

Systemic Resilience and Labour Immigration Policy-Making: A UK Perspective

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COVID has made us realize that our social and economic system is more vulnerable to shocks than we had previously thought. Understandably, most governments have been in crisis response mode but once the pandemic has passed we need to think about how our society can be made more resilient, including but not limited to immigration policy.

How much effort we should put into improving resilience depends on the likelihood of a recurrence of another shock and whether that shock is likely to be of a different or similar form to COVID. If a COVID-type pandemic is a once in a century event then it probably makes little sense to invest in increased resilience, but if something similar is likely to occur every decade, improved resilience is vital. While some aspects of increased resilience are likely to be widely applicable (e.g. stocks of PPE may be useful for all epidemics of infectious diseases), there is always the danger that one is planning how to respond to the last crisis rather than the next one that poses different challenges. Some countries had well-developed plans for an influenza but not a coronavirus pandemic; East Asian countries with experience of SARS in 2003 seem to have been better prepared for COVID.

An infectious disease has a chilling effect on the movement of people. This includes international travel which has significantly declined, in Europe remaining about 60% below 2019 levels¹. While immigration is much lower – numbers of visas issued have fallen dramatically in many countries – what has happened to emigration is less clear. The UK reports a massive fall in the migrant population in its Labour Force Survey² but

surveys are probably less reliable at this time and there are some reasons to be cautious before drawing very dramatic conclusions. Not all crises reduce human mobility: a natural disaster for example, can lead to increased movements of people as the local population moves away from the affected area and (perhaps) other people move in temporarily to help with relief. The *reduction* in the global flows of people is perhaps unique to a health crisis.

In thinking about how the pandemic affects the labour market, one can, very crudely, divide workers into three categories according to how they respond in the pandemic. First, there are the essential or key workers, those who have to keep working through the crisis even though this involves some personal risk of illness and even death. Second there are those, generally white-collar, who can carry on working albeit remotely. And third, there are those parts of the economy that depend on face-to-face interaction and are shut down or work at severely reduced capacity in the worst phases of the pandemic and can only operate under restrictions at other times.

Key workers

Key workers include highly-skilled professionals in healthcare but also some in personal care, agriculture, retail and food processing who are often paid the minimum wage.

There are a number of studies seeking to compare the fraction of migrants (defined as the foreign-born) who are key workers with the share of locals. These studies are often not comparable because of the different definitions

¹ See <https://www.eurocontrol.int/covid19>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality>

of a key worker used. One study for the US³ found that 65% of locals in the labour force work in jobs deemed “essential critical infrastructure” jobs but 69 percent of all immigrants and 74 percent of undocumented workers. A cross-country study for the EU⁴ had a lower overall share of key workers (31%) and 13% of them are migrants, slightly above their overall share of employment. And a study for the UK⁵ found 32% of migrants were key workers compared to 33% of the UK-born.

While the overall share of migrants in key worker roles seems to be similar to their share in the labour market as a whole, there is considerable heterogeneity across countries and across types of key workers. In many countries, migrants are over-represented in lower-paid key worker occupations. This over-representation in some occupations is matched by under-representation in others e.g. teachers.

If one conclusion drawn from the pandemic is that we need to pay more attention to key workers this might take two forms. We might respond by better rewarding those doing these jobs, both migrants and locals, in recognition of the value of the work they do. And we might decide that we want to increase the number of people in those roles to be better prepared for a possible future crisis, even if wages and conditions were kept at current levels. It is possible to do both of course.

Several countries have expressed thanks to key workers using one-off payments to both locals and migrants e.g. Wales has offered a £500 payment to those working in social care⁶. Some states have offered specific recognition for non-citizen workers e.g. France has offered fast-track naturalization and the UK extending health related visas without fees⁷. But if the reward takes the form of permanently higher pay this does not necessarily imply any change in immigration policy and to the extent that higher pay makes those jobs more attractive to citizens might in practice mean less immigration. Migrants are often over-represented in low-paid key worker roles because these jobs offer wages and/or conditions not very attractive to citizens.

On the other hand, if one increased numbers in key worker jobs to increase resilience in any future pandemic but maintains current poor terms and conditions then there would likely be little alternative but to allow more immigration into these roles.

For the higher-paid key worker roles, notably professional healthcare roles, increased resilience probably means funding healthcare systems more generously in normal times. And this may mean more immigration in those countries where migrants are over-represented among healthcare professionals. However, this does not necessarily entail much of a change in immigration policy as the main obstacle to hiring migrant health professionals in many countries is health funding, not immigration policy.

Stocks vs flows

Particularly challenging in the pandemic are those key roles that rely on a flow of immigrants rather than a more stable stock. The best example of this is seasonal agricultural work which, in most high-income countries, is almost exclusively undertaken by migrant labour. At the height of the first wave of the pandemic many countries exempted seasonal agricultural workers from travel restrictions, there being little alternative to get crops harvested even if there was some increased risk of disease transmission.

