These COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots are designed to capture the latest information and analysis in a fast-moving environment. Topics will be repeated from time to time as analysis develops. If you have an item to include, please email us at research@iom.int.

New research & analysis on migrants' public attitudes and COVID-19

Why COVID-19 does not necessarily mean that attitudes towards immigration will become more negative
by James Dennison and Andrew Geddes

From low-skilled to key workers: the implications of emergencies for immigration policy by Mariña Fernández-Reino, Madeleine Sumption, Carlos Vargas-Silva

Public Attitudes to Migration, Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute

"...looking at how previous recent crises affected attitudes to immigration provides immediate grounds to doubt that the COVID-19 crisis will necessarily lead to increased anti-immigration sentiment." James Dennison and Andrew Geddes.

Polarized views on migration

Understanding public attitudes to migration is important, as attitudes can influence both immigration policies and the ability of immigrants to successfully integrate in societies. The COVID-19 pandemic, whose impacts have been felt globally, has further brought migration and migrants into sharp focus, and is starting to influence views and attitudes towards migration.

In recent years and in many parts of the world, public attitudes to migrants and migration have been polarized, with public discourse on these issues often dominated by anti-immigrant sentiment. In Europe, for example, while attitudes to migrants and migration have varied across countries, polls and surveys have shown that over the last few years significant numbers of people viewed immigration "as more of a problem than an opportunity" and that many preferred a reduced number of immigrants in their countries. A 2019 poll by Gallup also revealed that in countries such as the United States, 35% of people preferred a reduction in immigration.

Shifting public attitudes

In some countries, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to already be shifting public attitudes to migration. This is most visible in the United Kingdom, where, like in many countries, many migrant workers are on the frontline in the fight against the pandemic. Migration has been a highly contentious issue in the United Kingdom over several years, with the subject overwhelming public and policy debates, including during the 'Brexit' referendum. A poll conducted in 2018, for example, showed that nearly half of the British public wanted a reduction in the number of low-skilled immigrants from the European Union. A more recent poll, conducted as the country is grappling with the spread of the pandemic, revealed a significant majority (62%) supported granting automatic citizenship to care workers who helped respond to COVID-19, while 50% backed offering citizenship to other essential workers, including supermarket and agricultural workers, a significant change from just two years ago.

More on shifting public attitudes

COVID-19 also appears to be shifting public corporate support for immigration, which has traditionally amplified the benefits and contributions of highly-skilled migrants. In recent months, there has been much more focus on the benefits of frontline workers, such as truck drivers, healthcare workers and farm workers, whose contributions during the pandemic are seen as essential.

In Switzerland, a recent Grippnet survey showed that during confinement, Swiss natives demonstrated positive attitudes toward foreigners and that immigrants have felt supported during the pandemic. A separate study also revealed that during the pandemic Swiss people have largely expressed solidarity with foreigners coming from countries in crisis.

Xenophobia and discrimination

But even as overall attitudes toward migrants have warmed in countries such as the United Kingdom, in a few others, public attitudes have skewed more negative, as migrants are stigmatized and blamed for spreading COVID-19. Some have even had to endure verbal and physical attacks. Incidents of xenophobia and discrimination linked to COVID-19 against people of Asian and African descent were widely reported in the early weeks and months of pandemic. See Snapshot 33 on combating xenophobia and racism.

Hardening views?

In countries such as Canada, attitudes towards immigrants may already be hardening as a result of the pandemic. The country has historically been viewed as welcoming and open to migrants, but the pandemic seems to changing people's attitudes according to reports on a recent survey, which found that while "most respondents said they felt immigration has made Canada a better place", a majority of respondents also favored a reduction in the number of immigrants because of COVID-19 impacts. But other recent survey research seems to contradict these findings, and shows that Canadians have become even more open to immigrants during covid, and reject the idea that immigration levels are too high.

Will we see a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and less support for immigration?

Some foresee a possible increase in anti-immigrant sentiment in specific settings as native workers increasingly feel the economic effects of the pandemic. In a recent interview Monash University's associate professor Alan Gamlen argues that we may see a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in Australia, especially if middle-class employment suddenly drops. Outsiders often become the scapegoats when economic conditions get worse. As he put it "immigrants are resented if they work (for taking local jobs), and also for being unemployed (for not making a contribution)."

Recent analysis from ODI echoes these concerns, stressing that COVID-19-related economic recessions may reduce "support for immigration, as locals prioritise their own access to jobs and social services."