics. Nevertheless, approximately 60% to two-thirds of the respondents who sought recourse through court or tribunal processes gave favourable evaluations.

Resolution Processes	Percent (%)		
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Public regulator; enforcement agency (n=90):			
Process was fair and had opportunity to explain	51.1	25.6	23.3
Treated with respect	60.0	21.1	18.9
Process and decision clearly explained	62.2	18.9	18.9
Outcome similar to other similar cases	57.8	24.4	17.8
Concluded in timely manner	62.2	20.0	17.8
Court or tribunal (n=60):			
Process was fair and had opportunity to explain	60.0	20.0	20.0
Treated with respect	68.3	13.3	18.3
Process and decision clearly explained	68.3	15.0	16.7
Outcome similar to other similar cases	66.7	21.7	11.6
Concluded in timely manner	68.3	16.7	15.0
Mediation, conciliation or arbitration (n=59):			
Process was fair and had opportunity to explain	69.8	11.3	18.9
Treated with respect	83.0	6.8	10.2
Process and decision clearly explained	69.5	20.3	10.2
Outcome similar to other similar cases	79.7	11.9	8.5
Concluded in timely manner	79.7	8.5	11.9

Table 12: Participants' views on the three most common processes.

3.3.1 Ongoing and concluded problems

Out of the 525 problems that were subject to follow up in the survey, only 41.3% were resolved. One in five of the problems persisted but parties had given up resolving them.

	Count	Percent (%)
Done with		
Problem was resolved	217	41.3
Problem persists but given up trying	108	20.6
Ongoing	115	21.9
Too early to say	85	16.2
Total	525	100.0

Table 13: Number of concluded and unconcluded problems.

3.4 Measuring legal capability

To measure legal capability, Pleasaence and Balmer developed unidimensional standardised measures for legal confidence, legal self-efficacy.¹⁴ Applying their scoring systems and scales, most of the respondents had medium legal confidence (61.3%) or medium legal self-efficacy (52%).

However, despite not having very high levels of legal capability, most respondents (61.5%) were still confident in achieving a fair outcome.

	Percent (%)		
	High	Medium	Low
Legal confidence	21.7	61.3	17.0
Legal self-efficacy	21.7	52.0	26.3

Table 14: Proportion of respondents by measures of legal capability.

	Count	Percent (%)
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¹⁴ Pascoe Pleasence and Nigel Balmer. *Legal confidence and Attitudes to Law: Developing standardised measures of legal capability*. 2018.

Confident in achieving a fair outcome:		
Strongly agree or agree	323	61.5
Neither agree nor disagree	142	27.0
Strongly disagree or disagree	60	11.4
Total	525	100.0

Table 15: Whether respondent was confident in a fair outcome.

	Count	Percent (%)
Bad luck or simply part of life	209	39.8
A family or private matter	149	28.4
A social or community matter	65	12.4
Bureaucratic or complicated procedures	64	12.2
Legal	62	11.8
Economic	49	9.3
Political	37	7.0

Table 16: How respondents described their problem (n=525).

3.5 Unmet legal needs

The OECD Guide defines a legal need as existing wherever there is a deficit of legal capability and support is needed to adequately deal with a legal issue.¹⁵ A legal need is unmet if it was not appropriately dealt with because legal support was unavailable.

The OECD Guide has a rudimentary logic model for measuring legal need and unmet legal needs using proxy measurements on seven factors: duration, seriousness, awareness/understanding, legal confidence, process fairness, expert help, and adequacy).¹⁵ Applying the model to the survey data, out of all the respondents who had a concluded legal problem, more than half had an unmet legal need.

	Count	Percent (%)
Had a Legal Need		
Legal Need Unmet	186	57.2

¹⁵ *Legal Needs Surveys and Access to Justice*, p. 24. ¹⁵Ibid., p. 89.

Legal Need Met	59	18.2
Had no Legal Need	80	24.6
Total	325	100.0

Table 17: Whether respondent had a legal need and whether the legal need was met. Base: all who had a concluded legal problem (n=325).

3.6 Impact of COVID-19

Since the reference period overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey asks the respondents whether they felt that it caused their problems or made them worse.

	Count	Percent (%)
Yes	149	28.4
Maybe	209	39.8
No	167	31.8
Total	525	100.0

Table 18: Whether the COVID-19 pandemic made the problem worse

4 Reflections

Presenting problem categories Asking the respondents about the types of problems using a shorter list of problem categories did not appear to have caused misinterpretation. However, in hindsight, more examples should have been provided within each problem category to help participants distinguish between potentially overlapping categories. For example, most Singaporeans reside in public housing and a housing problem could potentially also be classified as a public services problem involving the relevant public agencies. Positive and negative examples should be included in potentially overlapping categories to reduce such ambiguity.

Unclear whether legal problem or not As it was unclear from some of the brief follow up descriptions given by the respondents that there was an obvious legal dimension to their problems, showing examples of problems

with a legal dimension when asking them to recall their problems could potentially improve the accuracy of the responses. Another solution would be to set a minimum word requirement when asking the respondents to elaborate on the nature of the problem, although this has to be weighed against the disadvantages of increasing the duration of the survey and any associated risks of dropout.

5 Conclusion

Apart from the above limitations, the pilot survey demonstrated that the questionnaire was suitable for data collection in Singapore with very little adaptation required.

Quota sampling helped to ensure that responses from the lower income groups were captured but there were still underrepresented groups that underscores the need to diversify data collection methods for future studies.

It is therefore proposed that a multi-prong approach be adopted for data collection in future surveys. This should include using translators to translate the questionnaire into non-English languages and conducting phone surveys and face-to-face interviews. Special effort should also be made to reach out to the underrepresented groups, through grassroots and community organisations. By implementing these strategies, the survey can capture a more comprehensive picture of the legal needs of Singapore's resident population.

The preliminary findings from the pilot survey also point to gaps in our understanding of Singaporeans' legal needs that warrant a fuller study. For example, why are those who are older or from lower income groups reporting fewer legal problems? Is it because they fail to identify their problems or are they excluded from socio-economic activities that give rise to legal problems in the first place?¹⁶ The information gained from such a study will be invaluable in guiding policy-making and fostering an accessible, responsive, and effective legal system in Singapore.

¹⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/do-the-poor-suffer-disproportionately-from-legal-problems/>