Tracking Ethnic Integration Policy: Analysing Public Housing Patterns among Immigrant and Ethnic Groups in Singapore[1]

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1 S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. (2025, December 3). *RSIS seminar on tracking ethnic integration policy in Singapore: Analysing the public housing patterns among immigrant and ethnic groups in Singapore* [Event recording]. https://rsis.edu.sg/event/rsis-seminar-on-tracking-ethnic-integration-policy-in-singapore-analysing-the-public-housing-patterns-among-immigrant-and-ethnic-groups-in-singapore/

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Introduction

Singapore's Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) is the cornerstone for interracial mixing in the neighbourhood[2]. The policy was introduced in 1989 to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves in public housing as nascent signs of segregation surfaced in the mid 1980's. In 2010, the principle for a quota-based system was expanded to permanent resident households when similar gentrifications were observed among new immigrant families. Based on administrative data obtained from the EIP portal, this report explores the evolving spatial housing patterns among racial and permanent resident groups in Singapore from 2016 to 2025. It will also discuss how social cohesion may be fostered in increasingly diverse neighbourhoods.

How EIP works

EIP is a racial housing quota applied to all Housing Development Board (HDB) apartment blocks in Singapore. The instrument is designed primarily for the resale market to ensure that the ethnic proportion of households' mirrors that of the national population, i.e., approximately three-quarter Chinese, and one-quarter racial minorities (See Table 1). When a HDB block reaches the maximum limit in a specific racial category (e.g., 87% of the residents in block are ethnic Chinese households), there will be no further resale transaction that will dilute the racial composite of the block (e.g., from a Malay to Chinese home owner), though existing homeowners can still have the option to sell their flat to a prospective buyer from the same race (e.g., from one Malay homeowner to another).   In 2010, and in recognition of the significant influx of new immigrants from countries that are culturally dissimilar, a 8% housing block quota was applied to Singapore permanent resident (SPR) households in each block to prevent the formation of immigrant enclaves[3].

Table 1. Racial Distribution and EIP Quota

Race	Population Distribution (2020 Singapore Census)	EIP Block Limit
Chinese	74.3%	87%
Malay	13.5%	25%
Indian/Others	12.2%	15%

2 Housing & Development Board. (n.d.). *Ethnic integration policy (EIP) and Singapore permanent resident (SPR) quota*. https://www.hdb.gov.sg/residential/buying-a-flat/buying-procedure-for-resale-flats/plan-source-and-contract/planning-considerations/eip-spr-quota
3 Housing & Development Board. (n.d.). *Ethnic integration policy (EIP) and Singapore permanent resident (SPR) quota*. https://www.hdb.gov.sg/residential/buying-a-flat/buying-procedure-for-resale-flats/plan-source-and-contract/planning-considerations/eip-spr-quota

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Challenges to EIP

While EIP ensures that no HDB block will have a resident profile of the same race, there are four notable long-term trends and unexpected outcomes. First, in-spite of the racial quota levied at the block level, there are signs that ethnic gentrification is here to stay. When EIP was implemented in 1989, 24.4% of all HDB blocks (total 4,825) reported at least one form of ethnic constraint – in other words, 1,177 out of 4,825 HDB blocks have reached at least one EIP ethnic quota (i.e., Chinese, Malay, or Indian/Others). By 2016, the proportion of blocks with at least one racial restriction have increased to 27.9%, notwithstanding that the number of HDB blocks have nearly doubled (8,250). In 2025, the figure has risen to 30.8% (See Table 2). Among the three races, Chinese constrained blocks have consistently remained high, hovering over around 15%; Malay constrained blocks have steadily risen between 2016 to 2024, and marginally lowered to 10.3% in 2025; and Indian/Others constrained blocks fluctuated between 6.8% to 10.3%. Longitudinal spatial trend analyses have identified persistent racial hotspots that warrant empirical scrutiny: Chinese buyers consistently favour HDB neighbourhoods in central locations, such as Bishan, Ang Mo Kio, Hougang, and Queenstown; Malay home buyers are pivoted to Marsiling, Jurong West, Pasir Ris and Tampines; and Indian/Others buyers are dispersed across the island apart from the central region (See Figure 1).