Certain forms of agriculture are unavoidably seasonal, but there are other sectors, such as food processing, where the dependence on a continued flow of new migrants is more a business choice than an inevitability. In many high-income countries this sector pays badly, and it is dominated by migrants for whom these jobs are their first in the destination country. They then either return home or move on to better jobs. In many countries food processing plants have been implicated in COVID outbreaks, perhaps because the virus thrives at the temperatures at which these plants operate but perhaps also because the current mode of production is often very labour-intensive, and not socially-distanced. The migrants often do not just work together, they live together, often in crowded conditions that make virus transmission more likely.

³ Kerwin et al 2020

⁴ Fasani and Mazza 2020

⁵ Fernández-Reino and Kierans 2020

⁶ See <https://gov.wales/social-care-workforce-special-payment-scheme>

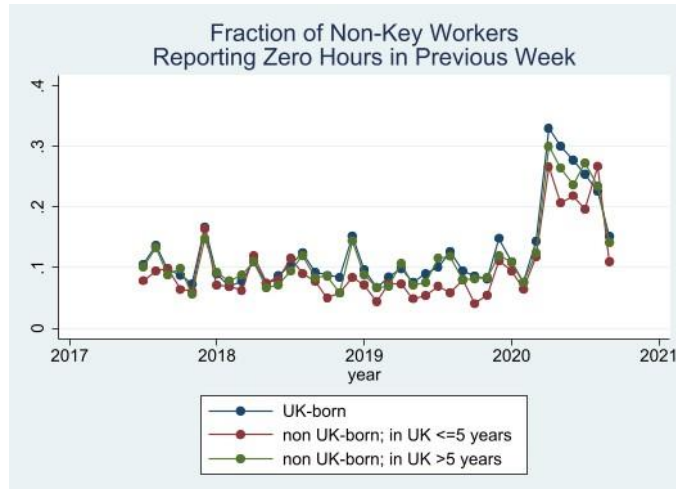
⁷ Kleine-Rueschkamp and Özgüzel 2020

Although most discussion of resilience post-pandemic focuses on government action, it is also possible that firms will, of their own volition, take steps to improve the resilience of their businesses. An outbreak of a virus at a food processing plant leads to a shut-down, hitting profits. A business model based on fewer but better paid workers would face less of a risk. Alternatively, some firms may seek to shorten supply chains, producing locally rather than importing.

Non-key workers

Although much discussion focuses on key workers, it is also important to recognize that non-key workers are not affected in the same way by the crisis. In some jobs, people can, more or less, keep working though remotely and, importantly, continue to be paid. Other types of work are shut down. While different countries imposed different restrictions at different times of the pandemic, hospitality and non-essential personal services were often very badly affected. These workers and the owners of affected businesses, locals and migrants, need income support from the government to prevent destitution. Some of the affected migrants may need income support they would not normally be entitled to. Rules making self-sufficiency through work a visa condition cannot be enforced when they conflict with government restrictions on the type of businesses allowed to be open in the pandemic. The economic downturn does seem to have been larger in economies such as the UK and Spain with high prior shares of employment in hospitality and non-essential services where the work cannot be performed remotely. One aspect of improved resilience might be to reduce the size of these vulnerable sectors of the economy.

It is important to know whether migrants are over- or under-represented among the non-key workers who stop working in the pandemic. One might think they would be over-represented as, for example, hospitality is shut down and many migrants work in this sector. But this does not seem to be the case. The Figure below shows the fraction of non-key workers in the UK⁸, migrant and UK-born who report working no hours in the previous week.



Source: Author's computations from UK Labour Force Survey

Although there are a number of reasons for why zero hours might be reported in normal times, one can see the sharp rise in the proportion in the lockdown. But what is also interesting is that very similar shares of migrants and locals report zero hours. On average, migrants seem slightly under-represented in the 'shut-down' part of the economy, especially more recent migrants.

Conclusions

Our societies do need to think seriously about how we would handle a future crisis; governments will almost certainly have more thorough pandemic plans. But I suspect that we are overly prone to think that 'the world will never be the same again'. Some pre-existing trends e.g. to online shopping and remote working are probably accelerated but we may be surprised by how quickly we go back to the old ways, good and bad. If the shape of our society is not fundamentally different, our immigration policy is unlikely to be very different either. But even if there is more of a change to improve resilience, the implications for immigration policy are likely to be small because migrants are neither very under- or over-represented among the relevant types of workers. And any implications are likely to be quite nuanced, implying more openness in some areas, but less in others.

⁸ Using the ONS definition of key workers, see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplein>

[work/earningsandworkinghours/articles/coronavirusandkeyworkersintheuk/2020-05-15/relateddata](https://www.ons.gov.uk/earningsandworkinghours/articles/coronavirusandkeyworkersintheuk/2020-05-15/relateddata)

Alan Manning is Professor of Economics in the Department of Economics at the London School of Economics and Director of the Community Wellbeing Programme at the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) at the LSE.

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The Migrants and Systemic Resilience Hub ([MigResHub](#)) facilitates research and debates on how migrant workers affect the resilience of essential services during the Covid-19 pandemic and similar shocks in the future. MigResHub is a joint initiative of the EUI's Migration Policy Centre (MPC) and Migration Mobilities Bristol (MMB) at the University of Bristol.

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