Migrant families and the COVID-19 pandemic:
A review of the literature on pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities
December 2020

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Introduction

Various public protection measures were implemented by the UK and Scottish Governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the closure of schools and all non-essential workplaces and businesses, and the introduction of social distancing (Scottish Government, 2020). While there are clear public health benefits of the measures, the social, economic and health consequences are inevitable (Douglas et al., 2020). More economic and socially vulnerable groups are at particular risk of becoming seriously ill and dying from COVID-19 (Race Equality Foundation, 2020). This is due to pre-existing inequalities (OECD, 2020; Qureshi et al., 2020), with provisional data suggesting a higher death rate in deprived areas and amongst ethnic minorities (BBC, 2020a; Bécares & Nazroo, 2020).

Indeed, intersectionality is an important lens through which to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. Intersectionality is an understanding of the ways in which different social identities - including gender, ethnicity, class, socioeconomic status, disability and migration status – overlap to create different experiences of socio-political structures and oppression (Crenshaw et al., 2013). In the context of COVID-19, different groups and individuals may experience the pandemic in different ways. Risk factors do not operate in isolation; instead they intersect within and through socio-political processes and structural inequalities, meaning that an individual can belong to multiple social groupings and experience the impact of the crisis in complex ways. Intersectionality allows a more nuanced analysis of the experiences and needs of individuals and groups as a result of the crisis (Hankivsky &, Kapilashrami, 2020; McEwan et al., 2020).

As well as pre-existing health inequalities, the inevitable negative economic and social impact of the pandemic and lockdown have been experienced more acutely by particular groups, such as young people; women; people with reduced communication abilities; undocumented migrants; workers on precarious contracts; and people on low incomes (Douglas et al., 2020). Many of these groups and the associated risk factors of ethnic minority status, socioeconomic status and racism intersect to form nuanced vulnerabilities (Chowdhury, 2020; Qureshi et al., 2020).

This review summarises key findings from the existing literature on inequalities experienced by refugee and migrant families in Britain. It presents data on the inequalities experienced by vulnerable migrant families in the following areas: the labour market and income; health; housing; and education.

Poverty, the labour market, and income

A key risk factor for the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 is existing higher levels of poverty. Scottish Government statistics indicate that people from minority ethnic (non-White British) groups in Scotland are more likely to be in relative poverty after housing costs compared to people from 'White - British' groups - see *Figure 1* (Scottish Government, 2019a).
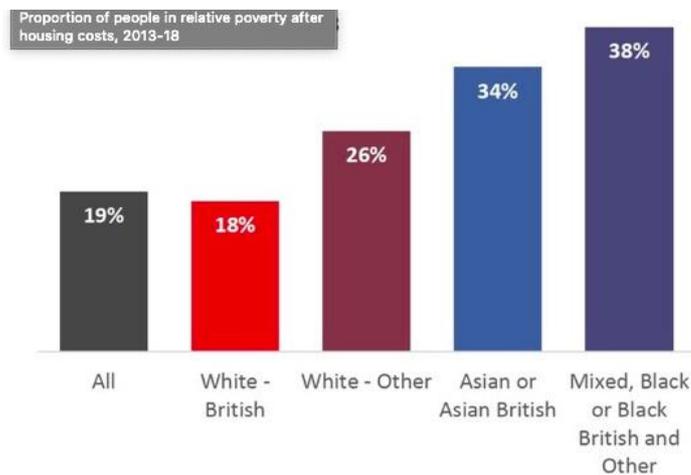

Figure 1 (Scottish Government, 2019a)

Evidence suggests this is shaped by labour market inequalities (Weekes-Bernard, 2017). Earnings for some ethnic minorities are lower than White - British groups, and many ethnic minority women are more likely to be economically inactive (ONS, 2018). Vulnerable migrant workers, including undocumented migrants, are also more likely to be in precarious and low-paid employment, and high proportions of migrant women are located in the healthcare and social care workforce (Bhopal, 2020; McEwan et al., 2020; Qureshi et al., 2020; Women's Budget Group, 2020). Refugees and asylum seekers face additional challenges. Findings from Mulvey's (2013) research with refugees in Scotland highlights overall poor labour market outcomes with persistent problems of unemployment and underemployment. Only 20% of the participants surveyed who were eligible to work were in employment, and they were predominately employed in low-paid and precarious work, with social care and cleaning common job types. Vulnerable migrant workers are therefore at greater risk of the negative impact of the pandemic, as they are more likely to be employed in precarious, service sector jobs with limited job protections on the one hand, and public sector jobs where people are likely still needed to work on the frontline of the COVID-19 response on the other hand (Qureshi et al., 2020; Women's Budget Group, 2020).

