



The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Lives of Latin American migrants and IRMO's Response

An IRMO Research Report

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 global pandemic is more than a public health crisis. Its impact is also socio-economic and the human cost is proving to be enormous. Undoubtedly, this unique crisis is changing people's lives. The pandemic is also exposing and exacerbating existing societal structural inequalities and vulnerabilities thus exerting enormous pressures on state and voluntary sector resources. Socio-economically, those who earn a precarious living, live in poverty or below the poverty line are impacted most. The microcosm of IRMO, as a charity organisation, as well as its users, are part of that macro socio-economic context and, under the COVID-19 pandemic, there have never been greater and more pressing needs to respond to.

Against this backdrop this report provides an empirical account of the critical impact of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on IRMO's socio-economically vulnerable Latin American beneficiaries. Through this lens, this report presents information about the experiences of people supported by IRMO, new findings on the vulnerability and precarity of Latin American migrants in London as well as IRMO's first phase emergency responses.

The purpose of this report is twofold. Firstly, to address the gap in information about the impact of COVID-19 on Latin American migrants during the first phase of national lockdown. By providing new information about IRMO's frontline responses to the COVID-19 crisis this research report aims to highlight Latin Americans' lack of visibility. Secondly, to provide evidence-based recommendations to policy-makers and local authorities.

The information contained in this report has been compiled from a documentation review, research and analysis of survey data carried out by IRMO during full lockdown and at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic (April-May 2020). The report provides a wide ranging perspective on the issues of concern to IRMO such as employment, income, housing, education, IT, health and the wellbeing of Latin Americans in London.

Key findings

- 93% of our respondents specified their ethnicity as Latin Americans. This is an important finding for the urgent recognition of Latin Americans as an ethnic group in the UK 2021 Census. The socio-economic and health repercussions of the pandemic have furthered the need for recognition and visibility.
- 65% of respondents are concentrated in some of the most deprived boroughs of London: Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham and Wandsworth. The implication of this finding is that the COVID-19 pandemic is both exposing existing inequalities and disproportionately impacting low-

income sectors of the society pushing them further into multiple deprivation.

Employment and Furlough

The COVID-19 job crisis had a negative impact on IRMO's beneficiaries early in the pandemic. Further, qualitative findings show that basic employment rights, such as Statutory Sick Pay, have been violated during the crisis.

- By mid-May, 49% of our respondents were out of work. 35% had been made redundant or had been dismissed and 14% were not working due to COVID-19 related issues, had childcare responsibilities or were absent from work.
- 77% could not work from home as most respondents work in the hardest-hit hospitality, cleaning and construction sectors. 49% were worried about (*going to*) work. Increasing job insecurity was aggravated by the dual fear of loss of employment and risk of contagion and/or death. 14% of IRMO's respondents were still working. Most were 'essential' workers. Their occupations put them at greater risk of catching to COVID-19.
- 65% of respondents have insecure employment contracts. Although this finding substantiates previous studies this report percentage is higher. It has been enhanced by 33% of respondents who are 'Not Sure' of the type of employment contract they have. A lack of clarity regarding employment status is a serious problem among IRMO's users and so is forced self-employment. The pandemic has exacerbated employment insecurity. This is a concerning finding.
- 31% of respondents reported that they had been furloughed. Although the Furlough scheme has protected millions of jobs across the UK, it had limited reach in the Latin American community who are mostly on low-incomes and in-work poverty. Many respondents were multiple jobholders and were not furloughed in all their jobs. This finding has practical implications for furlough status classification. Moreover, being furloughed does not guarantee job retention, it could lead to unemployment once the scheme is halted.

Income and access to benefits

The pandemic has resulted in a dramatic cut in incomes, leading many facing financial hardship. Some are able to apply for social security assistance through Universal Credit. However, No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) means that some will not be eligible and removes the safety net for vulnerable migrants who could easily fall into homelessness and destitution.

- 45% of respondents were experiencing financial insecurity. 35% of respondents are receiving no income at all.
- 27% are not entitled to benefits. Immigration status is key for eligibility. Latin Americans are both EEA nationals (and family members) and non-EEA nationals, some of whom have No Recourse to Public Funds.

Housing and food insecurity

Poor housing conditions have shown to be a risk factor in catching COVID-19. With Latin Americans concentrated in the most insecure and poorly regulated part of the private rental market, the research shows an increase in housing insecurity.

- More than half of respondents (58%) were struggling to keep up with their rent. Despite the government's emergency package of protection for private renters, 2% have already been evicted, a number that is likely to rise once the eviction ban ends.
- Many respondents did not have tenancy agreements. But 41% reported contacting their landlords to negotiate arrears and reduced payments. While landlords were sometimes understanding, in other cases abuse and illegal evictions were reported.
- One in three respondents (31%) were struggling to pay for food, leading to a reliance on food banks and food parcels. One implication of this finding is its association with child food insecurity. Increased food insecurity is associated with the COVID-19 sudden job crisis and the reduction in income.

Health and wellbeing

As a public health crisis, the pandemic is clearly having a major health impact on the Latin American community. However, as an invisible minority community the impact on Latin Americans is not captured in public health statistics. Nevertheless, the survey revealed:

- One in seven respondents are not registered with a GP. This is concerning number as GPs act as the main point of contact for all healthcare services, including any future vaccination roll-out.
- Qualitative data on psychological well-being a group of respondents struggling with their mental health. They reported depression, anxiety, insomnia and panic attacks. The overlapping challenges and stressors that respondents are experiencing under COVID-19 amount to stress overload.
- The COVID-19 pandemic also adversely affected family wellbeing. Facing multiple stressors in overcrowded housing, including home schooling is leading to stress overload for both parents and children.

Language, education and access to IT

Under COVID-19, the issue of English language proficiency acquired unprecedented relevance. The language barrier exposed and magnified IRMO's beneficiaries' extreme vulnerability. In addition to the existing language-related employment, income and job contract insecurities, the language barrier has further exposed them to fraud. They have been offered 'help' in applying for furlough wages from the CJRS scheme.

- 54% of respondents are keen to continue attending English classes remotely at IRMO. Given the number of serious problems related to the language barrier this is an important finding.
- Home teaching/learning was a challenging endeavour for Latin American migrant parents. Online lessons were ineffective. In some cases communication between schools and families failed. Technical issues such as incorrect login details added further failures.
- 15% of respondents had no IT equipment at home and four out of ten had no internet at home.

IRMO's response

The pandemic added a new set of challenges that IRMO adapted to by creating innovative remote services. The sharp rise in food and housing insecurity, the 2021 EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) deadline, the job and mental health crises and the increased benefit and school advice demand added further workload.

- IRMO created new cross-cutting services and supported 262 individual cases between the start of the lockdown in March and mid May 2020. The *Advice* service provided remote support in welfare, housing and immigration to 100 beneficiaries and 70 food bank vouchers were issued. The Wellbeing check-in phone calls service became a lifeline for vulnerable Latin Americans.

Introduction

COVID-19 is impacting and transforming people's lives and societies worldwide. At the core of the pandemic are uncertainty, vulnerability and inequality. Migrants' lives are more exposed to all three. The pandemic is disproportionately affecting migrants and those in the poor echelons of societies. Latin American migrants in London are among them and next to nothing is known about their experiences during the pandemic. This is mainly due to the lack of official recognition as an ethnic group. Although there has been recognition in some boroughs in London and academic research has presented a comprehensive profile of their vulnerable lives, Latin Americans in London continue being invisible in terms of policy, strategy and access to mainstream services.

This research report is about their COVID-19-related experiences. It draws from the quantitative and qualitative data of a survey carried out by IRMO on 170 respondents during the peak of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. It also draws from IRMO's responses and documentation produced by the organisation from the start of national lockdown on 23rd March until 30th of June. The research in this report is substantiated by new research and reports on COVID-19, academic literature on the issues covered, research on Latin Americans, journalist and national and international organisations' accounts on COVID-19.

The main aim of this report is to make visible the COVID-19 experiences of Latin Americans in London so as to provide local authorities and policy makers information and a nuanced account about the early impact that COVID-19, both as a pandemic and as a socio-economic crisis, is having on the Latin American community. With this purpose in mind this research report contextualises low-income Latin Americans in London and IRMO's responses to their needs' trajectories during such an unprecedented and difficult time.

The research report is structured as follows. Section I provides a brief overview of the COVID-19 global and the UK's socio-economic context and financial responses. It includes societal issues as well as underlying socio-economic policies. Section II introduces IRMO. Section III profiles IRMO's Latin American beneficiaries. Section IV provides a brief account of the COVID-19 pandemic and British government responses. Section V focuses on IRMO's prompt responses as a front-line charity and its newly adapted/created COVID-19 support system for its beneficiaries. Section VI explains the research methodology and reports conflicting data on Furlough. Section VII deals with employment, income and job contracts with a subsection on unemployment and support. Section VIII tackles the issues of housing and food insecurity. Section IX discusses the psychological and welfare impact of the socio-economic implications of lockdown. We have explored these issues because they are all disproportionately impacting the lives of our respondents. The final section concludes and is followed by some recommendations.

I. The Socio-economic Context: Setting the Scene

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a severe global economic recession has unfolded. The IMF has warned that “Today we are confronted with *a crisis like no other*” and perhaps “the worst economic fallout since the Great Depression”.¹ As the COVID-19 pandemic forced the country into the first lockdown (23rd March), a whole set of existing social and economic issues have been exposed and sharpened. Considering that poverty is also a European problem (Gaisbauer *et. al.*, 2019), a decade of neoliberal austerity in the UK and the economic impact of the 2016 Brexit referendum had already affected the livelihoods of people experiencing ‘in-work poverty’. The OBR estimated that the economic effects of the Brexit referendum vote has so far reduced potential output by around 2% and that real business investment had barely grown since then.² As a result, by March 2020, the British economy had already shrunk by 2 percent³ and, according to a recent OECD forecast, the UK economy is expected to fall by 12 percent and unemployment will increase to around 9 percent.⁴ For people already in poverty, household food insecurity means that hunger has been on the rise. In the first two weeks of the lockdown in the UK, there was a soaring 81% increase in emergency food parcels from food banks (Trussell Trust, 2020).⁵ If before the COVID-19 pandemic those on low-income and/or in in-work poverty were already struggling (so-called ‘JAMs’)⁶, poverty charities are providing evidence of the pandemic crisis’ disproportionate impact and hardship (JRF, 2020).⁷ With this report, IRMO is contributing to this growing evidence-based information and research.

One way to mitigate the serious impact of the lockdown on employment has been the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), known as the Furlough scheme, back-dated from 1 March 2020.⁸ This is not employment *per se*.

¹ ‘Confronting the Crisis: Priorities for the Global Economy.’ By Kristalina Georgieva, IMF Managing Director. International Monetary Fund.’ April 9, 2020.

<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/04/07/sp040920-SMs2020-Curtain-Raiser>

² Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) ‘Economic and fiscal outlook. Presented to Parliament by Chief Secretary to the Treasury by Command of Her Majesty’. March 2020. www.cdn.obr.uk

³ ‘GDP monthly estimate, UK: March 2020’ – ONS. [ow.ly/jukH30qFz25](https://www.ons.gov.uk/gdp/estimates/quarterly/gdp-monthly-estimate-uk)

⁴ ‘The world economy on a tightrope’ OECD Economic Outlook, June 2020.

<https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/>

⁵ ‘Food Banks Report Record Spike in Need as Coalition of Anti-Poverty Charities Call For Strong Lifeline to Be Thrown To Anyone Who Needs It’ . The Trussell Trust. 1 May 2020.

<https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/05/01/coalition-call/>

⁶ ‘JAMs’ – Just About Managing. See: ‘Who are the Jams (the ‘just about managing’)?’ Justin Parkinson

BBC News 21 November 2016. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38049245>

⁷ ‘What’s really happening to poverty during the coronavirus outbreak? – Peter Matejic, Joseph Rowntree Foundation May 14 2020. <https://medium.com/inside-jrf/whats-really-happening-to-poverty-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak-81beb11936b7>

⁸ To qualify for Furlough (Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, CJRS), individuals had to be employed on 28th February 2020. Employers pay 80% of an employee’s wages (up to £2,500 a month) provided workers are kept on the payroll of their respective employers. The CJRS has

According to the Law Society (2020), '[I]t is a financial package which helps all UK employers pay the wages of workers in organisations that would otherwise have to reduce their workforce due to the coronavirus pandemic'. This means that the employer keeps employees on the payroll if they are unable to operate and puts their employees on temporary leave instead. It was a comprehensive scheme. Over a million businesses and 9.3m UK workers have been furloughed at a cost of £25.5bn. This amounts to around a quarter of the UK's entire workforce. However, not all employers have fully utilised the scheme and many workers have been made redundant or denied furlough.

To complement the CJRS, the existing Universal Credit (UC) benefit has been another state financial support for people affected by the crisis. Since mid-March and up to mid-May 2020, more than 1.4 million additional people signed up for UC (Butler, 2020). Yet, low-income households were denied COVID-19 support by the benefit cap (ONS, 2020a). The poor continue to be on a lesser welfare scheme when compared to those who have been furloughed. This is a two-tier system that is discriminating against the most vulnerable.

