



The Experiences of London's Latin American Migrants during Brexit and the COVID-19 Pandemic

An exploratory qualitative study

Executive Summary
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Disclaimer

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ABOUT THE STUDY

Focus

This executive summary presents key findings from an exploratory, qualitative study of the experiences of Latin American migrants in London during Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, conducted by the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) of the University of Oxford and the London's charity Latin American House (LAH).

Rationale

Latin Americans constitute a diverse and significant community in London. However, they lack formal recognition as an ethnic group. As a result, little is known about how they have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and how they have been navigating Brexit, two issues of major concern for the community.

Methods

From June 2020 to June 2021, COMPAS and LAH gathered Latin Americans' qualitative accounts of Brexit and the pandemic through:

- Focus groups and individual interviews with 73 Latin Americans living in London (51 females, 22 males) from Ecuador (23), Colombia (18), Mexico (10), Argentina (6), Chile (4), Honduras (2), Bolivia (2), Peru (2), Venezuela (2), Dominican Republic (2), Brazil (1), Cuba (1)
- Two focus groups with 15 Latin American Year 11 students (7 males, 8 females) from a secondary school in London who were mostly children of Ecuadorian, Dominican, and Colombian parents arrived in the UK via Southern Europe.
- Individual interviews and conversations with 39 experts and community workers from London-based Latin American NGOs.

KEY FINDINGS

How did Latin Americans navigate the EU Settlement Scheme?

- Misinformation about the EUSS was common, particularly among Latin Americans with limited English skills, those employed in low-income jobs dominated by migrant populations, and non-EU family members.
- Latin Americans faced several challenges in applying to the EUSS: (1) language and digital divides complicated the application process; (2) non-EU family members struggled to meet the additional application requirements; (3) due to the COVID-19 outbreak, it took longer for non-EU family members to complete their EUSS applications; (4) the pandemic complicated the application process for non-EU family members abroad
- Latin Americans are facing challenges to prove and keep the new status due to digital and language barriers. Pre-settled status holders who were out of the country and lacking financial resources to return to the UK in the context of the pandemic were indeed worrying about losing eligibility for settled status.
- Latin Americans felt misinformed about their rights associated with the EUSS status.
- Latin Americans perceived the new status as insecure and are considering British citizenship, but many do not qualify or may lack resources to face application costs.

“English is a big obstacle [...] it’s a bit difficult to find information in Spanish [...] the process [to apply to EUSS] [...] you can do it online. You can download the application. But not knowing about technology makes you lose welfare benefits, makes you lose study opportunities, including the opportunity to get your settled status” (Lucrecia, Ecuador)

“How Brexit will impact us... it’s still unsure. However, what I already saw is the difficulty to understand what it’s your condition here. I am a pre-settled. But what am I? What am I entitled to in terms of benefits? Can I feel that I am a part of the UK or, in the end, do I remain a visitor?” (Francisco, Argentina)

What does the end of freedom of movement mean for Latin Americans?

- The end of freedom of movement motivated Latin Americans with EU passports to move to London and reunite their families, but the pandemic became an obstacle.
- With the end of freedom of movement, there are Latin Americans at risk of becoming undocumented, in particular:

(1) Latin Americans with EU passports moving to the UK without a visa but with intention to settle after the 1st of January 2021

(2) Latin Americans and their non-EU family members who did not register to the EUSS by the deadline

(3) Latin Americans with pre-settled status who fail to convert to settled status

(4) Latin Americans with pre-settled status who will lose eligibility for settled status because they stayed out of the country for more than six months per year

(5) Non-EU family members who arrived as tourists and therefore might not have been able to apply for the EUSS.

- Latin Americans' understanding of the end of freedom of movement is shaped by the kind of passport held and past migratory trajectories:

(1) Latin Americans with EU passports who came to the UK via Southern Europe felt that the end of freedom of movement returned them to a position of legal vulnerability

(2) Latin Americans who acquired EU passports by descent felt that with the end of freedom of movement they lost privileges that other Latin Americans never had

(3) Some of our interviewees with British passports felt that British nationality lost value outside the UK

(4) Latin Americans on visas perceived that the end of freedom of movement would open up more labour opportunities for Latin Americans without EU passports.

How did Latin Americans experience the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Lack of access to official information in Spanish and Portuguese: Latin Americans were not able to access official information in Spanish and Portuguese - this facilitated the spread of fake news and misinformation about safety norms, vaccinations, and government support schemes such as furlough and welfare benefits.
- Workers in the cleaning and hospitality sectors were severely impacted by the pandemic, as they faced unemployment and violations of their work rights.
- Latin Americans arriving in the UK during the pandemic in 2020 faced barriers to employment as (1) the pandemic reduced the job opportunities available (2) Job Centres were closed which meant some could not register for their National Insurance Number.

“I was fired in October. We were 60 Latinos working in [company]. We were all fired, they told us they didn’t need our services anymore. We couldn’t take advantage of the furlough. We just got a very low severance pay. The situation became very difficult, because... it’s obvious, I have a daughter, I am a single mother” (Soledad, Peru)

“The pandemic complicated my arrival. [...] I stayed a year without the famous National Insurance [...] Everything with public administration became difficult. [Without the National Insurance Number] finding work was very difficult, finding income was complicated” (Ignacio, Argentina).

How did Latin Americans experience the COVID-19 pandemic (cont.)?

