COVID-19: A Crisis of Borders

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ABSTRACT The public health crisis of COVID-19 has compounded preexisting crises of democratic stability and effective governance, spurring debate about the ability of developed democracies to respond effectively to emergencies confronting their citizens. These crises, much discussed in recent political science, are joined by a further crisis which complicates and reinforces them: A migration crisis. Widespread travel and immigration restrictions instigated the largest and fastest decline in global human mobility in modern history, and COVID-19 may fundamentally change immigration over the longer term.

The migration crisis heightens three crucial and preexisting concerns within immigration policy: the role of visa design; the status of undocumented migrants and other migrants without recourse to public funds; and the interaction of immigration and the labor market policy. It could reinforce a rising tide of nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment, protectionist sentiment within labor-market policy debates, and a K-shaped recovery in migration patterns.

The years 2020 and 2021 have been marked by interlocking crises, the like of which most of us have not known in our lifetime. The COVID-19 public health crisis has fallen on preexisting crises of democratic stability and effective administration and governance, culminating in significant debate about the ability of developed democracies to respond effectively to emergencies (Allen et al. 2020; Bermeo and Pontusson 2012; King and Le Gales 2017). These crises, much discussed in recent political science, have been joined by another crisis that both complicates and reinforces them: a migration crisis.

The long-term economic consequences of diminished immigration programs will be enormous, demanding nuanced discussion about the shape and size of the migration regimes of different nations. The winding road to recovery ahead has led some to ask the unexpected question: Has immigration ended over the longer term? The largest and fastest decline in global human mobility in modern history was instigated by widespread and, in most cases, instantaneous travel and immigration restrictions. Some international border closures—for example, in the case of Australia and New Zealand—likely will extend well into 2021 or even 2022 (Fox Koob and Calligeros 2020). Across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), visa issuances plummeted 46% in the first quarters of 2020 and 72% in the second semester, compared with the same period in 2019 (OECD 2020a, 18).

Even in countries that have not introduced specific barriers, we could speculate that the short-term mobility on which parts of the global economy depend—such as international education, agriculture, business, and tourism—will be drastically reduced: seasonal-worker flows have declined markedly. High-skilled potential immigrants may reconsider their options, and firms may sponsor fewer international transfers and placements. Potential graduate students can no longer easily acquire visas to traditional locations such as Australia (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs 2020) and the United States.

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longer-term security in the form of permanent residency will become an even more sought-after premium. Moreover, as global economic conditions remain uncertain, support for proactive immigration policies is likely to decrease even more, with alarming negative effects for the integration of current and future immigrants (OECD 2020b, 9).

COVID-19 may fundamentally change immigration over the longer term. With global travel and resettlement disrupted and limited access to public funds for migrants in many countries, longer-term security in the form of permanent residency will become an even more sought-after premium.

As the pandemic spread from February 2020—and contrary to the prevailing wisdom of pandemic response before the event—many countries acted quickly to restrict international movements. Exemptions to travel bans varied across different countries for nationals and residents, seasonal workers, and health professionals. The migration crisis heightens three crucial concerns already present within immigration policy: the role of visa design; the status of undocumented migrants and, relatedly, those other migrants with no recourse to public funds; and the interaction of immigration and labor-market policy.

This article considers each of these concerns and discusses how the migration crisis could exacerbate more established forms of political crisis. It concludes with a discussion of the long-term effects of COVID-19 on immigration policy.

THE CRISIS OF BORDERS AND VISA POLICY

Changes in visa rules and delays in visa processing since the advent of COVID-19 have led to a crisis of borders. These changes have generally been justified on the basis of public health considerations. In some cases, this crisis of borders also has been securitized. In the United States, for example, the Trump administration swiftly introduced a new policy under which it began deporting people who illegally cross the southwestern border rather than taking them to a detention center to seek asylum and due process. This has meant that some newly arrived immigrant children, even after they tested negative for COVID-19, were deported rather than afforded the protections that permitted them to seek asylum before the pandemic (Lind and Kriel 2020). High-skilled workers holding H-1B visas also were targeted in Trump's attempts to protect the jobs of US workers (Chishti and Pierce 2020; *Federal Register* 2020).