Additionally, over three million of the UK's essential migrant workers earn below the Living Wage⁹ and a great number of them are subject to 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) (Woolley, 2019). NRPF is an immigration condition imposed on most individuals who hold limited leave to remain in the UK. Although NRPF also applies to elite migrants (i.e. entrepreneurs), NRPF hits migrants struggling with daily living costs most. Among those are IRMO's service users. NRPF restricts migrants' access to a number of mainstream benefits such as Child Benefit, UC, Housing Benefit, Disability Living Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance.¹⁰ NRPF applies to those with spouse visa, student visa, limited leave granted under family or private life rules and Indefinite Leave to Remain as the adult dependent of a person with settled status. Asylum-seekers are also excluded from all benefits.¹¹ NRPF is more relevant when people come to a situation of crisis (e.g., unemployment, illness, domestic violence).

While acknowledging that domestic violence/abuse has been a historical and critical issue in the UK and more so during the decade of austerity measures (hence the Domestic Abuse Bill¹²), since the lockdown there has been a surge

now been extended until the end of October 2020. Yet from 1st of August until 1st October 2020, Government's contribution will be reduced.

⁹ 'Data indicates over 3 million key workers earn below living wage'. The London Economic. 2 April, 2020.

<https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/news/data-indicates-over-3-million-key-workers-earn-below-living-wage/02/04/>

¹⁰ For a full list of UK Government Public Funds see 'Public Funds' – Guidance. 17 February 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-funds--2/public-funds>

¹¹ See NRPF Network – a group of local authorities and partner organisations working with people subject to NRPF www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/information/Pages/public-funds.aspx Also see Home Office in the Media (2020) 'No recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)'. 5 May 2020. <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/05/05/no-recourse-to-public-funds-nrpf/>

¹² 'Domestic Abuse Bill passes House of Commons' (6 July 2020). Home Office in the media.

in domestic violence (gender-based violence/abuse, child abuse and neglect¹³). Since the lockdown measures were imposed, *Refuge*, the UK's largest domestic abuse charity, reported a 25% increase in phone calls to its helpline.¹⁴ Migrant women in general and the UK's Latin American migrant women in particular, are not excluded from what the UN Women has called the "Shadow Pandemic".¹⁵ NRPF applying to migrant women escaping violence under lockdown is impacting them even more (Topping, 2020).

People's mental health under COVID-19 has been put to the test.¹⁶ Stressors such as the lockdown, self-isolation, physical distancing and fear of contracting the virus, have increased levels of anxiety, distress and trauma. The sudden loss of loved ones under strict health regulations or the fear of losing a job or business has aggravated mental health problems. Parents have become teachers in totally unexpected circumstances. This new role is proving to have greater consequences for low-income single mothers/parents.¹⁷

Another issue is housing. The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by those on low-income in the private rental sector. Despite the UK's Government emergency legislation (Coronavirus Act, 2020) that allows for a rent pause and a ban on evictions, low-income and unemployed tenants facing financial hardship are under threat of losing their home or rented accommodation without full court process. In general, private renters fear eviction and/or post-lockdown debt. As this report will demonstrate, this predicament is even more dramatic in the case of low-income and recently arrived migrants.

Government management of the pandemic has led to an increase in border restrictions and closures. This development is contributing to worsening the already vulnerable condition of many migrants. As freedom of movement will end in a post Brexit UK (31 December 2020), those EU, EEA/Swiss migrants

<https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/07/07/7626/>

¹³ NSPCC 'Calls about domestic abuse highest on record following lockdown increase' 10/06/2020. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2020/Calls-about-domestic-abuse-highest-on-record-following-lockdown-increase/>

¹⁴ '25% increase in calls to National Domestic Abuse Helpline since lockdown measures began.' *Refuge* 06 April 2020. <https://www.refuge.org.uk/25-increase-in-calls-to-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-since-lockdown-measures-began>

¹⁵ 'Press release: UN Women raises awareness of the shadow pandemic of violence against women during COVID-19'. Wednesday, May 27, 2020. www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories//2020/5/press-release-the-shadow-pandemic-of-violence-against-women-during-covid-19

Also see 'Exclusive: Migrant Women Suffering Domestic Abuse Can't Get Help and Aren't Believed, Government Told'. *Huffpost News* 26/06/2020. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/migrant-women-no-recourse-public-funds-domestic-abuse_uk_5ef35849c5b6aa825ac9b08e

¹⁶ The Mental Health Foundation in partnership with the Institute of Public Health at Cambridge University found that at the outbreak of the pandemic millions of Britons "felt panicked, afraid and unprepared."

¹⁷ 'The Cost of Learning in Lockdown.' Survey reveals school closure costs fall heaviest on low-income parents. Child Poverty Action Group. 18 June 2020. <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/cost-learning-lockdown>

who are living and working in the UK and have not applied for EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS),¹⁸ will face a new 'points-based' Immigration system (OBR, 2020). Most applicants looking for work in the UK will need a job offer that meets a £25,600 salary threshold.

Up until now, the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) was £400 for adults and £300 for children and young people. It was not applied to EU migrants. However, from October 2020, the IHS annual surcharge has risen to £624 per year for adults and £470 per year for all children under 18. Although the IHS for NHS frontline migrant medical staff was scrapped in May 2020, non-NHS migrants (including those applying to enter the UK from outside, the newly arrived EU migrants and their family members as well as non-EEA nationals applying for limited leave to remain) are not exempted.

This COVID-19 socio-economic overview was of most importance and concern to IRMO. It both sets the scene for this report and informed responses to the crisis. Under such an unprecedented scenario, the issues covered posed a number of significant challenges that needed addressing.

¹⁸ EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) is obligatory for those EU citizens and other EEA/Swiss nationals who are already living in the UK by 31st December 2020 and want to secure their stay and jobs in the UK. The deadline for application is 30 June 2021.

II. IRMO – Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO)

IRMO is a UK registered charity (No 1080813) that dates back to 20th August 1982 with the founding of Chile-Democrático-G.B. (Lopez Zarzosa, 2016). It is governed by the Director and a Board of Trustees. IRMO is a community-led organisation whose vision is that Latin Americans living in the UK are empowered to fulfil their potential and are able to fully and equally access services and opportunities. IRMO's mission is to provide Latin Americans (and other Spanish and Portuguese-speaking communities more widely), with tools and information in an empowering process to build fulfilled, independent and integrated lives in the UK. This mission is accomplished through a rights-based and comprehensive approach that addresses a wide range of needs. IRMO's work spans three main pillars: (1) Education, training and employment; (2) Legal advice and advocacy and (3) Children and young people services. IRMO's values of commitment to social justice, transparency, solidarity, community and collaboration make its service users feel welcomed and respected. IRMO supports over 4,000 people every year.

IRMO's premises are situated in Brixton in Lambeth, a borough that has one of the highest concentrations of Latin Americans in London (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016). Lambeth Council recognised Latin Americans as an ethnic group in November 2013. The organisation's beneficiaries are part of a nation-wide community of 250,000 Latin American migrants of whom 145,000 have settled in London.

III. Latin Americans in the UK

Existing research on 'new' Latin Americans, particularly in London, has provided important insights about the community (McIlwaine *et al.*, 2011; Granada, 2013; Mas Giralt and Granada, 2015; McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016; Berg, 2017; de la Silva *et al.*, 2019). It is estimated that in 2013, 58 percent of the entire community of Latin Americans in the UK were living in London (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016).

The more 'visible' Latin American migrants and refugees have been in the UK since the early 1970s. Political refugees were the most visible. Currently, there are two distinct groups of Latin Americans living in the UK: the 'national' Latin Americans (non-EEA) and the new (EEA) Latin Americans. The new Latin Americans (mainly South Americans) migrated to Europe in the early 2000s. Most migrated to booming Spain with a European citizenship acquired either in their countries of origin or while settling in Spain. However, the 2008 global financial crisis hit the Spanish economy hard. The labour market collapsed and unemployment rocketed. The loss of employment among *Latinos* was catastrophic (Aysa-Lastra and Cachón, 2016). Those who did not return to their countries of origin re-migrated to other European countries including the UK. Migrating to an English-speaking country to escape unemployment has had one major disadvantageous consequence. Study after study shows that the new Latin Americans' lack of English language knowledge is a significantly limiting factor in their lives and more so in relation to access to employment opportunities. Although these studies demonstrate that most are well-educated and have high employment rates (up to 85%), the majority work in low-paid and precarious jobs mostly in the cleaning and hospitality sector. In most cases, employment and working conditions are poor and exploitative and abuse is severe (McIlwaine *et al.*, 2011; McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016; O'Connor, 2016; de la Silva *et al.*, 2019).

Despite the growing number of Latin Americans, one of the puzzling issues is the community's invisibility in the UK's official statistics and the official ethnic groups (BAME).¹⁹ The 2011 UK Census mentioned 'a peak of arrivals of Spanish-born residents (20%) in the period 2007-09.' According to the Census, their migration to the UK was 'most likely to be related to the economic crisis...' (ONS, 2013). The new Latin Americans were invisible among these arrivals. Despite academic efforts (McIlwaine *et al.*, 2011; McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016; Berg, 2017), recognition campaigns (Granada, 2013) and crucially, the indefatigable work and able advocacy of the Coalition of Latin Americans in the UK (CLAUK)²⁰ that resulted in their recognition as a minority group by the local

¹⁹ 'List of ethnic groups' <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups>

²⁰ CLAUK, Coalition of Latin American organisations in the UK. <http://www.clauk.org.uk/recognition/>
See also 'CLAUK y la comunidad latinoamericana en Londres' <https://enunlugardelondres.wordpress.com/2015/12/09/clauk-y-la-comunidad-latinoamericana-en-londres>

authorities of Southwark (2012), Lambeth (2013), Islington (2015), and Hackney (2015), Latin Americans continue to be officially invisible.

The recent report by Public Health England (2020)²¹ on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities is a case in point. While Latin Americans share a number of BAME's key demographics and social structural issues, the report does not mention Latin Americans as a minority group in the UK. Despite emerging evidence (CLAUK, 2020), lack of official data on the health impact of COVID-19 on the Latin American community is concerning. Undeniably, invisibility can only be overcome by organising collectively. CLAUK, the coalition of thirteen 'led-by and for' Latin American charities, has been strategic on this and more so under COVID-19 (*ibid*).²² The objective to be recognised as a minority group is twofold. First, to overcome statistical and official invisibility. Second, as a strategy to combat structural problems that are more salient during the COVID-19 pandemic.

²¹ 'Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups'. Public Health England. London, June 2020.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892376/COVID_stakeholder_engagement_synthesis_beyond_the_data.pdf

²² Since 2012 and as part of CLAUK, IRMO has been instrumental in the advocacy for recognition.

IV. The COVID-19 Pandemic

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 a global pandemic on 12 March 2020. Mitigation strategies such as social distancing and lockdowns were suggested. The UK did not officially acknowledge it until mid-March when the Government moved to the 'delay stage'. Before the full nationwide lockdown was enforced, some measures to tackle the virus had been taken.²³ With the sole exception made for children of 'key workers'²⁴ and vulnerable children, schools, colleges and nurseries closed indefinitely on 20th March. As the World Health Organization was pressing governments to adopt a stricter approach, the UK was put into full national lockdown on Monday 23rd March. The lockdown restricted the movement of people to the limited activities of shopping for necessities and some forms of exercise and the police were to enforce these measures. To protect public health the Government's messaging was: 'Stay Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives'. Social distancing and self-isolation were imposed. Compliance was high and geographically consistent.²⁵ Face-to-face work would be mandatorily stopped. This led to the official closing of most offices, businesses and economic activities with the exception of 'essential' sectors such as supermarkets, pharmacies, garages and a few others. One of the most affected sectors of the UK's economy has been the hospitality industry that includes hotels, restaurants, cafes, bars and pubs. According to Government statistics eighty percent of hospitality firms stopped trading in April and 1.4 million hospitality workers had been furloughed, the highest numbers in any sector of the economy.²⁶ Many of IRMO's beneficiaries are employed in this sector of the economy.

Conversely, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection, cleaning and disinfection became paramount (WHO, 2020).²⁷ To service the buildings that remained open through the pandemic, many companies in the cleaning industry continued operating and/or carried out additional cleaning. Frontline cleaners

²³ 'UK to ban mass gatherings in coronavirus U-turn' *The Guardian* Friday 13 March 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/13/uk-to-ban-mass-gatherings-in-coronavirus-u-turn>

²⁴ Under COVID-19, the official term 'key worker' was associated with childcare provision. See 'Critical workers who can access schools or educational settings.' Updated 16 June 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>

²⁵ Jeffrey B. *et al.*, 2020. Report 24.

²⁶ 'Chancellor's Plan for Jobs to help the UK's recovery.' 8 July 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/rishis-plan-for-jobs-will-help-britain-bounce-back>

²⁷ 'Cleaning and disinfection of environmental surfaces in the context of COVID-19.' World Health Organization (WHO). 16 May 2020. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/cleaning-and-disinfection-of-environmental-surfaces-inthe-context-of-covid>

became essential and some paid with their lives.²⁸IRMO's beneficiaries are over-represented in this sector.

