



IRMO RESEARCH BRIEFING

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LIVES OF LATIN AMERICAN MIGRANTS

FEB 2021

Key Findings

- Half of low paid Latin Americans in London are out of work due to the pandemic
- Half are experiencing financial hardship, including 35% receiving no income
- 3 out of 10 are experiencing food insecurity
- 62% of Latin Americans are in insecure housing situations. 58% are struggling to pay their rent, and some had already been evicted in spite of the eviction ban
- 1 in 7 is not registered with a GP

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed lives and societies across the world and brought into stark relief existing structural inequalities. The pandemic has precipitated not only a health crisis but also a wider economic and social crisis. The disease, and the lockdown measures that have been implemented to try to control it, have had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities, including ethnic minority communities, those who are living in poverty, and those experiencing precarity in both their employment and living situations. Low income Latin American migrants living in London are thus at the sharp end of this crisis.

This briefing aims to shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the Latin American community drawing attention to the specific vulnerabilities faced by this group. It presents the key findings from a recent research report, drawing on a survey carried out by IRMO with 170 low income Latin Americans at the height of the first lockdown between April and May 2020. The findings demonstrate that beyond the severe economic impact affecting all low-paid workers, migrant vulnerabilities, such as the language barrier, lack of information about their rights and the system, and immigration status, exacerbate the challenges for the Latin American community.

The full research report can be found at irmo.org.uk/research.



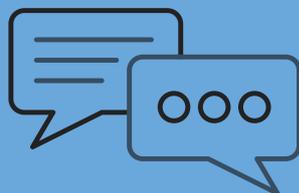
THE LATIN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

The Latin American community in the UK is diverse and includes people from a range of backgrounds and countries. However, research has highlighted the precarity and financial insecurity facing a significant sector of the community. Despite very high levels of employment within the community, this group experiences in-work poverty, shaped by low-pay, insecure contracts and lack of awareness of rights (6). This financial insecurity affects other areas of life, with research showing that low income Latin Americans live in inadequate and overcrowded housing and are unable to access a number of basic services, including health and education (3,6).

This report draws on findings from a survey conducted with IRMO's beneficiaries who are all low income Latin Americans. Survey respondents were living in boroughs across London, with one seeking support from outside London. However, the majority of respondents were living in South London - in particular in Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham - an area of London known to have a large proportion of Latin Americans and where IRMO is based.

Reflecting the diversity of the population, 17 nationalities were represented in the survey, with over half of respondents reporting having dual citizenship, illustrating the complex immigration flows of this group. However, 93% of respondents identified their ethnicity as Latin American, highlighting the value of this term for self-recognition. Although there has been recognition of Latin Americans as an ethnic minority in some boroughs in London, they continue to be largely invisible in terms of policy, strategy and access to mainstream services.

IRMO



IRMO is a community-led organisation, and registered charity (1080813), that provides Latin Americans with tools and information in an empowering process to build secure, independent, and integrated lives in the UK.

www.irmo.org.uk / @IRMOLondon

IRMO is one of the many vital organisations that adapted services and planned work to respond to the emerging, more acute needs of its community during COVID-19. Our response spanned from offering a higher number of advice appointments and expanding our food bank referral scheme, to offering new forms of support, such as doing check-in phone calls to vulnerable beneficiaries and keeping the community up to date with multi-lingual COVID-19 information sheets.

EMPLOYMENT



- 49% are out of work as a result of the pandemic: 35% lost their jobs and 14% are unable to work
- 33% do not know the type of contract they have, a further third are on insecure contracts
- Latin Americans have limited access to the furlough scheme

