

Experiences of new immigration at the neighbourhood level

Much is being said about immigration and asylum in the UK but little is actually known about the experiences and consequences of new immigration at the neighbourhood level. This review of the evidence by David Robinson and Kesia Reeve (from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University) represents a first step toward understanding the hidden experiences of newly arrived immigrants who are experiencing social and economic disadvantage. The review found:

- There is a surprising lack of evidence, knowledge and understanding about the situations of new immigrants experiencing social and economic disadvantage, less still about how new immigration can affect local neighbourhoods and the challenges for immigrant and receiving populations.
- Few lessons appear to have been learnt about managing the consequences of new immigration at the neighbourhood level. Agencies are working at the local level but their activities have rarely been systematically reviewed and evaluated.
- Whilst the settlement patterns of previous immigrant populations continue to be reinforced by the arrival of friends and relatives, new immigrant groups with less established patterns of settlement are being drawn (or directed, in the case of asylum seekers) to a far more diverse range of locations, often by employment opportunities.
- Many new immigrants benefit from living near people of the same ethnic background. Public policy, however, increasingly views such 'ethnic clusters' as problematic and dispersal restricts access to these benefits for some new immigrants.
- Community tensions are not an inevitable consequence of new immigration. The impact of new immigration on local neighbourhoods varies depending upon: the local socio-economic context, history of previous settlement and ethnic profile, actual and perceived ethnicity and identity of new immigrants, local media portrayals of immigration and asylum, the legal status of new immigrants and the success of local agencies in mediating between established and incoming populations.
- Evidence suggests that, regardless of legal status or ethnic origin, new immigrants typically live in poor quality housing in deprived inner city neighbourhoods. Many also face harassment and hostility and experience difficulties accessing appropriate support.
- Evidence suggests that new immigrants are making a positive contribution to the local and national economy, the cultural and social fabric of towns and neighbourhoods and, in some situations, the regeneration and revitalisation of declining neighbourhoods.



Background

Popular debate and political discussion about the rights and wrongs of immigration have become increasingly heated in recent years, yet research has remained relatively silent about new immigrants, their contribution to society and the impact of their arrival for neighbourhoods, towns, cities and the country at large.

This review focused on the neighbourhood situations and experiences of new migrants, irrespective of their legal status or their main reason for coming to the UK, who experience social and economic disadvantage. It therefore considered the situations and experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum alongside migrants from within the European Union (EU) and people from outside the EU entering the UK to work or to join family members.

The settlement experiences of new immigrants: what do we know?

Drawing on literature from across a range of disciplines and policy realms, it is possible to piece together a number of very general conclusions:

- Regardless of their legal status, new immigrant households who are experiencing social and economic disadvantage typically live in poor quality housing in inner city neighbourhoods often characterised by deprivation and social exclusion. The challenges raised by living in such locations can be compounded by the problems that some new immigrants encounter accessing the care, support and assistance they require.
- These neighbourhoods are often home to other immigrant households and established minority ethnic populations and can be rich in various resources vital to helping new immigrants meet the challenge of satisfying their material needs, coping with hostility and discrimination, engaging with key services and negotiating a place in British society.
- New immigrants settling in neighbourhoods with a more limited history of minority ethnic settlement appear more prone to harassment, abuse and violence. Community tensions, however, are not inevitable. New immigrants appear to receive a better reception in areas where local residents have been prepared in advance for their arrival.
- The settlement of new immigrant households in deprived neighbourhoods can serve to compound their own deprivation and reinforce existing areas of exclusion and disadvantage. New immigration also has the potential, however, to strengthen social cohesion and promote neighbourhood sustainability.

Factors shaping the settlement experiences of new immigrants

A number of apparent contradictions exist between the broad conclusions generated by the review. New immigration, for example, is recognised as compounding neighbourhood deprivation but also identified as a potential driver of regeneration. Such ambiguities reflect the fact that the experiences and consequences of new immigration at the neighbourhood level vary from place to place and depend upon a number of factors, including:

- The history of migration into and current ethnic profile of a neighbourhood: more positive experiences (engagement with and utilisation of key services, social interaction with other residents, commitment to a neighbourhood, minimal harassment and relatively limited community tensions) are apparent in places with a longer history of minority ethnic settlement, where new immigrants share aspects of their background or identity with existing residents and where relevant and appropriate provision (formal and informal) is already in place.
- The actual and perceived ethnic and cultural identity of new immigrants: people from culturally or linguistically distinct groups sometimes experience more difficulties negotiating a position within and being accepted into local communities and wider society; people perceived to belong to particular groups (for example, people thought to be Muslim or people matching stereotypical views of who is an asylum seeker) may be less readily accepted by existing residents and more likely to be the victims of harassment.
- The legal status of new immigrants and the material conditions and experiences of people seeking asylum.
- Media portrayals of new immigrants: local reporting can in some instances compound national media stereotypes, thereby fuelling animosity and hostility within receiving populations and creating tensions between population groups.
- The relationship between the local social and economic context and competition for limited resources in deprived neighbourhoods can raise tensions between existing residents and new immigrants. In some places this has been exploited in by the activities of far-right groups.