As the COVID-19 infections and deaths were imminent,²⁹ March was a decisive month for offices, business, industries and the voluntary sector to take action. The 'delay stage' allowed these sectors to plan for the potential impact of the pandemic.

²⁸ 'Death at Justice: the story of Emanuel Gomes' by Jack Shenker. 6 July 2020. Tortoise.
<https://members.tortoisemedia.com/2020/07/06/the-reckoning-death-at-the-ministry/content.html>

²⁹ 'Figure 1: The cumulative number of deaths involving COVID-19 in England using different data sources, up to 19 June 2020' Office for National Statistics- Updated 30 June 2020.
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/articles/comparisonofweeklydeathoccurrenceinenglandandwales/latest>

V. IRMO's Response to the Lockdown

IRMO responded calmly and proactively to the sudden impact of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency ('Contingency plan for Covid-19').³⁰ On 16th March, IRMO started winding-down all face-to-face activities and on 19th March it closed the centre. Staff transitioned to remote work and since national lockdown, IRMO has been running most of its activities and services remotely. Under the 'Covid-19 Continuity Plan'³¹, the three main work pillars continued without interruption. By the end of March the activities that continued their normal services were: employment support, family support and, immigration, welfare and housing advice. The ESOL classes, youth and children activities and workshops were resumed (remotely) a few weeks later.

People supported

Since national lockdown started and up until mid-May 2020 IRMO supported 262 individual cases:

- The *Education, Training and Employment* (ETE) area supported 87 people. Employment support continued remotely with a focus on Employment Rights (for COVID-19 related issues).
- The *Children and Young People* (CYP) area supported 55 families and 20 young people. It provided information about school closures, GCSEs, remote ESOL for colleges and schooling as well as information about food vouchers (to replace free school meals) and food banks.
- The *Advice* area worked with 100 cases providing remote advice in welfare, housing, immigration and basic employment rights. The EUSS (group and individual support) continued remotely.
- Additionally, three new cross-cutting services were implemented: i) production and translation of official information in Spanish and Portuguese, including producing FAQ sheets covering various topics (employment, housing, benefits, health). ii) Targeted support for users with NRPF. iii) 'Regular check-ins' phone calls service to support children, young people, vulnerable users and families, checking on their general wellbeing and connecting them with local groups if they need food or other suppliers.'

According to Google Analytics data, between April and May 1,120 people accessed resources and information through the online FAQ COVID-19 guide in IRMO's website. Additionally, online posters provided information about online security, domestic violence, wellbeing and resources about access and return to school. This information was shared through WhatsApp channels and Facebook.³²

³⁰ 'IRMO Contingency plan for Covid-19' 13th March 2020.

³¹ IRMO's response to Covid-19 pandemic' – Covid-19 Continuity Plan. Summary of how IRMO's services have adapted to Covid-19 (26th May 2020).

³² IRMO Director's Report, May 2020.

As a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, IRMO experienced high demand for services, particularly for welfare advice and general support.

In May, IRMO's Director reported: '(W)e have received an influx of queries on welfare issues requiring staff of all areas to adapt the support they provide to users such as applying for food vouchers and offering information and/or advice on the job retention scheme.' To respond to the high demand for welfare advice:

1. We expanded the service increasing the hours of our Welfare advisor and of five other staff members.
2. We are setting up a triage system across one of our partnerships, in which IRMO's welfare advisor provides support to complex cases and staff across the partnership provide support on basic queries.
3. We are expanding the Frequently Asked Questions sheets, and creating tri-lingual material and resources to respond to the substantial number of enquiries, including posters to raise awareness of different types of scams and how to report them; and on the impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing and education of children and young people and how to support them.
4. We have put in place a bi-weekly call led by IRMO's welfare advisor for IRMO and partnership practitioners to receive support on users' welfare issues³³

The Impact of COVID-19 on IRMO's Beneficiaries

An emerging warning on the potential impact of COVID-19 on IRMO's beneficiaries was reported by the organisation in March 2020.³⁴ It contextualised the existing living and working conditions of those Latin Americans who were already IRMO's beneficiaries. Given the above socio-economic overview, it warned about the increasing challenges for them. The issues mentioned were:

The majority of IRMO's users are on *zero-hours contracts* and working in cleaning and hospitality industries. Their hours may be reduced or their contracts may be terminated;

Many *families* are living in an *overcrowded situation* (the whole family living in a room, sharing the house with other families). This situation brings difficulties for self-isolation. Spending long periods of time in one room may impact their wellbeing. There is *no space* for children to play and/or exercise;

Families already relying on *food banks* and school meals would struggle and *Language* is a barrier to access any kind of support that could become available.

³³ IRMO Director's Report, May 2020.

³⁴ COVID-19. Impact on IRMO and the Latin American community. Paper for IRMO's Management Committee – March 2020.

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IRMO's socio-economic profile of its Latin American beneficiaries amounts to poverty, material deprivation and vulnerability. Given that the COVID-19 crisis was causing havoc with the economy, disrupting social life, and impacting the industries where most of its beneficiaries work, IRMO saw the need to assess the short-term impact posed for the Latin American community due to the pandemic. To do so IRMO conducted a survey during the first critical stage of full national lockdown. The analysis and conclusions of this report will provide an opportunity for recommendations to be framed.

VI. Methodology and data collection

This report draws on three sources of information. First, on survey data collected during national lockdown from 170 respondents; second, on the 262 cases supported by IRMO; third, on the documents produced by IRMO from early March to the end of June.

The questionnaire survey was conducted during the last week of April through mid-May. It deals with IRMO's Latin American beneficiaries who, at the time of full national lockdown, were facing the emerging socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Although there was no target sample, to collect information IRMO contacted those regular service users who were currently part of its projects. This population is representative of the wider cohort of beneficiaries. Life under lockdown was very difficult and challenging for all, but more so for charities working forcibly online with highly vulnerable beneficiaries. The government's message: 'Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives' posed unprecedented pressures. To conduct a survey under those conditions was a challenging endeavour.

The survey featured a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Most of the close-ended questions were followed by an open-ended one thus allowing respondents to qualify their answers. The qualitative information obtained not only contextualised the quantitative data collected but was also very useful for the creation of a word cloud that visualises respondent's experiences and feelings regarding the topic of employment/unemployment under COVID-19 and associated factors of concern [Figure 4].

The data presented in this Report was gathered in a two-stage survey. The first stage surveyed 100 beneficiaries and the second, the remaining 70 (N=170). However, some of the questions were answered by 153 participants only. Data collection was gathered in two modes. Some questionnaires were carried out over the phone by IRMO's staff and the rest were self-completed online by respondents. While staff members' qualitative notes appear both in English and Spanish, respondents' answers were in Spanish and Portuguese. Translations for this report were made by IRMO staff and the author.

The topics covered in the survey were: employment, income and job contracts; housing; children and their education; health, wellbeing and benefits. The topic of support underpinned all the above. Those cases with missing data (N/A and/or No Answer) of over 40 percent were removed from the analysis.

The geographical area covered by the survey was Greater London with a representation of eleven inner London boroughs and ten outer London boroughs. The one exception was a respondent from Scotland.³⁵

³⁵ Although 60 percent of Latin Americans in the UK reside in London, around 5,000 reside in Scotland (McIllwaine and Bunge, 2016 pp.16-17).

Survey Data Analysis

This section explores and analyses the quantitative and qualitative data obtained in the survey. The quantitative data is presented in percentages and the qualitative data as vignettes and in italics. The intention is to amplify our respondents' voices so as to provide a more careful account of how they were experiencing the COVID-19 situation. A snapshot of their lived experiences adds value to this report. We are very thankful to them for taking part in this survey. To distinguish their 'voices' to those of IRMO's staff notes, respondents' answers are in blue while IRMO's are in black.

One significant caveat seems necessary. The Furlough scheme (CJRS) data in the survey presents inconsistencies for individual (and partner) Employment and Income. There are different values for furlough for each of these categories (Annex 1, Table 1) and none of them match. However, this report claims that this problem does not pose a threat to data quality. On the contrary, it provides an opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of the problem and explore the reason(s) why those Furlough values do not match.

In the UK, Furlough is a new scheme.³⁶ As a term, furlough is not even recognised in UK employment law. According to the Legal Society (2020), there is 'no legal definition of furlough leave, but colloquially "to furlough" a worker means to put them on a paid leave of absence.' The confusing presence of furlough values on both the Employment and Income sections of our survey could be rooted here. However, we suggest that behind the furlough data incongruence there is a social phenomenon. It is not solely a 'statistical' issue. Respondents may have not been aware of the 'essence' and implications of furlough. To grasp the reasons for this problem, we need to go beyond the 'statistics', assign value to societal issues and see the problem in its whole socio-economic context. We need to find out its causes in the very nature of our respondents' vulnerability at the employment, income and job contract levels. Methodologically, it requires identifying patterns, trends and relevant quantitative and qualitative responses to questions that could shed light on such Furlough data inconsistencies.

Related to this is the issue of partner data. Individual respondents provided information about their partner's experiences who themselves were not part of the universe of 170 respondents (N=170), hence the missing data. Including information about partner experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic broadened the scope of the survey. Statistically however, we cannot add the two categories' values together otherwise we will end up with N=340. Partners did not participate in the survey and it is not clear whether they were all IRMO beneficiaries. Nevertheless, this report will consider limited partner information as an echo for individual respondents' data.

³⁶ The Furlough has been mainly utilised in the US and was more available during the 2008-9 recession. See Sucher and Winterberg (2014).

Demographics

Out of a universe of 170 respondents, 62 percent were women mainly mothers of pre-adolescent and adolescent children. Although IRMO has a roughly 50/50 ratio of women and men beneficiaries, men were less likely to respond to the survey (38%). This gender distribution is significant. Research on gender and migration has shown women's resourcefulness, resilience and adaptive capacities.³⁷ However, in times of crisis, resilience and vulnerability collide. Our data show that in times of global pandemic, Latin American migrant women living in hardship situations are even more available to express their opinions and ask for assistance and support.

Regarding geographical location, 73 percent of respondents reside in south London (see table 1), primarily in the inner London boroughs of Lambeth (32%) Southwark (16%), Lewisham (11%) and Wandsworth (7%).

Area	Number	Percentage
Lambeth	54	32%
Southwark	27	16%
Lewisham	18	11%
Wandsworth	12	7%
Other South London (Croydon, Greenwich, Bromley, Sutton, Merton)	13	8%
West London	16	9%
East London	14	8%
North London	10	6%
Outside London	1	1%
No data	5	3%

Table 1: Areas of residence of respondents (n=170)

This pattern of residence is important. Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham are amongst the most deprived boroughs in London (London Datastore, 2019). Due to lack of recognition at national level, Latin Americans living in these areas are not recognised as deprived in official statistics (GOV.UK, 2020). Respondents also live in the outer London boroughs of Croydon (4%), Haringey (4%) and Brent (3%). This distribution follows the pattern of IRMO's pre-lockdown services. Beneficiaries of regular activities such as ESOL and Children and Young People services come from nearby neighbourhoods in south London. Advice (welfare, housing, immigration and EUSS) on the other hand, attracts Latin Americans from all over London and outside. It is not surprising therefore that one respondent resides in Stirling, Scotland. Remote work could make

³⁷ Research on migrant and refugee women's enduring capacity is vast. The issue of motherhood is central to women's resilience.

IRMO's services more available to people in need of these from other parts of the UK.

Ethnicity & Nationality

93 percent of respondents specified their ethnicity as Latin American. This is an important finding for recognition. Recognition on grounds of ethnicity as Latin American in the 2021 Census will render them visible. A further way of rendering Latin Americans visible is their inclusion in research and data in mainstream academic institutes such as *Understanding Society*. Despite the burgeoning literature on Latin Americans in London, they are still part of a niche. Latin Americans in the UK should be part of an inclusive society.

The Latin American community in the UK, however, is very diverse in its *nationalities* and immigration statuses and more so since the 2000s. Respondents represented 17 different nationalities, 13 of which were different Latin American nationalities, in line with previous research on the diversity of the community (McIlwaine et al., 2011; de la Silva et al., 2019). The survey shows that 46 percent of IRMO's respondents hold both European and Latin American nationalities/citizenship – Spanish, Italian, Portuguese or British. Out of this and most significantly is the 22 percent who prioritise Spanish nationality. Prioritising Spanish nationality/citizenship is not new among 'new' Latin Americans (Granada, 2013; Berg, 2016; Lukes et al., 2020). Hence, we could safely say that more than half of our respondents (58%) have emigrated from Spain to the UK.

Although less numerous, Brazilians also reported dual nationality e.g. Brazilian-Italian, Brazilian-Portuguese, Brazilian-Spanish. As noted earlier, holding a EU passport is a recent development of Latin American migration to the UK. It responds to a secondary migration and the acquisition of European citizenship and termed 'onward' Latin Americans (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016). They are now intra-European migrants with EU citizenship and were able to migrate to the UK as a result of the EU free movement of people and workers. As onward Latin Americans are EU nationals living in the UK, Brexit introduces complexities for them such as the EUSS and the lack of clarity of what a 'pre-settled' status entitles them to, as they can still be subject to NRPF.

