

Has the pandemic shifted public opinion towards migrant workers in essential, but low-skilled, jobs?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has increased public awareness of the extent to which the workforce in essential sectors such as health, social care, food supply chains or transportation depends on migrants. The people in those industries were vital to maintain the functioning of the economy and ensure the provision of public services—especially health—during lockdowns and other mobility restrictions. Given their crucial role during the pandemic, this question has become a focus of new academic and policy work: *Has the pandemic shifted public opinion towards migrant workers in essential jobs?*

The category of essential workers includes both high-skilled occupations (e.g. doctors, nurses), as well as jobs often considered as medium- or low-skilled (e.g. social care workers). We already know that public opinion towards high-skilled migration tends to be very positive. For example, [Naumann et al. \(2018\)](#) conducted survey experiments in 15 European countries and found that high-skilled migrants are preferred over low-skilled ones, regardless of the respondents' own educational levels and income.

The reasons driving the public preference for high-skilled migration remain the source of debate, though there is more consensus that negative perceptions of the economic and cultural effects of low-skilled migration likely play a role.

Yet, following the pandemic, we need to explore whether an essential job compensates for it being low-skilled in terms of public perception. And so we have a new question: *Has the pandemic shifted public opinion towards migrant workers in essential, but low-skilled, jobs?* This would include workers in the care sector, food industry, delivery services or transportation.

A [recent study](#) conducted in the United Kingdom during the first half of 2021 looked at public preferences towards admitting migrants, based on them working in different occupations that varied in their required skills and degree of essentialness. As expected, respondents were more likely to show preference for admission of migrants in high-skilled jobs. However, respondents were also more likely to show a preference for migrants working in essential jobs, regardless of the skill level of the occupation. The results suggest that the probability of being preferred for admission into the United Kingdom was 24 percentage points higher for migrants in essential jobs than for those in non-essential jobs. Comparing occupations of similar skill levels, lorry drivers for a supermarket chain were 23% more likely to be preferred for admission than waiters.

Before COVID-19, an occupation's essentialness in public preferences towards labour migration policies was not a central focus of academic and policy discussions. Though some jobs may have always been more valuable to the public—based on perceptions of worthiness, social value or, indeed, their worth during a public health emergency—it is not possible to know the degree to which this has been affected by the pandemic. But given this new focus, we know essentialness is important for public preferences towards labour migration policies, regardless of whether it is a low- or a high-paid job.

Essentialness—as opposed, or in addition to skills—has key implications for immigration policy. Labour immigration systems worldwide have a clear preference for high-skilled migration, while imposing

restrictions towards those coming to work in lower-skilled occupations ([Fernández-Reino et al., 2020](#)). It remains to be seen if these immigration systems follow the new evidence on public opinion and put more emphasis on the role of essentialness.