Managing new immigration at the neighbourhood level: lessons learnt

Few lessons appear to have been learnt about managing the consequences of new immigration at the neighbourhood level. The situations and experiences of new immigration remain largely hidden from view and little is known about the associated challenges for immigrant and receiving populations. National policy has seen little reason to develop a systematic approach to managing the consequences of new immigration at the neighbourhood level. Neither does there appear to have been adequate attention to the extent that current policy can (often unconsciously) exacerbate problems at the neighbourhood level.

At the local level, there are agencies working to manage the consequences of new immigration. These activities, though, have rarely been the subject of systematic review and evaluation. The limits of understanding also make it difficult to attribute cause and effect to the actions (and inaction) of different agencies and institutions and to discern what works where. The lessons that can be drawn from current understanding about managing change at the local level are therefore very general:

- The variation in the impact of migration on different places suggests that any response must be tailored to local circumstances.
- Local agencies and institutions have the potential to promote community relations by working to prepare local residents in advance for the arrival of new immigrants in their neighbourhood.
- Certain challenges – such as the management of tensions between new and established local populations – are more likely to arise in particular types of location, especially deprived neighbourhoods with little previous history of minority ethnic settlement.
- Government agencies, local institutions and service providers need to be mindful of the unforeseen impact of policy and practice on the experiences and consequences of new immigration.
- Other factors, including the media portrayal of new immigrants, also shape the experiences and impact of new immigration at the local level.

Gaps in the evidence base

There remain more questions than answers regarding the experiences and consequences of new immigration at the neighbourhood level. Particular gaps in the evidence base revealed by the review include:

- *the identities of new immigrants* – the numbers (with status) and the socio-economic and demographic profile of new immigrants at the district and neighbourhood level; the skills, training and qualifications of new immigrants and their associated (current and potential) contribution to the local economy; the personal identities of new immigrants from different backgrounds with different settlement stories.
- *the voices of different new immigrant groups and populations* – material conditions; experiences in the local neighbourhood; relations with other local residents; the problems and challenges they encounter; the factors exacerbating these problems and the assistance that might help minimise such challenges; their requirements and the extent to which these are being met by current provision; the resources they have drawn on and the resources they require; their hopes and aspirations for the future and how these might be realised; the different experiences of men and women.
- *the settlement patterns of different new immigrant populations and groups* – the neighbourhood situations of new immigrants; the factors shaping these settlement patterns (resources, choices and constraints); changing patterns of settlement; different experiences and challenges associated with different settlement patterns; residential aspirations.
- *interaction and relations between different new immigrant groups and populations and existing residents* – nature and scope of interaction in different neighbourhood situations; factors restricting and facilitating interaction; tensions, harassment and conflict in different situations and settings; the response of statutory agencies (including the police) to incidents of abuse and harassment; the role of local agencies in managing and minimising tensions between established and incoming populations; the significance of interaction and community relations in shaping settlement patterns and informing neighbourhood change.

- *review and evaluation of local initiatives to manage change* – an auditing of local initiatives; a review of intervention options; an assessment of priorities and objectives; the contribution of different agencies and institutions; analysis of management structures and partnership arrangements; the monitoring and evaluation of impacts and consequences.
- *the dynamics of change in neighbourhoods affected by new immigration* – displacement and population change in different neighbourhood settings; stability and sustainability in the context of new immigration.

Cutting across this research agenda is an urgent need to differentiate more clearly between the distinct experiences of new immigrants on the basis of different socio-economic situations, ethnicities, cultural identities, countries of origin and resident status.

About the project

Little attention has previously been paid to the neighbourhood affects of migration and there is a surprising lack of information about the experiences of new immigrants. The review was therefore forced to cast its net far and wide in a bid to capture insights of relevance, drawing on evidence from across a range of disciplines and policy arenas. A full bibliography of the wide range of sources reviewed is provided in the full report.

For more information

The full report, **Neighbourhood experiences of new immigration: Reflections from the evidence base** by David Robinson and Kesia Reeve, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 978 1 85935 441 4, price £14.95).

This literature review is linked to two think-pieces which were also commissioned to inform the Foundation's work on Immigration and Inclusion:

- **What's new about new immigrants in twenty-first century Britain?** by Rob Berkeley, Omar Khan, Mohan Ambikaipaker of the Runnymede Trust; and
- **Immigration, social cohesion and social capital: What are the links?** by Professor Roger Zetter, Dr David Griffiths and Nando Sigona, Development and Forced Migration Research Cluster, Oxford Brookes University and Don Flynn, Tauhid Pasha and Rhian Beynon of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

Read more *Findings* at www.jrf.org.uk

Other formats available.

Tel: 01904 615905, Email: info@jrf.org.uk