Although a small percentage of respondents have British citizenship (1%), the most vulnerable group in the data is the 26 percent of 'national' Latin Americans, that is, those who have migrated to the UK with their original nationality/citizenship. They are non-EEA nationals, some who may be family members of EEA nationals, subject to immigration control and NRPF. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic many onward Latin Americans are experiencing these complexities for the first time.

VII. COVID-19 Impacts on Employment, Income and Job Contracts

Employment

According to research, Latin Americans have a very high employment rate (McIlwaine et al., 2011; McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016), but in jobs which are not possible to work from home such as cleaning, hospitality and construction. Full national lockdown disrupted this pattern immediately. Our survey showed that out of 153 responses, 77 percent could not work from home. This finding shows the nature of our respondents' jobs. Figure 1 below shows the respondents' employment situation distribution.

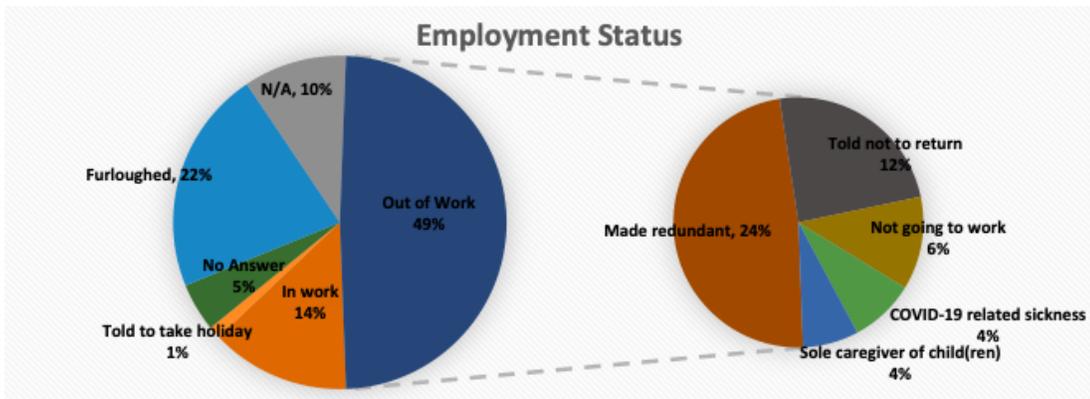


Figure 1: Employment status of respondents. Source: IRMO's Survey, April-May 2020 (N=170)

The above figure illustrates the changes in the employment pattern of our Latin American respondents. The employment impact of the COVID-19 crisis is reflected in the 49 percent who by mid-May were already out of work. This is an alarming finding. The pandemic is seriously challenging the hitherto widely acknowledged high rate of employment for Latin Americans. From a historical 85 percent employment rate before the national lockdown was introduced,³⁸ our survey shows that, by mid-May, only 35 percent were still employed.³⁹ However, we must acknowledge that Latin Americans' pre-pandemic relatively stable pattern of employment coexisted with rising job insecurity. COVID-19 has exposed that insecurity.

By mid-May, those still in work (14%) were mainly low-waged 'essential workers' who continued working during lockdown under dire conditions. For those living precarious lives, on a low-income and likely to be renting their accommodation the option was hunger versus virus. Unsurprisingly, out of 153 responses, 49 percent were apprehensive about (*going to*) work (i.e. either their work environment or their lack of work). Reasons were straightforward:

³⁸ McIlwaine *et al.*, 2011, p. 54. See McIlwaine and Bunge 2016, p. 24 for a 70% revision.

³⁹ 20% of partners were also employed. 12% were in work and 8% had been furloughed.

"I live off my monthly salary."

"If I don't work, I have no income."

"Because I have to pay the costs of housing and food. Even though transport is free at the moment,⁴⁰ when they start charging I will need my wage to pay for transport as well."

'Has no other choice than to risk his health by going to work.'

The category 'Employment' of our survey showed that 22 percent had been furloughed.⁴¹ However, being furloughed does not guarantee job retention. 'Many of our users independently of their immigration status, were working in the hospitality sector which has been especially affected by the pandemic. Even those who have been furloughed are now starting to be notified that the business they were working for is closing down. Consequently, unemployment will probably rise among the Latin American community.' (IRMO, June 2020). A respondent noted: *"I was receiving 80% from March to 14 May but I was made redundant."* Also, some users have noted that they were put on furlough for less hours than regularly worked.

An additional 1 percent of respondents reported that they were 'told to take a holiday'. At the time of the survey, employers could require workers to take holiday.⁴² However, the data does not show whether these IRMO beneficiaries were re-employed, made redundant and/or if they were entitled to and/or received holiday pay.

Nonetheless, under the looming unemployment scenario (Pound, 2020) and the likelihood of further waves of the pandemic, even the 35 percent still employed could well fall into a more insecure employment situation.

Unemployment

The COVID-19 crisis has most affected people with the lowest incomes. Those more at risk of losing their jobs are workers paid less than £10 an hour. These jobs have been classified as 'vulnerable' (TUC, 2008; Jayaweera and Anderson 2008). Vulnerable jobs are typically insecure (lack of a written employment contract, payment of wages in cash, lack of National Insurance number), temporary (unfair dismissal or without notice), low-paid (below minimum

⁴⁰ On Monday 20th of April TfL introduced free bus travel in London. It only lasted for a few weeks or so. <https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2020/april/tfl-introduces-middle-door-only-boarding-across-the-london-bus-network?intcmp=62703>

⁴¹ This Furlough data will be revisited in the next section.

⁴² 'Holiday entitlement and pay during coronavirus (COVID-19)'. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/holiday-entitlement-and-pay-during-coronavirus-covid-19?utm_source=458b84c0-5181-43ea-9d13-fd803529f23d&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate

wage, unfair deductions, illegal retention of wages and holiday/sick pay entitlements), with excessive and irregular working hours and in poor quality conditions (Jayaweera and Anderson 2008:14). These jobs were the first ones to be lost.

As seen, by mid-May, 49 percent of our respondents were out of work. This finding suggests that the COVID-19 jobs crisis a) started with low-income workers, hence impacting IRMO's beneficiaries early in the pandemic and b) disrupted the historical pattern of high employment for the Latin American community. The economic impact of the pandemic is revealing a structural shift in the employment pattern of IRMO's users. Pre-COVID, the informal economy, leisure, cleaning, hospitality and construction sectors were Latin Americans' main employers. In case of dismissal, workers could find an alternative employment in the informal sector. Yet lockdown hit these sectors hardest. Closures have left vulnerable workers and households' livelihoods unprotected and exposed to greater hardship. Our respondents' jobs were unsafe and so were those of some of their partners.

'She worked as a cleaner and her partner worked in construction. They have both run out of work.'

The COVID-19 recession, the high rate of 'vulnerable employment' (ILO, 2010) for Latin Americans is giving way to an increasingly high pattern of 'vulnerable unemployment'. If millions of jobs in the UK are at risk⁴³ and if the hospitality, construction and cleaning industries do not recover in the short-term, the prospect of longer-term unemployment for IRMO's beneficiaries can lead to further vulnerable underemployment. If in need to find an income and prevent looming unemployment, desperate Latin American migrant workers will be pushed even further to rely on the COVID-19 enhanced insecurities of the informal labour market. This therefore suggests that a number of IRMO's beneficiaries will enter into or continue in severely abusive and exploitative work.

Between the last week of April and mid-May, 24 percent of our respondents were made redundant instead of being furloughed. Many people were left with no shifts but they were not necessarily given notice of dismissal. The pandemic was providing the perfect alibi for some employers to dismiss workers unlawfully.⁴⁴ This practice is inextricably linked to employment contract insecurity.

'Works at a big chain who are going to close many of their local stores. There is no work. Cleaning company closed. Hasn't been working since March. They

⁴³ 'Millions of UK jobs still at risk from pandemic, warns business leaders' Daniel Thomas and Gill Plimmer, *Financial Times* July 9, 2020.

<https://accounts.ft.com/login?location=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcontent%2F4cddf3f8-87a4-45fd-ac6b-b27a7f714b1c>

⁴⁴ 'Unite highlights 'cruel' hospitality bosses behaving badly in coronavirus crisis.' Thursday 9 April 2020. <https://unitetheunion.org/news-events/news/2020/april/unite-highlights-cruel-hospitality-bosses-behaving-badly-in-cornavirus-crisis>

didn't sign her up for 80% furlough and was not made redundant, they just told her not to come back to work.'

A further 12 percent, 'were told not to return to work' and were not furloughed. Hence, by mid-May, 35 per cent of respondents were made redundant or dismissed rather than put on furlough. A basic COVID-19 emergency livelihood was taken away from socio-economically disadvantaged Latin American workers. An additional 4 percent were out of work because of COVID-19-related health issues or because they were shielding for a relative. 6 percent were not going to work at all (unspecified reason) and 4 percent of respondents couldn't go to work because they were the sole caregivers of their child(ren). The latter has been a critical issue during lockdown and more so for working mothers.⁴⁵ Women's jobs had been genuinely at risk because of lack of childcare. One of our respondents noted "*I have a six-year old girl and I cannot do my work and I can't do any more hours.*"

Our beneficiaries' unemployment situation is aggravated by the fact that, under the COVID-19 job crisis, the ability to find a job is minimal. IRMO warned that, 'Those who lost their jobs are trying to find a new employment. These individuals are faced with impossible decisions: to work and risk their lives and, potentially, also the lives of their family members, or to stay at home and struggle to subsist and provide for their families.' (IRMO, June 2020). Under COVID-19, patterns of unemployment are also changing. IRMO's warning resonates at the time of seeking out advice and support.

Employment Support

"I need advice on the 80% payment that I haven't received. I have received a letter from my boss telling me that they would pay me the 80% but up until now they haven't and I don't know what to do because he doesn't even answer my phone calls now."

Because of the high demand for IRMO's services, '[E]mployment support has focused on those users who are already in the Step Up project as there is no capacity to take on new users.'⁴⁶ The unprecedented 49 percent of beneficiaries that are out of work highlights both the high demand for employment support and the representativeness of this finding. In fact, out of 153 responses, 63 percent of beneficiaries reported needing employment-related support from IRMO.

The qualitative data revealed that respondents sought support and information on Universal Credit applications, loss of income, employment rights, the

⁴⁵ UK working mothers are 'sacrificial lambs' in coronavirus childcare crisis.' Alexandra Topping, *The Guardian*, 24 July 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/jul/24/uk-working-mothers-are-sacrificial-lambs-in-coronavirus-childcare-crisis>

⁴⁶ Director's Report. IRMO Management Committee Meeting. 26/05/2020 6pm via Zoom.

Furlough scheme and how to demand furlough wages,⁴⁷ employability and ways of finding a new job, support with statutory sick payment and advice on redundancy, dismissals and lost earnings. This evidence is consistent with a recent report that identified vulnerable migrants as seeking advice and support for more than one type of issue (Lukes *et al.*, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic continued magnifying existing socio-economic problems and inequalities with huge societal costs, IRMO's cases are becoming even more complex and multidimensional. Food insecurity, EUSS and the "shadow pandemic", are among them, this is a revealing finding.

'She has two kids, applied to UC but they cancelled it for this month [April] because she didn't have the EUSS code. Applied again to EUSS (she has Pre-Settled Status – has 4 years 8 months in the UK) and got code. Applied for Universal Credit which is supposed to arrive in June but she needs help for this month. She has reported a case of domestic violence and is now separated. She is trying to apply for jobs whilst looking after her 2 children... Referred to Lewisham food bank and LAWA for support with domestic violence issues.'

A significant number of correlated qualitative data highlights the need for English language support. It is a fact now that the language barrier is one of IRMO's beneficiaries' main sources of vulnerability. Recent research has once again confirmed the unfortunate prevalence of this finding (Lukes *et al.*, 2020). The language barrier has historically impacted upon employment and wages (Granada, 2013) as well as in accessing services (Berg, 2016).

COVID-19 has worsened such vulnerability. The reasons are twofold. First, as the pandemic has pushed bureaucracy online even further, a number of respondents needed language support either to fill in online forms correctly and/or to deal with employers and working conditions particularly when related to missing wages, effective communication with employer, employer's furlough fraud and/or worker's rights.

'Needs help in understanding and communicating with employer.'

'Need help to get unpaid days – no English. In need to claim that money.'

'Wants help interpreting what his employer is asking of him and he wants to know his worker's rights. Is on furlough but has been told by employer he must return to work but with a reduced hour contract.'

