

S'poreans split on issue of foreigners' presence: Poll

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Singaporeans are in two minds about having foreigners in their midst.

While many agree they are good for the country, a not insignificant number also feel they have been personally disadvantaged.

A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that about four in 10 respondents (39 per cent) thought foreigners benefited Singapore, compared to 22 per cent who said they made Singapore worse off.

Of the remainder, 38 per cent said they made no difference and 1 per cent had no idea.

Asked about the impact of foreigners on themselves, however, and more than a quarter (26 per cent) said foreigners had made them worse off economically during the recession.

Only 7 per cent said they were better off with foreigners around, and 67 per cent said they were not affected.

IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh said the recession had heightened competition for jobs, which could have led to Singaporeans feeling threatened: 'It's a worldwide phenomenon. When the pie is shrinking, we start to question who we're sharing the pie with.'

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser explained that 'one may not think much of the foreigners in your backyard', but could be more positive to the idea of having foreigners in Singapore in a general way.

Younger respondents - those aged 21 to 29 - and those from lower-income groups were more likely to say that foreigners made them worse off.

Those in the highest income group, earning \$8,000 or more a month, were most likely to say that foreigners benefited the country.

More than half (57 per cent) of them were of this view, and three-quarters (75 per cent) said foreigners had made no economic impact on them personally.

Dr Tan speculated that the antipathy of young Singaporeans could be due to their anxiety over the job market: 'It could be seen as quite tough, leading to a propensity to attribute the difficulty - real or imagined - to foreigners.'

As for the lower-income groups, Dr Tan hazards the following reasons: That there is more intense competition for lower-end jobs and a lower sense of security.

Both Dr Koh and Dr Tan cautioned that their comments were speculative. 'The IPS survey provides only indicative answers, so there is a need to drill down further,' Dr Tan said.

The IPS survey was conducted from Dec 9 last year to Jan 6 this year, collecting responses from 2,109 Singapore citizens and permanent residents aged at least 21. Factors such as age, gender and race were weighed according to their proportions of the general population.

It followed from an earlier survey done in February last year, and aimed to measure the impact of the recession on Singaporeans.