

Migrant workers affected by housing, debts and threats of deportation could be under significant stress

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A study by researchers at the Singapore Management University (SMU) on the wellbeing of migrant workers in Singapore has revealed that 62 per cent of surveyed workers with an injury or salary claim with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and 13 per cent of surveyed regular workers are likely to suffer from serious mental illness.

The research identified that the main drivers of emotional distress amongst workers surveyed were the threats of deportation from employers, agent fee debt, and lack of housing for workers who have run away from their employers.

The research co-author, SMU School of Social Sciences' Assistant Professor of Sociology Nicholas Harrigan said, "We were particularly surprised by the prevalence of emotional distress amongst injured workers. The high rates of threats of deportation amongst workers with injury and salary claims with MOM was also worrying. If workers fear deportation, it makes them much less likely to report mistreatment."

Numbering nearly one million persons or a third of the local workforce, it is crucial to understand the welfare issues confronting low-paid migrant workers. The findings from this study on this vital yet vulnerable group could have socio-economic impact on Singapore.

The study authored by SMU School of Social Sciences' Assistant

Professor of Sociology Nicholas Harrigan and SMU alumna Koh Chiu Yee was launched with a presentation and panel discussion at SMU. The panellists included senior representatives from Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), and Silver Ribbon Singapore which promotes positive mental health.

This study is part of the Social Insight Research Series of reports on unmet social needs in Singapore, driven by the Lien Centre of Social Innovation under SMU.

Key Findings

Threats of deportation

Sixty-four per cent of workers with an injury or salary claim with MOM said that they had been threatened with deportation by their employer. These workers were 50 per cent more likely to suffer from serious mental illness than a worker not threatened. Ten per cent of regular workers reported that their employers threatened to deport them back to their home countries. These workers were five times more likely to suffer from a serious mental illness.

Agent fee debts

Unpaid agent fee debt was one of the main causes of serious mental illness amongst regular work permit holders. Approximately 7 per cent of regular workers reported that they were in debt because they have not completed repaying their agent fees. This debt doubled their chances of having a serious mental illness.

Housing

Ninety per cent of workers with an injury or salary claim with MOM said that they no longer lived with their employer. Those workers were nearly twice as likely to suffer from serious [mental illness](#).

Recommendations

The Ministry of Manpower has a number of policies that address some of these problems. For example, the law requires employers to provide accommodation to workers who have injury and salary claims, and it is an offence under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act to repatriate workers with outstanding claims.

However, the report makes a number of recommendations about areas for further improvement. The study proposes that MOM explores direct or indirect provision of accommodation for injured workers who have run away from their employers. The study also recommends that the Singapore government explores licensing and regulating migration agents in sending countries. The study points out examples such as countries like New Zealand and corporate companies like Capella Hotels and Resorts that have policies that do this.

The study states that employers' threats of deportation could be significantly less damaging if Work Permit holders were guaranteed access to the 30-day Short Term Visit Pass (STVP) upon termination of their work passes. According to current policies, Work Permit holders must leave the country within seven days of termination, whereas Employment Pass and S Pass holders are generally granted the privilege of 30 days.

Assistant Prof Harrigan added, "While regular Work Permit holders are generally mentally healthy, agent fee debt weighs heavily on the mind of the newly-arrived workers. It would be good if the Singapore

government looked at ways of regulating these fees in sending countries. The New Zealand government and Capella Hotels and Resorts both have codes of conduct, licensing, and penalties for migration agents in sending countries. This can dramatically lower agent fees if implemented correctly.

About 10 per cent of regular workers report being threatened with deportation. Assistant Prof Harrigan said that the close link between their visas and work contracts means that often their employer can make a credible threat to deport workers. He suggested allowing workers to change employers without employer permission, and giving workers the access to the 30-day STVP to help reduce the danger that such threats pose to workers' mental health. "These workers have invested a lot in coming to Singapore, and if their employer can liquidate this investment by deporting a worker in just a few days, it gives the employer tremendous power. Unfortunately it seems that some employers abuse this authority," he said.

Over 2,000 South Asian Work Permit holders come through a local soup kitchen run by non-profit organisation Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) in Little India each year. Ninety percent of these workers are no longer living with their employers. "Many have run away saying they fear being deported for making salary or injury claims. It is important for these workers to have access to alternative accommodation. The government could look at providing this accommodation directly or indirectly. Expecting employers, whom workers are lodging a complaint against, to provide such accommodation is not a realistic option," concluded Assistant Prof Harrigan.

About the Study

The study of 801 South Asian migrant workers, mostly from the construction and marine sectors, was conducted in Little India in 2013

and 2014.

The study progressed in two stages: the first was a survey of 605 workers in August 2015. Approximately half of these workers had an injury and salary claims registered with MOM. These workers were recruited from the soup kitchen run by TWC2. The other half of these workers were regular worker permit holders interviewed on the streets of Little India.

The second study was a set of qualitative interviews with 196 workers, mostly at the soup kitchen of TWC2. These interviews explored how and why threats of repatriation took place, and why workers were running away from their employers when they had injury and salary claims.

The study measured the psychological distress of these men using the Kessler 6 scale that is designed by Harvard University Professor Ronald Kessler and used in large scale national health surveys in more than 13 countries, including the United States. The authors correlated this distress measure with over 40 socio-economic variables.

It should be noted that there are limitations which qualify the findings of our study. First, the injury and salary claim workers (who make up half our sample for stage 1 of the study and most of our sample for stage 2) represent less than one percent of [migrant workers](#) in Singapore, so the problems of this group cannot necessarily be generalised to the larger migrant worker population. The injury and salary claim workers are, at best, representative of the experiences of the approximately 2,000 injury and salary claim [workers](#) who pass through the TWC2 soup kitchen each year. Second, the sampling strategy we used was not random, and thus we cannot guarantee that our survey is statistically representative of the larger population. These caveats point to the need for further research in this area.

More information: Vital Yet Vulnerable: Mental and emotional health

of South Asian migrant workers in Singapore.
centres.smu.edu.sg/lien/files/...1-Yet-Vulnerable.pdf

Provided by Singapore Management University

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