Second, lack of language proficiency is showing a disturbing new dimension. IRMO's beneficiaries have been subject to scamming. Throughout the pandemic, scammers have been taking advantage of the crisis and of vulnerable people. By April, the problem was so notorious that online advice

⁴⁷ As part of the EULAMP project, IRMO's website provided information on the CJRS in three languages: English, Spanish and Portuguese. See EULAMP's 'Guide to employment rights during the Covid-19 pandemic.' English version available at: irmo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/EULAMP-QAs-En1c-2.pdf

was widely available.⁴⁸ Although advice was very useful, it was in English. IRMO reported that '[T]he language barrier has led to being more vulnerable to scammers, and IRMO has witnessed many users falling victims to impostors pretending to provide help in applying for furlough salaries from the government scheme.' (IRMO, June 2020). This significant finding suggests that the language barrier may be more important than ever before. Hence the willingness of 54 percent of respondents to continue attending English classes remotely.

The implications of unemployment are wide-ranging. Also, considering that the sectors of the economy where our beneficiaries work have been hit hard there is no certainty when they will re-open. Retraining remains an open question.

"I work in a restaurant, it was the first thing they closed and the last thing they will re-open. I need to work because with my current income I can't cover all my expenses."

Income

Out of 170 respondents only 9 percent were being paid their full salary.

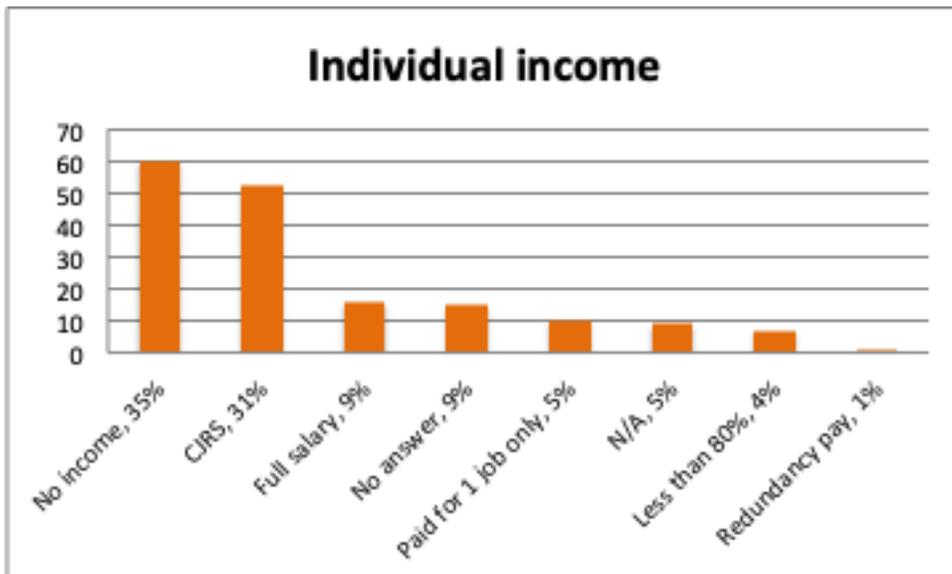


Figure 2: Reported individual income. Source: IRMO's Survey April-May 2020 (N=170)

Regarding income patterns, research has shown that around half of Latin American workers in London earn less than the London Living Wage (LLW)

⁴⁸ Sources for advice in English language abound, among those the Metropolitan Police, Citizens Advice, Consumer Rights organisations, charities such as Age UK, Money Saving Experts and Government services to name a few.

(McIlwaine *et al.*, 2011:65; McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016:49). At the time of our survey, the LLW had been increased from £10.55 to £10.75 per hour, that is, an hourly wage that lifts the vulnerability threshold. However, because the LLW is voluntary and not all employers adhere to it, it is not clear if our respondents were paid LLW or if they were furloughed on that income. Only one qualitative comment provided evidence that he/she was paid the National Minimum Wage (NMW) which is the statutory wage for under 25s (£8.20)⁴⁹ and was (perhaps unaware), that he/she was furloughed on that income. In answering if their hours had been reduced, the respondent noted:

"Yes, I was paid the hourly Minimum Wage, I worked 50 hours a week and now I am being paid a percentage of 40 hours a week only."

According to our data 31 percent received Furlough income. Interestingly, when referring to being furloughed, most respondents referred to the scheme as either "the 80%" or "the 20%". The "80%" turned into an income benchmark or a promise: *[T]hey haven't paid me the 80%, but they say they are going to. I'm waiting for the payment on the 7th and 15th of the month.*

Allegedly, the CJRS appears to be a leveller and a stress alleviator, it protects both employment and income. The CJRS keeps employees in employment and pays 80 percent of their salaries yet in an unequal wage system. Hence, Furlough income can also be seen as a livelihood loss. In fact, up until August, furloughed workers are being paid 20 percent less than their full salary and continue to pay income tax and National Insurance Contributions as usual. Being paid 20 percent less of an already low salary has a negative impact on furloughed low-income workers and can lead to further financial hardship. At the time of seeking support, a respondent needed *to get some hours of work to be able to get to the end of the month, that is, the rest, the 20%.*

The alternatives to not being furloughed however were more concerning. Respondents could either have their hours reduced and have a lower income or be made redundant. By mid-May, IRMO was instrumental in securing people's access to the Furlough scheme. 'IRMO helped 12 users to be furloughed rather than being dismissed or made redundant. However, the pay they receive at 80% of a very low income is not sufficient to sustain themselves and their families.' (IRMO, June 2020).

Thus far, this report is finding that the CJRS scheme is not only disproportionately impacting in-work poverty and/or low-income Latin

⁴⁹ There is now the hourly Minimum Wage for under 25s (£8.20), the National Living Wage for over 25s (£8.72) and the Real Living Wage which is £9.30 across the UK with a separate rate for London, the LLW (£10.75). For updates and classifications of the UK wage rates see the *Living Wage Foundation* at: <https://www.livingwage.org.uk>

Americans but it is also revealing the vulnerability of the temporary income status of being 'on furlough'.

'Was receiving 80%, her employer has just announced that he will be making people redundant from hotel.'

In order to increase their income and make ends meet, most of IRMO's vulnerable beneficiaries hold more than one job. The 'flexible' job market offers them that possibility. Low-paid migrant workers hold down more than one job and sometimes one full-time job during the day and a part-time job in the evening. Some have up to three part-time jobs (Datta *et al.*, 2006). These multiple jobs are associated with zero-hours contracts (Brinkley, 2013). Multiple jobholding is common in industries like hospitality (Quinlan, 2015). However, the economic impact of COVID-19 on the latter has been critical. As IRMO's beneficiaries are over-represented in hospitality occupations, the historical pattern of multiple sources of income has been acutely disrupted. In our survey, 6 percent of dual/multiple jobholder respondents have been paid for one job only.

This is a crucial stage in our report. We may be identifying one of the factors that could answer our problem of Furlough data inconsistencies. The latter appears to be strongly associated with the issue of multiple jobholding in zero-hour contracts. Some respondents have been furloughed in one job but not in the other(s). Hence they are still 'employed' in one but not in the other(s) and/or they are paid in one but not in the other(s) or worse, they are promised to be furloughed but they are still not paid: *[I]n one job they promised they would pay me 80% but in another job nothing but still not sure if they would pay me.* At the time of self-identifying as furloughed, our respondents were in any of those unclear Furlough income positions hence the inconsistency in the values for income and employment. This is a significant and useful finding that could explain the inconsistencies in Furlough data. The income variable has been critical in finding a satisfactory answer for the Furlough discrepancies in both employment and income data. This finding supports our argument that quantitative Furlough data inconsistencies are a societal phenomenon and not just a 'statistical' one. It seems that when 'being furloughed' is reported the emphasis has been placed on employment, and the determinant income variable has to a certain extent been neglected. Low-paid employment provides significant analytical dimensions. Hence when referring to being furloughed, we will consider the value to be 31 percent from this section's analysis.

Furthermore, those who are still being paid but receive less than 80 percent of their salaries (4%) is either because their hours have been reduced and/or because of pay deductions. Under the COVID-19 scenario, unlawful wage deductions are more easily done to people with vulnerable jobs and with limited or no entitlements.

"I've lost 20 hours of work."

"I am working only four hours a day."

"I had a full-time job but they dismissed me and in the other job they just pay me 10 hours per week."

For respondents facing no income the situation is even more concerning. The data showed that 35 percent of respondents are not receiving any income at all. Considering that a decade of austerity has impacted welfare benefit recipients the most, the NRPF condition is adding more hardship. Only a small number of beneficiaries with no income are in the category NRPF, the rest are eligible to access public funds. However, '[T]hose eligible to receive benefits haven't done so because of other barriers such as language, the complicated and constantly evolving benefit system to which beneficiaries have to apply online and particularly because of their unclear employment status. (IRMO, June 2020).

Overall, this section is showing that up until mid-May, 40 percent of our respondents were in relative financial security. More concerning, however, is that 45 percent were already living in financial insecurity.

Employment Status – Job Contracts

Under COVID-19, employment contracts have been exposed to disruption. In our survey, the most secure type of contract is Permanent (20%). A sub-total of 32 percent of our respondents reported to be in insecure job contracts (see figure 3).

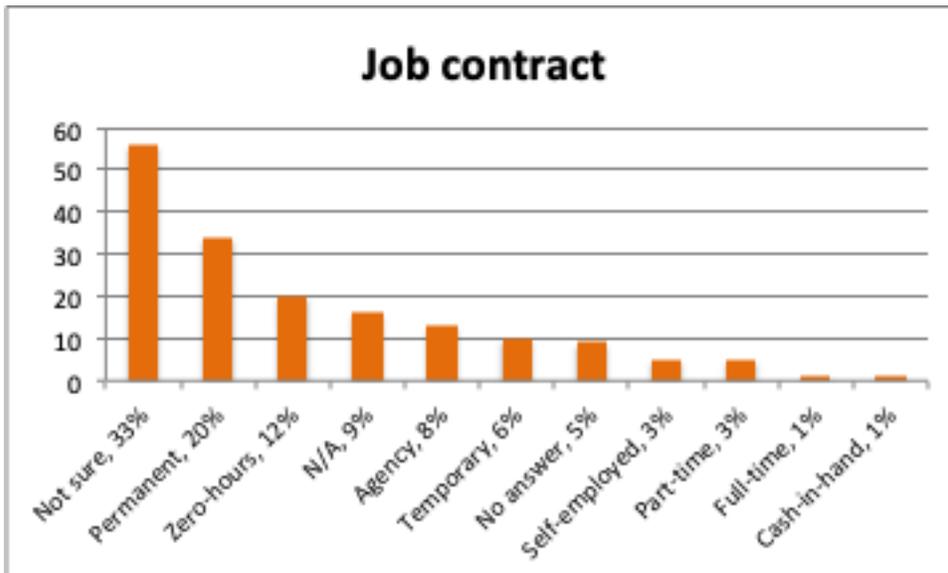


Figure 3 Type of job contracts. Source: IRMO Survey, April-May 2020 (N=170).

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated employment insecurity. Conceptually, job/employment insecurity is situated between employment and unemployment because it refers to employed people who feel threatened by unemployment (Hartley *et al.*, 1991). In our survey, job insecurity is represented by the types of job contracts our respondents hold: zero-hours (12%), agency (8%), temporary (6%), part-time (3%) and cash-in-hand (1%). Although these contracts differ in (inferior) terms and conditions, they all leave room for employers to deny Furlough, not to legally pay NI contributions (NICs), Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) and/or holiday pay.

"I was ill for six days, not with COVID-19. I presented the doctor's note but they didn't pay me."

Evidence shows that this breach of employment rights is also seen in the 'self-employed' category.⁵⁰ Thus the 3 percent self-employment can be included among the insecure employment contracts. This claim deserves a few words though.

Self-employment is a deceiving category. There is a spectrum of self-employed individuals that range from higher to lower earners. According to the *Resolution Foundation* (Cominetti *et al.*, 2020:29-31), the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the self-employed varied and the lowest paid were the least affected. However, in the case of IRMO's beneficiaries, we should think 'forced' self-employment and not just what Cominetti *et al.* call 'atypical work' (*ibid.*). As work worldwide, and specifically in the UK, got more flexible and precarious, self-employment is found in the intersection of the booming sub-contracting/outsourcing and *Gig* sectors of the economy or in what has been termed 'sham' self-employment. Agencies dominate these sectors.⁵¹ According to IRMO, '[A] lot of users are forced into self-employment contracts.' (IRMO, June 2020). Although the survey does not provide data regarding eligibility for the Coronavirus Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), IRMO's documentation provides important information. 'While there is a self-employment relief grant, a large proportion of people will not qualify as in many cases they don't have sufficient financial records. To qualify, people should show evidence of trading for the period 2018-2019' (IRMO, June 2020). This suggests the need to consider the 3 percent self-employed in an insecure employment contract. Summing up, 32 percent of respondents fall into the category of insecure job contracts.

⁵⁰ See 'CitySprint accused of 'making a mockery' of employment rights.' – Sarah Butler The Guardian Wed 15 November 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/nov/15/citysprint-employment-rights-courier-minimum-wage-holiday-pay>

⁵¹ Agencies also employ individuals as 'workers'. As such they are *not* employees hence not entitled to the same rights e.g. protection against unfair dismissal, maternity rights, redundancy rights. See Brinkley, 2013:7.