Table 2. Percentage of HDB Blocks that Reached EIP Racial Quota

Year	Chinese	Malay	Indian	At least one race
2016	17.7	4.7	6.8	27.9
2017	18.4	4.6	8.5	29.6
2018	19.5	4.8	7.7	30.0
2019	18.0	8.9	9.1	33.7
2020	17.2	10.6	9.3	34.0
2021	17.3	10.1	8.8	33.1
2022	17.4	10.2	7.9	32.6
2023	16.8	10.7	8.0	31.9
2024	14.6	11.6	10.3	31.5
2025	15.9	10.3	9.2	30.8

Second, racial housing clusters point to a sign of socio-economic disparity as resale prices among Chinese constrained flats are significantly above other housing estates, whereas the resale prices of Malay constrained flats are markedly lower[4]. Taken at a broader level, the housing dynamics hinted that the market schism is partially compounded by the demographic profiles of residents in the neighbourhoods.

Figure 1. Longitudinal Tracking on EIP Racial Data (2016 - 2025)

Blocks that met Chinese quota, 2016

Blocks that met Chinese quota, 2025
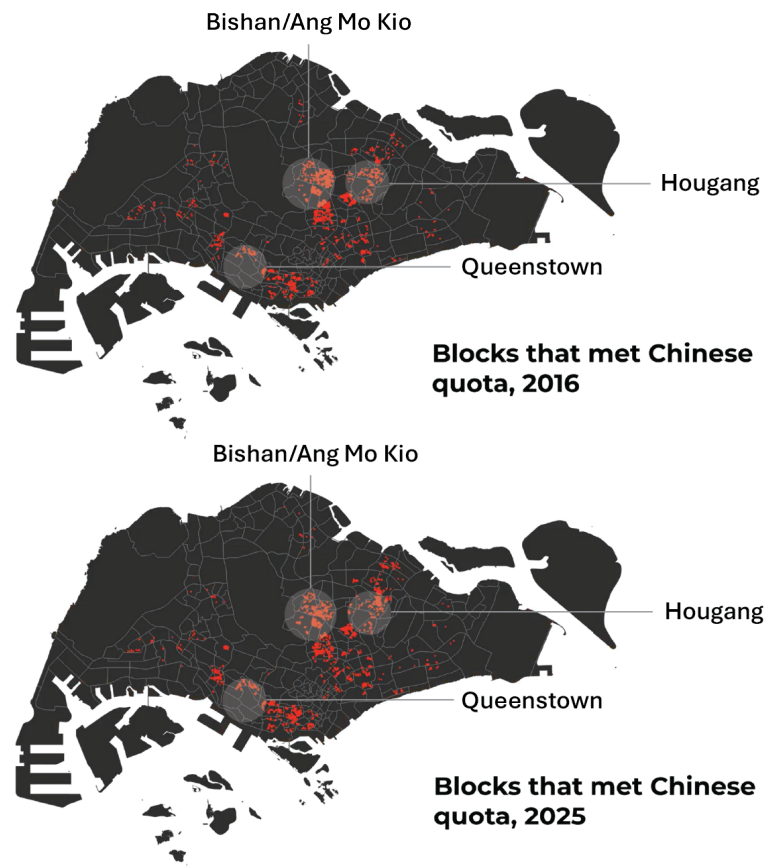
Third, in Chinese constrained estates such as Bishan, Ang Mo Kio, and Queenstown, ethnic minority (Malay, Indian/Others) home sellers tend to face greater difficulties in securing a homebuyer because of their racial classification, and this often times result in longer transaction delays for minority sellers. The mismatch is a result of two simultaneous drivers – the higher resale premium expected in Chinese constrained blocks, and the lower purchasing power of ethnic minority homebuyers. As a result, minority home sellers in these neighbourhoods require a longer time to secure a buyer and, in some cases, they had to accept an offer that is significantly below the prevailing market rate in the same block[5]. This challenge was mitigated by a government buy-back scheme implemented in 2022, although the effect of that intervention remains to be evaluated.