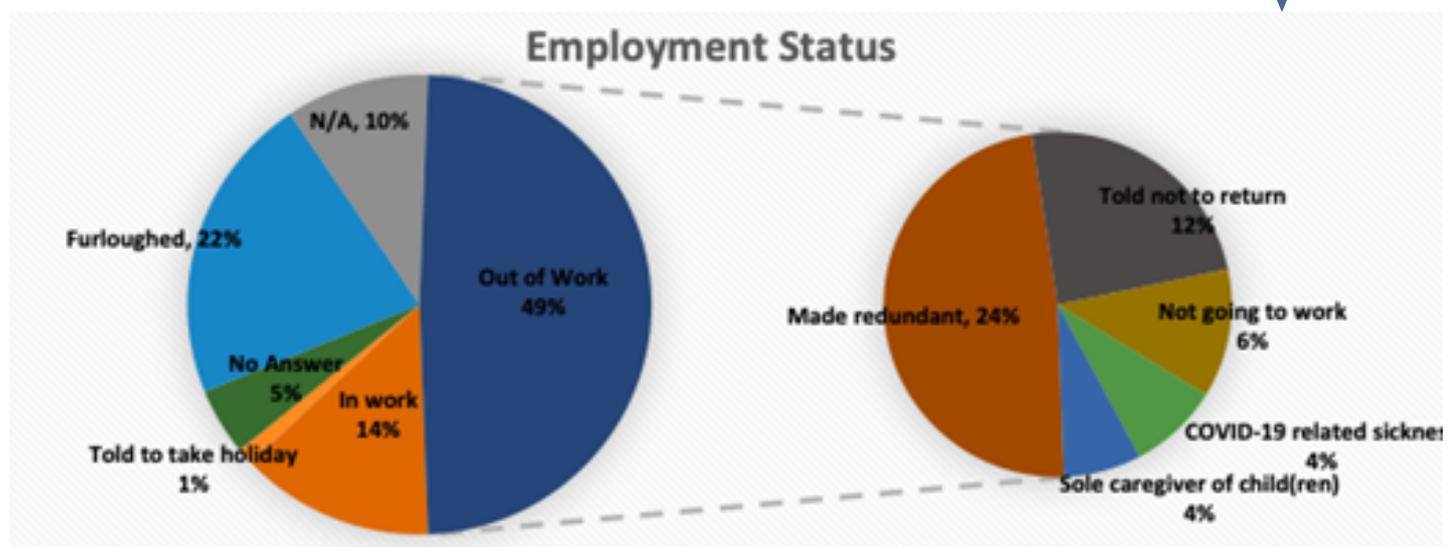
The most significant immediate impact on low income Latin Americans was a reduction or loss of work. Typically concentrated in sectors such as hospitality, contract cleaning and construction, 77% of respondents are unable to work from home through the lockdown.

As a result, by mid-May, just under half of respondents (49%) are out of work. This represents a dramatic drop from the rate of employment (75%) in normal circumstances (1). This finding also shows the immediate impact of the pandemic on this group. Over a third (35%) of respondents have already been made redundant or dismissed, while a further 14% are not working due to COVID-19 related issues or childcare responsibilities.

The UK government’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – known as the ‘Furlough scheme’ – was designed to protect jobs during the crisis by subsidising 80% of wages. Despite being praised for its generosity, a 20% reduction in wages is still hugely significant for those on very low incomes. Latin Americans working in these sectors usually earn below London living wage, with around 10% paid below the national minimum wage (6).

Moreover, the furlough scheme does not provide much protection for those in precarious employment. Many of the survey respondents held multiple jobs prior to the lockdown, so even for the 31% who reported that they had been furloughed, this usually did not equate to them receiving 80% of their total income. Instead people have been furloughed in some jobs, but made redundant or given reduced hours in other jobs. Furthermore, being furloughed does not guarantee job retention, it could lead to further job loss and unemployment once the scheme is halted.

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



The pandemic has provided cover for exploitative employment practices which is exacerbated in migrant communities by a lack of understanding of employment rights. A third of Latin Americans (33%) do not know what type of employment contract they have. A further third have insecure employment contracts (zero hours contract, temporary, part time, self employed, or cash in hand). Types of abuse reported by respondents included: simply being told not to come back to work; being furloughed on a lower number of hours than usually worked; withholding of sick pay and unfair dismissals.

14% of the survey respondents were still working, although many reported a reduction in their hours. They were usually classed as 'key workers', and clearly this status put them at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Respondents expressed high level of worry about catching the disease as a result of continuing to go to work. These concerns were heightened in those who reported having underlying health conditions (asthma, hypertension, pregnancy), who are living with vulnerable individuals, or who had not been provided adequate personal protective equipment in their workplace.

The COVID-19 economic crisis is disproportionately impacting low-paid and precarious migrant workers. The pandemic has magnified the pattern of being trapped in a circle of exploitative and abusive low-paid jobs with the risk of falling into a cycle of perpetual disadvantage and vulnerability.

