

# COMPAS Breakfast Briefing Summary

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## What choices and constraints do undocumented migrants experience in the labour market?

This briefing draws on qualitative interviews with 55 undocumented migrants living in the UK from China, Bangladesh and Turkey (including Kurds from Turkey and Northern Cypriots), carried out as part of an ESRC funded project, 'Undocumented Migrants, Ethnic Enclaves and Networks'. It explores the range of experiences of irregularity in the labour market, including both the constraints faced by undocumented workers and the ways in which they use mobility and other strategies to exercise agency.

### Current policy climate

The policy framework within which undocumented migrants live and work is punitive and sanctions-based. Public raids on workplaces, fines of £10,000 on employers per unauthorized worker, deportation and threats of deportation place this group in an increasingly vulnerable position in ever more hidden workplaces, unable to access either employment or human rights. Recent government policies have sought to create a more 'hostile environment' for undocumented migrants, although there is no evidence this has affected the numbers in the UK.

### Places of work

Among the 55 undocumented migrants interviewed for the research, 44 were working at the time of the interview. Most were working in ethnic enclave businesses, including restaurants, take-away shops, grocery stores and off-licences. Employees frequently used their own micro co-ethnic kinship and social networks to recruit workers. This can alleviate the formality of more regulated businesses, but can also compromise the terms and conditions, contracts and representation that goes with greater regulation.

Working lives were fluid, varied and complex; while some experienced constraints, others found ways, within the constraints of status, to incrementally improve working conditions.

### Labour market constraints

Being undocumented is the greatest labour market constraint and the consequences are far-reaching in relation to sectors, jobs and terms and conditions. A glass ceiling operated through which progression was almost impossible.

*There is no alternative for people like us except working either in a restaurant or on a building site (Ron from China).*

*Without residential status... I may work in a restaurant, but I can't be the chef (Bobby from China).*

Work was precarious and basic workers' rights not accessible for this group; without contracts or written agreements there is no route available for recourse without exposure. Experiences were framed relationally – that is in relation to workers with documents.

Thumbnail: Tawhid Bahrain, COMPAS Photo Competition 2010



*We are [treated] different in all ways... We do 14-15 hours every day with less pay... The legal ones... work less hours... It is exploitation (Fadi from Bangladesh).*

Hierarchies operated within the work place. Although these relations were managed and understood through the lens of status, they were sometimes closely intertwined with other factors such as ethnicity, language, religion and region of origin.

*I do not say the status is the only problem... The conflict between Alevi and Sunni Kurd might also be the reason... They might have discriminated me due to my religion I mean my sect (Zilan Kurd from Turkey).*

## Labour market choices

Far from being passive victims, some undocumented migrants moved jobs when they felt unsafe and strategised to maximise their skills and pay and/or improve other aspects of their working lives. This included moving jobs to achieve promotion, receive better pay and/or to acquire new skills.

*I thought it was too risky to work in the kitchen, because you could be caught anytime (Li from China).*

*I got a better job as a cook... Within the first three months, I became a cook from a kitchen porter... I was promoted (Soumen from Bangladesh).*

Another strategy was to stay in a job because of good colleagues, bosses or feelings of safety and security.

*I was happy working alongside my friends... even though we knew full well that the wages were low (Chow from China).*

*I feel safe at work (Reyan from Turkey).*

Our research focused on people living in London, though some had lived and worked in other locations and had clear reasons for moving from or back to London, often due to family or feeling isolated. There were financial considerations too:

some experienced greater pay outside of London while others had returned to the capital for more pay. Geographical mobility was nevertheless another way in which undocumented migrants have agency over their working lives.

*In Scotland... they pay you good... I used to get £480... Here now I get £350... Scotland is very far... You feel isolated (Jiyan Kurd from Turkey).*

Other tactics and choices were whether to disclose status or to use constructed documents.

*You know there are agencies... If we get really desperate for work... they can organise papers for us (Naser from Bangladesh).*

Safety was also an important aspect of behaviour; staying on good terms with people was thought to reduce the risk of reprisals and reportage.

*I always try to look nice and polite; after a small argument, they might call [the] Home Office (Arjin Kurd from Turkey).*

## Conclusion

There is no single experience of being an undocumented migrant in the labour market. Experiences were variable and complex, involving careful strategising or tactics. Economies require cheap and flexible labour and undocumented migrants supply this labour. They are aware of their position in relation to other workers and their vulnerability within the context of sanctions. Consequently their tactics are framed by their status and the current policy climate.

### About the author:

**Alice Bloch** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester. More information about the project, 'Undocumented Migrants, Ethnic Enclaves and Networks: Opportunities, traps or class based constructs?' (ES/J037490/2), can be found at [www.UndocNet.org](http://www.UndocNet.org). The research was carried out with Professor Sonia McKay and Dr Leena Kumarappan from the Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University.



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