- Low-income Latin Americans faced landlord discrimination, illegal evictions or were pressured to leave when showing COVID-19 symptoms or because of the difficulty of paying rent.
- Latin Americans faced several barriers to access welfare benefits, including (1) the digital divide (2) language barriers (3) difficulty of proving that the UK is their home when informally subletting and not holding a tenancy agreement (4) having been in the UK for a short period of time and struggling to provide evidence of intending to settle in the country (5) No Recourse to Public Funds condition for some visa holders.
- The pandemic affected the physical and mental health of Latin Americans in different ways: (1) the lack of access to information in Spanish and Portuguese meant there was confusion about how to treat COVID-19 symptoms; (2) low-income migrants were working at the cost of exposing themselves to the virus; (3) lack of access to information about the vaccine in Spanish and Portuguese meant that there was misinformation about the vaccine and some did not have their doubts and questions addressed; (4) both adults and young people felt the lockdowns and the pandemic affected their mental health; (5) lack of interpreters complicated access to physical and mental health care during the pandemic.

“I have a client right now with symptoms of COVID. The NHS sent him a text saying to inform everyone living with him to not go out and self-isolate for 14 days. He informed the landlord as well and he said: ‘This is your problem you have to leave’. Just like that.” (Community worker).

“Above everything is the fear [...] the instability [...] the lack of access to public services. [...] Those who have this restriction [NRPF] we face much more precarity because of this [...] My working hours got reduced in half. So, they reduced my contract to part time. This affected me economically because during all these months I could pay for the rent, nothing more” (Pablo, Mexico)

How did Latin Americans experience the COVID-19 pandemic (cont.)?

- The outbreak of the pandemic negatively impacted the education of young Latin Americans who (1) confronted the digital divide; (2) lacked space at home to do homework and attend online classes; and because they (3) missed their friends; (4) worried about their families; (5) were recently arrived to the UK and were learning English; (6) had parents who, because of the language barrier, struggled with homeschooling and communicating with teachers.
- The pandemic had positive and negative impacts on Latin Americans' family life: (1) in some cases, the lockdowns allowed people to spend quality family time together; In other cases, the pandemic led to (2) domestic violence or tensions within the family; (3) and family separations across borders.
- Some reported taking advantage of the lockdowns to learn English, study and access free educational workshops and courses.

“Some students don’t have adequate technology. They shouldn't be worrying that they have to work on a tablet or an iPad or the Internet keeps on cutting out because that in itself is stressful [...] You can see when they kind of disappear for seconds out of the lesson and then they come back two minutes later, they say: ‘oh, my Internet’. Or, you know, when they say: ‘Ms, I can't do this because I don't have the program’ [...] if we are going online, then the students need to be prepared, and they need to have everything to support that learning. What's the point in saying we're going online if they can't go online?” (Teacher)

What forms of solidarity have supported Latin Americans during the pandemic?

- Latin American NGOs have been providing critical support and resources to Latin American migrants in London during the pandemic and the Brexit process, including but not limited to (1) translation and dissemination of reliable information in Spanish and Portuguese; (2) food bank vouchers; (3) adaptation of their services to an online format to support Latin Americans with the EUSS, (4) access to health care and welfare support; (5) educational workshops on a wide range of topics; (6) English classes; (7) community outreach; (8) representation.
- During the pandemic, various forms of community organising emerged, such as (1) food banks created by Latin Americans and made accessible to all Latin Americans regardless of their status; (2) support groups for parents and families which emerged or continued to operate online; (3) campaigns to close the digital divide launched by Latin Americans to ensure that Latin American youth have access to digital devices to study and learn.

“I had the luck to find information [on COVID-19 and Brexit] through all these Latin American organisations. [...] This offers us the opportunity to have information, and to be prepared. [...] They help us get a medical appointment, to get the [EUSS] status [...] I am very grateful because they are supporting us and they are giving us the courage and resources to face these very difficult times” (Paola, Peru)

“I saw love and solidarity [...] At the food bank, everyone was bringing rice, meat, pasta [...] My neighbour cooked for me [when self-isolating due to COVID-19]. This is why I say I saw love, solidarity [...] We have been more supportive because this [pandemic] showed us we are vulnerable” (Filomena, Ecuador)

NINE RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE COMMUNITY

- 1. Close the digital divide among Latin American youths and adults**
- 2. Ensure that no Latin American becomes undocumented** because they struggled to apply to the EUSS or they did not apply by the deadline.
- 3. Have local authorities work and collaborate with Latin American NGOs** to enhance their impact
- 4. Have the government and local authorities provide official information in Spanish and Portuguese**
- 5. Protect the labour rights of Latin Americans working in the industries most affected by the pandemic**

6. Provide accessible skills and language training to enhance the social mobility of Latin Americans in low-income sectors

7. Recognise Latin Americans as an ethnic group at the local authority and government levels.

8. Widen access to health and mental health services by providing GP surgeries outreach and interpreters in Spanish and Portuguese

9. Widen access to social protection and welfare support by eliminating formal and informal barriers limiting access

“We must be recognised for who we are, for our children, for our grandchildren [...] We always have to put ‘other’ [in forms and in the census] [...] We have to be recognised because we are doing very positive things for this society. We are business owners, we are doctors, we are lawyers, we work in banks, we study in university, we clean and work in the hospitality [...] We deserve being recognised for our children, for our future” (Vicky, Colombia)



The University of Oxford's Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) conducts high quality research, develops theory and facilitates knowledge exchange in the field of migration.

COMPAS research covers a spectrum of global migration processes and phenomena, from conditions in places of migrant origins, through to institutions and activities affecting mobility, to social and economic effects in receiving contexts.



Since 1983, Latin American House has served as a community centre for both Latin Americans in London and for the local people of Kilburn. Through their work, they aim to be a source of support and information for the Latin American population throughout the UK.

Latin American House offers legal and social advice in relation to benefits, housing, employment, immigration, and the EU Settlement Scheme, as well as opportunities to acquire life-long skills and a place to meet people, share ideas and enjoy the rich culture of Latin America.

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