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP & FOOD POVERTY



- Half are experiencing financial hardship
- 35% are receiving no employment income
- 3 out of 10 are facing food insecurity
- 27% are not entitled to benefits

The economic crisis and its impact on employment have pushed people from financial insecurity into financial hardship and food poverty. Less than one in ten are receiving their full salary from before the lockdown and 35% are receiving no employment income at all. As a result, almost half of respondents are facing financial hardship.

As a result of this loss of income, three out of ten are experiencing food insecurity. This has led to a large increase in dependency on food banks – with IRMO having significantly increased the number of referrals made. However, inevitably people fall through the cracks, as a result of a lack of knowledge of the system or the language barrier. One participant commented in the survey:

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.

The loss of income has also led many to have to rely on social security – with large numbers applying for Universal Credit (UC) for the first time. Once again, however, this group is vulnerable to further exploitation as the language barrier and digital inclusion issues prevent people from being able to complete this application themselves. The huge strain that the system has been under, with 10 hour waiting times for the UC helpline a regular experience of IRMO’s advisers, plus the waiting time designed into UC, has left people waiting weeks for payments, further compounding the hardship experienced.

However, those who are able to apply for such support may be among the more fortunate, as immigration status limits people’s ability to access this support. Despite having worked and paid taxes, over a quarter of Latin Americans (27%) are unable to access welfare support due to having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). While this mainly affects those who do not hold EEA citizenship, those with EU passports are also finding themselves more vulnerable. As a result of Brexit, those with EEA citizenship now have to show Settled Status in order to be able to claim their entitlement, presenting a further bureaucratic hurdle for people to overcome.



HOUSING

- 6 out of 10 respondents are struggling to pay their rent
- 2 families had already been evicted

Previous research has found that large numbers of low income Latin Americans live in overcrowded, multi-occupancy homes in the private rental market, with whole families of four or more people sharing a single room (5,6). This survey found that 62% of Latin Americans are in insecure housing, representing an increase from previous studies.

Six out of ten Latin Americans reported struggling to keep up with their rent due to the loss of income. Four in ten respondents were seeking to negotiate with landlords for rent reductions. While some landlords were amenable, others responded with harassment and threats. As a result, in spite of the government’s eviction ban, two families had already been evicted, while others were feeling intimidated and scared in their homes.

All of this implies an increase in housing insecurity and hidden homelessness among this community with people moving to sofa-surfing or staying with friends. This is only likely to increase as the ban on evictions comes to an end.

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

LANGUAGE, EDUCATION & DIGITAL INCLUSION



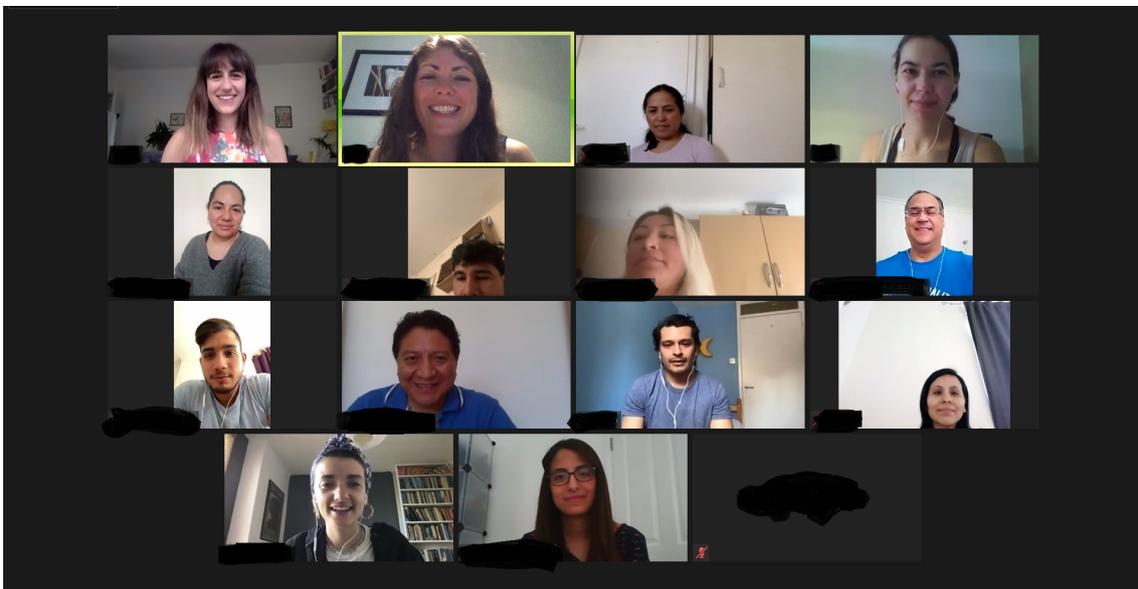
- 4 out of 10 have no internet at home
- 15% have no IT equipment

