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## Deportation threats among causes of distress in migrant workers: Survey

**Other major causes of emotional distress among migrant workers include housing problems and agent debt, according to a Singapore Management University survey.**

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A worker at a construction site amidst the haze (Photo: Ngau Kai Yan)

SINGAPORE: Housing problems, agent debts and threats of deportation are issues which plague migrant workers in Singapore, according to survey results released on Wednesday (Nov 4) by Singapore Management University (SMU).

The findings of the survey among 801 South Asian workers in Singapore revealed that 64 per cent of workers with injury or salary claims with the Ministry of Manpower had been threatened with deportation by their employers. In addition, 10 per cent of regular migrant workers surveyed also said their employers have threatened to send them home.

SMU's Assistant Professor of Sociology Nicholas Harrigan said the close link between the workers' visas and contracts means that employers can make a credible threat to deport them. Under current policies, Work Permit holders must leave Singapore within a week after they are terminated.

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“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,” he explained.

In addition, 90 per cent of workers with injury or salary claims said they no longer lived with their employers. A soup kitchen in Little India run by non-profit organisation Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) sees more than 2,000 South Asian Work Permit holders coming through each year, said SMU.

“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,” said Assistant Professor Harrigan.

Unpaid agent fee debt was another key problem which the workers cited. About 7 per cent of migrant workers surveyed said they were in debt as they had not completed repaying their agent fees.

Researchers in the study said the issues are the main drivers of emotional distress among migrant workers, and it could increase their risk of suffering from mental illness.

The survey was carried out between 2013 and 2014, mostly among migrant workers in the construction and marine sectors.

- CNA/ky