Conversely, IRMO has claimed that the majority of its beneficiaries are in zero-hours contracts. Surprisingly, the survey showed that just 12 percent of respondents are employed with such a contract. However, the answer 'Not sure' (33%) is noteworthy. This percentage is indicative of what this report is revealing so far, the unclear employment status of IRMO's beneficiaries. Vulnerable/insecure jobs are inextricably linked to vulnerable/insecure job contracts. The 'Not sure' may well indicate a zero-hours contract. If there is nothing written, low-paid workers are not aware and/or sure whether they possess a job contract or not and are unable to check the full facts or simply, they are not given one.⁵²

"I'm not sure because they told me that my contract was different."

Once again, the language barrier is critical. If Latin American workers do not understand and/or are not aware of the British employment system and laws, the language deficit exacerbates their vulnerability. Not knowing 'how things work' (Berg, 2016:10) but also not *understanding* them leads to confusion and conflicting misunderstandings. Past research has shown that those working in low-skilled jobs have no written employment contract and that lack of language knowledge is one of IRMO's beneficiaries' major problems to access better paid jobs and contracts (McCarthy, 2016a). Not being 'sure' of what type of job contract a person has is a key indicator of job insecurity.

Hence, if we collate the 32 percent of respondents in insecure job contracts, and the 33 percent 'Not Sure', the result is a very significant 65 percent (see figure 2). This finding is important. It reflects the grim reality of the Latin American community in general and IRMO's beneficiaries in particular under the COVID-19 recession. Nevertheless, IRMO has been instrumental in this respect. 'At IRMO we contact employers to clarify what type of contract the employee has and the employment situation of the person. This allows us to understand if they are furloughed (but were not made aware), if they are self-employed or if they are still employed. However, there is still a sector of people in insecure employment, who instead of being furloughed have stopped receiving shifts, which means a drop in income but without a confirmation that they are redundant, it is then difficult for them to apply for benefits or qualify for any support.' (IRMO, June 2020).

⁵² This finding also applies to Latin American migrant women workers (de la Silva *et al.*, 2019).

VIII. Core Services: Housing and Welfare

Housing: Securing a Roof over Your Head in Times of COVID-19

Even if before the COVID-19 pandemic keeping a roof over one's head has been a problem for a number of people in the UK,⁵³ lockdown and self-isolation would prove to disproportionately affect vulnerable private renters. On March 18th, and under the Coronavirus Act 2020, the UK Government announced an emergency package of protection for both private renters and landlords. The package allowed for a three-month payment holiday for mortgage borrowers and tenants and included a ban on evictions.⁵⁴ However, the situation was to be otherwise.⁵⁵

According to research, 70 percent Latin Americans in London live in inadequate private rental housing and in overcrowded conditions (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2016:28-9). Research on the specific housing situation of IRMO's beneficiaries validated those findings (McCarthy, 2016b). If living in overcrowded conditions has been prevalent for people on a low-income⁵⁶ this amounts to long-term unhealthy living. The COVID-19 pandemic has added full lockdown and social distancing. The Government's messaging 'Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives' was a problematic message for low-income private renters. As we shall see later, spending long periods of time in overcrowded or small accommodation would definitively have a serious impact on disadvantaged people's health and wellbeing.

Compounding this difficult situation is the reality that many of our beneficiaries have been unable to pay their rent and have fallen into arrears. Respondents who normally would have been able to pay their rents, have been unable to do so because they have suddenly lost their jobs (49%), are living in financial insecurity (45%) or have been furloughed (31%). According to IRMO's data, '50% of people supported by the Advice area responded that they are struggling to pay rent' (IRMO, June 2020).

Our survey data went further. It showed that 58 percent of our respondents were struggling to keep up with their rent (see table 2). Adding those who are

⁵³ Over the last twenty-five years housing costs have risen much more for low income households. See Bourquin *et al.*, 2019.

⁵⁴ 'Complete ban on evictions and additional protection for renters.' Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/complete-ban-on-evictions-and-additional-protection-for-renters>

⁵⁵ 'More than 220,000 renters at risk of eviction after falling into arrears during pandemic, charity warns.' May Bulman *The Independent* 5 July 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/renters-eviction-arrears-uk-shelter-england-coronavirus-lockdown-a9602186.html>

⁵⁶ 'Overcrowding is highest for those in low incomes' Adam Tinson. The Health Foundation. 13 May 2020. <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/overcrowding-is-highest-for-those-with-low-incomes>

(unsuccessfully) negotiating their rents with landlords (2%) and those who are 'not sure about paying rent next month' (2%), the percentage in insecure housing rises to a concerning 62 percent.

Difficulties paying rent	Percentage
Struggling to pay rent now	58%
Not sure about paying rent next month	2%
Need to talk with landlord about rent reduction	2%
No problems at present/so far	32%
Living with relatives	1%
On housing benefits	1%
No answer/not applicable	5%

Table 2: Respondents' difficulties with paying rent. Source: IRMO Survey, April-May 2020 (n=170). Above the thick line represents an insecure housing situation.

Despite the government's emergency package of protection for private renters, 2 per cent have already been evicted. Housing insecurity will become even more serious once the government eviction ban comes to an end.⁵⁷

Although 32 percent of respondents reported having no problems at present/so far (*We are OK at the moment*), temporary housing security might not hold even until the eviction ban ends. Housing security is contingent on their employment security and this in turn is directly contingent on the prospect of future waves of COVID-19. Further, living with relatives (1%) or on housing benefits (1%), also constitutes housing insecurity. At the time of paying rent, being out of work and having no income worked in tandem.

"Without a job we do not have enough income to pay rent."

"The truth is that we don't have the money to pay the rent. We do not receive any benefits and don't have any income."

"We are paying the rent with the savings we had."

"We had to leave the room we were renting because we can't pay. We are now living in the house of friends who have allowed us to stay here for a few days."

Conversely, being on furlough also impinges upon rent payments. 20 percent salary loss on an already low income is a significant amount and, as already

⁵⁷ Evictions in England were due to start on Sunday 30th August. On 21st August the ban on evictions was extended for four weeks. Landlords will have to give a minimum of six months notice (31st March 2021).

seen, could equate to a deduction of wages. For those furloughed private renters who are receiving 80 percent of their salaries and are living close to the breadline the reduction in income pushes them into arrears.

"The 80% takes away money to pay the rent."

"Because being paid 80% it is more difficult to pay the rent."

"I have paid less as I receive only 80% of my salary."

'Is running out of savings and his furlough payment is not enough to cover living costs.'

'Cannot afford rent with 80% that she receives of her salary'.

The socio-economic overview we provided earlier highlighted the problem of record high rents in the UK and its impact on affordability for those on low income. Even before the pandemic private rental prices in London had risen by 1.3% in the 12 months to January 2020 (ONS, 2020b). This trend increased inequality and pushed private renters into poverty (Travers *et al.*, 2016). Lockdown exposed the high cost of private rent and exacerbated the issue of arrears. A respondent noted, *I am renting a room that costs me £525 a month, I owe £225 from April and now the other £525 of May.*

Respondents also mentioned unsafe and poor housing conditions. When answering if they had contacted the landlord, one of the reasons was because their rented accommodation had *[P]roblems with damp and rats.'* This amounts to substandard housing. Importantly, behind these answers there are families and children and their health, safety and wellbeing may be seriously compromised. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 crisis has furthered housing insecurity for Latin American private renters. The association between housing insecurity stress, health and wellbeing is well documented (WHO, 2016). In the case of IRMO's beneficiaries, '[H]aving a safe and adequate housing is of fundamental importance to people's sense of wellbeing' (McCarthy, 2016b).

Also significant is the fact that '[I]ndividuals and families have been experiencing maltreatment and eviction threats from landlords. Some beneficiaries have already been asked to leave their homes as they are unable to pay their rent and some users have left the properties unaware that all Court actions for evictions have been put on hold.' (IRMO, June 2020). Some respondents have been either threatened with eviction or actually being subject to 'no fault' eviction (Section 21). Section 21 allows landlords to evict tenants at short notice and without a specific reason.⁵⁸ IRMO reported that '2% have been already evicted' (IRMO, June 2020).

The issue of empowered landlords and vulnerable tenants being defenceless against them is of utmost importance. Under the 'hostile environment'

⁵⁸ Section 21 eviction. Shelter.

https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/eviction/section_21_eviction

(Goodfellow, 2019), private landlords and other employees of public and private organisations have become 'everyday' border control agents (Yuval-Davis *et al.*, 2018:233). If landlords do not check someone's immigration status/eligibility to rent or work, they face sanctions. Hence, because of state pressure some landlords are reluctant to rent/deal with migrants on low-income. Against this backdrop, and despite the emergency legislation on evictions, the pandemic has been once again the ideal alibi to transgress any legislation. Notwithstanding, IRMO has been instrumental in supporting '[O]ur users to ask their landlords for rent pauses or reductions but there is no guarantee their landlords will comply with these requests' (IRMO, June 2020). IRMO was proved to be correct. With few exceptions, the survey's qualitative data provides rich information about landlords' (mis)behaviour and respondents' vulnerability.

"The landlord is pressuring tenants."

"The landlord only wants us to pay the full rent and argues that people in this situation want to take advantage by not paying so we have to pay now and that's it."

"He told me that they need the money and that they are not guilty."

'Having trouble with his landlord who is evicting him and leaving his personal belongings outside of the house for him to collect.'

'Domestic violence case. Partner has left her with two children. Landlord is also being abusive and threatening to change the locks. No income. Needs help reporting incidents to the police, moving house and applying to benefits.'

*'Having issues with Landlord who visits her flat unannounced, has not been respecting social distancing, is abusing her rights as a tenant.'*⁵⁹

'Her landlord was understanding and accepted the lower pay for now.'

'Has been self-isolating as developed symptoms of COVID-19. Landlord threatened to evict him and tried changing the locks and cutting electricity.'

'She has received threatening emails.'

This evidence suggests that respondents' housing-related experiences during lockdown occurred despite the Government's emergency package of protection

⁵⁹ Although the Fitness for Human Habitation Act gives social and private tenants the power to take their landlord to Court, in case of emergency, the Act also entitles landlords to enter the property on shorter notice. In this case, there was no emergency. Moreover, low-income tenants will not have the money to sue their landlords. For the Act, see 'Guide for landlords: Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018. 6 March 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/homes/fitness-for-human-habitation-act-2018/guide-for-landlords-homes-fitness-for-human-habitation-act-2018>

for private renters. Although this package included a ban on evictions, it does not deal with the issue of arrears and unlawful evictions.

To avoid evictions, some private renters pay their rent at the expense of other bills or food. Others have to make hard, stressful and difficult decisions: *I didn't receive my salary and I get Universal Credit but I couldn't pay the rent and the Council Tax because I had to reserve money for food.*

Food: *Putting Food on the Table* in times of COVID-19

Although food insecurity and the enormous increase in food banks have been concerning features during the ten years of austerity in the UK (Food Foundation, 2017; Sosenko *et al.*, 2019), the pandemic has exacerbated the problem. Our overview noted that soon after the COVID-19 pandemic struck, emergency food parcels soared by an alarming 81 percent. At the time of our survey, this exponential increase had reached IRMO's beneficiaries. As a frontline charity, 'IRMO received an influx of queries regarding food vouchers and as a result staff had to adapt the support they provided.' (IRMO's Director Report, April 2020). Having to *adapt* the support provided suggests both that IRMO became a regular referral agency and that food insecurity for its beneficiaries had increased. Although 62 percent were still able to access food (*'we haven't had problems with food'*), 31 percent had been struggling. Although food insecurity has varying degrees of severity marginal, moderate or severe (Sosenko *et al.*, 2019:22), the need to have access to a food bank or food parcels is an indicator that 31 percent of our respondents were experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity, that is, hunger. Not by chance COVID-19 has been deemed '[t]he hunger virus.' (Oxfam, 2020).

If we associate this finding to the 49 percent out of work to the 45 percent living in financial insecurity and to the 65 percent in insecure employment contracts, we could safely argue that a considerable number of IRMO's respondents and their families are falling into multiple deprivation, that is, into poverty/near destitution. This can be linked to the fact that 65 per cent of them live in the most deprived boroughs of London.⁶⁰ This precarity is the perfect pathway to poverty, destitution and hunger. This is a distressing finding.

Importantly, the minimum wage is designed to account for food and housing only. Our respondents' food and housing insecurity/deprivation is highlighting that they are not even getting the essentials that make up the minimum wage. At the time of asking for support, respondents pointed to the need to buy food or advice and support to access food parcels or help from food banks. IRMO's newly created Wellbeing check-in service became a life saver for many Latin American disadvantaged families. The regular check-in phone calls with vulnerable beneficiaries making sure that they were accessing food, along with

⁶⁰ See Leaser, 2019. 'Indices of Deprivation 2019 Initial Analysis.' London Datastore, 2019. <https://data.london.gov.uk/blog/indices-of-deprivation-2019-initial-analysis/>

its advice and referrals have been critical. By mid-May, and in addition to referrals, IRMO 'had issued 70 food bank vouchers' (IRMO Director's Report, May 2020).

