

Immigrants and access to public services

With immigration high on the political agenda, focus has turned to how much immigrants are given access to public services such as the NHS, housing and social benefits. However, there is a policy tension between restricting access to services and encouraging integration for immigrants settled in the UK.

Close family members are allowed to join immigrants in the UK, but increasing restrictions have been placed on the access to services and benefits after arrival in the UK. These rules vary according to the category of residents the family members are joining - whether British citizens, settled people, refugees, EEA nationals, workers or students.

This has led to a complex system of rules, in which access may be granted for family migrants to some services such as the labour market, healthcare and schooling, while access to other services - including welfare benefits, social housing, or funding for further and higher education - is given only to longer term residents.

The research project Impact of Admission Criteria on the Integration of Migrants (IMPACIM) at the ESRC-funded Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford, is investigating how restrictive admission criteria impacts on the integration of 'third country' (ie non-EEA) family members in the UK and three other EU member states.

Emerging IMPACIM findings suggest that even where access to work and services is allowed in specific areas to encourage integration in the UK, in practice immigrants encounter a series of barriers in gaining this access.

Key findings

- **The rules are complex and poorly understood:** Service providers as well as voluntary service advisors report frustration at the time needed to understand the rules – with confusion about entitlements, occasional requests for inappropriate documentation to access services, and (in some cases) refusal of services migrants are legally entitled to.
- **Procedural delays:** Some migrants, in particular refugees, are hampered by extended delays, for example in getting access to national insurance numbers, which hinders their entry into the labour market.
- **A shortage of places for training, education and housing:** Migrants who are entitled to services can encounter a lack of availability, including English language classes (delaying access to employment), primary school places and social housing.
- **The newly extended 'No recourse to Public Funds' rule may negatively affect integration:** The NRPF rule has been extended from two to five years, limiting entitlement to selected benefits and social housing. This can increase spousal migrants' vulnerability to exploitation, as their immigration status is conditional on the continued relationship with a partner already settled in the UK.
- **Training and education regulations impede entry into the job market:** Family migrants are delayed by the three year residency rule for accessing courses with Skills Funding Agency support. Required fees for ESOL classes also mean that women in particular can miss a crucial 'window of opportunity' - the time immediately following migration and before having children - and thus risk a long-term barrier to participation.

Policy relevance and implications

There is a need for:

- Simplification of the rules on access to benefits and services. The complexity causes wasted staff time and generates incorrect decisions.
- Training on migrant entitlement to improve practice and awareness of differences in entitlements for migrants by front-line service providers in job centres, health centres etc.
- Urgently addressing delays in issuing national insurance numbers for vulnerable migrant groups.
- Monitoring the impact of the extension of the probationary period with NRPF, especially in terms of the risk for families experiencing breakdown and the cost burden experienced by local authorities in supporting families with NRPF.
- An objective evaluation of the medium-term cost-effectiveness of restrictions to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) services, as there are indications this may be counterproductive to integration.



BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

IMPACIM is an 18 month research project co-ordinated by the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, with funding from the EU fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals. The aim is to investigate how restrictive conditions of stay impact on the economic, social, cultural and political integration of third country nationals in four EU member states, including the UK. Full project reports will be available in September 2013 at www.compas.ox.ac.uk/research/welfare/impacim/.

The COMPAS briefing paper *Post-entry restrictions and entitlements: What are the consequences of changing policies for family migrants within the UK?* outlines early IMPACIM findings on how rules determining family member migrants' rights to access services and benefits in the UK affect migrants' labour market and social integration.

Web: www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/Events/Breakfast_briefings/IMPACIM_FINAL_BB_12_JULY.pdf

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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The Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS) is an ESRC-funded research centre within the University of Oxford. COMPAS research covers a spectrum of global migration processes and phenomena, with a particular expertise in relation to migration and the labour market, and migration and urban change.

Web: www.compas.ox.ac.uk/home/welcome

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading agency for research funding and training in economic and social sciences.

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