4 Leong, C. H., Teng, E., & Ko, W. (2020). The state of ethnic congregation in Singapore today. In C. H. Leong & L. C. Malone-Lee (Eds.), *Building resilient neighbourhoods: The convergence of policies, research, and practice* (pp. 29–49). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-7048-9_3
5 Leong, C. H. (2022). HDB buyback scheme shows the premium Singapore places on racial harmony. *Channel NewsAsia*. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/eip-quota-ethnic-integration-policy-hdb-resale-prices-buyback-2631641

Fourth, and lastly, Singapore's increasingly diverse demography has contributed to more heterogenous living. Beyond racial clustering, residential estates are also increasingly divided along other tribal characteristics such as citizenship, income, age, and lifestyles. The EIP data on permanent resident

(PR) constrained flats partially supported this observation (See Table 3). In 2017, 5.18% of all HDB blocks are PR constrained. By 2025, this figure stands at 1.56%. While the reduction of PR constrained block augurs well on the intended policy goals of EIP (i.e., to mitigate social enclaves), a deeper dive into the spatial-temporal locations of the blocks found that the majority are located in a handful neighbourhoods (namely Jurong West, Marsiling, Woodlands, and Sengkang/Punggol) and it has been so since 2017 (See Figure 2).

Not much is known about the longer-term impact of PR household concentration in Singapore although a recent study suggests that neighbourhoods with concomitantly high density of PR and ethnic minority constrained blocks (i.e., Jurong West, Marsiling, Woodlands) reported lower social trust and satisfaction even after accounting for demographic differences on income, age, and racial identity[6]. The homophilic instincts to live among others who share the same tribal characteristics – regardless by choice or otherwise – makes the fostering of shared experiences an uphill task notwithstanding policies that encourage neighbourhood mixing[7].
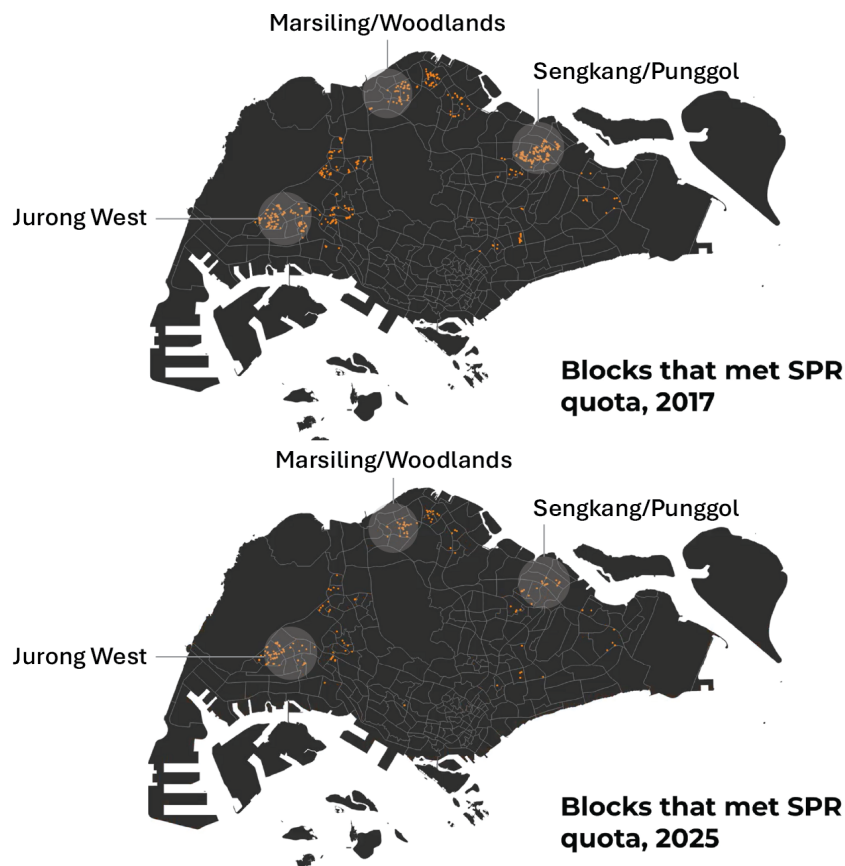
Table 3. Percentage of HDB Blocks that Reached EIP Permanent Resident Quota

