

How did the 'Hostile Environment' impact ethnic minority UK residents?



Evaluation suggest that the 'hostile environment' immigration policy impacted on the mental health of some UK-born citizens more than first-generation migrants.

What policy was being evaluated?

In 2012, the UK Government announced a series of immigration policy reforms, collectively known as the hostile environment policy. The policy intended to reduce the number of people living in the UK illegally; motivated by the desire of protecting public services and regulating the employment market. This was achieved by requiring landlords, employers, the National Health Service, banks, and the police to check right-to-stay documentation. These administrative measures were supplemented in 2017 with media campaigns which included the use of vans with billboards that displayed messages like *"Go Home or Face Arrest"* and provided a hotline number for people to report suspected illegal immigrants.

These reforms culminated in the Windrush scandal, where people from Black Caribbean backgrounds who had legitimately immigrated to the UK between the end of the 2nd World War and 1973 were falsely identified as undocumented and, in many cases, deported. The loss of immigration records in 2010 played a significant role in the Windrush scandal; when the UK Border Agency destroyed thousands of landing cards, a document crucial for many in this group who often possessed few other records sufficient to convince a system tasked with presenting a hostile environment to anyone who could not prove they had the right to stay.

63 policies can have real impacts on the health and lives of entirely innocent people that the policy did not target 99

How was the evaluation carried out?

The evaluation compared trends in the mental health of the main minoritised ethnic groups, relative to those of white ethnicity. Of the total sample of 58,087, 78.90% were of White ethnicity, 4.34% were from Black African backgrounds, 3.78% were from Black Caribbean backgrounds, 5.43% were from Indian backgrounds, 4.82% were from Pakistani backgrounds, and 2.73% were from Bangladeshi backgrounds.

The evaluation performed a Bayesian interrupted time series analysis on this sample, over the three time periods linked to the policy:

1. Before the Immigration Act 2014.
2. After the Immigration Act 2014.
3. After the start of the Windrush scandal media coverage in 2017.

Bayesian interrupted time series analysis is particularly useful when a clear intervention point exists, and the structure of the data used is complex. Mental health was measured using the outcome from the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), which provides an indicator of psychological distress.

Adjustments were made to the results to account for possible confounding; whereby certain individual characteristics might affect the degree of exposure to the policy. These included *sex, age, urbanicity, relationship status, number of children, education, physical or mental health impairment, housing, deprivation, employment*, place of birth, income, and time). Further adjustments were also made to account for temporal and spatial confounding that had not previously been identified within the analysis.

Findings

The increases in mean psychological distress score (i.e. mental health as indicated by GHQ-12 scores from 0–36) which the evaluation was able to attribute to the two policy events are shown in the table for the two communities most affected – those from Black Caribbean and Black African backgrounds. These are all compared to the White population during these two time periods.

Increases in mental distress scores (GHQ-12) by event

	Immigration Act 2014	Windrush scandal media coverage in 2017
White UK-born participants	Reference	Reference
All Black Caribbean participants	+0.67	Further +1.28
UK-born Black Caribbean participants	+0.52	Further +2.0
First generation Black Caribbean migrants	+1.25	Further +0.34
All Black African participants	+0.53	Further +0.54
UK-born Black African	+1.39	Further +1.22
First generation Black African migrants	+0.27	Further +0.25

The evaluation generated some surprising results. It might be assumed that the effect of these policies would be more pronounced among first-generation migrants living in the UK, given that the policy targeted non-UK born migrants. This was not particularly reflected in the results, with the Windrush scandal in 2017 impacting the mental health of UK-born participants from both of these ethnic minority communities more than the first-generation migrants from their respective communities. This counter-intuitive finding was also found for UK-born participants from the Black African community after the introduction of the Immigration Act in 2014 – implying that the hostile element of the policy and the resulting scandal had a greater mental health impact on UK citizens than first generation migrants.

The mental health of participants from a Black Caribbean background shows particularly pronounced and concerning results. As might be expected, first-generation migrants from this community were more affected by the 2014 measures than those born in the UK. This finding was reversed after the 2017 Windrush Scandal, where UK-born participants reported considerably greater mental distress than the first-generation migrants from this community – showing an increased score of 2.0 rather than 0.34.

It is difficult to fully explain this finding. It might reflect that the threat of deportation had to some degree passed for Black Caribbean migrants by 2017, once the scandal had broken, but their UK-born friends and family were only just becoming aware of, or coming to terms with, the unjust deportation of some elderly members from their community that had legitimately been resident in the UK for most of their adult lives.

The evaluation did not find increased psychological distress for any other minoritised ethnic group, and income was also not found to have played a significant part in the mental health of the affected communities.



What does this mean for policy?

Policies will often result in unintended consequences. Insights such as these seek to reduce the chances and severity of the unintended consequences resulting from future policy. What the findings of this evaluation highlight well is that policies can have real impacts on the health and lives of entirely innocent people that the policy did not target. It also demonstrates nuance within this, with one minority community being impacted in different ways at different times. In knowing this, future policy might better consider this more carefully and perhaps moderate and put in place support and mitigation.

It should not however be overlooked that this policy agenda led to a significant scandal and a basic failure to treat people fairly. The [Independent review](#) by Wendy Williams in 2020 concluded that *'the Windrush scandal was foreseeable and avoidable... and that a range of warning signs from inside and outside the Home Office were simply not heeded by officials and ministers'*. The review also claimed that *'successive governments wanted to demonstrate that they were being tough on immigration'*. In this context, it is hard to imagine the insights from this kind of report making a difference in the absence of significant reform.

This evaluation adds to our understanding of just who was most affected by this failure, for years after its implementation.

What were the strengths of using Understanding Society data?

Some elements of Understanding Society made it a particularly good source of data to use for this evaluation:

- The Ethnic Minority Boost within the Understanding Society sample was used as it was intended, to ensure that sample sizes are sufficient to allow for statistically significant findings to be made for ethnic minority groups.
- The Special licence arrangements with the UK Data Service allowed access to ethnic minority data without undermining the anonymity of Understanding Society participants.
- Understanding Society's longitudinal data allowed the researchers to follow the trends in the lives of the participants in the years leading up to the start of the policy.
- A further strength was Understanding Society's wide spectrum of baseline demographic data, which allowed the study to test and control for various possible sources of bias and confounding.