

Two in three concerned about impact of foreigners

Singaporeans think the Government should bring in foreigners when the economy needs them, but they also have concerns about the impact of the workers

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In a survey of 2,016 citizens last year by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), two out of three respondents said they felt that national unity would be compromised by the presence of foreigners, whether they were here to settle down or were transient workers.

More than 60 per cent of respondents agreed that 'the policy to attract more foreign talent will weaken Singaporeans' feeling as one nation, one people'.

This is significantly higher than the 38 per cent of respondents who felt this way in 1998, when the survey question was last posed.

In the survey last year, those most concerned about the impact of foreigners tended to be low-income earners who made less than \$2,000 a month, and those living in one-, two- or three-room flats.

Those least concerned about the influx of foreigners were those in the middle- to upper-income brackets, earning \$8,000 and above a month and living in private housing.

However, as much as the people expressed concern, two out of three - when asked whether the Government is right to increase the number of foreigners working here if the economy needs it - said 'yes'.

This question was not asked in the 1998 survey.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore and also an IPS faculty associate, explained the apparent contradiction in the survey findings.

He said that when it comes to foreigners coming here, Singaporeans make a distinction between how they are affected as individuals and as a collective.

'As citizens and employees, we may have a somewhat negative orientation towards having an influx of foreigners, but as investors and consumers, we may be more welcoming of them,' he said.

'I reckon Singaporeans would resolve this contradiction by taking the stand that we understand the need for bringing in foreigners, but they must not be allowed to threaten my job, my space, my comfort zone, my sense of security and the Singaporean way of life.

'Should these threats remain, we would expect some degree of tension to prevail,' he said.