'They have been referred to Lewisham food bank once. They have enough food for this week but will get in touch if they need help next week.'

'Needs support to buy food and other supplies.'

'Struggling between paying rent and buying food. Will let us know if they decide they need a food delivery.'

"I have a food voucher but the place is closed and I don't know where to go or what to do with the voucher."

"All my family is ill with coronavirus. I need you to register me for the food bank."

Regardless of the type of support requested, the issue of food was regularly mentioned. Food poverty is a disturbing finding. However, food insecurity not only relates to food vouchers, parcels or food banks, it also refers to free school meals. Having recourse to free school meals is indicative that children are growing up in low-income families and in deprived local regions/authorities where child poverty is already high.⁶¹ Undoubtedly, housing and food insecurity dovetail. One way to stop reaching critical levels of subsistence is to access the UK's benefit system.

Accessing Benefits

When the welfare system was reformed and Universal Credit (UC) was introduced, one of its aims was 'to reduce poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency' (DWP, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic crisis subverted that aim. One indicator was the 'avalanche of claims' that took place between 17th March and 12 May. According to the Resolution Foundation (Brewer & Handscomb, 2020:5), 'the number in receipt of Universal Credit rose by 40 percent, or 12 million, in just four weeks.' Since its introduction, UC has been an additional lifesaver for those experiencing 'in-work poverty' who had been supplementing their incomes with public funds. During COVID-19, low-income workers excluded from the CJRS, had no other option but to apply to UC. This was the case of a number of our respondents.

Up until mid-May, 49 percent of respondents were out of work and 45 percent in a financially insecure situation. As a result, IRMO's welfare service was in high demand. At the time of the survey the welfare service was facing

⁶¹ Child poverty in the local authorities where most of our respondents live is rather high. Measuring household income after housing costs, *End Child Poverty* provides the following data: Lambeth 43%, Southwark 40%, Lewisham 37% and Wandsworth 36%. See *End Child Poverty*, 2019. London: Local Data <https://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/poverty-in-your-area-2019/>

increasing demand and challenges, particularly with UC, one of the most requested benefits. Unsurprisingly, IRMO's challenges were related to the unprecedented rate of UK applications and waiting times. IRMO's Director reported: '[T]he waiting time of the Universal Credit line is up to 10 hours so it's been really difficult to organise the support.'⁶²

At the time of asking for support, our qualitative data shows an overwhelming number of requests for help to claim UC. As the financial situation of our respondents deteriorated, UC was also seen as a last resort. 49 percent of respondents reported needing help in applying for UC from IRMO. Support and advice requests ranged from a straightforward Universal Credit help to a more complex combination of issues. Respondents needed to claim UC to pay rent, buy food, compensate loss of income, or simply redress the failures of other agencies.

'Needs help re-applying to Universal Credit to help with loss of income.'

'Has been in touch with Job Centre for help with Universal Credit application and promised her an appointment to help her apply but they never got back to her.'

Once again, language becomes an issue. Applying for UC is not a simple endeavour. It requires some basic knowledge about other benefits as applying for UC could affect others they are receiving.⁶³ Lockdown, online applications, lack of digital literacy skills and language deficit make things more cumbersome. Vulnerable migrants with this profile find it difficult to navigate a complex benefit system. To avoid mistakes, IRMO's support was essential.

"I need to apply for Universal Credit but I have been unable to do it because I do not speak English."

"I have applied for Universal Credit but I did it on my own but I did it wrong. I would like you to help me with this and see if I am eligible for another benefit."

Our data shows that 48 percent of respondents were entitled to benefits and a further 2 percent needed to update their current situation. The latter is mandatory and any change in circumstances is required to be reported.⁶⁴

'She previously applied for Universal Credit but it was rejected because she stated she had a partner who was receiving full salary. In reality they are separated and she has to pay rent and look after 12 year old daughter. Needs to make 'change of circumstances' to the application.'

⁶² IRMO Director's Report. April, 2020. Highlights of IRMO's Areas.

⁶³ Citizens Advice. 'Universal Credit' <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/universal-credit>

⁶⁴ 'Benefits: report a change in your circumstances.' <https://www.gov.uk/report-benefits-change-circumstances>

A further 27 percent were not entitled to benefits. Importantly, this percentage is strongly associated with the nationality data. According to this, 26 percent of respondents are 'national' Latin Americans, that is, non-EEA nationals. This percentage corresponds to the 27 percent not entitled to benefits. As non-EEA nationals, they are subject to immigration rules and their right to benefits is defined by their immigration status. Hence, the 27 percent of IRMO's respondents not entitled to benefits may have NRPF. In order to use the NHS, they must pay a mandatory health surcharge.⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, NRPF removes the possibility of a safety net for vulnerable migrants who could easily fall into homelessness and destitution.

⁶⁵ 'Visitor & Migrant NHS Cost Recovery Programme. Implementation Plan 2014-16'. Department of Health.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/329789/NHS_Implementation_Plan_Phase_3.PDF#page=26

undocumented, IRMO has been instrumental in this, both since the EUSS's inception in March 2019 and throughout the pandemic.⁶⁷ Given that beneficiaries are facing barriers and difficulties in accessing benefits without an EUSS code,⁶⁸ this is all the more necessary and urgent. This urgency relates both to the EUSS deadline in June 2021 but more so due to the risk that overwhelmed beneficiaries may prioritise livelihoods over EUSS applications. Applying for EUSS constitutes another stressor. This is done online and in English. IT skills are paramount. '[It]'s not easy to support people with low IT skills remotely, which are a big part of the people who need EUSS support. We are therefore planning to have managed individual face-to-face sessions to support people with EUSS applications from September' (IRMO Director's Report, July 2020).

As a global public health crisis, COVID-19 magnified IRMO's beneficiaries' existing health stressors. The outbreak of the pandemic was a shocking event. To the existing and aggravated employment, income, housing and food insecurities, the pandemic added fear of the virus and health-related anxieties.⁶⁹ At the time of the survey, fear of contagion and death was a distressing health factor. The word cloud is a vivid visual representation of that impact. Figure 4 was created out of the qualitative data obtained from the responses to the question: "Are you worried about going to work?", a question answered by 153 respondents of whom 49 percent were worried about (*going to*) work.

The qualitative data collected for this question substantiated the opening argument of this report. The COVID-19 pandemic is more than a global public health crisis. Its impact is also socio-economic and this impinges on people's lives and wellbeing. Figure 4 provides compelling evidence of our argument as does the qualitative information in the survey. Contagion, safety, lack of PPE, confusion, fear, working conditions, reduced hours, overcrowding, uncertainty, risk of unemployment and actual unemployment were intertwined stressors enhanced by the pandemic.

"I'm worried because I work in a very high risk area for COVID-19 contagion and the company doesn't give us face masks."

"I'm worried because they will cut my hours for sure."

"I don't feel safe because my work place is not hygienic but most of all because I am pregnant."

⁶⁷ IRMO has supported 1,752 people with EUSS applications since the start of the scheme

⁶⁸ See page 21.

⁶⁹ We must add 'employment checks'. The Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006 requires employers to check documents for eligibility to work in the UK. Further, Section 35 of the Immigration Act 2016 notes that an employer commits an offence if it employs a person knowingly, or if they have reasonable cause to believe that the employee is disqualified from working by reason of their immigration status.

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/19/part/1/chapter/2/enacted>

"I'm worried that they will start making people redundant."
"I'm worried because I live in one room with my wife and two children."
'She has been given masks and gloves but has found the experience stressful. She is a single mother with a child and feels like she has been misinformed about ways of protecting herself and her family.'
'Afraid of getting ill. Works for Deliveroo. Was told Deliveroo would send PPE but hasn't received anything so far.'

In addition, fear and health anxiety was enhanced by the language barrier. Due to the contradictory official public health messages that trickled down to employers, IRMO's beneficiaries found themselves confused and exposed to the risks and some fell ill. 'Due to language barriers and conflicting messages from employers, some beneficiaries didn't receive appropriate information about the government social distancing measures and isolation during the 'Stay at home' phase of lockdown... families were unable to access information on COVID-19 symptoms, hygiene measures, how to request NHS support and testing. Many families contracted the virus, both children and elderly members, with some of the latter hospitalised.' (IRMO, June 2020). Because there is no official recognition of Latin Americans as an ethnic group, these cases are invisible in official data collection systems such as the ONS and the NHS. Hence the urgent need for recognition.

Mental Health

One of the most drastic measures adopted to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the serious risks that it posed to public health, was the strict nationwide lockdown. Strict confinement is posing a gradual yet unprecedented level of distress. If poor mental health is strongly associated with socio-economic circumstances, lockdown and associated psychological stressors impact the disadvantaged most.

Responding to the question about health, we could find three distinctive sets of respondent's evaluation of their state of physical and mental wellbeing. Even considering that by May the UK had the worst COVID-19 death rate in Europe,⁷⁰ one group of respondents had a positive evaluation of their general health and state of being. It appeared that lockdown and the COVID-19 crisis did not have a negative physical and/or psychological impact on them. They remained positive.

⁷⁰ 'United Kingdom Covid Map and Case Count' *The New York Times*. Updated September 29, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/europe/united-kingdom-coronavirus-cases.html>

"We are fine/Very well"/"100%"/"Excellent"/"Good"/"We are in good spirits."

"Well and healthy at the moment./'We are optimistic.' This situation has to change."

"Up to now we are well/We are relaxed. Try not to get bored and to be on our guard."

"I'm fine, I'm not worried about the virus."/ "With will to live."

Research has shown that Latin Americans rely on their churches (Roman Catholic or Evangelical Christian) for religious guidance and practices as well as services support such as immigration, education and health (McIllwaine *et al.*, 2011:105-6). At a time of a pandemic some of our respondents resorted to their faith. Tolerance and resilience were facilitated by their religiosity.

"We are fine thanks to God/Thanks to God everything is fine."

"I am very well thanks to God."

"We are fine because we fully trust in God the Creator's will."

This finding that religiosity has a positive effect on mental health and psychological wellbeing during the peak of the pandemic provides additional insights into how some Latin Americans cope with adversity.

A second group of respondents showed ambivalence about their wellbeing. The hallmarks of the pandemic have been uncertainty and an unprecedented disruption of life and work. Mounting concerns and uncertainties about health, family, friends, jobs, income, housing and food security have disrupted the disadvantaged and poorest most. Most aggravating is the fact that uncertainty and disruption have acted in tandem. Disruption in the form of closure of non-essential stores/business, leisure facilities, churches and schools had various degrees of impact. Against this backdrop, some respondents straddled between high and low stress days.

"It depends on the day /Good and bad days."

"A bit of everything. Sometimes very worried for the situation we are facing."

"Good, except when I don't get paid/Generally good, but some days sad and worried."

"So-so, sometimes very well, others overwhelmed by so much confinement. My son has no toys and no-one to play with."

As the pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the economy and people's lives and livelihoods remain uncertain, it remains to be seen if respondents' ability

to maintain such state of mental and/or emotional psychological resilience will withstand future high levels of challenges and barriers.

Furthermore, migrants have added stressors. Not being able to send remittances and, more importantly, family separation have a detrimental effect on psychological wellbeing. Parents who have left their children behind (in their countries of origin), some with the hope of a future family reunification, experience severe psychological distress. Migrant transnational parenthood and more so 'Latina transnational motherhood' is a complex and emotionally costly experience (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). Lockdown added further stressors.

"We remain expectant. I always send them money monthly. They are in Venezuela."

"Trying not to get depressed. Although it is difficult to be 100% because we don't know what we are facing and with the children back in my country you can't avoid being worried about them and the family."

A third group of respondents regarded their situation as negative and showed poor psychological wellbeing. We must acknowledge that one of the cultural pillars of the Latin American community is sociability. For a large section of the community, social contact, sociability and social networks constitute coping strategies against disenfranchisement and marginalisation.⁷¹ These also matter for health and wellbeing. The pandemic has been a significant life event and as we noted at the outset of this report, it is undoubtedly changing people's lives. Lockdown, social distancing and isolation were a sudden and unexpected shock. Latin Americans' lifestyles were completely upended. Important sources of face-to-face emotional support from friends and families came to a halt. The beneficial effects on wellbeing of carnivals, social gatherings, creative cultural and social community activities were abruptly disrupted.

Given the overlapping stressors this group of respondents fell into what the UN called "mental health crisis."⁷² Issues such as depression, panic attacks, insomnia, anxiety and stress featured highly. It is not surprising therefore that their enhanced poorer socio-economic situation was turning into a mental health risk factor. This is a significant correlation. Some respondent's negative evaluation of their lives under lockdown was described in one word: *bad, down, depressed, nervous, stressed, anxious*. Others provided more information.

⁷¹ Latin Americans' street life, commercial activities and support networks are expression of this. See Granada (2013). See also 'Pueblito Paisa –Un lugar que no debe ser destruido' by Mandana Ghanadzadeh.

EUDELONDRES, 10/11/2017 www.enunlugardelondres.wordpress.com

⁷² 'UN leads call to protect most vulnerable from mental health crisis during and after Covid-19'. UN News, 14 May 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063882>

"We are extremely down and worried."/"/"Very anguished and with fear."

