

Most S'poreans, PRs agree immigration is good for economy, but half worry about foreigners taking jobs: IPS report

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SINGAPORE — Most Singaporeans and permanent residents (PRs) agree that immigration is generally good for the economy, but slightly more than half of them also felt strongly that immigrants took jobs away from people here, and that the Government has spent too much money assisting immigrants.

These were among the findings from an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) report that was released on Thursday (Sept 23). It was based on a survey of about 2,000 Singaporeans and PRs on national identity and pride.

The face-to-face survey, which was done between September and November last year, sought to explore people's general perceptions of Singapore, including the topic of immigration.

Respondents were asked several questions relating to immigration and had to answer on a four-point scale of “to a great extent”, “to a moderate extent”, “to a small extent” and “not at all”.

When asked to what extent they agreed that immigrants are generally good for the economy, 75.3 per cent answered “to a great extent” (17.2 per cent) and “to a moderate extent” (58.1 per cent).

Some 68.3 per cent of those surveyed also supported the statement either to a “great extent” or “to a moderate extent” that immigrants improve Singapore society by bringing in new ideas and culture.

However, when asked to what extent they agree that immigrants take jobs away from people born in Singapore, 50.3 per cent chose either “to a great extent” or “moderate extent”.

More than half, or 53.4 per cent, also supported the statement “to a great extent” or “moderate extent” that the government spends too much money assisting immigrants.

The longstanding issues surrounding immigration were [raised in Parliament](#) earlier this month, in a marathon 11-hour debate over foreign talent policy and job competition.

Opposition party members from the Progress Singapore Party had raised concerns that the Government's foreign talent policy has led to Singaporeans being displaced from their jobs, singling out the free-trade pact that is the India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (Ceca) and claiming that it allows unfettered entry of certain Indian professionals here.

The researchers, who published the report, said that although Singaporeans are generally agreeable to the benefits of immigration and globalisation, they may still have questions about whether government policies on immigration are really benefiting them.

Speaking at a media conference on Thursday, Dr Mathew Mathews who is one of the four authors of the report said that Singaporeans and PRs have been “quite positive” when it comes to issues such as immigration and globalisation, despite the recent scrutiny over free trade agreements.

“Singaporeans are able to consider that globalisation works... as a nation, we have come to accept the fact that we are well-related to the broader world and based on that, we should work with (people) from various kinds of backgrounds, countries and cultures that might be here,” Dr Mathews said.

Dr Tan Ern Ser, a co-author of the report, said that although most Singaporeans may not be ideologically opposed to immigration, they may be worried about how immigration policies could lead to their jobs being taken away.

“Singaporeans are not anti-globalisation... neither are they anti-immigrants,” he said. “I think they have more problems with their perception of a policy, where they think Singapore can do better in terms of ensuring that Singaporeans are not discriminated against.”

The implication is that the country needs to continue to calibrate its immigration policy, Dr Tan said.

“We have to ensure that we bring in the people we really need and, at the same time, that Singaporeans are not discriminated against.”

ECONOMIC THREATS FROM IMMIGRANTS

The survey also found that less-educated, lower-income individuals were more concerned about immigrants taking jobs away from Singaporeans.

When asked how much they agree with the statement that immigrants take jobs away from individuals born in Singapore, 21.9 per cent of those who classified as coming from a less-educated background chose “to a great extent”, compared to 2 per cent of mid-educated respondents, and 9 per cent of higher-educated respondents.

Those of lower education levels attained an education level of secondary school and below, mid-educated respondents attained at least a post-secondary diploma and those who are higher-educated attained a degree and above.

The difference, however, was less stark when comparing socio-economic status.

To the statement that immigrants take jobs away from individuals born in Singapore, 17.9 per cent of those who are of lower socio-economic status indicated that they agreed “to a great extent”, compared to 15.9 per cent of mid-socio-economic status respondents and 13.9 per cent of high socio-economic status respondents.

Dr Mathews said that this trend towards lower-income workers feeling this way could have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has brought about job uncertainties, particularly for this group.

“When people lose jobs and have financial difficulties, you do have the big rhetoric that immigrants are competing for jobs and maybe sometimes unfairly,” he said.

“It pushes people to think that immigration is probably the cause of all the lack of jobs, which may not necessarily be the case.”