

Younger and higher-income S'poreans more open towards immigrants: IPS study

Grace Ho

The Straits Times, 24 Mar 2021

SINGAPORE - Younger Singaporeans, as well as naturalised citizens and permanent residents, view immigrants more positively.

Those with higher education, earning higher salaries or who live in larger housing types are also more positive about the economic impact of immigrants and immigration. But they are less so when it comes to the social and cultural implications, according to a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) released on Wednesday (March 24).

In its study, IPS said it is not surprising to find that naturalised citizens and PRs have more positive views of immigration and immigrants, given that they were part of this group themselves.

It added: "(Singaporeans) who were less well-off viewed immigrants as economic and employment threats, while those who were more well-off were more concerned about the social and cultural dimensions."

Some 45.1 per cent of Singaporeans were on the fence regarding the impact of immigrants on Singapore's development - similar to the results found in Taiwan, the United States, Sweden and Switzerland.

This is unlike the more than 40 per cent of Malaysians, Thais and Australians who felt that immigrants had a "quite bad" or "very bad" impact on their country's development.

Naturalised citizens and PRs, as well as younger Singaporeans, were more likely to view the impact positively.

They were also more likely to agree that immigrants strengthen cultural diversity.

A total of 60 per cent of those in the youngest group aged 21 to 35 agreed with the statement that immigration helps to fill important job vacancies, compared with just 43 per cent of those older than 65.

Those in the youngest group were more likely to agree that immigration offers people from poor countries a better living, and asylum to political refugees.

While both the social and economic implications of immigration weigh on people's minds, higher proportions are concerned about the impact of immigration on unemployment, said the head of the IPS Social Lab, Dr Mathew Mathews.

He added that this is more apparent for those who are over 50, as well as those who are less educated and have lower incomes. "For these groups, the economic threat weighs more strongly, as they wonder how much more immigration will continue to impact their livelihoods.

“It is inevitable that when people are concerned about immigrants as potential hindrances to their economic well-being, that they will also be more antagonistic to them - and it has social implications.”

Only slightly over 46 per cent of those aged 21 to 35 disagreed with the statement that immigration increases the crime rate – this was even lower among each of the other age groups at less than 36 per cent.

Older and locally born citizens wanted stricter limits on the number of foreigners who can enter Singapore.

Around half of Singaporeans aged above 50 also believed immigration increased unemployment for Singapore, compared with 38.4 per cent of those aged between 21 and 35.

Also, the study observed a "notable difference" between locally born citizens, and naturalised citizens and PRs, in their views of whether immigrants cause social conflict.

While 40.3 per cent of locally born citizens agreed that immigration leads to social conflict, only 29.6 per cent of naturalised citizens and PRs agreed with the same statement.

"This diversity of views when it comes to immigration highlights the need for policymaking to consider potential impacts as well as the population's threshold for immigration in lived spaces," said IPS.

"When it comes to policy preferences vis-a-vis immigration, the majority of Singapore respondents are open to foreigners coming into Singapore, but believe that numbers should be within strict limits enforced by the state."

It added that older Singaporeans may be less idealistic than younger ones about immigration, and more concerned that a lack of strict enforcement of immigration quotas would have negative consequences on their livelihoods. "The latter may be a more imperative and immediate concern, when one is settling down in life and starting a family."