"I am distraught and with depression, I can't stop thinking about the situation."

"With great anxiety and stress." 'Psychologically affected and very stressed."

"Dismayed and very disoriented, hoping this lockdown ends soon."

"I'm really unwell, I don't know what to do with my situation. I have been looking for a job but it's been very difficult."

Physical Health

Some respondents reported physical health conditions, among them insomnia, asthma, cancer, anaemia, mobility and dermatological problems. Undoubtedly, not all these health problems were the result of the pandemic and ensuing lockdown. These were pre-existing health conditions and people with these conditions were considered high-risk groups and required shielding. This meant staying at home, avoiding contact with others, and practicing social distancing in the household. Some of our respondents fell into this category and were entitled by law to receive Statutory Sick Pay.

'She has asthma so can't go back to work. High-risk condition.'

'Stop working due to health condition (asthma). Presented sick pay notice from GP but hasn't been paid yet.'

One of the unintended consequences of lockdown was its impact on mental health-associated physical stressors. These are also conducive psychosomatic problems.

"The stress of being in lockdown and the worry of becoming infected by COVID-19 made me develop insomnia. There are nights when I can't sleep."

'Has been unwell, was in hospital for 4 days. Doesn't feel well now, has chest pain, could be anxiety or COVID, not sure.'

Others were ill with the virus themselves or close relatives were (mainly elderly parents). In a couple of cases the entire family was ill with the virus. Some reported getting better from it. Being ill with the virus, self-isolating and in a dire financial situation amounts to total disruption of life.

We must acknowledge that migrant workers hold so-called '3-D jobs' (dirty, dangerous and demanding) and are recognised to be among the most vulnerable members of society. Their physically demanding working conditions and employer's behaviour and abusive practices expose them to high levels of physical and psychological stress. Refugees, failed asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants are more susceptible to deplorable working conditions

and practices where bullying and abusive shouting is not uncommon (Lewis *et al.*, 2013) and so are Latin American migrant women in London (de la Silva *et al.*, 2019). A small number of our respondents provided some evidence of this.

"The person in charge is bullying me."

"I need a medical check up. Since they shouted at me I have carried on with my ups and downs and now hay fever is making my health worse and it has been difficult to get a GP appointment..."

Again, language proficiency continues to be a problem.⁷³ If Latin Americans were relying on service providers such as Southwark Council translation service (Berg, 2016), our survey's section on 'Support' showed the need of some respondents to have GP and/or hospital texts or letters translated. IRMO's staff also provided this service.

'Offered support to translate text message from GP.'

'Has received a voice message from X Hospital (she has been there for a chest treatment before) but couldn't understand what they said. She believes has an appointment this week. I'll call the chest department on her behalf to try to confirm her appointment. Couldn't get through today. Will try again tomorrow.'

Having access to a GP is paramount and more so under a pandemic. Although 59 per cent of respondents were registered with a GP a considerable 14 percent were not, that is, almost one in seven is still not registered. This percentage is slightly lower than those reported in previous studies.⁷⁴ Although it has not changed significantly, it is a welcome positive finding. However, this fragile improvement could be easily reversed by the devastating impacts of national lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic both on the Latin American community (seen through the experiences of our respondents) and the entire UK health service. Also, given that during and, even when the lockdown was starting to ease, GP services have been severely disrupted and referrals and treatments cancelled, there is a concern for those respondents who were diagnosed with serious conditions. A distressing report has revealed the intersection between cancer and socio-economic deprivation (CRUK, 2020). Considering that our respondents are from an ethnic minority, live in some of the most deprived boroughs of London and most of them are themselves (multiply) deprived, there is no certainty if those who reported health issues such as cancer and lung conditions had access to health services during lockdown.

⁷³ Granada (2013) discusses the issue of language in depth. McIlwaine and colleagues (2011; 2016) and Berg (2016) also emphasise the role of language as a marginalisation factor.

⁷⁴ In McIlwaine *et al.* (2011:97) it was 1 in 5 (19%). In 2016 (McIlwaine and Bunge (2016:58) it was almost 1 in 6 (17%) that is, slightly lower than in 2011.

Family wellbeing

As figure 4 illustrated, family was one of our respondents' main concerns. Most reported feeling worried and anxious about the health of their loved ones and/or about their children's isolation and lack of school support. As schools closed on 20th March, home learning became the norm. Overnight parents became teachers and instructors. For low-income families with school children, the closure of schools was an additional stressor. Home learning highlighted inequalities and overwhelmed unprepared disadvantaged ethnic minority parents (Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2020). When responding to the question about their health and wellbeing, one of IRMO's staff notes reads: *Well. Stressed for children's schoolwork.*

It is a fact that some schools are better equipped than others. Socio-economic characteristics of both the geographical area and parents are key (Andrew *et al.*, 2020). Online school support and digital infrastructure depend on this. IRMO's parents were at a disadvantage and online lessons were ineffective. The effectiveness of online lessons relies on the support of both schools and families. In the case of IRMO's families, that interaction failed. '[F]amilies struggled to communicate to schools and other service providers and struggled to access their children's school work and resolve technical issues such as incorrect login details resulting in considerable delays for children to receive school homework' (IRMO, June 2020).

It is not surprising that this experience caused parents more anxiety and stress. Home learning was an enormous challenge for both parents and their children and more so to Latin American migrant parents with a language deficit. This is an important finding. Research on the impact of COVID-19 on home learning has shown the extent to which the pandemic exposed and magnified inequality in educational attainment (Andrew *et al.*, 2020). Considering that the extent of online lesson provision in state schools was minimal (Green, 2020), the long-term effects of learning loss for these children remain to be seen. This is exactly IRMO's concern. 'Children and young people without adequate IT equipment experienced difficulties in accessing their online school work and struggled to access appropriate online support. Some children and young people have been left without homework from schools and without adequate English as a Second Language (EAL) support' (IRMO, June 2020).

"I'm worried because my daughter couldn't do her homework online due to lack of IT skills and English."

Another stressor for families is access to school. Schools places are not automatically allocated to new arrivals. Parents must apply on behalf of their child(ren). Each year, IRMO comes into contact with hundreds of families who are facing difficulties accessing services and formal education for their children. IRMO's Family Project supports primary and secondary school children to

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access schooling (McCarthy, 2016c). COVID-19 has seriously impacted this vital service. 'Postponement of schooling applications has left some children and young people without access to any education for a prolonged period of time impairing their educational development.' (IRMO, June 2020). Apart from being an added stressor for parents and children, the risk of 'educational poverty' (Green, 2020) for IRMO's disadvantaged families' children is deeply concerning.

In sum, by mid-May, the COVID-19 pandemic was already impacting family wellbeing. The high exposure to overlapping stressors was contributing both to the increased risk of health problems and stress overload.

Conclusion and Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen shock that has permeated every single sphere of human life and society. The microcosms of IRMO were not left untouched. It impacted both IRMO as a charity organisation and its beneficiaries. The objective of this research report was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on its Latin American users and IRMO's responses. The report shows that during the peak of the first wave of the pandemic, user's needs and IRMO's responses worked in an integrated manner. Consistent with its mission and values, IRMO played an accompanying and responsive role towards its users, some of whom were desperate. In so doing, IRMO showed resilient leadership. This was a necessary standing to face unprecedented challenges. IRMO's users were also facing their own overlapping challenges and risks.

Before COVID-19 hit the UK, IRMO's users were already at a disadvantage. Inequality and a decade of austerity had impacted the disadvantaged most. Precarious employment and job contracts, in-work poverty, housing and food insecurity and health disadvantages already existed. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated this structural scenario. Our research is contextualised against this background.

The need to collect information about the impact of COVID-19 on IRMO's users was twofold: to assess the extent of that impact and to fill the gap in knowledge about the COVID-19 experiences of Latin Americans in London. Our research traced the quantitative and qualitative trajectory of our beneficiaries in terms of their employment, income, job contracts, their housing, education, benefits and equally important, their health and wellbeing. The outcome of this research showed a number of worrying changes to the existing profile of low-income Latin Americans in London.

Our findings on employment, job contracts and income showed a sharp decline when compared with previous studies. We found that a considerable percentage of our 170 respondents and their families are falling into multiple deprivation. One of the findings of concern was the high rate of unemployment. By mid-May almost half of our respondents were out of work. This finding suggests that at the first sign of a pandemic crisis, low-income jobs are the first ones to go. The COVID-19 job crisis started early for IRMO's users. If we associate this finding with the 65 per cent with insecure employment contracts, the 45 percent in financial insecurity, the 62 percent living in housing insecurity and the 31 percent with food insecurity, the outcome is extremely concerning. Financially, they are not even getting the essentials that make up the minimum wage. This means that the COVID-19 crisis is both magnifying existing disparities and pushing low-income and in-work poverty workers to a life with increasing risks of long-term unemployment, hardship, poverty and homelessness. Unsurprisingly, the qualitative findings on mental health and wellbeing amounted to stress overload. These findings are important for IRMO,

and should also be used to inform responses from local authorities and policy-makers.

Furthermore, one of the variables that was not quantified but was underpinning all others was language deficit. Under COVID-19, it acquired unprecedented relevance. The pandemic allowed for new challenges and risks to emerge. Lockdown added new challenges for those experiencing the language barrier, from the need to navigate complex online applications to avoiding fraudulent schemes targeting the furlough scheme.

In sum, the significance of these findings is that a number of Latin American migrants in London continue to be trapped in a circle of vulnerability and precarity that has been enhanced by the COVID-19 crisis to such an extent that they are now falling into continuing unemployment and suffering from livelihood insecurity, hardship and the psychosocial impact of the pandemic. This is a concerning predicament.

There is no doubt that the pandemic is deepening the needs of the Latin American community. Patterns of employment, housing and welfare are changing rapidly. This research report has provided ample evidence of this change. One way to ameliorate the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 socio-economic crisis on IRMO's Latin American users is by recognising them as an ethnic minority. Given that 93 percent of our respondents specified their ethnicity as Latin Americans, ethnic recognition will provide some empowerment to their lives in British society particularly at a time when they are facing unprecedented overlapping challenges and risks and when inequality, vulnerability and uncertainty persist.

"I know that it's risky to go to work but the virus isn't going to go away, we have to learn how to live with it, devise new ways of living. I am a nanny and at the moment the family is looking after their child but I fear that this will be a permanent decision and I will lose my job. I get anxious when I think about the future and I try not to think about it."

Recommendations

- **Officially recognise Latin Americans as an ethnic minority group** and include the category 'Latin American' in all monitoring. It is vital that the community is recognised by the Office for National Statistics and Public Health England in order to make visible the impact of COVID-19 as there was no mention of Latin Americans in the recent report by Public Health England on the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups. In the four London boroughs which have officially recognised Latin Americans as an ethnic group, this recognition has not been fully rolled out in monitoring forms across all public services. This is a crucial step to ensure that services are made fully inclusive.

- **Monitor access to the COVID-19 vaccines.** The high proportion of Latin Americans not registered with a GP raises questions about their potential exclusion from health programmes, including the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccine. Monitoring access to the vaccine will be critical to ensure that it reaches all groups, including the Latin American community.
- **Provide official health information in community languages.** In light of the ongoing health crisis, it is crucial that public health information is provided in a range of languages, particularly Spanish and Portuguese, to reach those who do not have English as their first language. Where translation and interpreting services are available they must be more widely advertised and offered.
- **Fund specialist BAME and migrant organisations.** This crisis has revealed the value of specialist support provided by BAME and migrant organisations in reaching out to and supporting the most vulnerable communities. The multi-pronged nature of this crisis shows the critical importance of holistic wrap-around advice services encompassing welfare, housing, immigration, health, employment and emergency food support provided by and for migrant and BAME communities.
- **English language and employment support for migrant workers.** Latin American migrant workers have proved to be on the frontline of the jobs crisis. Far from being a slow-burn crisis, this group was already losing jobs in mid May. As the pandemic moves into its eleventh month, there is a growing need for employability support to help people move into new jobs. A key component of this should include English language courses aimed at work, as without further language support this group will be trapped in a cycle of in-work poverty.
- **Ensure adequate referral pathways and partnerships to tackle food insecurity.** Food insecurity is a growing issue in the Latin American community as in many communities. Organisations should work together to ensure that there are adequate referral pathways and partnerships in place so that Latin Americans are able to access these services. Civil society should work with funders, local authorities and other stakeholders on strategies to tackle rising food poverty.
- **Monitor educational impact.** Research has already highlighted that the most vulnerable children have been most severely impacted by the lockdown and resulting lost schooling. Latin American children who experience inadequate housing, digital exclusion and having English as an additional language fall within this group and face additional educational challenges. In the mid to long-term, there is a need to monitor children's educational attainment in order to assess both their progress and provide resources to support social mobility.

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- **Provide mental health support.** The pandemic will have lingering impacts on mental health and wellbeing for people across society. There will be a widespread need for a range of funded projects provided through community organisations, in Spanish and Portuguese, as well as through more mainstream institutions.

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