

RESEARCH PROJECT

Young Undocumented Migrants *in Britain*

Findings from the Scoping Study

The data presented in the scoping study report is based on three focus group interviews, carried out with community representatives and others who work closely with young undocumented migrants and therefore have a broad overview of their experiences. The focus groups were carried out in Manchester, Birmingham and London and were concerned with exploring, from the knowledge and perspectives of community representatives and others who work closely with young undocumented migrants, the livelihoods and social worlds of young migrants from Brazil, Zimbabwe, China and Turkey (including Kurdish young people). The scoping study was carried out to inform and refine both the substantive areas to be included in the main study and the key methodological considerations that might emerge when carrying out research with young undocumented migrants. The research is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation under its Social Justice Programme. The Programme seeks to tackle the difficult issue of integration, by helping people on the fringes of society, who are out of the reach of existing agencies, building bridges between communities and ensuring marginalized people's voices are heard.

The research team for the scoping study was Alice Bloch (Department of Sociology, City University); Roger Zetter (Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford), Nando Sigona (Oxford Brookes), Maknun Gamaledin-Ashami (Birkbeck College and Freelance Researcher and Consultant).

Reasons for migration

Motivations for migration differed between the different countries of origin and depended, in part, on when young people migrated. Poverty and perceptions of economic opportunities were influential in determining migration. For some migration formed part of a family livelihood survival strategy with families receiving money in the form of remittances. As one focus group participant noted,

...in terms of Chinese young people most of them are here because er for a better lifestyle and make some money to send money back home (1 London).

Among Chinese and Zimbabwean young people remitting money was a large part of the initial motivation for migration though these transactions were thought to be more widespread. One participant described how families pooled resources to send someone overseas.

I know from experience people have sold their homes just to organize the journey for a son or daughter to go abroad and in return they will be expecting some continuous support (12 Birmingham).

Some young people left their country of origin due to political oppression or persecution. Others came as tourists or students and their visas had expired while others entered on visas but then became asylum seekers when the situation in their country of origin changed and they were unable to return – a pattern found among Zimbabweans.

Some young people actively wanted to come to Britain due to the presence of existing communities (Chinese for example) and language skills (Zimbabweans). Others ended up in Britain as a consequence of a number of possible factors including migration routes, agents and the acquisition of visas.

Livelihoods: Networks, exploitation and survival

Being undocumented restricts the kinds of work young people can do and affects job seeking strategies. The focus groups suggested clustering between groups in terms of different sectors of employment with English language a particularly strong indicator of employment options. Chinese young people tended to be employed in co-ethnic businesses notably Chinese supermarkets, restaurants and take-away outlets or other areas where there is no premium on English such as fruit picking. Zimbabweans, in contrast tend to be fluent in English and many have high level qualifications and are found clustered in care work but are also working as cleaners, security guards, fast-food restaurants and among men in warehouses. Supermarkets and factories were also sites of work for young undocumented migrants with one participant describing factories in Manchester, who employed Kurdish young people, as 'sweat shops'.

One focus group participant noted how the tendency for same sector work is enhanced through routes to employment describing how people,

...are collected in groups to go to work elsewhere and then brought back, mostly menial tasks on minimum wages (13 Birmingham).

Social networks particularly information through word of mouth were important routes to employment and can lead to clustering in a few sectors. Describing the Brazilian case one participant noted that,

...much recruitment is done by the workers, cos they're trying to find work for their friends. And therefore it's a rich recruiting opportunity (6 London).

Young people with transferable skills and high pre-migration qualifications experience downward occupational mobility though not all young people have transferable skills sets. Regardless of the skills sets the employment profile is one of long hours and low pay. Young people were described as working for as little as £1 an hour in factories, £2 an hour on farms and £3 an hour in factories – all well below the minimum wage.

Community networks and integration

In addition to community networks facilitating employment other informal community networks were also in place and the picture painted was one of close community networks with limited interaction with the majority population. Where interaction was taking place outside the immediate community there was the suggestion that young

people kept their undocumented status unknown or in the case of Turkish or Kurdish young people might even pretend they were from Southern Europe.

Young people shared multiple-occupancy households with people from the same country of origin and among some Zimbabweans organized religion was important though even churches and mosques were divided along ethnic lines and were not therefore facilitating meaningful contacts outside of the immediate group.

The main study

The research team for the main study is Alice Bloch, Roger Zetter and Nando Sigona. Alice Bloch and Roger Zetter are joint project directors. Alice Bloch will also be principal investigator and Nando Sigona will be the senior researcher.

The scoping study highlighted the need to understand from the perspectives of young undocumented migrants (aged 18-30), the complexity of life processes, decisions and choices made, set within the context of their undocumented status. The research will therefore focus on the voices of young undocumented migrants about which little is known and will explore and develop the key themes around lives and livelihoods identified in the scoping study including: experiences of employment; social networks; community involvement; links and obligations with friends and family in their country of origin; how being undocumented impacts on their lives and the longer term goals and aspirations of young undocumented migrants.

The research will comprise 60 in-depth interviews and 20 testimonies from young undocumented migrants from five countries of origin. The countries of origin are Zimbabwe, Brazil, China, Turkey and Ukraine.

The full report of the scoping study by Alice Bloch, Roger Zetter, Nando Sigona and Maknun Gamaledin-Ashami is available at www.staff.city.ac.uk/yum/material.htm
For more information about the project please visit the project website www.staff.city.ac.uk/yum