In other countries, permanent residents have been granted different rights and privileges than temporary residents. For instance, a dichotomy was established in Australia whereby permanent residents were allowed to return—at least in the early months of the pandemic—whereas temporary residents were not. Furthermore, the processing of new permanent visas has slowed in Australia, with separation from family members in some instances (Ryan 2020). Temporary migrants, who comprise the bulk of global immigration flows (Boucher and Gest 2020, chap. 5), have been denied entry to many host countries (International Air Transport Association 2020). There are exceptions: Ireland, Portugal, France, Greece, Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy are still allowing permanent and temporary visa holders to enter or reenter (OECD 2020b, 3), and most of these countries are permitting temporary visas to be extended during the pandemic. As public concern about new variants of COVID-19 intensified in late 2020, various countries responded by again excluding temporary residents and visitors, restricting outbound travel, and establishing new testing and hotel quarantine requirements in various degrees of stringency. Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, and Sweden have since been cautioned by the European Commission about reintroducing disproportionate border restrictions that threaten free movement (European Commission 2021). Australia temporarily halved the government-controlled cap on inbound international returnees; 40,000 Australian citizens and permanent residents were officially registered as "stranded" abroad (Haydar 2021; Prime Minister of Australia 2021).

The crisis also severely slowed or halted the processing of asylum seekers and refugees around the world. In the United States, this hesitancy complemented an existing opposition and reduction in the number of refugees admitted annually under the Trump administration (Smith and King 2020). In theory, asylum applications should still be processed in most OECD countries given the continued operation in law of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). However, personal interviews have been postponed and only pending or priority applications are being processed in many countries (OECD 2020b, 6). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2021), at least 72 countries have denied access to their territory without exception for asylum seekers. Several countries resumed processing in 2021: New Zealand, for example, resumed its refugee program in February 2021, after closing its borders to nonresidents in March 2020 (Menon 2021). It is perhaps too soon to know what the full toll of COVID-19 will be on the rights of asylum seekers and refugees globally.

In the medium term, as economies continue to suffer and poverty, food shortages, and job losses increase, the drive to emigrate also will increase, raising the likelihood of high rates of economic asylum. Supporting this fact, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that nearly half of the world's workers are at risk of losing their livelihood—certainly in the short term—due to COVID-19 (ILO 2020, 1). The extent to which the economic effects of COVID-19 will persist after vaccines are administered, leading to new forms of displacement and emigration pressures, is difficult to predict. Yet, only an exceptional vaccine program—available at scale, priced affordably, allocated globally, and effectively distributed in local communities—would facilitate a return to previous levels and patterns of economic activity. The low likelihood of a universally available vaccine means that reduced activity in many sectors likely will persist with flow-on effects for global unemployment levels (Wouters et al. 2021). This, in turn, could create pressure for outward migration that at the same time could be fettered by vaccine availability.

THE CRISIS OF EMERGING UNDOCUMENTED POPULATIONS AND OTHERS WITHOUT RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS

Although countries have legislated differently on visa extensions, there is a growing subcategory of migrants who are overstaying short-term visas that expired during the pandemic because there are no mechanisms for visa renewal or they are unable to travel home. Some countries, including Ireland and Portugal (Department of Justice and Equality 2020; Schmitt and Massimino 2020), have offered relief measures to these migrants through changes to visa policy (e.g., the easing of employment restrictions) or the possibility to remain. However, these relief measures have not been a feature of welfare policy more broadly. Temporary migrants in some countries (e.g., Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) have found themselves with no entitlement to public benefits. With great uncertainty through and beyond lockdown periods in individual countries, many migrants—regardless of status—may be left with limited prospects to return home or to extend their visa.

The situation of undocumented migrants is a major concern, not least because these migrants are rendered especially vulnerable to the public health and related crises. There also are migrants still on valid visas but only for a temporary or fixed period who are ineligible for access to public services. In Australia, more than 60,000 people currently are overstaying their visa (Acharya 2018), and 2.1 million people with temporary migrant status are not entitled to access the welfare system (Stayner 2020). In the United Kingdom, an estimated 1.4 million people are without recourse to public funds. Thousands of immigrants have been denied access to income support and free school meals during the summer since the pandemic began (Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity 2020); restrictions may extend to access to vaccines. Furthermore, access to welfare can provide a "ticket to service" to other essential government services. For example, in Australia, one repercussion of a lack of documentation or recourse to public funds is that a person ineligible for social security also is ineligible for domestic-violence services. Approximately 1.8 million temporary visa holders in Australia cannot access government support services and payments (Houghton 2020).

