

Policy Brief: Migrant Essential Workers, Covid-19 health, financial, social and cultural impacts

This brief presents an overview of findings from a major new independent study of the health, social, economic and cultural impacts of Covid-19 on migrant essential workers in the UK.

Recommendations:

1. Change the file names of online Covid-19 fact sheets to the target migrant language
2. Tackle vaccine hesitancy within migrant communities
3. Invest in and improve uptake of mental health services especially in Health & Social Care and Food / Necessary Goods sectors
4. Improve childcare options for migrant workers
5. Protect migrant essential workers' employment rights
6. Make all migrant essential workers eligible for Universal Credit

Summary

Covid-19 has exposed the UK's socio-economic dependence on a chronically insecure migrant essential workforce. While risking their lives to offset the devastating effects of the pandemic, migrant workers find themselves in precarious professional and personal circumstances (e.g., temporary zero-hours contracts, workplace exploitation, limited access to adequate health and social services including Universal Credit). This research project investigates how Covid-19 impacts on the everyday lives of migrant essential workers and their decisions about leaving or continuing to stay in the UK. It focuses on the largest non-British nationality in the UK, the Polish community, who - while employed across a range of roles and sectors - are over-represented in essential work.

Essential work is the type of work that is key for keeping British society and economy running during the pandemic. Hence, essential workers (sometimes also referred to as 'frontline workers' or 'key workers') are usually health and care workers and volunteers, staff maintaining public safety (e.g., police, fire service) or delivering pivotal services such as public transport, food production and sale, product delivery, justice, religious and mortuary services, postal services, cleaning and maintenance of public and communal spaces, among others.

The research involves:

- a survey of ~1100 Polish essential workers in the UK
- 40 migrant interviews
- 10 stakeholder interviews.

Policy recommendations

1. Change the file names of online Covid-19 fact sheets to the target migrant language

Language barriers prevent access to essential Covid-19 information from the UK Government and governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the NHS, DWP, local authorities, employers and landlords. For example, those with limited proficiency in English may not be able to locate the Polish-language NHS guidance because the digital file names are in English, meaning they are not returned by web searches conducted in Polish.

2. Tackle vaccine hesitancy within migrant communities

The NHS and UK/devolved governments could improve vaccine hesitancy within migrant communities by circulating reliable and unbiased information in target migrant languages via social media (e.g., Facebook Ad campaign). Employers have a lot to gain from a vaccinated workforce and could collaborate with the NHS to allow employees time off for vaccination in mobile clinics visiting workplaces.

3. Invest in and improve uptake of mental health services to support migrant essential workers, especially in Health & Social Care and Production, Food / Necessary Goods sectors

Urgent investment is needed in NHS mental health services for migrant workers. Uptake campaigns for employer schemes are needed in migrant languages.

4. Improve childcare options for migrant workers

Childcare is a considerable problem for some migrant families, especially lone parents and households where both parents are required to work outside the home during the day. Many migrant essential workers are not able to rely on family support because they do not live near any family members. Access to free, reliable, high-quality childcare is essential to enable migrants to continue their essential work. Information about existing services needs to be targeted to migrants in their own language.

5. Protect migrant essential workers' employment rights

For some migrant workers, in particular those employed in lower-paid and precarious work (e.g., zero hours contract), taking time off work to self-isolate may involve a delay or cut to their pay. This puts employees on low incomes in a highly disadvantaged financial position. Fears around having one's pay cut or not being paid may prevent

some workers from following Government guidelines. Employment law needs to protect migrant essential workers, especially those in precarious work, so that they can self-isolate on an adequate income.

6. Make all migrant essential workers eligible for Universal Credit

Some Polish migrant essential workers, especially those with pre-settled status or those who arrived in the UK during the pandemic, may experience extreme financial hardship if they cannot access Universal Credit whilst out of work or to top-up low-waged work (in-work UC¹). DWP should make an exception to habitual residency eligibility criteria so that migrants with EU citizenship doing essential work can qualify for UC immediately.

Summary of evidence

As of January 2022, the research is ongoing. Early evidence shows the following:

Vaccine hesitancy

Although 67% of our Polish survey respondents had been vaccinated or intended to be, there was considerable vaccine hesitancy (with 12% not willing to take the vaccine and 18% unsure²). Hesitancy was highest amongst younger respondents who perceived low risks of Covid-19 for their own health, including women of childbearing age, who may have worries over vaccine side-effects for fertility.

Mental Health

55% of migrant essential workers said their mental health had declined during the pandemic. Women carers and those working in Health & Social Care and Food/Necessary Goods sectors were worst affected. Many did not have access to mental health services and others reported fearing employment consequences of using mental health services via their employer.

Childcare

During the period of implementation of 'stay at home orders', parents of young children who needed childcare support were allowed to seek this from other family members exclusively (grandparents, other relatives). In the case of Polish migrants, this was often not a viable option. In addition, while childcare support was introduced for essential workers, several jobs which were not classified as essential required continued attendance throughout the pandemic. This created difficulties for some migrant families who could not access any childcare support during the pandemic, especially those on lower incomes.

Universal Credit and social security

¹ Equivalent of Working Tax Credit.

² 3% did not respond.

40% of migrant essential workers reported being worse off financially because of the pandemic. Precarious workers were at most financial risk.

Experts and our respondents pointed out that accessing furlough payments was difficult for agency workers and others in precarious employment. Moreover, the basis on which furlough payments were calculated was highly problematic in sectors that started winding down their activities before the furlough scheme was introduced. Payments were calculated based on earnings received in the month before applying to the scheme. Meanwhile, in some sectors, such as hospitality, work hours had been cut earlier. Therefore, in many cases the furlough payments received did not reflect the usual pay levels pre-pandemic.

For migrants with lower levels of English and/or low digital literacy (or access to devices), the 'digital by default' claims process for Universal Credit was a serious barrier to accessing social security benefits. We also found a reluctance to apply for state support among Polish migrant workers.

Sources and further reading

- Project website: www.migrantessentialworkers.com
- Piekut, A. (2022) '[Covid-19 impacts on mental health](#)', 7 January
- Piekut, A. (2021) '[Vaccine hesitancy among Polish migrant essential workers in the UK](#)', 12 October
- Trevena, P. and Grzymkowska, M. (2021) '[Addressing vaccine hesitancy among the Polish community in Scotland](#)', Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament Information Centre, 14 September

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