

Government COVID Response Did Not Effectively Support UK Migrants, New Study Suggests

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The Government's response to curbing the spread of Covid-19 did not do enough to support the challenges or needs of migrants living in the UK, new research suggests (<https://dro.dur.ac.uk/32799/>).

The study, conducted by Professor Benedetta Cappellini (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/business/about/our-people/search-results/?id=18439>) at Durham University Business School, alongside colleagues Dorothy Ai-wan Yen on of Brunel Business School, Hsiao-Pei Yang of Coventry University and Suraksha Gupta of Newcastle University London, sought to better understand why migrants living in the UK experienced additional mental strains and anxieties during Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown measures imposed by the Government, in order to help facilitate justice for overlooked parts of society.

Professor Cappellini said;

“The Government employed a variety of interventions to minimise the transmission and impact of Covid-19. These included communication campaigns through media, healthcare support, social distancing, national and regional lockdowns, and financial support schemes for businesses. Nevertheless, Covid-19 does not affect all groups of people equally. Our study shows that migrants struggle to cope more than non-migrants during global pandemics because of cultural barriers, reduced access to healthcare and welfare support, and limited social and often economic capital.”

Globally, the researchers say, policymakers have overlooked the challenges faced by international migrants in their host countries during the pandemic. However, the UK in particular received controversial global reviews and scrutiny due to the Government's initial pandemic response and high death toll.

The researchers conducted 60 interviews with Chinese, Italian and Iranian migrants living in the UK. These nationalities were specifically chosen due to the high number of deaths within their countries at the time the study took place, and because of the stricter prevention measures enforced within their own borders, at a time before such restrictions came into place in the UK.

The interviewees were asked general questions about their personal backgrounds, professions and their motivations to move to the UK, as well as more exploratory questions designed to gauge their understanding of the lockdown and government measures both in their home countries and in the UK. Researchers also asked interviewees about their daily experiences of mandatory confinement and their different coping practices.

The results showed that, similarly to UK nationals, migrants adapted their living and working habits during the lockdown to best comply with government guidance and to stay safe. However, the research shows that, in the early stages of the pandemic, many migrants experienced unexpected and significant new worries if they adopted additional health and safety practices in line with the guidance distributed by their home countries that had not yet been advised or adopted by UK Government.

For example, interviewees expressed mask wearing to be a common source of worry in the early months of the pandemic. Migrants whose home countries were advocating mask use were eager to protect themselves from infection but remained wary of a negative or hostile public response.

Professor Cappellini says,

“At the time of the fieldwork, the UK Government was still advising against the benefits of wearing face masks to the general public, but participants offered counterarguments in favour of mask use, citing sources from their home countries, including newspaper articles and information received through networks of friends and family. Some were also actively involved in convincing sceptical British colleagues and friends via social media of the benefits of mask wearing. Nevertheless, many participants said they were at times reluctant to wear a mask so as not to seem different from UK friends and colleagues.”

According to the researchers, the unexpected and negative reactions migrant interviewees had received from those around them triggered additional emotional stress and anxieties. As a result, migrants were faced with adopting “multi-layered integrated coping strategies”, developing individual, household-based and community-based protective strategies, in order to stay safe and not provoke additional anxieties.

Families which encompassed mixed nationalities were placed under further strain when migrants’ families overseas implored their UK-based relatives to adopt more cautious behaviour such as mask wearing and social distancing, particularly when British members of the family chose not to do so.

Other concerns highlighted by the study was the limited effectiveness of Government messaging to penetrate some migrant communities where English was not a first language and, consequently, communities did not engage with British media or news and were unable to both fully follow lockdown rules or use support services.

Professor Cappellini says,

“Our paper illustrates how coping became paradoxical, because alongside the need to cope with the pandemic, migrants also had to cope with the hostile reactions that their initial coping strategies provoked from those around them. Migrants had to learn to cope with coping.”

By highlighting this concept, the researchers believe their study leads to several managerial implications for governments and policymakers to consider in the event of future pandemics or Covid-19 lockdowns, to best ensure public health, safety and wellbeing are protected. Action should be taken, they say, to support migrant families and communities and to promote societal understanding and inclusion.

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