Legal status is another form of structural inequality. In the UK, an individual seeking asylum only receives £37.75 per week per member of the household, with between £3-£5 extra allocated to pregnant women or for children under the age of 3 years (UK Government, N.D). This means people seeking asylum are often reliant on third sector and community

organisations for additional support and are therefore vulnerable to poverty (Sime, 2018; Saltmarsh, 2020). People whose asylum claims have been rejected and who have no recourse to public funds are particularly vulnerable to destitution and face very limited access to services (McKenna, 2018; McEwan et al., 2020; Poverty Alliance, 2020). Furthermore, the transition from the asylum process after receiving refugee status is not straightforward, and many refugees who have spent a considerable amount of time in the asylum process face barriers to getting out of poverty (McKenna, 2018; Scottish Refugee Council, 2017). Those migrant families who were already living in poverty are more likely to suffer most from economic impact of the crisis (Douglas et al., 2020).

Health and housing

The relationships between ethnicity, socioeconomic status and health are complex and varied (Walsh, 2017). However, minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, with people of ethnic minority origin overrepresented in both hospital admissions and deaths related to the virus (Qureshi et al., 2020). Studies report a range of social, environmental and biological risk factors that mean some minority ethnic groups are at greater risk of developing a serious illness from COVID-19 (Hankivsky &, Kapilashrami, 2020), while racism and structural inequalities within British society have been called the 'root cause' of health inequities in the COVID-19 crisis (Bécares & Nazroo, 2020).

Furthermore, evidence points to a risk that fear of repercussions might prevent undocumented foreign nationals or migrant workers from accessing healthcare (Kluge et al., 2020). The 'hostile environment' policy in place in the UK means hospital staff are required to ask for proof of access to healthcare before treating someone, therefore groups without formal immigration status may be wary of data sharing agreements between the NHS and UK Home Office (Qureshi et al., 2020). Indeed, trust of statutory authorities may be limited generally among undocumented migrants (Bhopal, 2020). According to Poole (2010), Roma are more likely to work for employers who are unwilling to formally register their employees, and as such lose their entitlement to health care.

Additionally, participants in Mulvey's (2013) research noted the adverse effect of the asylum process on mental health. The Scottish Refugee Council (2017) note that asylum seekers and refugees often lack family and social support and are at greater risk of social isolation. Mulvey's (2013) research also indicated the negative impact on participants of living in temporary accommodation, contributing to social isolation. The (temporary) removal of formal and informal support networks for asylum seekers, for example through places of worship, is likely to impact the mental health and wellbeing of those who rely on these forms of support, which suggests that this group are at greater risk of the psychological effects of social distancing measures.

Housing insecurity and overcrowding are another health-related 'risk factor' for vulnerable migrant families. Research indicates that ethnic minorities in the UK are more reliant on the private rental sector than the majority population, and as such are at greater risk of rent arrears and eviction (Qureshi et al., 2020). The threat of housing insecurity is a risk to mental health and physical health and its determinants (Douglas et al., 2020). Certain ethnic minority groups are more likely to experience overcrowding at home and to have older family members who are more vulnerable to COVID-19 infection in the household (Quresehi et al., 2020), while people in overcrowded homes and families without access to gardens are at risk of reduced physical activity and subsequent adverse mental and physical health effects (Douglas et al., 2020). This is pertinent for Roma families in Glasgow. Higher levels of unemployment or precarious employment and a lack of Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) papers means Roma are more dependent on the private rental sector, and often live in sub-standard and overcrowded accommodation (Poole, 2010). Mulvey (2013) and Scottish Refugee Council (2017) have also found overcrowding to be an issue amongst refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland.

Furthermore, there is evidence of a relationship between health conditions in childhood and sub-standard housing. It has been reported that children in cold homes or homes that suffer from dampness or mould are more likely to suffer from childhood illness, particularly respiratory and lung illnesses such as asthma (Caillaud et al., 2018). Given existing evidence of the poor quality of temporary accommodation provided to those seeking asylum in Scotland (Scottish Refugee Council, 2017), there is therefore a potential risk of increased childhood illness amongst refugee or asylum seeker children living in substandard housing. Vulnerable migrant families were therefore particularly exposed to the impact of the pandemic, given pre-existing health and housing-related inequalities.