Race	PR Constrained Blocks
2017	5.18
2018	4.31
2019	3.68
2020	3.15
2021	2.53
2022	2.01
2023	2.01
2024	1.76
2025	1.56

6 Leong, C. H., Ang, A., & Tambyah, S. K. (2024). Using spatial big data to analyse neighbourhood effects on immigrant inclusion and well-being. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 102*, 102020. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.102020
7 Leong, C. H., & Yap, Y. (2020). Geographic segregation in Singapore: The emerging schism in our social contour. In T. Chong (Ed.), *Navigating differences: Integration in Singapore* (pp. 231–247). ISEAS.

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Figure 2. Longitudinal Tracking on EIP Permanent Resident Data (2017 - 2025)

Marsiling/Woodlands
Sengkang/Punggol
Jurong West
Blocks that met SPR quota, 2017

Marsiling/Woodlands
Sengkang/Punggol
Jurong West
Blocks that met SPR quota, 2025

What can we do to enhance quality of social mixing?

Research in urban studies have shown that access to shared spaces alone do not always lead to equitable participation or reduced outgroup prejudices. Micro-segregation (e.g., not wanting to be seated next to someone of a different racial background or nationality) can exist even among integrated institutions, and the neighbourhoods are no exception. From a temporal perspective, this proclivity for ethnic clustering and gentrification is seemingly a hardwired instinct that is difficult if not impossible to ameliorate[8].

While the EIP may curate chance encounters and organic daily interactions in the residential environment, the challenge is to ensure that these engagements are both meaningful and impactful. To this end, common neutral touch points like the community clubs, hawker centres, and educational centres are lynchpins to the social mission[9]. Empirical evidence suggests that proximity to these meeting points predicted greater intercultural inclusion and confidence. The strategic imperative and discourse should therefore be pivoted to contact quality rather than quantity.

8 Lim, T., Leong, C. H., & Suliman, F. (2019). Managing Singapore's residential diversity through ethnic integration policy. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 38(2), 109–125. https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-05-2019-0168

9 Leong, C. H., Ang, A., & Tambyah, S. K. (2024). Using spatial big data to analyse neighbourhood effects on immigrant inclusion and well-being. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 102*, 102020. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.102020

Leong, C. H., & Shen, L. (forthcoming). Impact of neighbourhood characteristics on attitudes to multiculturalism and life satisfaction. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

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Lastly, with advances in geographic information systems and communication technology, we now have comprehensive tracking records on interaction patterns across geography. These emerging insights would enable urban planners and community activists to harness, analyse, and nudge desirable social engagements spatially[10]. For instance, in identifying what and where are the nodes for prolonged interactions, and who are the stakeholder groups[11]. Critically, by integrating spatial data with other sensemaking tools such as household surveys and online user feedback, community-based programmes that promote interracial and host-immigrant ties can be customised according to the needs in focused neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

EIP is the strategic policy tool in the prevention of absolute racial enclaves. It plays a pivotal role in creating the conditions for day-to-day interracial interactions in the residential estates. This quota system however is not perfect as periodical calibration is required to ensure its relevance. Minority home sellers in Chinese constrained neighbourhoods tend to encounter greater uncertainties in securing desired transactions; having a common access to public spaces do not always guarantee meaningful interaction as isolation and exclusionary behaviours may persist even among formally integrated venues; the primordial instincts to live along socioeconomic and tribal contour remain compelling. Strengthening social mixing beyond ethnic housing distribution would thus require urban design strategies that promote organic exchange in residential estates.

10 Leong, C. H. (in press). Analysing intercultural contact and change through a spatially bounded perspective. In C.-H. Mayer & E. Vander-heiden (Eds.), *A new research agenda for intercultural relations: Positive psychology, critical and socio-technological approaches*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
11 Big Data and AI for Civic Innovation. (n.d.). *CityData.ai*. https://citydata.ai

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