

Most welcome foreigners but want slowdown ST survey shows citizens' main gripes are over-crowding and jobs

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MORE than eight in 10 Singaporeans feel the country needs foreigners, but mostly to do jobs that Singaporeans do not want to do.

At the same time, fewer than four in 10 believe they are needed here because Singapore has more jobs than workers.

Overwhelmingly, those polled say they accept foreigners being allowed in to work - but at a slower pace.

When asked why locals and foreigners do not get along, almost seven out of 10 ranked 'over-crowding on public transport and common spaces' as a top reason.

These were among the findings of a Straits Times survey to gauge sentiments towards foreigners. The survey of 400 Singapore citizens shows 'a clear majority believe in the need for foreigners', said Dr Leong Chan Hoong, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

But the question on many minds is 'how and under what conditions', added the expert on intercultural relations and migration.

In fact, the responses on why Singaporeans have problems getting along with foreigners indicate that their unhappiness stems from their negative impact on jobs and the environment, rather than discomfort with social or cultural differences. Almost 70 per cent of those interviewed by phone last month blame foreigners for causing 'over-crowding on public transport and common spaces'.

The next factor fingered by most is that 'they take away jobs from Singaporeans'. In contrast, factors such as 'they do not speak English' and 'their presence in my neighbourhood makes me feel unsafe' are ranked almost at the bottom.

This shows Singaporeans are fundamentally open to diversity, say experts.

So the anxiety over immigration is about 'the policy, not the people', noted Dr Leong.

The findings also reflect the widespread view that public infrastructure, such as the MRT network, has not grown in tandem with the population over the last half a decade, said Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng.

'People are anxious to see the infrastructure catch up first before letting more foreigners in, which I think is valid,' he said.

Added Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh: 'It's not that Singaporeans are xenophobic. If we had built infrastructure ahead of the rapid influx, then maybe Singaporeans would not be so upset.'

When asked how foreigners contribute, more saw them 'taking jobs that Singaporeans do not want' rather than complement Singaporeans as 'there are more jobs than workers here'.

Those polled are not as comfortable with foreign presence at other levels of society, although about six in 10 count foreigners among their circle of friends.

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Still, experts said it is puzzling that the jobs factor should be so highly ranked, given that unemployment is at a historic low rate of 2 per cent. A plausible reason, said National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser, is a manifestation of the 'not in my backyard' syndrome.

Just as some people do not want nursing homes built in their estates, people do not want immigration where the personal impact - in terms of competition for the same set of opportunities - is negative. Singaporeans also see the competition to be unfair on several facets. For one thing, foreigners, especially those from the region, will accept lower wages, and are not beholden to the same obligations like National Service reservist training, said Mr Baey.

About four out of 10 Singaporeans also accuse foreigners of driving up property prices.

Measures have been taken to ramp up the building of new HDB flats and to improve the public transport network with more trains and trips as well as buses. But most experts interviewed felt that the effects had yet to be felt on the ground.

Despite the lingering misgivings, the survey shows the Government's move to curb the inflow of foreigners and policy changes to sharpen the differentiation between locals and foreigners in areas such as housing, education and health-care subsidies, have not gone unnoticed. When asked if the Government puts Singapore citizens first, about two-thirds said yes.