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the language barrier has exposed and magnified Latin Americans' extreme vulnerability. As public and private services moved online, English language and IT skills have become critical for accessing any support.

There has also been an increasing need for trusted and reliable information, as fraudsters have sought to fill information gaps by targeting the most vulnerable. Latin American respondents to the survey reported examples of such frauds, with people thinking they needed to pay to have someone else process their application for the furlough scheme.

The question of digital inclusion and connectivity is also a key challenge. Four in ten reported having no internet at home and 15% had no IT equipment at home. This has impacted on people's ability to engage with remote services, including those provided by IRMO (photo below). Other issues reported included the high cost of using mobile data, and the difficulties in completing online tasks, such as home-schooling, on a smart-phone. This is having a significant impact on the education of children, who already face disadvantages due to having English as an additional language and delays in accessing mainstream schooling (3). Parents are struggling with difficulties supporting children's education and communicating with schools adding to their stress and worry.

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



RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has highlighted the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on low income Latin Americans in London. This impact has primarily manifested through a loss of employment and consequently a loss of income, pushing those who were already experiencing financial precarity into extreme hardship. The findings show that in contrast to an expected slow-burn unemployment crisis, those in the most precarious and hidden forms of employment, often migrant workers, experienced impacts immediately. This compounded with vulnerabilities associated with migrants status, such as a lack of language and information, makes the Latin American community particularly at risk of exploitation from unscrupulous employers, landlords and fraudsters.

The findings point to a number of key recommendations for local authorities and funders.

It is crucial that national and local authorities, including public health bodies, recognise this community as an ethnic minority in order to make visible the impacts of the pandemic and to ensure the vaccine reaches everyone.

Lucía Vinzón, Director of IRMO

- **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 the 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 (7).
- **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 (2). 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.
- **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.

REFERENCES

- 1) Coalition of Latin Americans' Organisations in the UK (CLAUK) 2020. Letter to Public Health England about COVID-19 and the Latin American Community.
- 2) D'Angelo, A. 2020. Sitting at the back? The impact of Covid19 on migrant pupils in the UK. Discover Society.
- 3) McCarthy, H. 2016. IRMO Research Briefing: Children out of School in Lambeth. October 2016.
- 4) McCarthy, H. 2016. IRMO Research Briefing: Latin Americans' Barriers to English Language Skills. June 2016.
- 5) McCarthy H. 2016. IRMO Research Briefing: Latin Americans' Housing Situation. June 2016.
- 6) McIlwaine, C. and D. Bunge. 2016. Towards Visibility: The Latin American Community in London. London: Trust for London.
- 7) UNHCR 2020. IOM and UNHCR chiefs stress that COVID-19 underlines the urgent need for universal health coverage.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IRMO would like to thank Dr Helia Lopez Zarzosa for the analysis and drafting of the research report and Dr Helen McCarthy for drafting the briefing. IRMO would also like to thank its staff and trustees for their support with the research and all the Latin American migrants who participated and contributed to it.

IRMO also gratefully acknowledges the support of its funders:

- BBC Children in Need
- City Bridge Trust
- GLA – European Londoners Outreach
- GLA – Mayor's Young Londoners Fund
- Good Things Foundation
- Lambeth Council
- London Catalyst
- London Community Response Fund
- Sir Walter St. John's Educational Charity
- People's Postcode Trust
- Peter Minet Trust
- Southwark Council
- The London Community Foundation
- The National Lottery Community Fund
- Trust for London
- United St Saviour's Charity
- Walcot Foundation