Differential access to welfare also can affect access to health services. Governments have focused particular attention on health-care rights for migrants because of the major public health risk that COVID-19 could spread undetected among groups of migrants who do not have access to diagnosis or treatment or are deterred from seeking support due to their insecure status. In Australia, those with a temporary visa are required to obtain their own health insurance, which means that there is a population that does not have access to public health care. Some international students, for example, avoid even charitable support because they are fearful that their visa has expired.

In the United Kingdom and most of Europe, there are exemptions to health services that ensure that treatment for COVID-19 and other infectious diseases is available to all; however, migrants' knowledge of or willingness to trust these exemptions may be limited (Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity 2020). France and Belgium already offered free universal access to health care for migrants before the pandemic. Unfulfilled promises have been made to immigrants in the United Kingdom. All temporary migrants pay a special National Health Service surcharge and, under pressure, the government reluctantly promised in May 2020 to waive this surcharge for anyone working in health care—although this has yet to be seen (Gower 2020). Italy and Portugal temporarily regularized all undocumented migrants to facilitate access to health care, but many countries have not been as generous (Amante 2020; Schmitt and Massimino 2020). With Great Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, many European residents in the United Kingdom lose both their right to remain and their access to benefits if they do not apply for settled status (O'Carroll 2020).

THE CRISIS OF THE WORKFORCE/LABOR MARKET

Given that COVID-19 presents a wholesale upheaval of the labor market in most countries, it is clear that this also will affect migrant workers, who comprise a significant proportion of workers in many of the countries most impacted by COVID-19. For instance, temporary migrant workers comprise a relatively high 8% to 10% of all workers in the Australian labor market, based on best estimates (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019). With approximately 164 million migrant workers globally, they are an essential component of contemporary workplaces (ILO 2018, ix). Due to the lack of mobility of these temporary migrant workers, key industries that rely on them currently suffer shortages (e.g., logistics, delivery, horticulture, and agriculture).

Where does immigration fit in the context of rising unemployment? How should policy makers reconcile enduring skills shortages with the limitations of redeploying the domestic workforce and with new forms of labor-market displacement? The narrative of "migrants taking our jobs" remains popular for politicians seeking election, but to what extent are they doing so in fact, and how well can domestic redeployment function, if at all? How important is immigration to projections of future surplus, particularly if temporary migration is an integral component of those countries' economic success stories? Answering these questions will be crucial for global governments in navigating the effects of COVID-19 on their labor market and economy.

Whereas unemployment has increased globally, it also is likely that this issue will play out differently in the skilled and unskilled labor space. In low-skilled seasonal agricultural work, there was evidence of enduring skills shortages even during the first six months of COVID-19. There were challenges in mobilizing domestic workers; the United Kingdom and Germany, for example, continued to rely on workers from Eastern Europe for their agricultural and meat-processing sectors despite the pandemic. In several cases, these clustered groups of workers tested positive for COVID-19 (Pitu and Schwartz 2020).

The United Kingdom and Germany are not alone in this regard. Several countries have implemented special measures for seasonal workers, enabling people on short-term visas to remain in the host country to work or, in some cases, to obtain a new permit and enter the host country. Greece, Italy, the United States, Canada, Norway, and Australia have taken measures to permit seasonal agricultural workers to stay and work (OECD 2020a, 22; 2020b, 4). Elsewhere, mechanisms have been developed to allow categories of migrants not otherwise authorized to work to undertake agricultural work, including in Belgium, Spain, Ireland, Austria, and Greece. Germany reauthorized the entry of foreign seasonal workers, primarily from Romania and Bulgaria, in April 2020 after a failed effort to supplement labor shortfalls with unemployed Germans (Alderman, Eddy, and Tsang 2020; Rising 2020). These examples suggest that without low-cost mobile labor from Eastern Europe, wealthier economies risk losing their harvests. The question of whether nationals may soon be prepared to take jobs or move for work where they previously were not is important because new forms of labor-market displacement may be occurring by extending working rights to temporary migrants across other sectors (Boucher 2020).

First, there is concern about a rising tide of nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment, *with historical resonance from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACIES OF COVID-19

The unprecedented rapid closure of borders as a result of COVID-19 meant that many international migrants were unable to leave countries when their visa expired, were often forced to enter the labor market in ways that their current visa prohibits simply to survive, and were ineligible for existing social security systems and emergency support payments. Consequently, there is a clear risk that this may lead to the rapid expansion of the number of people effectively living as undocumented migrants over the short to medium term. Finally, as countries start the long process of economic recovery, the potential opening up of immigration will quickly be asserted as a primary political question, closely linked to both the labor market and intensified political debates about culture and identity. Immigration already was vehemently debated in many countries (e.g., the United States and Brexit Britain) before the pandemic began, linked to long-standing racial divisions reinvigorated by populist parties (King and Le Gales 2017; Smith and King 2020).