Education

There is limited data relating to the pre-COVID-19 educational attainment of refugee, asylum seeker or vulnerable migrant children specifically. Attainment data for ethnic minorities more broadly in Scotland and the UK presents a varied picture; in Scotland, Asian minority ethnic groups on average perform better than their White-Scottish peers, while previous data has shown that Polish, African and Gypsy/Traveller pupils on average have been behind their White-Scottish Peers (Scottish Government, 2019b; Sime, 2018). Roma migrants experience discrimination and marginalisation and are the lowest achievers in schools throughout Europe (Sime, 2018). The attainment gap between the most and least deprived communities in Scotland is well-documented[1], and it is likely that inequalities in attainment relating to

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[1] Pupils from the most deprived quintile are according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) over 35 percentage points less likely to achieve 1 or more qualification at SCQF level 6 or better in 2018/19 (the equivalent of 1 SQA Higher qualification) (Scottish Government, 2019b)

migration status intersect with socioeconomic status and deprivation more broadly in high poverty areas.

Further, studies have shown that for pupils with EAL, language can be a barrier to successful engagement with the curriculum and indeed attainment through national testing (McBride et al., 2018; Sime, 2018). It has been reported that English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision varies across schools in Scotland (McBride et al., 2018), and that waiting lists for ESOL places have delayed asylum seeking children's access to education (UNICEF, 2018). For adults, access to ESOL classes is also limited, particularly in Glasgow where demand far outstrips availability (McKenna, 2018). Refugee and asylum seeker children are therefore already at risk of social isolation within school, particularly where EAL needs are present (Sime; 2018).

Schools play an important role in facilitating a sense of belonging for vulnerable children, and multiple studies have found that the education system is one of the most positive aspects of life in Scotland for children from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds (Mulvey, 2009; McBride et al., 2018; Sime, 2018). Some children have experienced gaps in and disruption to their education in the past due to having to leave their home country (McBride et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2019), and some may have greater emotional needs as a result of previous trauma (Mulvey, 2009). UNICEF (2018) outline mental health as the most significant contextual barrier to refugee and asylum seeker children thriving in education. This suggests that school closures and the subsequent shift to distance education would have an adverse effect on the groups for whom attending school is so beneficial.

UNICEF (2018) research found that for over half of the refugee and asylum seeker children consulted, additional one-to-one educational support, such as the assistance of classroom assistants and homework clubs, was cited as an enabler of educational wellbeing and progress, particularly for children whose level of English is lower. Removing access to this type of support may mean that children from these groups will be adversely affected. Similarly, prolonged school closures could have adverse effects on educational outcomes for young people from lower income families, who are less likely to have access to study space and home computing (Douglas et al., 2020; The Sutton Trust, 2020). There is therefore a risk that existing educational inequalities between the least and most deprived groups may increase, in turn risking further widening the existing attainment gap (*ibid*.)

Conclusion

This review of the literature raised several key issues and risk factors that are of relevance to the experiences of COVID-19 for vulnerable migrant families in Glasgow, who already experience above average levels of poverty, are more likely to be unemployed or to be employed in precarious work. Evidence also shows that these groups are more likely to live

in substandard housing, and to experience overcrowding. These issues shape the health inequalities experienced by such groups, who are also at increased risk of social exclusion, and present barriers to thriving in education for children from refugee, asylum seeking and Roma families. The impact of COVID-19 on society is widespread and is likely to be long lasting, and the impact on migrant families will be exacerbated by these pre-existing structural inequalities and risk factors, many of which intersect with one another (BBC, 2020b).

This literature review has highlighted areas for further research in relation to mitigating the impact of the crisis. This evidence informed our approach to the qualitative research with practitioners during the pandemic, to draw on their experiences of supporting refugee, asylum seeking and Roma families. A full report on the findings from this research (McBride et al. (2020) is available on the CNS website.

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This report is published by Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

About us

A children's neighbourhood is an initiative that brings together people, resources and organisations in a neighbourhood area, so that all of those things can work together towards better lives for the children living there.

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland is a collaborative centre, developed by Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Policy Scotland and Robert Owen Centre at the University of Glasgow.

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland is funded by Scottish Government.

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