

Class and immigration: Younger S'poreans want more talk, govt action

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Younger, better-educated and wealthier Singaporeans want more discussion and government involvement in class and immigration issues. They are also more likely to feel that trust levels in the Government and politicians will fall if both issues are not managed well.

According to an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) study released yesterday, half of young Singaporeans aged 18 to 25 surveyed wanted more public discourse and state involvement in issues concerning class differences, compared with just over 40 per cent of those aged 65 and above.

Almost half, too, indicated lower trust in the Government if class differences were not properly managed. Almost a third said that it would decrease their sense of belonging to Singapore, compared with less than 30 per cent of older Singaporeans.

Explaining this, the study said younger Singaporeans may be more affected by inequality issues, as they experience more competition for jobs and a widening socioeconomic divide.

Perceived financial mobility plays a part too. Those who perceive downward personal and inter-generational financial mobility expect trust in the Government to deteriorate the most - more so than other consequences like polarisation, mistrust among communities, anger and violence.

And with two-thirds of the study's respondents saying that they are experiencing downward or negligible financial mobility, it is critical that class differences are addressed, said the study. "If mismanaged, these would result in increased disenfranchisement within younger cohorts, and perceptions of greater discord."

Half or more of those living in private property felt that trust in the Government and national identity can erode if immigration is mismanaged, compared with a third of those living in three-room or smaller Housing Board flats.

The study said that wealthier Singaporeans, who tend to live in more expensive housing, are likely to be more educated and in increased competition with employment pass holders for similar jobs.

They are also jostling with foreigners to buy and invest in private housing, unlike HDB flats which have foreign ownership restrictions. "Hence, more affluent individuals may tie the management of immigration issues more directly to their trust in the state, as well as their sense of national belonging and identity," said the study.

Immigration is a pain point especially for the Chinese. More local born Chinese compared with Malays and Indians said it could lead to erosion in national identity and trust in the Government - a difference of 12 percentage points.

"It is possible that more Chinese respondents want to maintain a distinctly Singaporean Chinese identity and fear that immigration might change that," the researchers said.

Overall, close to half of both younger and older respondents felt there should be more state involvement in immigration, reflecting possible higher levels of xenophobia and job insecurity in recent times regardless of age, they added.

While almost all respondents (93 per cent) agreed it is good for their children to play with others from a variety of backgrounds, over a third still prefer to associate with others of similar income levels.

This is particularly entrenched among less educated Singaporeans, who should be given "greater confidence in interacting with those who are better off", the study said.