In our view, these events could reinforce, in turn, a dangerous set of preexisting political crises if not carefully managed by policy makers and politicians. First, there is concern about a *rising tide of nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment*, with historical resonance from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (King 2000)—for example, the anti-Asian American sentiment ignited in the United States in recent months. Before the pandemic, there already was significant global concern about the rise in nationalist populism and the politics of xenophobia (Lonergan and Blyth 2020). The new migration crisis could result in governments conflating COVID-19 risk with overseas arrival or workers in low-skilled sectors rather than considering the social inequality that influences differential transmission risk. In the United States, COVID-19 already has been used as a rationale for changes to immigration policy, as explained previously. Anti-immigrant parties across immigrant-heavy countries could use such rhetoric to push their agendas in future elections, especially if vaccines are not universally distributed. It also is a convenient camouflage for Brexit-caused disruption in the United Kingdom.

Governments will need to model carefully the extent to which domestic workers want to and can be redeployed into sectors previously dominated by migrant workers and the implications of these changes for wage and welfare settings.

Second, as documented previously, a familiar "natives first" sentiment can reinforce existing *protectionist sentiment within labor-market policy debates*, even when domestic workers do not necessarily exist. Governments will need to model carefully the extent to which domestic workers want to and can be redeployed into sectors previously dominated by migrant workers and the implications of these changes for wage and welfare settings. Without astute management, political crises over labor-market and industrial-relations policy could emerge. The short-term responses in agriculture therefore may not be indicative of future trends, especially as the recovery period extenuates. Examples of how this protectionism currently is playing out are evidenced in the promotion of high-skilled migration as a priority for future policy across several countries. In the United States, skilled migration has been halted temporarily but will recur; in the United Kingdom, there is support for a new points-based system with a high-salary threshold for admission and a new high-skilled, exclusive (focused mainly on information-technology workers) scheme similar to one adopted in Australia in 2019. In Australia, this scheme has been proposed for the 2020–2021 budget (Boucher et al. 2021). These types of measures are examples of how governments have used the pandemic to justify embracing specialist-skilled migrants and to reduce or eliminate entirely the intake of lower-skilled immigrants. The value of expertise in information technology and STEM subjects has never been greater as the biological and life-sciences industry expand.

Third, we anticipate a K-shaped recovery in migration patterns as the affluent find access to vaccination via so-called vaccine passports, which they can certify for travel, and as complements to the preferential treatment of high-skilled migrants. In contrast, the movement of both asylum-seeking refugees and low-skilled, unvaccinated Global South workers is on long-term hold. Acting as barriers to movement, border and visa regulations matter more for this latter group, and differential access to vaccines across the globe will influence these outcomes (Wouters et al. 2021). Certainly, there still are many desperate asylum seekers attempting to cross into the European Union from North Africa, into the United Kingdom from France, and into the United States from Mexico. COVID-19 represents a fundamental challenge to the global legal regime for refugee processing (OECD 2020c).

We do not expect a quick reversal of these trends. Formally, high-immigration countries such as Australia and Canada during COVID-19 either have effectively ceased immigration (i.e., Australia) or slowed down its annual quotas (i.e., Canada). Other Global North states—notably New Zealand—have closed down routes for unskilled and temporary migration that previously buttressed its high net-migration levels. This means that the sociological pattern of migration may be morphing more toward class distinctions rather than being driven by clear typological differences that existed before COVID-19, when there were differing ratios of skilled to family migration and humanitarian intake across democratic nations (Boucher and Gest 2020). Given the nature of the coronavirus, it is is unlikely to be eradicated—merely controlled—which does not bode well for any wholesale pre-pandemic levels of immigration.

Fourth, in terms of solutions to the crisis, it appears that longstanding political institutional differences in comparative health policy also have proved fundamental, as revealed by the contrast between death tolls in Germany and the United States (Johns Hopkins University 2021). In this regard, the gaps in health coverage experienced by immigrants and asylum seekers, in particular, appear to result in higher rates of transmission in those populations, which compounds inequality in health systems globally and places pressure for reform on those systems. Furthermore, in some countries, undocumented populations are facing greater challenges in accessing the vaccine, which could present further complications for the retention of migrants moving forward (OECD 2020c; Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants 2021). ■

NOTE

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